

ASAN REPORT

Saudi Arabia in 2030 The Emergence of a New Leadership

JOSEPH A. KÉCHICHIAN

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

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The author of fifteen published books, his latest titles are *The Attempt to Uproot Sunni-Arab Influence: A Geo-Strategic Analysis of the Western, Israeli and Iranian Quest for Domination* [A translation of *Istihdaf Ahl al-Sunna* (Targeting Sunnis), by Nabil Khalifé], Sussex Academic Press, January 2017; *From Alliance to Union: Challenges Facing Gulf Cooperation Council States in the Twenty-First Century*, Sussex, 2016; *Iffat Al Thunayan: An Arabian Queen*, Sussex, 2015; *Legal and Political Reforms in Sa'udi Arabia*, Routledge, 2013; as well as the forthcoming *The Arab Nationalist Advisor: Yusuf Yassin of Sa'udi Arabia*.

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Acknowledgments

At the outset, this report was intended to be a follow-up to my 2015 *Succession Challenges in the Arab Gulf Monarchies*, which was published as an Asan Institute Report in December 2015 [<http://en.asaninst.org/contents/succession-challenges-in-the-arab-gulf-monarchies/>], and was well received in both its original English version as well as the Korean transliteration.

Dramatic changes over the course of three short years in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia necessitated a rewrite of various sections of my original essay, and I sincerely thank the Asan Institute for Policy Studies for this expanded publication opportunity. As a frequent guest in Seoul, the Republic of Korea, I am privileged to be associated with one of the world's leading think-tanks, and those who attend, and/or participate in, the annual Asan Plenum will vouch that it is one of the most meaningful such assemblies anywhere.

My sincere appreciation goes to Dr. Ji-Hyang Jang, a Senior Fellow at Asan as well as the Director of its Middle East and North Africa Center, for shepherding the first two drafts of the report through the vetting process. Dr. Jang is one of those rare Asian colleagues who know the Muslim World—where she travels frequently—and can separate the wheat from the chaff. It is always a pleasure to exchange notes with this premier researcher.

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Sa'ud al-Sarhan, have encouraged me as well and I thank both doctors for their unwavering support. It is rare to find a true center of research in the Arab World and I am delighted to be associated with one.

A Note on Transliteration

This study follows the same transliteration methodologies adopted in all of my previous academic publications, based on a modified version of the Library of Congress (LC) transliteration system. Although rendering Arabic words and names into English is nearly impossible, I rely on LC protocols, along with the style used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) to offer solid versions. For practical purposes, all diacritical marks for long vowels and velarized consonants are eliminated, except for the hamza (') and the ayn ('). Moreover, variations in common names, including the commonly rendered Mohammed or Riad in English, are transliterated as Muhammad and Riyadh. Mecca, still used in some sources, is dropped for the more accurate Makkah, which is also the official adaptation. All quotations that referred to specific spellings were not tampered with, including “Sheik” or “Shaikh” instead of the correct transliteration of Shaykh—according to LC and IJMES protocols.

In modern Arabic, even when using standard pronunciation, the feminine -ah is often ignored, with the h usually silent and not recorded. Consequently, we see it as -a, like in fatwa, Shi'a, Shari'a or even 'Ulama. Strangely, however, the h is kept in other circumstances, including Riyadh or Jiddah or even Shaikh when it is not written as Sheikh. Throughout this study, an effort is made to be both consistent and accurate, which is why the h is recorded in all instances, including when it refers to the *ta' marbutah* (fatihah, rahmah), the *alif* (Abhah, Hasah), the *alif maqsurah* (shurah, fatwah), or even the *hamza* ('Ulamah, fuqahah). Thus, all transliterated words that qualify include the silent h, as in fatwah, 'Ulamah, Shari'ah, Shaykh, and Shurah. This may look odd but, at least, the approach is consistent.

An effort was made to clarify family names as well. When referring to the proper appellation of ruling families, the Arabic word Al, which means “family,” precedes the name of the eponymous founder. In Saudi Arabia, the founder imparted his name to the family, thus the Al Sa'ud. A lower case al- often refers to a sub-branch of the ruling family. In this instance Turki al-Faysal is the son of the late King Faysal bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al Sa'ud. Furthermore, and although the transliteration of 'Abd (servant or slave in Arabic) is rendered as 'Abdul, I am aware that the “ul” (al) is really the article of the succeeding word, as in 'Abd(ul/al) Allah, and that together they mean “servant of God.” In that regard the family of Muhammad 'Abdul Wahhab is not simply Al Shaykh, but

Al al-Shaykh, or “House of the Shaykh,” as his descendants are called. Yet, I use 'Abdallah rather than 'Abdullah throughout this text because it comes as close as possible to Library of Congress and *International Journal of Middle East Studies* protocols, and it is a more accurate transliteration from the Arabic, instead of from the Urdu used in Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Arabic speakers will know the correct references and while special care was devoted to standardize the spellings of transliterated words, there are—inevitably—a few inconsistencies that, I trust, readers will understand and forgive any linguistic transgressions.

Preface

Regrettably, and with clockwork precision that spanned over five decades, observers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have anticipated its demise and, more precisely, the fall of the Al Sa‘ud from power. Some even believed and continue to hold with frightening precision that the vast country, whose physical size is nearly half that of the continental span of the United States, could be divided into smaller Emirates or Shaykhdoms. At the height of the War for Iraq in 2003, challenged commentators opined that the time was right to split the oil-rich Eastern Province from the rest of the Kingdom, and to rely on the local Shi‘ah population to “manage” the entity for the benefit of oil-consuming nations. Whether such wishful thinking was dangerous was beside the point as several contemplated the brake-up of the country, with the Central Najd region to be entrusted to the Al Sa‘ud under a demented scheme—as long as they would not surrender it to an unfriendly tribe—while the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah would be administered by a putative international Muslim authority that, comically, would enjoy extra-territoriality within an independent nation-state. An even more deranged feature of this brilliant strategic hodgepodge would see the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah fall back under Hashimite administration, whose last rule over the Hijaz ended with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, in 1918. Dismantling the Kingdom was actually taken seriously for a short period of time by rabid antagonists, some equipped with sharp academic rigor, even if the forecasts bordered on the irrelevant. At other times, anti-Saudi writers added fuel to the fire by raising legitimacy questions, the likes of which few societies experienced. Remarkably, and while such prognostications included elements of academic enquiry or even useful strategic evaluations, they bordered on the juvenile with the passing of time and the endurance displayed the Al Sa‘ud. The Kingdom proved its longevity and the Al Sa‘ud affirmed their legitimacy, their breadth to power and, equally important, their fiduciary responsibilities towards a nation that was restored by the founder of the Third Saudi Monarchy in 1932, King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman bin Faysal Al Sa‘ud.

Of course, while nothing is permanent, the ruling Al Sa‘ud family insisted and continues to uphold its survival, an eminently logical endeavor. Furthermore, senior family members were and are determined to survive as well as prosper, which is acclamatory. This is more so in the aftermath of the 2 October 2018 Jamal Khashoggi murder in Istanbul that, understandably, raised several new questions about the Al Sa‘ud. Those are where

this study aims to pick-up the story, embark on a fresh assessment in light of recent developments, and test several hypotheses. Without any pretensions of absolute certainty that the Al Sa‘ud will permanently prevail, it is critical to enquire how stable the Government of Saudi Arabia is under King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, and what are the most likely scenarios for Muhammad bin Salman to succeed his father, precisely to ensure continuity.¹ There are many questions that need to be raised to test these hypotheses accurately in order to speculate on what the Kingdom might look like in about a decade, or roughly around 2030. It may be worth repeating that the aim of this work is to offer sound assessments of current leaders’ capabilities to rule the Kingdom for the next few decades without falling into sycophantic praise.

What may be said at the outset with some confidence is that Saudi leaders are resolute to help an increasingly educated and technologically awakened population to “create wealth” and to encourage entrepreneurship. In early 2019, King Salman and his Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman, strongly believed that Saudi Arabia deserved a bright future and were steadfast to preserve and protect the nation. If epochal challenges during the past eight decades failed to shake the Al Sa‘ud, and if calamitous events could not unsettle the ruling family to abandon innate responsibilities, chances were excellent that inevitable prospective contests would be handled with the same verve and poise, no matter what critics claimed. This does not mean that Riyadh will not experience socio-economic jolts or that the religious establishment, which is the vital pillar that backs the Al Sa‘ud, will not test the ruling family, or that harmony will always triumph within it. What it means is that Saudi Arabia seldom lacked the required leadership to overcome dares, and while contestations around the sitting monarch and his heir apparent lingered, both men have displayed their mettle as strong trailblazers, individuals who hailed from a long and distinguished line of Al Sa‘ud

1. The name of Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman is often abbreviated to MBS or MbS though this chronicle will refrain from doing so (save for direct quotations in various sources). As the bulk of this study was written in late 2018 and, therefore, before the more recent controversies, “MBS” is also rejected for being a crass acronym. Now that journalists refer to the heir apparent as “Mr. Bone-Saw,” there is an even better reason to avoid ugly and largely insulting appellations, since they mean very little in the context of the ruling Al Sa‘ud family.

frontrunners.²

To be sure, critics derided the monarch and his heir apparent, with one observer of the Kingdom going so far as to affirm that Muhammad bin Salman “is not a capable fire-fighter or a tactical statesman.” Elaborating further, the writer maintained that the young official “is confident that, equipped with nothing more than money and unconditional US support, he can surmount any obstacles to his imminent accession. So far he has succeeded in marginalizing his rival cousin MBN [Muhammad Bin Nayif] and enlisting Donald Trump as an ally, albeit temporarily.”³

Of course, one could disagree with what was quite a strong opinion offered along entirely acceptable academic grounds, though others denigrated Muhammad bin Salman even more, advancing wild speculations that skirted scholarship, even if they failed to add analytic value. Many journalistic reports concocted all sorts of fantasies, offering little in terms of concrete evidence, with even less attention to accuracy. Serge Sur, commenting in a specialized French magazine, described the reforms attributed to Muhammad bin Salman as being hypocritical, insisting that “hypocrisy is not liberty.” Sur added that the Kingdom was little more than a “successful Da’ish” [the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State], which was both wrong and insulting, though illustrative

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2. Among the many strategic analyses that advance these notions, the reader may consult Guillaume Fourmont-Dainville, *Géopolitique de l'Arabie Saoudite: La Guerre Intérieure*, Paris: Ellipses, 2005, pp. 139-143; and Fatiha Dazi-Héni, *L'Arabie Saoudite en 100 Questions*, Paris: Tallandier, 2017, pp. 106-120. Critical studies on the Kingdom, Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz and his son, started to fill library shelves. See, for example, Ardavan Amir-Aslani, *Arabie Saoudite: de l'influence à la décadence*, Paris: Éditions de l'Archipel, 2017; Neil Partrick, ed., *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2018; Ellen R. Wald, *Saudi, Inc.: The Arabian Kingdom's Pursuit of Profit and Power*, New York: Pegasus Books, 2018; David Cowan, *The Coming Economic Implosion of Saudi Arabia: A Behavioral Perspective*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, London: Hurst & Company, 2018; and Christine Ockrent, *Le prince mystère de l'Arabie: Mohammed ben Salman, les mirages d'un pouvoir absolu*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 2018.
 3. Madawi Al-Rasheed, “King Salman and His Son: Winning the USA, Loosing the Rest,” in Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, *Ibid.*, pp. 235-250; the quotation is on p. 249.

of what passed for analysis by instant experts.⁴ It was open season on Muhammad bin Salman and just about anything was acceptable to portray him as an incapable buffoon, someone who craved power in the best authoritarian traditions, converging on contradictions, double-standards, and nonchalance. One focused on his “ruthlessness,” repeating an unverified anecdote that saw him threaten a judge who apparently refused to sign off on a questionable transaction. That story then evolved as Muhammad bin Salman allegedly “removed a bullet from his pocket and told [his interlocutor] he had to sign [and] the judge acquiesced but complained to then king Abdullah, who banned Muhammad bin Salman from his court for several months.” Although the author of this scuttlebutt tale failed to provide any evidence to back the phantasmagoric “bullet story,” the fable took on a life of itself, repeated by innocent journalists with even less access to accuracy than the originator of the saga (see Chapter 1). This perspective took on exponential dimensions after the Khashoggi Affair surfaced, as journalists and commentators loaded on Muhammad bin Salman with a vengeance, and attributed guilt even if investigations were under way and not a single court ruling was rendered by the time these lines were composed in late 2018 (see Chapter 4).

Nevertheless, and given the proliferation of such fiction concerning a key country that is embarked on dramatic socio-economic transformations, it is fair to ask whether Saudis will voluntarily abide by the country's new economic model and whether they will accept whatever permutations are introduced without making stringent political demands that, truth be told, is what preoccupies many observers. Simply stated, a vast majority of Saudi watchers seem persuaded that King Salman's rule will be a failure, that Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman's accession to rulership will be hotly contested, and the epochal *Vision 2030* economic projects will become little more than mirages in the desert.⁵ To many Western, especially American, journalists and commentators who practice public diplomacy but who economize on analysis, the rise of a new discipline—bashing Saudi Arabia and Muhammad bin Salman—appears to have become a viable activity, though this simply highlights acute biases. These attitudes surfaced in late 2018 rather forcefully, especially after the tragic Khashoggi assassination,

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4. Serge Sur, “L'Âme de l'Islam, le Corps du Roi, les Fruits du Pétrole,” *Questions Internationales*, Number 89, January-February 2018, pp. 4-11.
 5. “A Prince Fails to Charm: Saudi Arabia's Economic Reforms are not Attracting Investors. Or Creating Jobs,” *The Economist* 429:9123, 22 December 2018, pp. 48-49, at <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/12/22/saudi-arabias-economic-reforms-are-not-attracting-investors>.

even if equally appalling deaths of journalists occurred in numerous countries around the world without eliciting similar uproars. It was revealing that *Time Magazine*, which designated Jamal Khashoggi as one of its four “Guardians and the War on Truth” in its annual “Person of the Year” issue, chose to publicize the Saudi journalist’s disappearance, but barely touched on equally appalling deaths in Mexico, Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere.⁶ *Time* sided with journalists who took “great risks in [the] pursuit of greater truths,” but it also opined that the “death laid bare the true nature of a smiling prince, the utter absence of morality in the Saudi-U.S. alliance,” both of which redefined hyperbole. The magazine concluded that Muhammad bin Salman was little more than “a tyrant ... [who] visited [his fury] upon a man armed only with a pen.”⁷ To be sure, Jamal Khashoggi was a prominent Saudi journalist, but he was much more than that as discussed in this report. While his murder was sickening, few doubted that focusing on Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman—condemning him for allegedly ordering the murder—was a political goldmine to further isolate the Kingdom and embarrass the Al Sa’ud.

Saudi Arabia is not a democracy but neither is it a theocracy like Iran whose authoritarian features are all too evident. This Kingdom is just that: a monarchy, and King Salman—or Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman—is not a dictator like so many of his fellow Arab and/or Muslim counterparts who rule with iron fists or practice retribution. To surmise otherwise is to display acute ignorance of a dynamic society where injustice certainly exists though it pales in comparison with either established republican or democratizing societies. It is an absolute monarchy that cherishes traditions and aims to retain its age-old and amply tested norms that preserved society and ensured its security throughout time. Muhammad bin Salman, who will eventually succeed his father, is an aspiring modernizer who intends to gradually transform his society and place it on a different, and hopefully, more egalitarian footing, even if his chief faults are inexperience and obsessive staff members. Of course, there are not too many optimists

around though it is critical to ask whether Saudis would opt for the status quo or ask for, perhaps even demand, genuine political representation from their leaders. As a corollary, it is also vital to assess whether such demands would preserve current conditions, shake the very foundations of the monarchy, or literally transform it inside out.

6. Karl Vick, “The Guardians and the War on Truth,” *Time* [2018 Person of the Year], 192: 27-28, 24-31 December 2018, pp. 32-67. To its credit, *Time* carried the pictures of 52 journalists who either died over their work or were murdered as of 10 December 2018 without, however, assigning guilt to leaders in various countries. See also Associated Press, “Journalist Death Toll: Retaliation Killings Nearly Double in 2018,” *The Guardian*, 19 December 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/dec/19/journalists-death-toll-nearly-doubles-in-2018>.

7. *Time*, *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 40, 43.

Introduction

In what can only be termed as an unbecoming media frenzy, primarily fueled by prejudiced Iranian outlets, Muhammad bin Salman was assumed to be dead, the victim of an alleged shoot-out near the royal palace in Riyadh on 21 April 2018. Wild speculations over his fate were published in *Keyhan* newspaper, an official mouthpiece of the Government of Iran, which reported that the Heir Apparent had disappeared for three weeks. The newspaper further claimed that it had obtained a copy of a report by an “Arab intelligence apparatus” that the heir could have been shot by two bullets. Jumping on the Persian press bandwagon reputed for its inaccuracies, the London *Observer* speculated on the putative death, or injury in the alleged palace shooting incident, even though the Saudi government announced that what occurred was a security forces operation that destroyed a toy drone, which breached the palace perimeter. More comical still, a hashtag—“ولي العهد مصاب أو متوفى” [Heir Apparent Injured or Dead]—circulated on social media, with some anxious contributors hoping he was actually killed. One, who pretended to have insights into family affairs, asserted that the Al Sa’ud confronted “massive internal conflicts over what to do” that, presumably, prevented them from announcing his death.⁸ The challenged *Observer* journalist reported that some sources confirmed the gunfire near the palace was “in fact a coup led by Saudi royals trying to topple King Salman, [Muhammad] bin Salman’s father,” and quoted an exiled member of the ruling family, Prince Khalid bin Farhan who apparently told the *Middle East Eye* “that if his uncles—Prince Ahmad bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz and Prince Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, in particular—were to stage a coup against the current king, 99 percent of the members of the royal family, the security services and the army would stand behind them.”⁹

Adding insult to injury, it was further speculated that the alleged coup attempt was most likely retaliation against the Heir Apparent’s November 2017 “sweeping anti-corruption crackdown ... in which he detained dozens of wealthy royal members.”

8. For a flavor on the puerile exchanges, see, “Rumors Swirl Around Over MBS Fate After Month-Long Disappearance: Where Is He?,” *Al Bawaba*, 28 May 2018, at <https://www.albawaba.com/loop/rumors-swirl-around-over-mbs-fate-after-month-long-disappearance-where-he-1138154>.

9. Sissi Cao, “Is Saudi Arabia’s 32-Year-Old Crown Prince Dead?,” *The Observer*, 25 May 2018, at <http://observer.com/2018/05/is-saudi-arabias-32-year-old-crown-prince-dead/>.

Middle East Eye, an online news outlet founded in 2014 and that often carries anti-Saudi essays, added fuel to the fire when David Hearst provided Prince Khalid bin Farhan a forum to vent his frustrations. Hearst quoted the dissident prince as he pleaded with his uncles to depose King Salman because, the prince opined, “the damage being done to the Saudi royal family and the kingdom by Salman’s ‘irrational, erratic and stupid’ rule had gone beyond the point of no-return.”¹⁰

Raw and emotional, these assessments proved to be excessive and, mercifully, wrong. They told us absolutely nothing because Muhammad bin Salman was not dead and continued his duties. He travelled to Moscow on 14 June 2018 to meet with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, where he also watched the Saudi football team play in the opening World Cup game against the host country. His loyal uncles, led by Ahmad bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz and Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, did not pay any attention to a dissident’s pleas and did not rise against their brother, King Salman, and they did not stoop so low as to oppose a sitting monarch and his heir. Still, concerns over the young prince’s health were pertinent as he was slated to eventually succeed his father, who is 84-years old (born on 31 December 1935). As discussed in several publications on the subject, succession matters top most considerations related to political stability in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, even if equally critical issues must now be addressed as the heir apparent prepares himself and his nation for the next phase.¹¹

10. David Hearst, “Call for Coup in Saudi: Dissident Prince Urges Uncles to Seize Power,” *Middle East Eye*, 21 May 2018, at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coup-saudi-dissident-prince-khaled-bin-farhan-urges-uncles-seize-power-mbs-1776042904>.

11. This chronicle follows-up on previous narratives dealing with succession matters. Consequently, it aims to look forward and picks up on key analyses provided earlier, and while every effort was made to avoid duplication, some previously published items are included here for clarity. Readers interested in background materials may refer to: Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001; Idem, *Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies*, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008, pp. 225-277 [chapter on Saudi Arabia]; Idem, *Succession Challenges in the Arab Gulf Monarchies*, Seoul, the Republic of Korea : The ASAN Institute, December 2015, available online at: <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/succession-challenges-in-the-arab-gulf-monarchies/>; and Idem, “The Politics of Succession in Saudi Arabia: A Struggle for Primogeniture,” in Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, ed., *The Changing Security Dynamics of The Persian Gulf*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 143-163, 238-245.

Methodology

To better approach the subject, Chapter one, *Succession and Primogeniture*, provides an assessment of the reasons why King Salman introduced changes to the succession mechanism and opted for primogeniture. This is followed by the elevation of his nephew Prince Muhammad bin Nayif to what turned out to be a very short heirship, before he elevated his son Muhammad to the same position, though he did not rule out other qualified princes from rulership.

The narrative in Chapter two, *The Quest for Consolidation*, then delves in the heir apparent's quest to strengthen his powers. Attention is devoted to the internal challenges that Muhammad bin Salman must tackle as he responds to criticisms regarding his elevation. An effort is made to assess what was demanded from him, and plans for elaborate economic projects, ostensibly to remedy existing conditions. These are followed by a careful examination of the vital role occupied by the religious establishment and how the King and his Heir are handling concerns associated with this vital legitimizing community. The section closes with an effort to update the Kingdom's legal conundrum that, without a doubt, will largely shape the country's direction in the future.

Without being comprehensive, Chapter three, *Regional and Global Trials*, concentrates on several external challenges, looking at ties with the United States, Russia, leading Asian powers (including Pakistan, India, China, and the Republic of Korea), as well as the United Kingdom and France. Naturally, relations with the Arab World are surveyed too, especially Saudi Arabia's policies vis-à-vis the "Arab Spring" phenomenon, relevant contacts with Gulf Cooperation Council partners, and the repercussions of the War for the Yemen. The section closes with a discussion of the sensitive relationships with

Revolutionary Iran, a neighboring state whose presence is, and will always be, felt.¹²

Chapter four, *The Consequences of the Khashoggi Affair*, first examines the disturbing developments that targeted Saudi Arabia after 2015. It aims to document why Muhammad bin Salman was so despised and what actually occurred on 2 October 2018, both in Istanbul as well as in Southaven, Mississippi. Although the Khashoggi assassination was an acknowledged fact, it was too soon to reach any conclusions as to what exactly happened, and who gave the ultimate order to murder the journalist. The chapter closes with an assessment of Khashoggi and the mysteries surrounding his life.

In *Succession in Saudi Arabia after the Khashoggi Affair*, the subject of Chapter 5, an effort is first made to assess the initial aftermath of the murder. As in previous chapters, the narrative looks into the actual focus on Muhammad bin Salman before 2 October 2018 and the fallout of this development on succession matters. What were and are some of the sophisticated speculations under way and, at an experimental level, why was there such attention on succession after the Khashoggi Affair that, presumably, would see a dramatic change at the top?

The sixth and last chapter of the chronicle, *Succession and Rule*, provides an assessment of King Salman's Rule after 2015, offers initial suppositions concerning Muhammad bin Salman when he becomes ruler and, in turn, when he appoints his own heir. The discussion ends with several assumptions on the political stability of the Kingdom until 2030.

12. There are, of course, dozens of crucial relationships between the Kingdom and various Asian and European powers that deserve careful analysis although the focus in this chronicle is limited to selected countries. This does not mean that Japan, Germany, Spain or Italy, along with several other important states do not play or would not continue to realize major initiatives with the Kingdom. In fact, Riyadh was keenly interested in forging mutually beneficial relationships with many, including Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, and others, and may well be in a position to doing precisely that in the years and decades ahead, although these discussions are excluded from this study for practical reasons.

Chapter 1

Succession and Primogeniture

King Salman Changes the Succession Mechanism

Muhammad bin Nayif as Heir Apparent

Muhammad bin Salman as Heir Apparent

Chapter 1. Succession and Primogeniture

Less than a year after his accession to rulership, King Salman allegedly confronted an epochal crisis when an unnamed senior prince launched an unprecedented call for change in the country's leadership. The news was splashed across news outlets, which emphasized how the ailing monarch faced a combination of challenges as the Kingdom was at war and oil prices sank, all of which spelled gloom and doom.¹³ The worse criticism leveled by "one of the grandsons of the state's founder," concerned Salman's management of the holy cities. To be sure, this was not the first time that such a frontal assault was lobbed against a ruler, though our intrepid dissident senior prince apparently wrote two letters that called for the removal of the King. "The king is not in a stable condition and in reality the son of the king [Muhammad bin Salman] is ruling the kingdom," the prince apparently ranted. "So four or possibly five of my uncles will meet soon to discuss the letters. They are making a plan with a lot of nephews and that will open the door. A lot of the second generation is very anxious." *The Guardian* newspaper, an otherwise reliable source but still hostile to the Al Sa'ud and Arab monarchies in general, further quoted the prince stating: "The public are also pushing this very hard, all kinds of people, tribal leaders. They say you have to do this or the country will go to disaster."¹⁴

Interestingly, and according to the London daily newspaper, the critical letters were "read more than 2 million times," and called on the surviving sons of the founder—specifically the princes Talal, Turki and Ahmad bin 'Abdul 'Aziz—"to unite and remove the leadership in a palace coup, before choosing a new government from within the

royal family."¹⁵ The first letter presumably pleaded "the oldest and most capable [be allowed] to take over the affairs of the state, let the new king and crown prince take allegiance from all, and cancel the strange, new rank of second deputy premier." It further called for the sons of the founder monarch, "from the oldest Bandar, to the youngest, Muqrin, to make an urgent meeting with the senior family members to investigate the situation and find out what can be done to save the country, to make changes in the important ranks, [and] to bring in expertise from the ruling family whatever generation they are from."¹⁶ Remarkably, and although a prominent Saudi journalist poured scorn on the idea that a power struggle loomed in the country, this was merely reported for balance. Jamal Khashoggi, then the General Manager of the still-born *Al Arab* television station, questioned the authenticity of the letter by stating that he knew of "a prince who [was] always exchanging ... documents and articles" with him. Khashoggi affirmed that the putative letters were fictitious, had not circulated as implied, and raised doubts about their authenticity. He went so far as to declare: "the succession issue is settled for now in Saudi Arabia."¹⁷ Few remembered this quotation after Khashoggi was murdered on 2 October 2018, although this was a clear piece of evidence that Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman, falsely accused by sycophants and those anxious to derail American-Saudi ties for ordering the assassination, did not consider Khashoggi to be an "enemy-of-the-people" if only to paraphrase Donald J. Trump.

Irrespective of this critical denial by Jamal Khashoggi, and a day after this bombshell bulletin was splashed across Western newspapers, readers were informed that King Salman had "thrown caution to the wind," allegedly because he "also made significant changes in the royal pecking order which, coupled with the recent disasters in Mecca

13. Before the news was picked-up by mainstream newspapers, it was splashed across the Internet. See Rori Donaghy, "Senior Saudi Royal Urges Leadership Change for Fear of Monarchy Collapse, *Middle East Eye*, 22 September 2015, at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-senior-royal-urges-change-amid-fears-monarchy-collapse-1612130905>.

14. Hugh Miles, "Saudi Royal Calls for Regime Change in Riyadh," *The Guardian*, 28 September 2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/28/saudi-royal-calls-regime-change-letters-leadership-king-salman>.

15. On 23 December 2018, King Salman presided over funeral prayers for his brother Talal, which further belied facile commentaries like these. See "Saudi Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz Passes Away Aged 87," *Al-Arabiya*, 22 December 2018, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2018/12/23/Saudi-King-Salman-performs-funeral-prayers-on-late-Prince-Talal.html>.

16. *Ibid.* Copies of the two letters (or similes thereof since one is not sure whether these were doctored), are in the author's hands, though it is important to note that such documents cannot be authenticated. Both letters are highly provocative and include the names of leading signatories who, it goes without saying, were quick to deny they ever affixed their signatures to either manuscript.

17. Donaghy, *op. cit.*

that cost more than 800 lives, help to explain the current rumblings of discontent from within the royal family.”¹⁸ The author of this reportage linked the two events together—the Makkah incident and our brave prince’s imaginary letters—and repeated the story of the unnamed Saudi royal—a grandson of the Kingdom’s founder readers were dutifully reminded—who, the narrative added, appeared to have “support from others in the clan.” Because our fearless prince’s letter said things commoners might not have the courage to state, someone with royal blood was less “likely to be carted off to jail and flogged,” the article quoted our noble official declaring. Far more important, what this essay purported to highlight was the existence of a fundamental problem in the Saudi system: “its unaccountable autocracy.” With razor-sharp precision, the reader was told that “decisions are handed down from on high—decisions which in Salman’s case many consider to be rash, and which certainly have far-reaching implications for the kingdom’s future. In other countries these would be subjected to some kind of public scrutiny and national debate before being finalised, but not in Saudi Arabia,” because the Kingdom apparently continued to suppress most civil society activities.¹⁹

These were not the only recent assertions that King Salman was a loose cannon with little awareness of what he was doing, or that he was healthy enough to rule over a Kingdom, or that he was even capable of holding cogent conversations with visiting

dignitaries.²⁰ What several authors aimed to discuss were the generational conflict that allegedly existed within the ruling Al Sa‘ud as powerful wings of the family presumably battled for preeminence after King ‘Abdallah died. Whatever irritated these observers was difficult to decipher though King Salman’s decision to replace his predecessor’s men with his own people added fuel to the fodder. This was, at least for some analysts, an illustration of a struggle even if a monarch was merely exercising his authority. Interestingly, outsiders focused on the rapidity with which some of the changes occurred—within a week of the accession and in certain cases even faster—that, to say the least, unsettled many. For example, few expected that the powerful head of the royal court under King ‘Abdallah, Khalid al-Tuwayjri, would be summarily dismissed and replaced by the new monarch’s son, Muhammad bin Salman. Notwithstanding palace rumors that trickled out at the speed of sound, few questioned Tuwayjri’s machinations as he attempted to secure his own position and contrived to have one of the late King’s sons, Prince Mit‘ab bin ‘Abdallah appointed as deputy heir apparent. Even fewer raised the flag that Tuwayjri, a non-royal, was immersed in what ought not have concerned him to begin with. While largely forgotten, Tuwayjri held court during the late King ‘Abdallah’s last days, and literally closed the door to visiting dignitaries who rushed to the monarch’s bedside. Such a misstep may have been overlooked in the case of junior officials but not when it concerned the dying King’s brothers, including Salman bin

18. The Makkah deaths were caused by a stampede, as an estimated 2,400 pilgrims perished during the annual Hajj, most of whom suffocated or were crushed in the Mina area, on 24 September 2015. The estimates of the number of dead varied with the Associated Press placing the figure at 2,411, while the AFP advanced the figure 2,236. The government officially reported two days after the event that there had been 769 killed in the stampede and 934 injured. See Brian Whitaker, “Saudi Arabia is Worried—and Not Just About its King,” *The Guardian*, 29 September 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/29/saudi-arabia-king-salman-spending-gulf>.

19. *Ibid.*

20. There are many sources that make outrageous claims about the Al Sa‘ud even if most are of the immaterial variety. For illustration purposes, see Kamel Daoud, “Saudi Arabia, An ISIS That Has Made It,” *The New York Times*, 20 November 2015, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/opinion/saudi-arabia-an-isis-that-has-made-it.html>; Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Saudi Arabia: Running into the Sand,” *Financial Review—afr.com*, 16 November 2016, at <https://www.afr.com/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-is-running-into-the-sand-20161108-gsl0h3>; Elihugh Abner, “The Collapse of Saudi Arabia and the Cataclysmic Power Shift in the Middle East,” *Journal of International Affairs* 69:2, March 2016, pp. 169-176; Ben Rich and Ben MacQueen, “The Saudi State as an Identity Racketeer,” *Middle East Critique* 26:2, February 2017, pp. 105-121; Bruce Riedel, “Will Saudi Arabia’s King Salman Abdicate?,” The Brookings Institution, 23 June 2017, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/23/will-saudi-arabias-king-salman-abdicate/>; Jacques Neriah, “Is the Saudi Throne Shaking?,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Policy* 17:28, 7 November 2017, at <http://jcpa.org/article/saudi-throne-shaking/>, and Hanif Ghaffari, “Bin Salman is Doomed to Failure,” *Tehran Times*, 9 May 2018, at <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/423381/Bin-Salman-is-doomed-to-failure>.

‘Abdul ‘Aziz.²¹

Of course, Prince Mit‘ab bin ‘Abdallah regretted his behavior, but the opportunism coaxed by Tuwayjri failed. The worst part was Tuwayjri’s meekly attempts to have Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz declared mentally unfit to rule, something that was hinted at in the letter that called on senior Al Sa‘ud members to sideline him. In the event, that was not to be, and the new ruler favored younger members of the family to be close to him. This preference became blatant especially after the ruler secured the resignation of his first Heir Apparent, Prince Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz and replaced him with a nephew, then Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayif. King Salman entrusted his own son Muhammad with the deputy heirship that further mucked the waters for those allergic to change. Astonishingly, the plucky yet unnamed prince supposedly wrote in his clandestine letter: “[We have neglected] the marginalisation of the elders and the carriers of experience, as well as the surrender of command to the new generations of foolish dreamers who are acting behind the façade of an incapable king,” adding, “how could we accept the marginalisation of King Abdulaziz’s sons both in power and in the processes of policy making?”²² For some obscure reason, it did not occur to the author of this unproven communication that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a monarchy, and that the ruler was the ultimate decision-maker. Be that as it may, the letter was interpreted by King Salman as a sign of disapproval of his rule and appointments, although the monarch remained steadfast in his quest to remake the institutional mechanism that dealt with succession matters.

King Salman Changes the Succession Mechanism

It was thus a foregone conclusion that King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz would quickly appoint the second deputy prime minister, Prince Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, as his heir to the throne on 23 January 2015 even if some anticipated gloom and doom doubting that the designee would be so elevated along the pecking order. What came as a surprise,

21. Although this information circulated widely in late 2014, it is impossible to verify, and is mentioned here as a possible justification for King Salman’s quick decision to dismiss Tuwayjri after the heir apparent acceded rulership. It does not imply that the monarch sought revenge but to simply affirm that a non-royal exceeded his authority to interfere in what were private family matters that, to say the least, was unacceptable.

22. Donaghy, *op. cit.*

however, was the speed with which the then 79-years-old monarch—presumably with the knowledge if not the approval of his heir apparent—issued various decrees that reshuffled the cabinet a few days after he succeeded the late King ‘Abdallah.²³

As expected, Prince Muqrin became the heir apparent, even if the royal decree that appointed Prince Muhammad bin Nayif as heir to the heir apparent surprised everyone. The designation was a vintage Al Sa‘ud move, which amply illustrated how serious the process was and, perhaps more important, how keen the ruling family remained to maintain domestic stability. In fact, as Minister of the Interior—a position he kept throughout his tenure in office—Prince Muhammad bin Nayif’s chief writ was counter-terrorism, which clarified what the new ruler’s priorities were. Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, who was born in 1959, earned his well-deserved reputation as a doer, and secured an impeccable reputation as someone who knew how to protect the Kingdom from extremists. Educated in the United States—he received a bachelor of arts degree in political science in 1981—with extensive specialized counter-terrorism coursework with the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well as Scotland Yard in the United Kingdom, the heir to the heir apparent believed in rehabilitating young Saudis who veered away from the country’s cherished values. Moreover, and as the architect of the Kingdom’s counter-insurgency program, he went out of his way to win over each extremist who wished to redeem himself, and personally welcomed those who recanted in his majlis for a full reconciliation session.²⁴

What turned heads in January 2015 was another appointment, however. In addition to Princes Muqrin and Muhammad bin Nayif, King Salman also appointed his son Muhammad bin Salman as the country’s new defense minister—a post entrusted to Salman by the late King ‘Abdallah—along with the sensitive portfolio of Chief of the Royal Court (Diwan). Whether the rapid dismissal from the post of Chief of the

23. Kéchichian, *The Politics of Succession in Saudi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-163, 238-245.

24. For his bravura, the prince survived at least four assassination attempts, one of which required hospitalization and, remarkably, the visit of King ‘Abdallah to his hospital bed. On 27 August 2009, a terrorist detonated himself as he entered the minister’s majlis, even if the two men were in contact for several weeks/months, and had exchanged telephone conversations a few days before the assassination attempt, when the extremist expressed a desire to turn himself in. See Associated Press, “Saudi Prince Injured in Suicide Bomb Attack,” *The Guardian*, 28 August 2009, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/aug/28/saudi-prince-injured-suicide-bomb>.

Figure 1. King of Saudi Arabia: Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud



Source: © Yonhap News.

Diwan was planned was difficult to know although Khalid al-Tuwayjri, the incumbent, was not particularly popular. As stated above, al-Tuwayjri was viewed with suspicion and many Saudis alleged that he was a corrupt individual, though he was in the late monarch's good graces. In mid-2014, Prince Khalid bin Talal bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz launched an attack on his Twitter account against al-Tuwayjri that, at the time, surprised many. While the cryptic messages did not name the Chief of the Diwan, it referred to “The Supreme Leader [who] has opened his own Court,” adding that he disrupted the affairs of state and accumulated a lot of wealth in the process. Another grandson of the founder, Prince Sa‘ud bin Sayf al-Nasir targeted Tuwayjri openly, accusing him of corruption over a series of tweets as well.²⁵

25. For an examination of Sa‘ud bin Sayf al-Nasir and his numerous missives, see his twitter page at https://twitter.com/SAUD_SAIFALNASR?lang=ar.

As in the past, an exceptionally well-oiled Al Sa‘ud method was in full view in late January 2015 when members of the ruling family, senior clerics, government officials, and Saudi citizens pledged their allegiance (*bay‘ah*) to the monarch and his heir in several ceremonies across the country. In fact, the Muqrin designation as heir confirmed that the late King ‘Abdallah’s choice was respected, which also affirmed that the succession torch would now pass to a new generation of Al Sa‘ud with Muhammad bin Nayif. Towards that end, Riyadh convened the Allegiance Council members to affirm these two choices, which further set the stage to an orderly transition process.²⁶ With these affirmations, King Salman underscored how he perceived the succession mechanism in Saudi Arabia, as he considered lineage to be a key factor in any choices made, though meritocracy was also vital, best illustrated by the appointment of Prince Muhammad bin Nayif.²⁷

To be sure, detractors anticipated catastrophes around every corner, and what preoccupied analysts was the putative handing of power to a new generation of Al Sa‘ud, even if these selections displayed impeccable discipline. In fact, King Salman upheld his predecessor’s commitments to place the family’s as well as the country’s interests above all else and, under the circumstances, those who expected a full-blown internal power struggle were probably disappointed as Saudi Arabia remained focused. The monarch’s priorities concentrated on internal harmony and, towards that end, he ushered in dramatic changes that caught many by surprise. It was not long after this

26. Robin Wright, “The Saudi Royal Family Shakeup,” *The New Yorker*, 30 April 2015, at <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-saudi-royal-family-shakeup>. See also Ben Hubbard and Neil MacFarquhar, “A Saudi Royal Shake-Up With a Goal of Stability,” *The New York Times*, 29 April 2015, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/world/middleeast/king-salman-saudi-arabia-succession-changes.html>. For details on the Allegiance Council, see Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Sa‘udi Arabia*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 137-146, 231-241; and Stig Stenslie, “Salman’s Succession: Challenges to Stability in Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Quarterly* 39:2, July 2016, pp. 117-138.

27. Of course, critics of Prince Muqrin stressed that he was not eligible for rulership because his mother was a Yemeni and, therefore, had no royal blood. See Liz Sly, “Appointment of Deputy Heir to Throne Stirs Controversy in Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Post*, 26 May 2014, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/appointment-of-deputy-heir-to-throne-stirs-controversy-in-saudi-arabia/2014/05/26/1397be64-53cd-4a9c-b3f9-78c904abee92_story.html.

serious shake-up that the monarch elevated his nephew to the heirship.²⁸

Muhammad bin Nayif as Heir Apparent

To be sure, the 23 January 2015 elevation of Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz to become heir apparent, confirmed continuity and stability as the new monarch consolidated his authority and though the Prince was eventually replaced, it was important to briefly discuss his original appointment. As steadiness and constancy were classic Al Sa‘ud family objectives, even if disagreements existed between the late King ‘Abdallah and his heir apparent on various political issues, the new monarch ensured permanence. Moreover, King Salman added value to his predecessor’s considerable innovation on succession matters when he appointed his nephew, Muhammad bin Nayif, as Deputy Heir Apparent and eventual successor, which safeguarded the notion that a new generation of leaders would come to power in what everyone concluded would be a smooth process. On 29 April 2015, however, the monarch practiced “Shock and Awe” in Riyadh when he relieved Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, reportedly upon the latter’s request, and ushered in a reshuffle that raised many questions and added substantial fuel to the speculation fire that Saudi Arabia was bound to confront serious challenges in the years ahead.²⁹

Even if rumors circulated between January and April 2015 throughout the Kingdom that Prince Muqrin would be relieved from his heirship and that Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the King’s son, Minister of Defense, Head of the Royal Court, and Chairman of the Economic Committee, would assume yet another critical post, most did not expect that to occur for several more years. Instead, an official royal decree read on television informed Saudis that Muhammad bin Nayif, 55, a grandson of the

founder of Saudi Arabia, was elevated to the heirship, though the affable prince was also tasked to retain his thankless Ministry of Interior portfolio along with the chairmanship of the security committee that, truth be told, took their toll.³⁰ Muhammad bin Nayif and Muhammad bin Salman served the Kingdom, and while the result of these shocking announcements was a realization that nearly all of the Kingdom’s powers were now entrusted to the two Muhammads, what followed was even more dramatic.

Muhammad bin Salman as Heir Apparent

A week before the 21 June 2017 royal decree that dismissed Muhammad bin Nayif from all of his positions and elevated Muhammad bin Salman to the heirship was issued, a leading commentator for the London *Financial Times* wrote that he had “heard a faint rumour of an intense quarrel within the Saudi royal family, which was presumed to be focused on an attempt to force King Salman to rein in his son, ... and to return the country to something closer to normality after three years of chaotic ambition and growing instability.”³¹ Nick Butler envisaged a palace coup and how that would reshape the oil market. With the appointment—not a coup but a full-fledged royal decision to alter the succession order—Butler fantasized how Muhammad bin Salman “deposed the crown prince and [had] taken full authority over everything including the key role of internal security.” This was a provocative declaration that was quickly emulated by many others, although a few exceptions stood out, even if their voices were limited to more serious audiences.³² For Butler, however, the move was Shakespearean, as he added:

“Who better to chronicle the unravelling story of the House of Saud? An ailing

28. “A Saudi Royal Shake-Up With a Goal of Stability,” *The New York Times*, 29 April 2015, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/world/middleeast/king-salman-saudi-arabia-succession-changes.html>. Prince Muqrin’s resignation led to many speculations that failed to clarify motives. For a flavor of the controversy see, Nick Gass, “In Sudden Shakeup, Saudi King Taps New Crown Prince with Close US Ties,” *POLITICO*, 29 April 2015, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/saudi-king-crown-prince-with-close-us-ties/>; and Paul Aarts and Carolien Roelants, “The Perils of the Transfer of Power in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 9:4, October 2016, pp. 596-606.

29. Kéchichian, *The Politics of Succession in Saudi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-153.

30. For details on the two committees [The Council of Political and Security Affairs and The Council of Economic and Development Affairs] as well as the year-long Muhammad bin Nayif tenure, see Kéchichian, *The Politics of Succession in Saudi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-153, 155-159.

31. Nick Butler, “A family Coup in Saudi Arabia,” *The Financial Times*, 26 June 2017, at <https://www.ft.com/content/78e87714-c846-3ddd-b94b-65a44654b106>.

32. See, for example John Duke Anthony, “A New Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia,” Washington, D.C.: National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, 24 June 2017, at <https://ncusar.org/aa/2017/06/new-crown-prince-saudi-arabia/>. Anthony explained the actual mechanism and believed that the latest appointment ought to “be interpreted as a sign of support for [Muhammad bin Salman’s] bold domestic policy and foreign relations projects.” See also Fatiha Dazi-Héni, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-120.

king breaks the delicate balance of the ruling family to promote his son—a young man whose vanity can be exploited by every breed of consultant and banker—over the trusted heir apparent. All this against the background of falling revenues from the kingdom’s one source of wealth, hostility from neighbours and sometime friends, in the context of a region split by the revival of religious conflicts. We are somewhere between King Lear and Richard II.”

The decree that appointed a new heir was merely the first step of many anticipated developments—all bad, according to the Butlers of this world—because, according to this line of thinking, Saudi Arabia was internally destabilized, regionally isolated, and had an unreliable ally in Washington. No power grab ever produced long-term success, opined Butler, since such maneuvers only generated instability.

The Financial Times was not the only source that carried such scurrilous commentaries. Simon Henderson, the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy—who brags about the fact that he never visited the Kingdom—was equally gloomy. Henderson quickly concluded that King Salman was in poor health,

“walks with a cane and, when meeting foreign leaders, sits before a computer screen to remind him of his talking points. Once reputed to be the House of Saud’s institutional memory, Salman now often displays a puzzled visage and has leaned increasingly on [Muhammad bin Salman] for advice, apparently regarding him as almost a reincarnation of King Abdulaziz, known as Ibn Saud, Salman’s father and the founder in 1932 of Saudi Arabia.”³³

Henderson further opined that the monarch had positioned his eldest son from his “third wife as his intended eventual successor,” and provided a précis on the heir apparent that was comical in more ways than one: “At thirty-one,” the reader was informed, Muhammad bin Salman wore “sandals rather than the Gucci shoes favored by some of his cousins,” did not “speak fluent English,” was rigid in his views even if he

33. Simon Henderson, “The New ‘King’ of Saudi Arabia,” *Policy Alert*, 21 June 2017, Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-new-king-of-saudi-arabia>.

allowed “his views to be challenged,” and was ruthless. Of course, the journalist-cum-scholar repeated “the bullet story” mentioned above, as if repetition sealed veracity, and listed the young prince’s many faults, including being “the architect of the deadlocked war in Yemen,” his determination to regain possession of Tiran and Sanafir, two Red Sea islands administered by Egypt, and his adoption of what could only be described as a despotic behavior vis-à-vis Qatar. Henderson reiterated Muhammad bin Salman’s alleged obsession with Iran and apparent favorable view to eventually initiate ties with Israel. As an avowed energy expert, he even complained about Muhammad bin Salman’s position to arbitrate Saudi policy on oil, “the price of which is, for Riyadh, worryingly low and trending lower, imperiling the groundbreaking IPO [Initial Public Offering] of Saudi Aramco.” He closed his opinion piece with a caveat on *Vision 2030*, the Kingdom’s “ambitious plan to reform its economy and society,” that needed to be “encouraged, although the cultural barriers are great and reduced oil revenues mean funding is problematic.”³⁴

This was followed by another unproven and equally undocumented assertion related to an alleged Muhammad bin Nayif contract worth \$5.4 million with Stryk S.P.G.—a lobbying firm close to the Donald J. Trump team in 2016–2017. King Salman apparently got wind of the deal after Stryk S.P.G. revealed its income to federal agents as required by the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 in the United States, and demanded that Muhammad bin Nayif explain himself, which was wholly unlikely since the monarch wished to get as close to the Trump Administration as possible. Still, detractors assumed, again without the shred of any evidence, that the King took advantage of this

34. *Ibid.* As discussed in Chapter 4, below, all of these sharp disparagements were thrown at Muhammad bin Salman before the Khashoggi murder that, for Henderson and others, offered a golden opportunity to further denigrate the Kingdom’s heir apparent.

putative misstep to sack his nephew and entrust the heirship to his son.³⁵

It was altogether depressing to read that King Salman was hasty in his decision to alter the succession pattern, and exercise his royal prerogative to appoint whomever he pleased, to the position of heir. It was critical to repeat that Salman was the monarch and that he was entirely capable to reach his decision(s) in a clearly thought-out manner, no matter gratuitous insinuations about his mental capabilities.³⁶ He and he alone perceived this appointment to be in the best interest of the country, which disappointed equally qualified candidates for the post, though only a single individual could be chosen. In the event, not only was Muhammad bin Salman acclaimed by a majority and received the oath of allegiance from most members of the Al Sa'ud, the appointment was sealed after the *Hay'at al-Bay'ah* [Allegiance Commission] reportedly

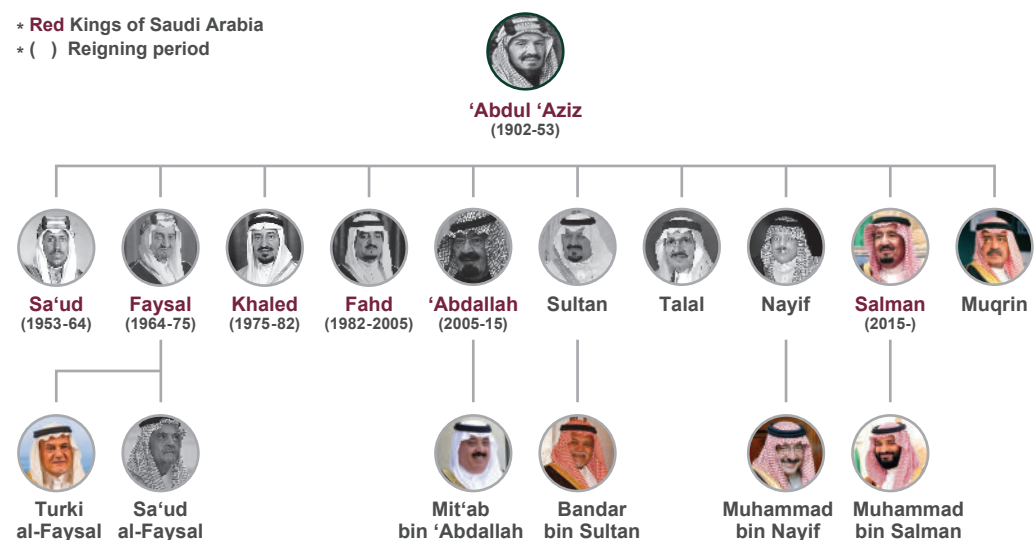
35. Charles G. Cogan, "Arabie Saoudite: Chronique d'un Changement d'Ordre de Succession," *Questions Internationales*, Number 89, January-February 2018, pp. 25-28. Cogan, a former CIA Station Chief in Paris, France, passed away in December 2017 but delivered his remarks on 17 June 2017 to the Association of Former Intelligence Officers gathered in Kennebunkport, Maine. According to the editor of *Questions Internationales*, who relayed these details under Cogan's name, the Stryk S.P.G. references were reported in Kenneth P. Vogel and Theodor Meyer, "Trump Drawn into Saudi Game of Thrones," *POLITICO*, 17 May 2017, at <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/17/donald-trump-saudi-arabia-238464>. See also Theodor Meyer, "Saudi Lobbying Contract Ended the Day Crown Prince was Deposed," *POLITICO*, 3 August 2017, at <https://www.politico.com/tipsheets/politico-influence/2017/08/03/saudi-lobbying-contract-ended-the-day-crown-prince-was-deposed-221691>. For details on the Stryk S.P.G. ties with the Trump Administration, see Nicholas Confessore, "How to Get Rich in Trump's Washington," *The New York Times*, 30 August 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/30/magazine/how-to-get-rich-in-trumps-washington.html>.

36. Discussions regarding the King's dementia or pre-dementia, among other debilitating diseases, are readily available on the Internet although giving any of them credibility is meaningless. There is no denying that the monarch is advanced in age but, to date, there has not been any evidence that whatever condition(s) he may suffer from prevented him from exercising his full mental capabilities and reaching political decisions in the interest of his nation. For a flavor of the insinuations regarding the ruler's health, see Kéchichian, *The Politics of Succession in Saudi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 239.

cast 31 votes in favor to 3 votes against.³⁷ For Bruce Riedel, the Muhammad bin Salman appointment was part of a "study in transition, disorder, and discontinuity—not stability and order," as the former CIA agent and National Security Council official opined that "what was once a very predictable royal family line of succession has become unpredictable."³⁸ In Riedel's case as well, the right of a King to alter the succession pattern in his own country was dismissed as a reckless effort, allegedly because the decision ushered in "unpredictability."

In fact, what King Salman did was not particularly complicated. He altered the line of succession from a lateral mechanism—which saw six sons of the founder of the

Figure 2. Saudi Arabia's Royal Family Tree



Source: © The Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

37. "All You Need to Know about the Pledge of Allegiance and the Allegiance Council," *Al Arabiya*, 21 June 2017, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/06/21/All-you-need-to-know-about-the-pledge-of-allegiance-and-the-allegiance-council.html>.

38. Riedel, Will Saudi Arabia's King Salman Abdicate?, *op. cit.*

Third Monarchy, ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman, reign—to primogeniture.³⁹ Notwithstanding this preference, it was important to note that Royal Decrees A-255 and A-256 (26 Ramadan 1438 AH or 21 June 2017), which selected Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud as Heir Apparent, amended Article 5 (b) of the Kingdom’s Basic Law of Governance too. The original Article stipulated:

Article 5 (b): “Rulers of the country shall be from amongst the sons of the founder, King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman al-Faysal Al Sa‘ud, and their descendants. The most upright among them shall receive allegiance according to the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him).⁴⁰

As amended, a sentence was added by King Salman to this section, which now reads as follows:

Article 5 (b): “Rulers of the country shall be from amongst the sons of the founder, King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman al-Faysal Al Sa‘ud, and their descendants. The most upright among them shall receive allegiance according to the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him). After the sons of the founder, no future King or Heir Apparent shall henceforth be selected from his own branch of the family.⁴¹

This addition did not mean that King Salman did not favor primogeniture but that he recognized two very specific concerns that may well preoccupy Saudi leaders: (1) the availability of a vast pool of capable future trailblazers within the family, and (2) that he, or his successor, or any number of senior princes, could and ought to seek the most talented heir possible to serve Crown and Country.

39. Kéchichian, *The Politics of Succession in Saudi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-163. See also Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Mystique of Monarchy: The Magic of Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia,” in Al-Rasheed, *Salman’s Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-71.

40. Kéchichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

41. For the text of Royal Decree A-256 (26 Ramadan 1438 AH or 21 June 2017), see “Amr Malakih: al-Amir Muhammad bin Salman Walian lil-‘Ahd wa Na’iban li-Ra’is Majlis al-Wuzarah” [Royal Decree: Prince Muhammad bin Salman is Heir Apparent and Deputy Prime Minister], *Al-Riyadh Daily*, 21 June 2017, at <http://www.alriyadh.com/1604536>.

As discussed in the last part of this report, Prince Muhammad bin Salman will have to earn his rulership, though it is unbecoming to blame him for all of the challenges that Saudi society confronts or to place every shortcoming on his laps. It is entirely legitimate to assess his performances but what is tangential is to doubt his father, and his monarch’s, decision to elevate him to the post. This, it is critical to repeat, is the prerogative of a King in any monarchy, much less in an absolute monarchy. Moreover, and even if the Al Sa‘ud are well known for their survival features, it is facile to state that “they are in very stormy weather,” as Riedel has written. What is more puerile is to ask whether the ruler will now “abdicate the throne and turn power over to the son he clearly trusts?”⁴² Again, and as discussed below, that possibility cannot be ruled out given King Salman’s advanced age, but it is vital to underscore that in a monarchy, there can only be a single ruler even if caution compels the incumbent to seek advice from a broad range of stakeholders. Assigning Muhammad bin Salman a nickname like “Mr. Everything because he has been given control of the military, the economy (including the oil industry), and even control of the entertainment business,” is unbecoming. In a monarchy, the ruler is the ultimate decision-maker, but he seeks advice from as many folks as possible. For now, that individual is King Salman who, in time, will be succeeded by his son Muhammad.

42. Riedel, *Will Saudi Arabia’s King Salman Abdicate?*, *op. cit.*

Chapter 2

The Quest for Consolidation

Internal Challenges

Potential Remedies and Economic Transformations

The Vital Role of the Religious Establishment

A Necessary Update of the Kingdom's Legal Conundrum

Chapter 2. The Quest for Consolidation

Because the Kingdom is a traditional society in every sense of the term, the Al Sa'ud seldom experimented with innovations, as most of the population looked with pride on past accomplishments that were, truth be told, reached through painstaking due diligence. Any break with the pace of change would, consequently, be of an epochal nature and that was precisely what circumstances required as the Kingdom entered the second decade of the twenty-first century. Notwithstanding critics who perceived the reforms introduced after 2015—which were, of course, building on previous transformations under several monarchs—as being little more than an outright power grab, what Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman embarked upon was meaningful, especially after he secured the monarch's approval to introduce a gargantuan new economic plan for Saudi Arabia.

The purpose of this chapter is, first, to assess some of the internal challenges that confront and will preoccupy Saudi Arabia over the next few years. It then evaluates how the heir apparent responded and continues to retort to critics, as an attempt is made to gauge the country's economic realities and what kinds of remedies may be available to deal with them. The chapter then examines the vital role of the religious establishment in tolerating critical transformations of major institutions and offers a few remarks on the requirements that may be necessary to embark upon a revision of the Kingdom's legal institutions.

Internal Challenges

At the height of a political crisis with Canada over a tweet that called for the “immediate release” of human rights activists detained in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh embarked on a diplomatic crisis that saw the withdrawal of its ambassador from Ottawa and the expulsion of Canada's envoy from the Kingdom. Saudi authorities froze new trade and investment projects between the two countries, canceled flights to Toronto by the national airline, and forcibly withdrew the bulk of their students studying in Canadian

colleges.⁴³ What followed was ugly, with a Saudi twitter adopting nationalistic fervor when it carried a thinly veiled threat—showing an Air Canada plane flying toward Toronto's skyline, reminding the world of the 9/11 attacks. The image was quickly withdrawn and an apology issued, but it illustrated the deep resentment that some harbored towards any criticisms of Muhammad bin Salman and his plethora of reforms that were, more often than not, ridiculed and dismissed as little more than cosmetic acts. Many Saudis, especially among Generation Z youngsters (a cohort which demographers define as people born since 1997), praised and continue to look-up to Muhammad bin Salman for fighting to transform the Kingdom's economy, steering the country away from religious zealotry, and for enacting concrete reforms like lifting the ban on women driving and ushering in full-fledged entertainment options.⁴⁴ What many objected to were the allegations of unprecedented crackdown on dissent, including imprisoning senior officials, selected women's rights activists, a few journalists and several clerics, all of which occurred, but within specifically drawn boundaries. Most, including the overwhelming majority of Saudis from all walks of life and from both genders, weighed these restrictions against the plethora of changes that dramatically altered life in the country over such a short period of time.

To be sure, suppressions negated the heir apparent's proclivity for liberal democracy, though he never claimed that he intended for the Kingdom to become one. What he declared in various interviews and reiterated to one and all, was for the country to introduce meaningful reforms on a gradual basis and, equally important, to protect and preserve the ruling family from internal as well as external foes irrespective of any

43. Robin Wright, “Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Picks a Very Strange Fight with Canada,” *The New Yorker*, 8 August 2018, at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/saudi-arabias-crown-prince-picks-a-very-strange-fight-with-canada>.

44. Holly Ellyatt, “Young Saudis Get Behind Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Reform Drive, Mostly,” *CNBC*, 8 May 2018, at <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/08/crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-wins-over-young-saudis.html>. See also James Langton and Gillian Duncan, “Arab Youth Survey 2018: Saudi Crown Prince and his Reforms Win Huge Support from Young People Across the Middle East,” *The National*, 8 May 2018, at <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/arab-youth-survey-2018-saudi-crown-prince-and-his-reforms-win-huge-support-from-young-people-across-the-middle-east-1.728098>; and Sam Bollier, “Saudi Arabia: The Crown Prince and the Generation Gap,” *DW [Deutsche Welle]*, 3 May 2018, at <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-the-crown-prince-and-the-generation-gap/a-42795556>.

pressure from any sources.⁴⁵ He emphasized to friend and foe alike that Saudi Arabia was and would remain an absolute monarchy and would cooperate with its partners and allies to advance mutually beneficial strategic interests. Indeed, the Minister of Defense committed the Kingdom to a war in neighboring Yemen against Iranian-backed Huthis, pressed for a boycott of the neighboring Shaykhdom of Qatar because of Doha's support to the Muslim Brotherhood (listed by the Gulf Cooperation Council as a terrorist organization), and pledged to muzzle opponents who threatened the state. Naturally, his reaction to the Canadian Foreign Minister's tweet upset many, but what was difficult to comprehend was whether the latter's undiplomatic language—"immediate release"—achieved its objective to see the liberation of the arrested Saudi defenders. Irrespective of any merit that the case(s) may have had, and objectively speaking, the diplomatic dispute turned out to be just that and not a successful resolution of what Ottawa presumably desired to accomplish. Moreover, and even if Muhammad bin Salman's forceful reaction to the tweet by Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland was, perhaps, disproportionate, in reality the heir apparent send a clear message to those tempted to weigh in on the Kingdom's internal workings.⁴⁶

Equally important was the royal's faith in his own capabilities to rule in the best interests of his nation even if he knew that his reactions would not earn him positive feedback. Whether he appreciated the negative public relations aftermaths was difficult to determine, though even more tragic was the undeniable fact that Muhammad bin

Salman failed to truly seduce the world with his vision for a modernizing nation-state. Each and every one of his numerous initiatives were mocked by unsatisfied critics. The mingling of genders, live concerts and opera productions, the opening of cinema theatres and a myriad other innovations were dismissed as gimmicks when they were nothing but.⁴⁷ The way conservative Saudis were called upon to accept women driving as of 24 June 2018, or attend sporting events, or even to travel without the previous requirements to have a written permission from their legal guardians (*mahram*), were perceived as less than genuine transformations.⁴⁸ Few appreciated that Muhammad bin Salman was keen to help change Saudi society without provoking opposition from the male-dominated and hierarchical establishment. Some went so far as to assume that the apparent need to arrest women activists suggested that the heir apparent was "having

45. "Saudi Arabia: The Regime's Blueprint for Survival," *The Economist*, 9 January 2016, pp. 7-8, 17-20. See also "Transcript of Interview with Muhammad bin Salman," *The Economist*, 6 January 2016, at <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/01/06/transcript-interview-with-muhammad-bin-salman>; Glen Carey, "Saudi Arabia to Sell Stake in Parent of State Oil Giant by 2018," *Bloomberg*, 1 April 2016, at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-01/saudi-arabia-to-sell-stake-in-parent-of-state-oil-giant-by-2018>; and Glen Carey, "QuickTake: Mohammed bin Salman," *Bloomberg*, 1 November 2017, and updated on 7 March 2018, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/mohammed-bin-salman>.

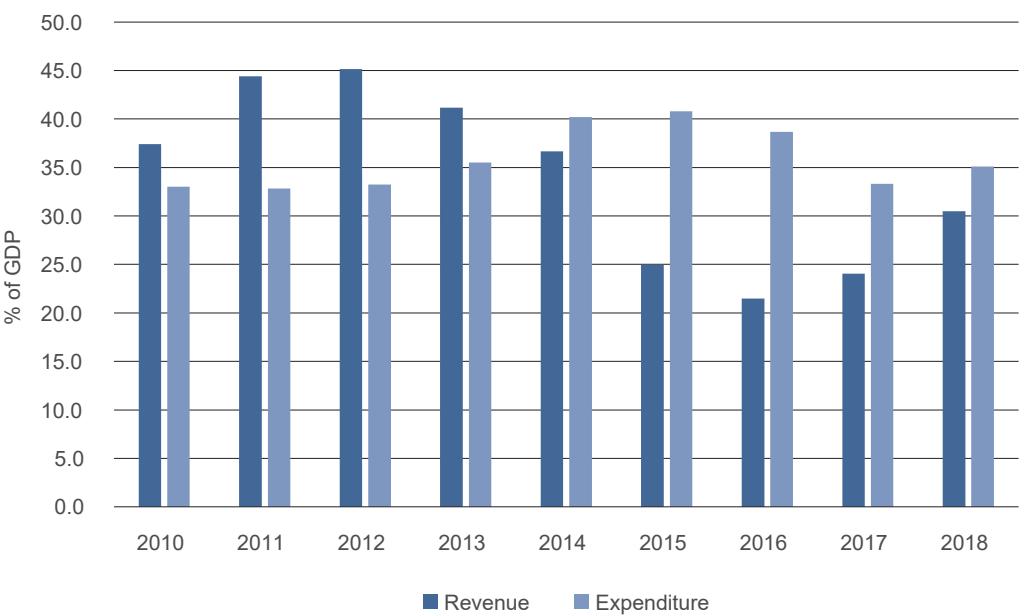
46. When Ottawa used similar language—"demanding [the] immediate release"—of three of its nationals arrested in China, Beijing responded with a mild but firm rebuke, calling on everyone to respect Chinese legal institutions. See Ben Blanchard, "China Accuses Britain, EU of Hypocrisy Over Canada Detentions Concerns," *Reuters*, 24 December 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-canada/china-accuses-britain-eu-of-hypocrisy-over-canada-detention-concerns-idUSKCN1ON0DN>.

47. See, for example, Simon Tisdall, "Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud: the Hothead Who Would be King," *The Guardian*, 25 Jun 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/25/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-heir-young-hothead-with-ambitions>. See also Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Is Pushing His Country To The Brink. Will It Hold Together?," *Huffington Post*, 9 December 2017, at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/saudi-arabia-crown-prince_us_5a1dca8ae4b04abdc6147caa; Patrick Cockburn, "Mohammed bin Salman's Ill-Advised Ventures have Weakened Saudi Arabia's Position in the World," *The Independent*, 15 December 2017, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-patrick-cockburn-qatar-lebanon-a8112426.html>; "Mohammed bin Salman: Only Death Can Stop Me from Ruling," *Al Jazeera*, 19 Mar 2018, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/mohammad-bin-salman-death-stop-ruling-180319051856128.html>; Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2018, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>; and "Loosening Up and Cracking Down in Saudi Arabia: The Calculations of Muhammad bin Salman," *The Economist*, 9 June 2018, at <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/06/09/the-calculations-of-muhammad-bin-salman>.

48. Tom Percival, "Saudi Women No Longer Need Men's Permission To Travel," *Unilad*, 6 March 2017, at <https://www.unilad.co.uk/news/saudi-women-no-longer-need-mens-permission-to-travel/>. See also "Women Above 25 Can Now Travel to Saudi Arabia Alone," *Khaleej Times*, 11 January 2018, at <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/region/saudi-arabia/women-above-25-can-now-travel-to-saudi-arabia-alone>; Margaret Coker, "How Guardianship Laws Still Control Saudi Women," *The New York Times*, 22 June 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/22/world/middleeast/saudi-women-guardianship.html>; and Heba Kanso, "Saudi Women 'Still Enslaved,' Says Activist as Driving Ban Ends," *Reuters*, 22 June 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-women-driving/saudi-women-still-enslaved-says-activist-as-driving-ban-ends-idUSKBN1JI2XH>.

to rethink his grand plans.”⁴⁹ Adding insult to injury in what was a truly unbecoming tale for any serious writer, the author of one allegory emphasized that Muhammad bin Salman “is sometimes likened to Saddam Hussein [inside the Kingdom], the executed former dictator of Iraq,” and that he was not “really interested in change.” While Simon Henderson hoped that the heir’s goal to create a modern nation-state was laudable and that his ability to “detach itself from its conservative theocratic underpinnings” were equally worthy, he, Henderson, concluded that the latest arrests illustrated what many doubted: that the next ruler of the Kingdom was a classic dictator like the “good” Saddam Hussein of the 1970s.⁵⁰

Figure 3. Government Revenue and Expenditure in Saudi Arabia, 2010-2018



Source: IMF Fiscal Monitor, 2019.

49. Simon Henderson, “Saudi Arabia Hits the Brakes on Reforms,” *The Atlantic*, 22 May 2018, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/saudi-arabia-hits-the-brakes-on-reforms/560870/>.
50. *Ibid.*

Notwithstanding trifling commentaries, and as important as these social changes were in the rags-to-riches history that transformed the country from a relatively isolated and impoverished entity to a major oil power in less than two generations, what was truly epochal were the numerous attempts to place the economy on sounder footing. In the past, the vicissitudes of the oil market upset traditions and altered the very way in which Saudi society operated, and though things changed in 1974 after the price of oil quadrupled and a gold rush began—even if emphasis on consumerism was just the tip of the modernization process—the country became a *rentier-state*.⁵¹ An El Dorado phenomenon ushered in the rise of a public sector anxious to reap the spoils of plenty while the hard labor was done by the ever-swelling ranks of expatriate workers. Oil touched every life and defined both domestic politics and global relations, which meant that society benefitted when prices increased, but recorded setbacks when prices fell. To be sure, Riyadh invested in an incredible infrastructure that is the envy of most developing states, but the private sector—key to creating wealth—was largely neglected. Oil price fluctuations, ranging the gamut from \$10 in 1985 to nearly \$150 per barrel in 2008 and back to between \$60-\$80 in 2017-2018, meant that the economy was like a yo-yo, sliding from plenty into serious slumps. Consequently, budgets were likewise difficult to plan, moving from surpluses (six times since 2007), to deficits—\$98 billion in 2015, the first year under King Salman, \$76 billion in 2016 and \$61 billion in 2017.⁵² According to the latest budget figures, the Kingdom planned to increase state spending by 7 percent in 2019 to spur economic growth, for total projected expenditures slated

51. Rayed Khalid Krimly, *The Political Economy of Rentier State: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia in the Oil Era, 1950-1990*, Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Political Science, George Washington University (Washington, D.C.), 1993. See also Rayed Krimly, “The Political Economy of Adjusted Priorities: Declining Oil Revenues and Saudi Fiscal Policies,” *The Middle East Journal* 53:2, Spring 1999, pp. 254-267; Robert E. Looney, “Saudi Arabia: Measures of Transition from a Rentier State,” in Joseph A. Kechichian, ed., *Iran, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf States*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, pp. 131-159; and Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010.
52. The literature on oil is voluminous and beyond the scope of this essay. For two recent assessments, see Zakir Hussain, *Saudi Arabia in a Multipolar World: Changing Dynamics*, Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2016; and Ellen R. Wald, *Saudi, Inc.: The Arabian Kingdom's Pursuit of Profit and Power*, New York: Pegasus Books, 2018. See also “Saudi Arabia Recorded Budget Surplus Six Times Since 2007,” *Argaam*, 17 December 2017, at <https://www.argaam.com/en/article/articledetail/id/519848>.

to rise to an all-time high of 1.106 trillion riyals (\$295 billion), from an actual 1.030 trillion riyals in 2018. This meant that the actual deficit was projected to hover around 136 billion riyals (\$36 billion), well below the 195 billion riyal gap originally projected for 2018 (\$52 billion), but the writing was on the wall.⁵³ The Kingdom could not continue along the same path and needed to restructure its entire economy before it was too late. In a bold statement to the *Al-Arabiya* network, Finance Minister Muhammad al-Jada'an stated that Riyadh aimed to balance the country's budget by 2023, which was a real challenge.⁵⁴ Naturally, this was ambitious but doable, especially as non-oil revenues increased, even if subsidies continued, including bonuses and allowances for public sector workers.

Of course, Riyadh spent lavishly in the past, perhaps even indulged in excesses that, regrettably, meant a lack of accountability. Still, the first modest controls on excessive spending occurred in the 1960s, when King Faysal bin 'Abdul 'Aziz imposed relative fiscal discipline. In the post-1970s, however, and as the price of oil fluctuated, the economy underwent inevitable financial crises. These underscored the necessity for balance budgets that, in the political climate of the times, were never prioritized. Likewise, and because of the presence of millions of expatriate workers who arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the country embarked on a massive transfer of funds that further drained the economy. In fact, in 2016 alone, expatriate workers transferred \$40 billion out of the country, which represented 7% of Gross Domestic Product, while the figures stood at \$42 billion in 2015.⁵⁵ Though the fiduciary relationship was entirely

fair, what the Saudi economy needed was to keep more of this wealth at home, whose flight could not be blamed on brave workers who toiled under difficult conditions and who looked after needy families in the respective countries from where they hailed. Still, as the value of expatriate remittances added to significant sums over the years—over \$40 billion in each of 2015 and 2016 alone—the impact of such transfers on the local economy could no longer be neglected.⁵⁶ Indeed, it might be safe to advance the figure of over one trillion American dollars that were legally transferred out of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the course of the past four decades, especially if we factor in an average of \$30 billion per year. International Monetary Fund statistics confirmed that the Kingdom was the second largest country in the world in terms of remittances made by its expatriate workforce in 2017.⁵⁷ By all accounts, this was a significant financial drain on the local economy, and what was required—and what the heir apparent planned for—was to literally restructure the entire financial fabric of the Kingdom to see some of those resources invested at home. The parameters for a bold restructuring were embedded in his *Vision 2030* proposals, along with the equally challenging National Transformation Program, both of which offered a way out of the sluggishness that defined Saudi finances for decades.⁵⁸

Potential Remedies and Economic Transformations

Together, *Vision 2030* and the *National Transformation Program* proposals were, in effect, Muhammad bin Salman's responses to critics who concluded that Saudi Arabia

53. See, "Saudi Arabia Projects \$35bn Budget Shortfall in 2019," *Arabian Business*, 18 December 2018, at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/409956-saudi-arabia-projects-35bn-budget-shortfall-in-2019>. See also Marwa Rashad and Stephen Kalin, "Saudi 2019 Budget Boosts Spending in Bid to Spur Sluggish Economy," *Reuters*, 18 December 2018, at <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-budget/saudi-2019-budget-boosts-spending-in-bid-to-spur-sluggish-economy-idUKKBN10H14M>.

54. Zlata Rodionova, "Saudi Arabia Projects \$53bn Budget Deficit for 2017 as the Kingdom Moves Away from Oil," *The Independent*, 22 December 2016, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/saudi-arabia-budget-deficit-53-billion-kingdom-oil-production-dependent-opeca-7490916.html>. See also Lu Hui, "Saudi Works to End Budget Deficit by 2023," 2 May 2018, *Xinhua*, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/02/c_137151425.htm.

55. "Foreign Remittances from Saudi Arabia Decline by Almost 7% in January," *Arab News*, 3 March 2017, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1062506/saudi-arabia>.

56. Irfan Mohammed, "Expat Remittances Witness a Drop in Recent Months," *Saudi Gazette*, 10 August 2018, at <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/514038/SAUDI-ARABIA/Remittances>.

57. Stephen Snudden, *International Remittances, Migration, and Primary Commodities in FSGM*, IMF Working Paper WP/17/20, Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, January 2017, pp. 16-18 and 20-22, at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2017/01/30/International-Remittances-Migration-and-Primary-Commodities-in-FSGM-44603>. See also Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD), *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, p. vi, at <http://www.worldbank.org/prospects/migrationandremittances>.

58. For an examination of the Saudi economy, see Mohamed Ramady, *The Saudi Arabian Economy: Policies, Achievements, and Challenges*, New York: Springer, 2014, and Matthew M. Reed, *Saudi Vision 2030: Winners and Losers*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 August 2016, at <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64227>.

was permanently mired in an economic quagmire. Detractors dismissed both and declared their failures long before any of the envisaged or planned projects were implemented. In what was an avalanche of negative analyses, cynics were not even willing to wait a little while to see what would be accomplished and how effective some of the projects could be. Most reasoned in what were extremely harsh and largely gratuitous comments that *Vision 2030* proposals could not possibly wait until 2030 to function, much less to show results, and were, consequently, utter failures. Time was short and 2030 was too far in the future, toadies presumed, and Muhammad bin Salman could not possibly accomplish any of his ideas, critics further reasoned, since what was required was instant gratification. The heir apparent was not poleaxed, as he dismissed negative commentaries that asserted the Kingdom was not equipped to accomplish any of his reforms, aware that *Vision 2030* projects necessitated perseverance and time.⁵⁹ It was unfortunate that the vast majority of Muhammad bin Salman's critics were so determined to show how *Vision 2030* failed, or would quickly fail, since the kickoff was barely announced in 2016. In the short two years since then, Riyadh adopted sweeping socio-economic changes, as authorities hoped their freshly minted proposals would dramatically change the economic system in place. It is easy to dismiss major proposals out of hand on account of how slow their implementation was or is, but realism required a modicum of patience given that the economic system took decades to create, and could not possibly be altered in a few months or a few years. *Vision 2030* aimed to diversify the Kingdom's economy, encourage foreign investments, improve conditions for the private sector to assume the real burden of industry, create employment opportunities—perhaps even reduce unemployment that saddled the government in more ways than anyone was willing to acknowledge—and expand innovation by unleashing entrepreneurship. In short, *Vision 2030* aspired to modernize

59. See, for example, Ian Leclerc, "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 Is Going To Fail," *Odyssey*, 16 May 2016, at <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/saudi-arabias-vision-2030-is-going-to-fail>; Anonymous, "Saudi's Economy: Why Vision 2030 will fail," *Middle East Eye*, 25 August 2017, at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/saudis-economic-future-six-problems-it-needs-solve-vision-2030-plan-1907352248>; Paul Hodges and David Hughes, "Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030' is Looking a Lot Less Clear," *The Financial Times*, 26 October 2017, at <https://www.ft.com/content/6f27998a-ba3d-11e7-9bfb-4a9c83ffa852>; and Iyad el-Baghdadi, "Mohammed bin Salman is the Worst Enemy of his 'Vision 2030' Plan," *The Washington Post*, 15 June 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/06/15/mohammed-bin-salman-is-the-worst-enemy-of-his-vision-2030-plan/?utm_term=.5c58638dcc71.

the country where it mattered most—among able-bodied and creative youths. As stated above, but worth repeating, only two years after the proposals were made, media outlets that asked why or whether *Vision 2030* was failing had it truly wrong.⁶⁰ The elephant in the economic room was the much-touted ARAMCO IPO that angered some and confused others when implementation plans were postponed. What was the concern and how did Riyadh respond?

At the core of *Vision 2030* was a plan to place a percentage of the state-owned Saudi Arabian Oil Company (ARAMCO) in an Initial Public Offering (IPO). This stock market launch intended to raise money by offering ARAMCO shares to institutional investors as well as retail investors to raise confidence levels and transparency. When several reports hinted that the IPO would be delayed, detractors concluded that businesses were puzzled, and that many became hesitant to invest in the Kingdom.⁶¹ This was infantilism 101 but par for the course as the bar was placed very high indeed. It did not matter that Riyadh unhesitatingly passed a landmark sales tax that, in the context of the Kingdom, was an innovation. It did not matter that King Salman and his team were weighing the long-term consequences of the ARAMCO IPO (with key requirements to literally open the books for inspection). It did not matter that

60. Since introducing its *Vision 2030* economic reform plan in 2016, Saudi Arabia faced inevitable barriers, which economists may be better equipped to analyze. For our purposes, and as anticipated, ordinary Sa'udis who received hefty benefits from the government could possibly be reticent to revise their expectations about what they deserved in terms of jobs and services, but that was precisely why *Vision 2030* was important. Simply stated, the country could no longer afford to provide cradle-to-grave emoluments. Instead, Saudis confronted the challenge of opening-up the economy, the largest in the Arab World. To his credit, Muhammad bin Salman understood that foreign direct investments were required to help achieve economic stability as well as prosperity, and for that to become reality, he appreciated the need for reforms, which could neither be postponed nor neglected.

61. John Lillywhite, "The Saudi Aramco IPO is Not Too Big to Fail - It Might Be Too Big To Happen," *Albawaba*, 18 October 2017, at <https://www.albawaba.com/news/saudi-Aramco-ipo-too-big-happen-1035840>. See also Kurt Cobb, "Was The Aramco IPO Destined To Fail?," *Oil Price*, 1 August 2018, at <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Was-The-Aramco-IPO-Destined-To-Fail.html>; and Lauren Silva Laughlin, "Breakingviews: Aramco's Failed IPO is a Beginning not an End," *Reuters*, 23 August 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/legal-us-saudi-Aramco-breakingviews/breakingviews-Aramcos-failed-ipo-is-a-beginning-not-an-end-idUSKCN1L81V2>.

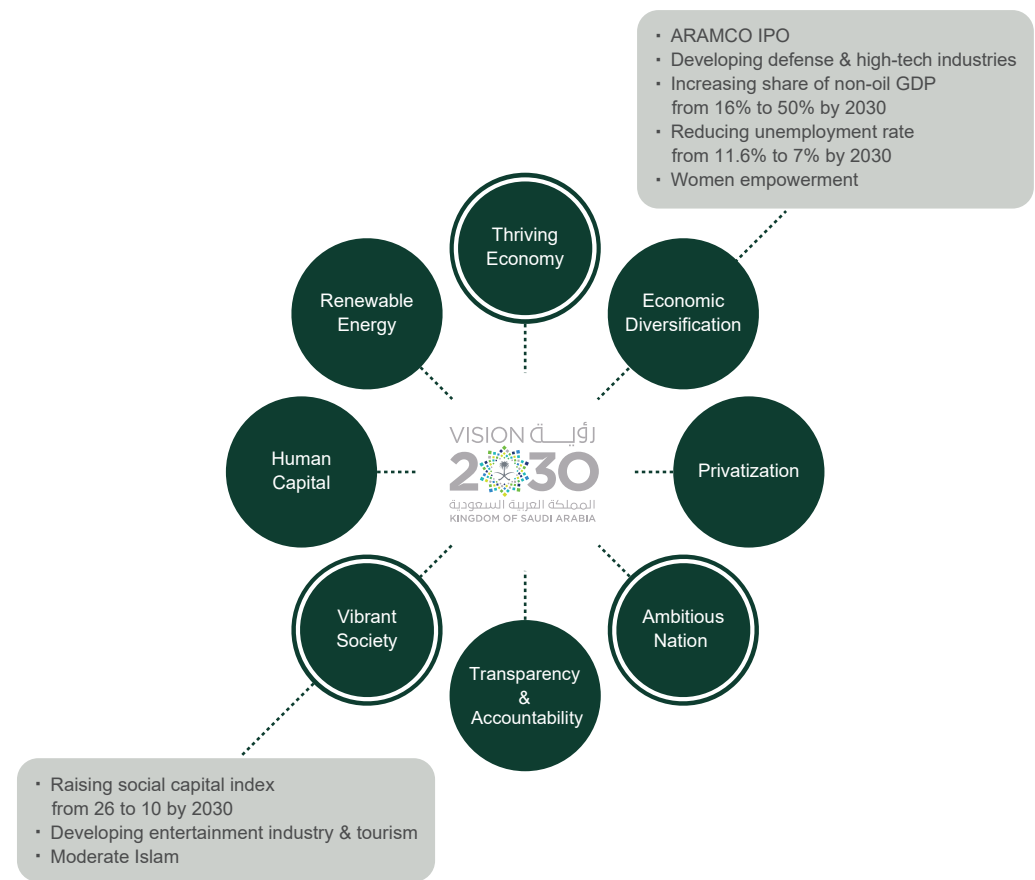
ARAMCO, as the world’s leading oil company, was nothing to trifle with. No, those who perceived delays in the IPO as a sure sign of failure refused to accept that *Vision 2030* was too complex to stand on a single leg, and that several initiatives were in various implementation processes simultaneously, which meant that progress would be slow. Remarkably, most outsiders that dealt with Saudi Arabia were seldom at ease with lofty declarations to build a “vibrant society,” a “thriving economy” and an “ambitious nation,” expressions that few applied to the country in the past and most had a hard time to adjust and accept them for the present and future. Aspirational language as it applied to Saudi Arabia was new and while some of *Vision 2030* goals may be said to be patronizing, what the heir apparent envisaged was to increase non-oil government revenues to over 1 trillion Saudi riyals (\$267 billion) that, to put it mildly, was exceptional.⁶² It was crucial to place this figure in context, as Riyadh expected to earn 492 billion riyals (\$131 billion) from oil sales in 2018, compared with 440 billion riyals (\$117 billion) in 2017, whereas non-oil revenue was expected to climb to 291 billion riyals (\$77 billion) in 2018 from 256 billion riyals (\$68 billion) in 2017.⁶³ The climb to 1 trillion Saudi riyals by 2030 was a serious goal, even difficult to contemplate, though illustrative of the ruler’s ambitions. To achieve such objectives were not and would not be easy, nor can they be done in a matter of months or a few years. They may even require a new social contract between Saudis and their government that, truth be told, lay at the heart of the proposals.

In fact, what Muhammad bin Salman was embarked upon was to gradually step back from the traditional relationship the Al Sa’ud forged with their populations over decades and centuries, where they provided all needed resources and services in exchange for absolute rulership. *Vision 2030* proposals included a gradual loosening of existing social contracts as taxation was contemplated and, in the case of the VAT (Value Added Tax), the process was implemented starting on 1 January 2018. Naturally, the move startled many, and some Saudis expressed discontent, though authorities tried to

62. Readers interested in the numbers may consult the documents published by the Government of Saudi, *Vision 2030*, 25 April 2016, Riyadh, at <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/download/file/fid/417>; and *National Transformation Program 2020*, 7 June 2016, Riyadh at http://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/NTP_En.pdf.

63. Nayla Razzouk and Claudia Carpenter, “Saudi Arabia Sees Higher Oil Revenue as OPEC Cuts Boost Prices,” *Bloomberg*, 19 December 2017, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-19/saudi-arabia-sees-higher-oil-revenue-as-opec-cuts-boost-prices>.

Figure 4. Saudi Arabia *Vision 2030*: Key Goals and Themes



Source: For data, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>. © The Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

mollify the new burdens with targeted countermeasures to soften the blow on low-income households. For example, price hikes for electricity were adjusted to separate rates that applied to commercial institutions from those that were levied to residential units. Equally important, vulnerable Saudi families that experienced financial difficulties received cash advances from the *Citizen’s Account Program*, which increased deficits but were necessary as a stopgap measure while citizens adapted to the dramatic

transformations under way.⁶⁴ Real changes are on their way and while it may be far too early to judge the success or failure of *Vision 2030*, progress is clearly evident in specific areas, while delays are also visible in other sectors. Few can deny that Saudi leaders made serious choices and were likely to continue along the same paths in the years to come, even if the onus is on them to figure out how to improve representation, precisely to avoid taxation without accountability.

The Vital Role of the Religious Establishment

In order to deliver such accountability, and because of the structure on which political life was established in Saudi Arabia, a successful new social contract in the Kingdom required the approval of the vital religious establishment that stood and continues to stand as one of the pillars of authority in the conservative society. Any changes to the existing socio-religious and, consequently, political order will, by necessity, entail the tacit approval of clergymen. While the Al Sa‘ud can cajole senior clerics to accept their choices, they traditionally refrain from imposing their will-to-power on the religious establishment, preferring to win it over through persuasion. Like the Al Sa‘ud, senior clerics perceive their obligations to preserve and protect the public good to be a duty, or at the very least to assume that such responsibilities fall within their “institutional” prerogatives. In short, the eighteenth century alliance between the Al Sa‘ud and the Al al-Shaykh—that sealed the Kingdom’s ideological foundations—defined their relationships, and stood at the core of society’s Unitarian principles. The latter, pejoratively known as “Wahhabism” in contemporary discourses, stood the test of time. Indeed, the 1744 ideological ordnance was and is the source that shaped the country’s laws and foreign policies, even if it remained largely misunderstood save for fantastic

64. See, for example, “Only 26% Users Affected by Hike in Power Tariff,” *Arab News*, 23 June 2016, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/943706/saudi-arabia>. See also Irfan Mohammed, “Threefold Increase in Electricity Bills from Today,” *Saudi Gazette*, 1 January 2018, at <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/525167/SAUDI-ARABIA/Threefold-increase-in-electricity-bills-from-today>; Katie Paul and Sylvia Westall, “Saudi Arabia Makes 2 Billion Riyal Payment in Citizens Account Program,” *Reuters*, 21 December 2017, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-allowances/saudi-arabia-makes-2-billion-riyal-payment-in-citizens-account-program-idUSKBN1EF0S2?il=0>; and “Citizen’s Account: 700,000 Saudi Families Receive SR 1,000 Each,” *Saudi Gazette*, 26 December 2017, at <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/524889/SAUDI-ARABIA/A-total-of-700000-families-received-over-SR1000-per-family-as-financial-aid-through-the-Citizens-Account-Program>.

allegations that have little or no substantive foundations.⁶⁵

As an Islamic doctrine and religious movement, “Wahhabism” aimed to restore “pure monotheistic worship” (*tawhid*) by devotees who, because of these commitments are sometimes known as Salafis. A Salafist is, in reality, a believer who upholds the principle of the “uniqueness” and “unity” of the Creator, Allah or God. Another name for a Salafi is a Muwahhid [Unitarian], from where the term Muwahhidun [Unitarians] emerges. Followers of the creed practice the theology of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328) within the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, though traditionally some Hanbali leaders renounced most of the teachings offered by Muhammad bin ‘Abdul Wahhab (1703–1792). For our purposes, what was useful to remember was the founder’s reform mindedness in a remote part of Arabia, the Najd heartland, and his advocacy to purge widespread practices including the veneration of saints and visiting their shrines, which ‘Abdul Wahhab considered to be idolatrous and innovative (*bid‘ah*). Beyond his puritanical preferences, ‘Abdul Wahhab entered into the now 275-years-old pact (1744–2019 and counting) with Muhammad bin Sa‘ud that ushered onto the Arabian Peninsula *political stability*. In exchange for the acceptance of *tawhid*—and the obedience that accompanied such a creed—‘Abdul Wahhab accepted Muhammad bin Sa‘ud’s protection.

Because the 1744 Alliance endured for such a long-time, and notwithstanding specific changes that were brought about by King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, chances were excellent that the durable pact would continue sine die. Remarkably, and given the relatively limited number of Hanbali/Unitarians—estimates varied although their

65. So much has been written on “Wahhabism” [written in brackets here to highlight that Saudis do not refer to themselves in these terms] in recent years that one is loath to add fuel to the fodder. Most authors who take liberties in discussing the creed have little or no background in religious studies and repeat stale accounts about Muslims in general and Hanbali/Unitarians (which is the creed practiced by Saudi Muslims) in particular. There are specific political differences between and among Muslims that can and ought to be fairly discussed but to focus on doctrinal matters are best left to those equipped to undertake such analyses. For background materials, see Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; and David Dean Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006. For two critical assessments, see Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay*, Oneonta, New York: Islamic Publications International, 2002; and Simon Ross Valentine, *Force and Fanaticism: Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and Beyond*, London: Hurst, 2015.

demographic presence was largely concentrated in Saudi Arabia and Qatar—pragmatic Al Sa‘ud leaders were and are not keen to convert other Sunni Muslims to their creed, notwithstanding outrageous claims to the contrary.⁶⁶ Rather, what they aimed for was to maintain the country’s politico-religious alliance to ensure domestic tranquility and, in strictly political terms, to expand their influence throughout the Muslim World to better serve the interests of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Of course, some Sunni—as well as Shi‘ah—Muslims disagreed with “Wahhabi” interpretation, though the polemics centered around *tawhid* and the more conservative doctrinal features of the creed. Political enemies of the Al Sa‘ud tended to go so far as to accuse them of encouraging extremism, even for being “a source of global terrorism” that, apparently, inspired the ideology of the so-called Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁶⁷ Without denying that some Saudi citizens backed IS/ISIS, or wished to cause disunity among Muslims, these were neither official government representatives nor the overwhelming majority of devout traditionalists who rejected extremism.⁶⁸ In fact, extremists who disagreed with one or another interpretation of Islam tended to label each other with the dangerous apostasy (*takfirism*) epithet that, regrettably, justified violence, even if government representatives did not condone such vile acts. Few denied that mausoleums or shrines were destroyed in the past, and that other Muslims, even other non-Muslims, were targeted in the struggle for political goals. Yet,

from Muhammad bin Sa‘ud in 1744 to King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, pragmatic Saudi leaders emphasized that the very term “Wahhabism” was not a “doctrine” (see also Chapter 6). King Salman reiterated as recently as 2010 that the term “Wahhabism” did not exist in Saudi Arabia, and challenged users of the term to locate any “deviance of the form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia from the teachings of the Qur’an and Prophetic Hadiths.”⁶⁹ Again, and for the purposes of this chronicle, it is important to underscore that the “Wahhabi” mission started as a revivalist movement in the remote, arid region of Central Arabia, for political reasons. Wars and conquests led to the reunification of the entire Arabian Peninsula and though anti-Saudi voices—mostly emanating from Iran—broadcast that Makkah and Madinah were “occupied territories,” this was, at best, gibberish.⁷⁰

Still, religious authorities in Saudi Arabia faced serious challenges, most notably after the November 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Makkah by extremist elements that may have received indirect assistance to occupy the facility. Among various demands made by Juhayman al-‘Utaybi, the ringleader of that takeover, was the end of

66. James M. Dorsey, “Creating Frankenstein: The Saudi Export of Wahhabism,” *The Straits Times*, 13 March 2016, at <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/creating-frankenstein-the-saudi-export-of-wahhabism>.

67. There are too many such claims that are highly questionable. For an example, see “Saudis and Extremism: ‘Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters,’” *The New York Times*, 25 August 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html?_r=0.

68. Daniel L. Byman, “Order from Chaos: Where Will the Islamic State Go Next?,” Washington, D.C.: Brookings, June 25, 2018, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/25/where-will-the-islamic-state-go-next/>. See also “Muslims but not Brothers: Saudi Arabia Turns Against Political Islam—The Crown Prince Tries to Reform Wahhabism and Isolate the Muslim Brotherhood,” *The Economist*, 23 June 2018, at <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/06/23/saudi-arabia-turns-against-political-islam>. For a Saudi perspective on IS, see Nawaf Obaid, *Saudi Arabia’s Master Plan Against ISIS, Assad and Iran in Syria*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (Harvard University), 16 February 2016, at <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/saudi-arabias-master-plan-against-isis-assad-and-iran-syria>.

69. Wael Mahdi, “There is No Such Thing as Wahabism, Saudi Prince Says,” *The National*, 18 March 2010, at <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/there-is-no-such-thing-as-wahabism-saudi-prince-says-1.552348>; and “Saudi Prince Salman: The Term ‘Wahhabi’ Was Coined by Saudi Arabia’s Enemies,” *Islam Daily Observing Media*, Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Media Research Institute, 14 May 2010, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160804012750/http://www.islamdaily.org/en/wahabism/8411.saudi-prince-salman-the-term-wahhabi-was-coined-by.htm>.

70. Calls to “liberate” Makkah and Madinah are not new and pop-up from time to time. See, for example, Zafar Bangash, “The Two Holiest Cities of Islam—Makkah and Madinah Under the Occupation of Aal Saud,” *Crescent International*, December, 2013, at <https://www.imamreza.net/old/eng/imamreza.php?id=11367>. See also AFP, “Muslims Should Reconsider Letting Saudis Manage Hajj, Holy Sites: Khamenei,” *The Express Tribune*, 5 September 2016, at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1176418/khamenei-calls-muslims-reconsider-saudi-holy-sites-management/>; Marwa Osman, “Mecca Ruled by House of Saud Should Belong to all Muslims,” *RT [Russia Today]*, 5 August 2017, at <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/398713-mecca-muslims-saudi-religion/>; İbrahim Karagül, “They sold Jerusalem! They will Sell Mecca and Medina Too. It is Now Time for Intifada,” *Yeni Şafak*, 8 December 2017, at <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/columns/ibrahimkaragul/they-sold-jerusalem-they-will-sell-mecca-and-medina-too-it-is-now-time-for-intifada-2040239>; and Avi Dichter, “Iran Seeks to Take Control of Mecca and Medina,” *Arutz Sheva*, 7 August 2018, at <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/248611>.

Figure 5. The Qa'abah at the Grand Mosque in Makkah



Source: © Yonhap News.

Western occupation of Arab lands. This call was reiterated by other extremists after the deployment of Western troops during the 1991 War for Kuwait, followed by equally critical imprimaturs made after the 9/11 terrorist acts that led to wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. What all of these events did was to embolden more conservative elements and, from the socio-political angle, add to the distrust towards the Kingdom and especially its official religion in leading Western societies. Over several decades, Saudi clerics maintained, and in some instances improved, their hold on religious law courts, presided over the creation of Islamic universities and a public school system which gave students “a heavy dose of religious instruction,” and otherwise guided Saudi society in a direction that did not necessarily correspond with what the Al Sa‘ud, as the

rulers in the Kingdom, wanted.⁷¹

Muhammad bin Salman frequently referred to the 1979 Makkah Mosque takeover in his various presentations and how he foresaw the need to return to the era before that tragic episode in the country’s history shaped Saudi policies for at least one generation. For the heir apparent, the seizure of the Makkah Mosque by several hundred insurgents—who called for an overthrow of the monarchy, denounced religious scholars as puppets, and announced the arrival of the long awaited Mahdi⁷²—stood as a breaking point in contemporary Saudi affairs. In a major interview with the *Guardian*, Prince Muhammad stated:

“What happened in the last 30 years is not Saudi Arabia. What happened in the region in the last 30 years is not the Middle East. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, people wanted to copy this model in different countries, one of them is Saudi Arabia. We didn’t know how to deal with it. And the problem spread all over the world. Now is the time to get rid of it.”⁷³

This was no ordinary declaration but a firm statement of opposition to past practices that, for the young heir to the throne, required a complete overhaul. It was an avowal of principles perceived to have hindered Saudi interests and the heir apparent did not waste time as he proposed various steps to address socio-economic concerns. He ruled in favor of allowing women to drive and enter sport stadiums, reopened cinemas, and placed enough pressure on the clergy to stand aside. He even announced that a review and certification process would be introduced to carefully examine the great canons of Muslim orthodoxy, including numerous hadiths—sayings attributed to the Prophet

71. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, p. 155. See also Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education, and the Wahhabi Mission*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017, especially pp. 109-156.

72. The Mahdi is the “guided one” and, in Islam, an eschatological redeemer who will appear to rule for 40 years before the Day of Judgment (*yawm al-qiyamah*, literally “the Day of Resurrection”) and will free the world from evil.

73. Martin Chulov, “I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam, Says Crown Prince,” *The Guardian*, 24 October 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.

Muhammad—which were often misinterpreted for raw political purposes.⁷⁴ How that appraisal either advanced, or would eventually start, was difficult to know although various rumors filled social media outlets. This was one of the most sensitive and therefore secretive plans that Riyadh may be working on and there is nothing in open sources to indicate the direction under consideration or, if they are already operating, who might be leading the various review and certification panels. Suffice it to say that a variety of sources existed to allow for dramatic revisions if King Salman wished to empower the *Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulamah*, presumably the leading Hanbali/Unitarian institution that might be entrusted with the duty to fulfill this task. Among many leading Muslim experts who offered new interpretations were Muhammad Shahrur and Edip Yüksel, to name just two, although a wave of reformists were increasingly

vocal throughout the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere.⁷⁵

What King Salman and his heir were truly concerned with was the legacy of the 1979 insurgency on public opinion, both at home and overseas. They understood that extremist pronouncements deviated from Hanbali/Unitarian doctrine and wished to see the vital role of the religious establishment strengthened along religious lines—not the political ones. In fact, senior Al Sa'ud officials appreciated the need for qualified scholars to address extremist assertions to, consequently, cleanse the damage caused to the faith. This quest became even more urgent after the 2001 attacks in the United States, which killed nearly 3,000 people and that were assumed by many, at least outside the Kingdom, to be “an expression of Wahhabism” because ‘Usamah bin Ladin and most

74. Kamel Daoud, “If Saudi Arabia Reforms, What Happens to Islamists Elsewhere?,” *The New York Times*, 16 November 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/16/opinion/saudi-arabia-reform-islamists.html>. It was unclear when Muhammad bin Salman was disturbed by the 2016 Grozny [Chechen Republic, Russia] conference where several hundred Muslim clerics from Egypt, Jordan, Russia, Sudan, Syria, and a number of European countries, rejected Saudi Arabia's doctrinal preferences. One observer perceived the Grozny gathering as a “frontal assault on Wahhabism” as well as on other conservative “interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism and Deobandism,” although neither King Salman nor his heir spoke about the event. See James M. Dorsey, “Crown Prince Mohammed's Vow To Moderate Saudi Islam: Easier Said Than Done,” *BESA Center Perspectives*, Paper Number 637, 9 November 2017, at <https://besacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/637-Crown-Prince-Mohammeds-Plan-Easier-Said-Than-Done-Dorsey-final.pdf>.

75. Muhammad Shahrur was born in Syria in 1938 and is an Emeritus Professor of Civil Engineering at the University of Damascus, but writes extensively about Islam. Although trained as an engineer, Shahrur refers to the Holy Qur'an as “The Book,” which upsets many. Like most Qur'aniyyun Muslims, he does not consider the Hadiths [sayings attributed to the Prophet] as a divine source. “It is easier to build a skyscraper or a tunnel under the sea than to teach people how to read the book of the Lord with their own eyes,” he insisted, adding that believers “have been used to reading this book with borrowed eyes for hundreds of years” and, consequently, needed to be retrained. See Mehran Kamrava, ed., *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity: A Reader*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007, p. 150. For two English-language volumes of his numerous studies, see Muhammad Shahrur, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by Andreas Christmann, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009; and Muhammad Shahrour, *Islam and Humanity: Consequences of a Contemporary Reading*, First Authorized English Translation of *Al-Islam wa-l-Insan* by George Stergios, Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2018.

Among other notable Qur'anists, one must include Ahmed Subhy Mansour, born in Egypt in 1949, who founded a small group in his native country but was exiled to the United States; Edip Yüksel, born in Turkey in 1957 into a Kurdish family but who now lives in the United States; and Rashad Khalifah (1935–1990), an Egyptian-American biochemist and Islamic reformer whose *Quran, Hadith and Islam* argued that the Holy Scriptures remained the sole source of Islamic belief and practice. Khalifah was killed by Glen Cusford Francis, an American member of the terrorist organization *Jama'at al-Fuqara'* [Community of the Impoverished] for stating that the Hadiths and Sunna were “Satanic inventions” under “Satan's schemes.” See also Neil MacFarquhar, “Muslim Scholars Increasingly Debate Unholy War,” *The New York Times*, 10 December 2004, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/10/world/middleeast/muslim-scholars-increasingly-debate-unholy-war.html>.

of the hijackers were Saudi nationals. King Salman and Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman were rightly focused on the undeniable fact that anti-Saudi Westerners concluded Riyadh practiced a doctrine of terrorism and hate. Consequently, there was an urgent need to address the Kingdom's religious, tribal, business, and media leaders both to sensitize them to the putative projected image and, if possible, to correct mistaken perceptions. Al Sa'ud leaders, starting with then Heir Apparent 'Abdallah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, followed by Prince Turki al-Faysal bin 'Abdul 'Aziz and Prince Talal bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, acknowledged the necessity to assume unmitigated responsibilities. By doing so, they clarified to one and all that the Al Sa'ud held ultimate power in the Kingdom, and that clerics ought to accept the ruling family's primacy. They declared that Muslim rulers were meant to exercise power, while religious scholars were meant to advise, which King Salman and his heir hammered after the monarch created the special commission to address various misinterpretations.⁷⁶

What the Al Sa'ud demanded from the religious establishment was epochal as they insisted on separating the wheat from the chaff, and for calling a spade a spade. No longer willing to tolerate extremist views, the Saudi government, along with all five of its Gulf Cooperation Council allies, declared in March 2014 the Muslim Brotherhood a "terrorist organization," because clear pieces of evidence surfaced that implicated its leaders in a diabolical scheme to overthrow Arab Gulf monarchies. GCC rulers appreciated the harm to their interests that such a brotherhood order would usher in and, to prevent it, adopted various responses to meet the challenges. Even the State of Qatar, which harbored leading Brotherhood officials and putative theoreticians, signed on the dotted line—a fact that added to the animus that surfaced in 2017 and that pitted Doha against at least three of its closest partners [Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates].

As more evidence of Brotherhood involvement in anti-monarchical schemes surfaced, Riyadh resorted to exceptional measures, fearing infiltration among the ranks of its own religious establishment. It stripped the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, known in Arabic as the *Hay'at al-Amr bil-Ma'ruf wal-Nahi 'anl-Munkar*, informally referred to as the *Hay'at*, from their power to follow, chase, stop,

76. Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia*, New York: Viking, 2009, pp. 234–236.

question, identify, or arrest any suspected person(s) when carrying out police duties. This unprecedented April 2016 directive did not mince orders: enforcers were simply instructed to *report suspicious behavior* to regular police, or anti-drug units if applicable, who would then decide whether to take the matter further (emphasis added).⁷⁷ Of course, this did not mean that Muslims in the Kingdom would not observe the religious duties of Islam or submit to the enforcement of public morals, but that the burden of such duties was now placed on the faithful rather than on zealous officials who, sometimes, harmed the image of the country far more than they upheld conservative traditions. Over the decades, a large number of practices including smoking, playing backgammon, chess, or cards, drawing human or animal figures, listening to music, dancing, fortune telling, watching entertainment programs, and, the most "visible" invisible—women driving—were forbidden by Saudi clerics. A few "scholars" even prohibited football, allegedly because it was a foreign practice and, worse, because players wore revealing uniforms during matches. In the event, the Kingdom's Grand Mufti declared football permissible, insisting that playing it and watching it could not possibly be considered sinful, though his views on chess were problematic.⁷⁸

Still, mundane practices that offended extremists were perceived to be innovations, *bid'ah*, subject to severe punishment. Moreover, extremists believed that such improvements were contrary to Islam, though over a billion devout Muslims experienced them without eluding their faith. Strangely, and though this must have been clear to them as they witnessed dramatic changes over time, it seldom dawned on faultfinders that rules

77. "Saudi Arabia's Religious Police Ordered to be 'Gentle,'" *BBC News*, 13 April 2016, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36034807>.

78. These may appear to be petty concerns but in the context of the conservative Saudi society were what gelled citizens together and that were now under relaxation. For the Mufti's remarks, including his decision to ban playing chess because it allegedly causes rivalry, see, Kareem Shaheen, "Chess Forbidden in Islam, Rules Saudi Mufti, but Issue not Black and White," *The Guardian*, 21 January 2016 [Last modified on 29 November 2017], at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/21/chess-forbidden-in-islam-rules-saudi-arabia-grand-mufti>. Notwithstanding this ban, the Kingdom hosted a major chess tournament in December 2017, which spoke volumes about the evolving decision-making process. See Associated Press, "Saudi Arabia Stages Chess Event Two Years After Game was Declared 'Forbidden,'" *The Irish Independent*, 26 December 2017, at <https://www.independent.ie/world-news/saudi-arabia-stages-chess-event-two-years-after-game-was-declared-forbidden-36437436.html>.

of what was permissible changed, including when King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz introduced the use of paper money in 1951, when King Faysal bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz abolished slavery in 1962 and formalized the education of females in 1964, and even brought television to the land in 1965.⁷⁹

Likewise, grouse failed to take note of the many changes ushered in by King Fahd, topped by the creation of the Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shurah) and the adoption of various political regulations that added to the local order. Similarly, denigrators completely misread King ‘Abdallah’s national dialogue initiatives, which changed the internal “conversation” among citizens, as they encouraged thousands upon thousands to tackle taboo subjects.⁸⁰ It was, thus, not surprising—though it must have shocked grumblers—when authorities quietly arrested several high-profile clerics in September 2017, including Salman al-Awdah, an influential Islamic thinker with millions of social media followers. The crackdown on clerics, which saw over a dozen prominent scholars and speakers—including Safar al-Hawali and Nasir al-‘Umar [Omar]—jailed, was unprecedented. Those who opposed the social reforms that the heir apparent pushed through, including allowing women to drive, opening cinemas, and allowing mixed entertainment and sporting events, could not possibly be allowed to decide how the Kingdom was ruled. Even if the methods used were heavy-handed, it was clear that some of the clerics rejected the progressive view of a “moderate Islam,” which Muhammad bin Salman wished to adopt. His efforts were geared to a full-fledged culling of extremist tendencies that, observers and activists noted, were carelessly applied. A few added that the heir apparent adopted Machiavellian tendencies though it was eminently clear that he was not prepared to consent for activists like the jailed clerics al-Awdah and al-Hawali, for example, to propagate pro-Muslim Brotherhood Islamism.

Al-Awdah and al-Hawali, along with fellow Sahwists—those who belonged to the Sahwah, an awakening movement that followed the teachings of Sayyid Qutb, a figurehead of the Muslim Brotherhood—were socially conservative, but ideologically at odds with the Hanbali/Unitarian school over fealty to monarchs and dictators. In

79. Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Iffat Al Thunayan: An Arabian Queen*, Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2015, pp. 108-133, 198-229. See also, Max Rodenbeck, “Unloved in Arabia,” *The New York Review of Books* 51:16, 21 October 2004, at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2004/10/21/unloved-in-arabia-2/>.

80. Kéchichian, *Legal and Political Reforms*, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-108.

the 1990s, al-Awdah and al-Hawali called for the overthrow of the Al Sa‘ud and the introduction of a parliamentary democracy in the Kingdom, although they recanted for a period of time. After the so-called 2011 Arab Uprisings, al-Awdah insisted on a full-fledged constitution, an elected parliament, and the formation of professional associations and unions. Of course, none of these wishes endeared al-Awdah and other Sahwists to King Salman and his heir and, by locking up clerics, it was eminently clear that the monarch signaled how he intended to rule. Naturally, and because of the Kingdom’s 1744 alliance between the Al Sa‘ud and the Al al-Shaykh still stood strong, any challenge to King Salman’s authority—and presumably that of his successor—must, logically, emanate from within the establishment though it was unclear whether the vast majority of the clerical class would ever challenge the regime.⁸¹

As discussed below, Muhammad bin Salman pursued multi-pronged policies that distanced the Al Sa‘ud power structures from the strict Hanbali/Unitarian strain of Islam, pursued an agenda billed as the “future for the young generation,” ended a decades-long women’s driving ban, opened the military to women, eased regulations for opening businesses, and otherwise authorized various entertainment options. To be sure, he managed to market himself as a reformer and a modernizer because, and this must be stated as clearly as possible, he is an activist in the true sense of the word even if critics see him as an authoritarian figure. Detractors focus on the many and inevitable contradictions between Riyadh’s centralized hold on power, and the King Salman/Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman reformist inclinations, including their views regarding the religious establishment. Of course, the burden rested on the ruler and his eventual successor to deliver, though it would be unbecoming to conclude that both are not doing their very best towards that goal, and will not continue along the same lines. Where the country’s clerics may, just may, complicate matters would be in denying reformists the opportunities to upgrade the legal structures in place that, to put it mildly, are in need of substantial improvements.

81. For additional details on the relationships between the Al Sa‘ud and the religious establishment, see Taylor Luck, “What’s Behind Saudi Arabia’s Summer of Discontent?,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 16 August 2018, at <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2018/0816/What-s-behind-Saudi-Arabia-s-summer-of-discontent>. See also Stig Stenslie, “The End of Elite Unity and the Stability of Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41:1, Spring 2018, pp. 61-82.

A Necessary Update of the Kingdom's Legal Conundrum

If numerous sources affirmed that the Saudi judiciary lacked transparency and efficiency, human rights organizations lambasted, and continued to point the finger at its worst features, claiming that Saudis lived in fear of the threats that lurked behind smiles. There was a general perception that citizens as well as expatriates living in the country were constantly aware of being watched and that they can easily be censored or even condemned for mundane infractions. The list was long and while some of the practices associated with the judiciary fell short of Western norms, the conundrum that confronted Riyadh was crystal clear: how to update the Kingdom's legal regulations without infringing on Islamic Law.⁸² This challenge was very serious and required reassessments of how society functioned for, in the end, citizens and residents alike aspired to live under the law. One that was clear and applied fairly across the board, that respected local norms, and that withstood every imaginable storm. "An excellent judicial system," wrote the prominent Russian writer Aleksander I. Solzhenitsyn, was "the last fruit of the most mature society," and its absence necessitated a "Solomon."⁸³ Critics lambasted the Saudi judiciary, asserting that surveillance, repression and eventually torture were all realities that shaped life in the Kingdom.⁸⁴ Even worse, the Al Sa'ud stood accused of arbitrary justice that, apparently, absolved the ruling family of any infractions. Because Saudi Arabia considered the Holy Scriptures to be its "constitution," no separate written penal code existed, although the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced security-related crimes. In the event, authorities seldom hesitated to hold

those accused of heinous crimes in prolonged incommunicado detention, sometimes under harsh conditions. Accusations of discrimination against Shi'ahs were rampant too and this deserved a closer examination to better ascertain the dimension of the reform challenges that confronted decision-makers.

Because the Kingdom's oil resources were primarily located in the Eastern Province that, just about every author emphasized, is predominantly inhabited by Shi'ah Saudis (though Shi'ah Saudis also live in several areas of the country, including Madinah), that authorities could not possibly tolerate any dissent in the super-sensitive region. In fact, according to one observer, the city of Qatif—a hotbed of Shi'ah uprisings—"was close to the oil industry, it was not as close as other oil cities such as Dammam and Khobar," which begged the question as to whether there were other reasons for the Shi'ah unrest than any association with their presence in the oil-rich area.⁸⁵ As predominantly Shi'ah areas, it was natural for local Shi'ah preachers—who were in charge of their judicial institutions—to travel to Iran and Iraq for religious education. It was, therefore, logical to assume that Iraqi and Iranian influences shaped most of the narrative that came from the Eastern Province, given the proclivity for revolutionary zeal taught in Iraqi and Iranian Shi'ah seminaries (*hawzas*).

Indeed, Shi'ah clerics swayed by Iran believed that the Saudi Council of Senior 'Ulamah (*Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulamah*) were not independent and could not render justice. They accused the Al Sa'ud-Al al-Shaykh alliance of practicing injustice, and pointed to the 1990 approval to allow Western forces to enter the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—ostensibly to prevent an Iraqi invasion—as a solid illustration of the pro-American decision. This example, they emphasized, highlighted injustice because most Saudis, they believed, did not agree to the need to invite half-a-million foreign soldiers to defend the holy lands even if several Muslim states participated too. The decree (*fatwah*) issued on the occasion by the Council of Senior 'Ulamah was, according to these interpreters, "the final act of the Wahhabi 'Ulama's evolution from guardians of an activist ideology to state servants," which underscored their inability to apply the justice prescribed in the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah [words or acts attributed to the

82. For a sample of human rights breaches, see Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Events of 2017," in *Human Rights World Report 2018*, January 2018, at <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/saudi.pdf>; Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia 2017/2018," at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabia/report-saudi-arabia/>; Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "Saudi Arabia 2017 Human Rights Report," in *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017*, Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, April 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277507.pdf>.

83. Aleksander I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973, p. 287.

84. See, for example, Pascal Ménoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism and Road Revolt*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2014; and Malise Ruthven, "The Saudi Trillions," *London Review of Books* 39:17, 7 September 2017, pp. 12-16, at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n17/malise-ruthven/the-saudi-trillions>.

85. Sultan Alamer, "Beyond Sectarianism and Ideology: Regionalism and Collective Political Action in Saudi Arabia," in Al-Rasheed, Salman's Legacy, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

Prophet].⁸⁶

The belief that Saudi ‘Ulamah surrendered their judicial independence or no longer participated in key policy decisions was not accurate even if it was always exaggerated. Rather than seeing a decline in influence, and starting in the mid-1990s, an evolution in the relationship between civilian and religious authorities occurred, which both parties preserved to protect innate interests. In fact, and notwithstanding several anti-state clerics whose jihadist agendas gained popularity between 1979 and 2003—from the Makkah Mosque takeover to the bombings that marked the country’s leaders in unprecedented ways—an undeniable transformation was ushered to deal with those who wished to challenge the country’s judiciary. Moreover, an entirely new approach was adopted after 2015 under King Salman, as anti-state and anti-Saudi clerics like ‘Abdallah bin Jibrin, Turki Al bin ‘Ali and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a Jordanian ideologue of Palestinian origin, were arrested because they accused establishment clerics to be little more than “court scholars.”⁸⁷ ‘Abdallah bin Jibrin and Turki Al bin ‘Ali, in particular, blamed Riyadh for stifling Hanbali/Unitarian traditions in what can only be described as a successful method to abscond “Wahhabi” norms. They donned the mantle of the creed, chastised the Al Sa‘ud and most Saudi ‘Ulamah, even denigrated the latter for correctly representing the creed, and hoped—along with a few other similarly inclined clergymen—that Muhammad bin Salman’s reforms would mobilize conservative Saudis to reject what was believed to be a secularization of the country (*‘almanat al-bilad*). It was unclear where this reasoning emerged from, since neither King Salman nor his heir apparent, planned to secularize the Kingdom. Rather, what contemplated reforms entailed were to focus on sorely needed judicial, as well as socio-economic, changes to allow young Saudis the opportunities to create wealth, while holding to their established values. On the contrary, the danger appeared from the ranks of extremists, which infuriated Muhammad bin Salman.

In March 2015, a Saudi commander sympathetic with ISIS “called on fellow Saudis to

kill relatives employed by the state’s security services,” which shocked everyone.⁸⁸ Parricide occurred in at least four known cases, and while not prevalent, these instances highlighted the power of kingship and loyalty to tribal affiliations.⁸⁹ Remarkably, and long before Muhammad bin Salman told a journalist “people misunderstand our monarchy. It is not like Europe. It is a tribal form of monarchy, with many tribes and subtribes and regions connecting to the top,” critics lambasted him for these remarks too.⁹⁰ What he clarified was what religious scholars underscored time and time again, with respect to the vital ties that existed within Saudi society, through which families and tribal connections were affirmed, under the imprimatur of the religious establishment. What the heir apparent did not say in this interview, and in similar exchanges since he assumed the burdens of power, was that the time was long overdue to introduce concrete adjustments within society at large, including within the judiciary.

Interestingly, and save for a few encounters that brought the monarch, his heir and senior clerics together, religious authorities have by and large been rather quiescent. If Shaykh ‘Abdul Rahman al-Barrak, a student of Shaykh bin Baz—the cleric who influenced Hanbali/Unitarian doctrine for at least an entire generation—stood as one of the most vocal opponents of women’s socio-political emancipation in the Kingdom, King Salman’s order to allow women to drive starting on 24 June 2018, managed to secure his silence. Al-Barrak had derided King ‘Abdallah’s decision to allow women to vote in municipal elections when he issued a *fatwah* that insisted the ban be maintained, though he lacked the courage to voice his opposition a decade later as the Salman Juggernaut, ably piloted by Muhammad bin Salman, rolled in. In continuing his brother’s legacy to promote women’s rights in Saudi Arabia, King Salman displayed the highest form of respect to his later brother, notwithstanding personal disagreements over other specific policy matters. When the national interest was at stake, the Al Sa‘ud stood firm, and in unison. Comically, it was assumed that the monarch allegedly harbored sympathy towards Islamists, when Riyadh had taken steps under the ruler to restrict the powers of the mutawayyin.⁹¹

86. Guido Steinberg, “The Wahhabi Ulama and the Saudi State: 1745 to the Present,” in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, New York: New York University Press, 2005, p. 30.

87. Cole Bunzel, “Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic State: ‘Abdullah Ibn Jibrin and Turki Al bin ‘Ali,” in Al-Rasheed, *Salman’s Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-196.

88. Nadav Samin, “Parricide in the Kingdom,” in Al-Rasheed, *Salman’s Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-213.

89. Samin, *Ibid.*, pp. 198, 203-205, 210.

90. Thomas Friedman, “Letter From Saudi Arabia,” *The New York Times*, 25 November 2015, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/opinion/letter-from-saudi-arabia.html>.

91. For a solid discussion of this sensitive topic, see F. Gregory Gause III, “Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges,” in Al-Rasheed, *Salman’s Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-43.

Figure 6. Saudi Arabia Granted Women the Right to Drive



Source: © Yonhap News.

Nevertheless, and rather than openly clash with clerics over the state's reform policies concerning women, Riyadh encouraged women to become active in assuming their security responsibilities to defend the nation. A leading Saudi female journalist, Hayfah al-Zahrani, provided fresh insights into the types of reforms which combined emancipation with developments in the War for Yemen, when she was "photographed wearing a military-style helmet and vest, even posing inside a military tank." According to one observer, al-Zahrani asserted "her *hazm* [decisive] state feminism, [when] she declared that this was not because she was brave, but because she was 'fulfilling a duty to the nation'."⁹² While others mobilized against specific state policies, al-Zahrani championed women's rights in close association with state objectives, which believed in gradual reforms, not sudden ones. Naturally, not all Saudi women approved of "state feminism" though rescinding taboos in a largely patriarchal society required time, especially as the reforms were carefully integrated in the national security narrative that could not

92. Nora Doajji, "From *Hasm* to *Hazm*: Saudi Feminism Beyond Patriarchal Bargaining," in Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-144, the quote is on p. 131.

possibly contradict Islamic Law.

In other instances, and as stated above, Riyadh displayed its will-to-power as authorities arrested more than twenty clerics and intellectuals, including Salman al-'Awdah and 'Awad al-Qarni. Riyadh confirmed that several individuals were acting on behalf of foreign parties and accused them of "espionage activities and having contacts with external entities, including the Muslim Brotherhood."⁹³ Because of his prominence throughout the 1990s in the *Sahwah* [Awakening Movement] that was associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and because he criticized the Saudi government on religious grounds, including for allowing American troops to enter the Kingdom during the 1991 War for Kuwait [which he recanted after serving a five-years term in prison], authorities asked the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh that Salman al-'Awdah be condemned to death. In 2018, he faced thirty-seven charges, "including stirring public discord, going against the ruler and being active in the Muslim Brotherhood—all of which are considered crimes in Saudi Arabia."⁹⁴ This extraordinary step, it is worth underscoring, highlighted King Salman's determination to impose his will to reform the Kingdom, loosen social restrictions, and reject revolutionary zeal. Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman intended to return to the pre-1979 era, when extremists, he believes, hijacked moderate Islam.

Moreover, and while some may think that "Saudi Arabia's religious authorities were extreme even before Ayatollah Khomeini ruled over Iran," few can deny the negative impact that the Iranian Revolution has had on the entire Muslim World.⁹⁵ In this instance, what Muhammad bin Salman seems determined to usher was not just to end the extremist agenda, but to also reform the judiciary in his own country so that excesses were and are not practiced in the name of Scriptures or because of foreign influences emanating from Iran. Regrettably, Muslim Brotherhood interpretations found their

93. "Saudi Arabia 'Arrests Clerics in Crackdown on Dissent'," *BBC News*, 13 September 2017, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41260543>.

94. Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia Seeks Death Penalty in Trial of Outspoken Cleric," *The New York Times*, 4 September 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-salman-al-awda.html>.

95. "Saudi Arabia Turns Against Political Islam—Muslims but not Brothers: The Crown Prince Tries to Reform Wahhabism and Isolate the Muslim Brotherhood," *The Economist*, 23 June 2018, at <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2018/06/23/saudi-arabia-turns-against-political-islam>.

way into Hanbali/Unitarian dogma—along with other Muslim creeds—and inspired a political Islam that opted for militancy, both within Sunni and Shi’ah traditions. This necessitated attention and Riyadh was poised to address whatever challenges emerged to the best of its abilities. As Tunisia espoused democratizing reforms within the al-Nahdah movement, while Hamas, the armed Palestinian movement that rules Gaza, adopted Iranian-inspired and equipped call-to arms, Saudi Arabia was determined to avoid any duplication. Likewise, Riyadh perceived Hizballah in Lebanon and the Hashd al-Sha’abi in Iraq to be ideal vehicles to sprout violence, which clarified that the so-called al-Nusrah and al-Qa’idah were not the only varieties of extremism that mushroomed in recent years. In just about every society where these extremist groups flourished, including in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, authorities proved to be powerless. This is where King Salman and his heir stepped in to address perceived threats to law and order.

Although seldom discussed, it was critical to mention that while Muslim Brotherhood operatives enjoyed relatively correct ties with conservative Arab Gulf rulers—as the latter considered them to be useful against nationalists and leftists—the Sword of Damocles fell when they, the Brothers, encouraged rebellion against rulers they regarded as being impious. Naturally, Arab Gulf rulers rejected such descriptions, and further dismissed the Brotherhood quest for a democratic caliphate. It need not be stated so blatantly, but perhaps a careful examination of the Islamic State Caliphate experiment advanced by one Ibrahim al-Baghdadi—certainly a Brotherhood pupil—highlighted that the effort was not particularly successful. Why would any Muslim ruler, especially in a monarchy, entrust the future of the nation to such perspectives is not too difficult to understand, and no one should be surprised that the Caliphate paradigm was a flop. Moreover, and while a leading source concluded that “the Saudi push for ‘moderate Islam’ may have one paradoxical boon,” ostensibly because “many Shias hope[d] it will quieten the worst anti-Shia utterances of Wahhabi clerics,” it was difficult to see how that may actualize when the Iranian revolutionary government positioned itself against Arab monarchies.⁹⁶

In fact, no fundamental reforms within the judiciary were possible to unless these fundamental threats—extremism fueled by outside forces—were addressed in full. To

be sure, some of the grievances, identified above could not be attended to unless a fundamental reformulation of existing social contracts, were not initiated. Towards that end, it may be useful to look for similar developments in contemporary Saudi history, to better ascertain whether such transformations may be possible, and under what circumstances.

The founder of the Third Saudi monarchy, ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman, was the first ruler to face the wrath of the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia and he certainly managed to overcome most of the hurdles he confronted. Truth be told, this was the only credible opposition he faced, even if his tribal conquests were arduous affairs. In a country where the constitution is the Holy Qur’an, a religious opposition might not make a lot of sense, though what was undeniable was the quest for power that most clerics anticipated on account of the 1744 Pact between the Al Sa’ud and the Al al-Shaykh, or between the secular and religious communities that joined forces in the unification of the land. Indeed, Sunni opposition was entirely motivated by political aspirations—rather than any religious demands given that the Al Sa’ud shared in the creed—and, at least until the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Shi’ah opposition was subdued and focused on economic neglect of the Eastern Province. Saudi Shi’ahs—it is critical to underscore even if revisionism shies away from such descriptions—were invigorated by ‘Ayatallah Ruhallah Khumayni’s [Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini] brash anti-monarchism, but accepted their status as a minority population in a predominantly Sunni country. In reality, Saudi Shi’ah leaders craved financial investments long before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, even if ideological motivations lingered. Khumayni’s goading altered the status quo, not necessarily in positive terms. To be sure, the 2003 “Partners in the Nation” petition, which secured the signatures of 450 Saudi Shi’ahs, including 46 women, sought basic rights and a recognition of the Shi’ah creed, though most if not all were nationalists at heart, not irredentists who wished to abandon the Kingdom and join Persia.⁹⁷

Likewise, the 1991 War for Kuwait allowed Sunni critics of the Al Sa’ud to open a new front against the ruling family and, starting in May 1991, Saudi ‘Ulamah petitioned King Fahd to end corruption and end Riyadh’s alliances with Western powers. They

96. *Ibid.*

97. For a discussion of this important development, see Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi’is of Saudi Arabia*, London and San Francisco: Saqi, 2006. The petition is reproduced on pp. 257-262.

ridiculed King Fahd's 7 August 1990 call on the United States to prevent an Iraqi invasion of the Kingdom. This was followed by a July 1992 "Recommendation Memorandum," which the monarch dismissed as being irrelevant, even if signatories included several prominent clerics.⁹⁸ Within a year, the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) was created, whose writ was to empower believers with Shari'ah, something that Riyadh was supposed to uphold and that, allegedly, it failed to. CDLR pamphlets targeted Al Sa'ud leaders though neither the organization nor its offshoot, MIRA (Movement for Islamic Reforms in Arabia), threatened the ruling family's harmony. Rather, the CDLR, MIRA, and other groups—that harbored and broadcast demagoguery—failed to gain popularity. When Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-'Awdah, two Sa'udi 'Ulamah who petitioned the monarch in 1991 and 1992, rose to lead the Sunni opposition, both were rejected by the establishment. Ironically, their voices were beamed into the Kingdom on the Qatari television network *Al-Jazeera* [al-Jazirah], or further away, from the United Kingdom. By 2001 and the horrible 11 September events, Sunni opposition was significantly weakened, as 'Usamah bin Ladin was expelled and his nationality stripped. Lest we forget, al-Qa'idah was vocal and somewhat effective throughout the region, but what worried the Al Sa'ud was the ideology's growing popularity among domestic extremists who, helter-skelter, seemed determined to spread chaos and challenge the state. Few wished to see a repeat of the 1979 Makkah Mosque takeover—by Juhayman al-'Utaybi and his gang—that, without a doubt, still haunted officials, something that Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman acknowledged on several occasions.

Therefore, and while Kings Fahd and 'Abdallah managed internal Sunni extremists to the best of their abilities, the monarchy's perceptions regarding religious opposition figures only changed after the May 2003 bombings that rocked the capital city and brought "real terrorism" home. A number of Saudi citizens were killed along with expatriate workers whose crime it was to contribute to the welfare of Saudi society.⁹⁹

98. For a discussion of the petition industry, see Kéchichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Sa'udi Arabia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-187, 248-270.

99. On 12 May 2003, 39 people were killed, and over 160 wounded when bombs went off at three compounds in Riyadh—Durrat al-Jadawel, al-Hamrah Oasis Village, and a compound housing Vinnell Corporation employees. A few months later, on 8 November 2003, a bomb was detonated outside the al-Muhayyah housing compound west of Riyadh, killing at least 17 people and wounding 122. For details, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 199-226.

King 'Abdallah rejected all of the extremist discourses that relied on Islam to justify violence and admonished clerics who justified the killings. Most reform-minded intellectuals, conservatives as well as liberals, agreed. The ruler embarked on fundamental reforms but did not live long enough to see them implemented. It may be useful to mention a few of his accomplishments here and the kind of opposition he faced, including from among the clergy—most of whom failed to heed his calls for change—who also stood in King Salman's way.

As early as October 1999, then Heir Apparent 'Abdallah focused on the country's finances as well as its engagé diplomacy. Aware of domestic schisms, 'Abdallah became the first senior official to visit Qatif in April 1999 and, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 calamities, consulted with the country's academic and media leaders—all to gain first-hand knowledge of what ailed Saudi society. On 4 November 2001, he granted an audience to women's organizations and pledged to take into account their grievances. Ten days later, he welcomed several 'Ulamahs and counseled them to be "prudent" and to remain "vigilant" in all their declarations. "Avoid fanaticisms," he pleaded, in what was a mild but effective rebuke. Consultations with the military, provincial governors, tribal leaders and assorted dignitaries were also held, all to protect the national interest. On 5 February 2002, 'Abdallah issued his now famous declaration that warned everyone about "injustice, neglect, and wastage." But his most telling and profoundly touching initiative came on 22 November 2002 when he visited one of Riyadh's poorest neighborhoods. What he saw, probably the first time a senior member of the family laid eyes on such dwellings in the post-oil boom era, shocked him. Extremely poor living conditions sickened him, as he understood what needed to be done, even if Saudi extremists accused him of being out of touch. Critics labeled him an opportunist, someone motivated by ideology and power, rather than a leader who felt genuine concern for his nationals. Saudi Arabia, concluded 'Abdallah was better than that, and ought not tolerate such poverty, which was why he initiated specific assistance programs that targeted those most in need.

As stated above, King 'Abdallah did not live long enough to see many of his reform plans, which is why the burden fell on his successor's shoulders. Moreover, and because of various regional crises, including the War for Yemen and the crises in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, most of which were certainly fueled by direct Iranian interference in Arab affairs, attention on internal developments and on Gulf Cooperation Council affairs—always priorities for the Arab Gulf monarchies—were placed in abeyance. That is until

the Qatar Crisis, which arose between Doha and the Anti-Terror Quartet (ATQ), and which includes Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Those who perceived the rise of new links between Tehran and Doha after it was clarified that the Iranian State was providing consumer goods, food and other essentials to Qatar, elicited praise. One erudite professor did not read too much in the rapprochement because he understood that Qatar was not part of the Iranian sphere of influence and, as a full-fledged Arab nation, remained within the Arabian theater, permanently attached to the Kingdom.¹⁰⁰ To be sure, the promontory is physically part of the Arabian Peninsula, and its peoples share historical and cultural affinities with fellow Arabs that cannot be easily dismantled. Yet, real political differences existed within the Gulf Cooperation Council, which surfaced under King ‘Abdallah and took on a certain urgency under his successor.

The ATQ-Qatar crisis may last a long time, as Doha is planning for a sustained boycott, which it calls a blockade. Naturally, the Shaykhdom has the financial means to manage its affairs for a few years and may actually succeed in absorbing the financial impact, but it truly cannot pretend to be a liberal and democratic entity while the ATQ states are allegedly the opposite. Ironically, Doha sought and received assistance from two of the most authoritarian and repressive regimes in the entire region—Iran and Turkey—whose internal challenges are grandiose, while those that afflict ATQ states pale in

100. Bernard Haykel, a Professor of Near Eastern Studies and the Director of the Institute for Trans-Regional Studies of the Contemporary Middle East at Princeton University in the United States, was interviewed in Beirut’s *L’Orient-Le Jour* daily where he offered one of the bleakest assessments of the ills that befell the Sunni realm. Beyond the venue, which reflected the über confusion that envelops Lebanon, the message was strikingly pessimistic as it foresaw gloom and doom. Haykel is a seasoned analyst who knows the region well, travels throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and maintains close contacts with scores of leading personalities. He also advises various branches of the U.S. Government, testifies to Congressional committees and, far more importantly, teaches at a prestigious institution of higher learning where future leaders are trained. For most, the few classes on the Middle East and Arab World will be the only introduction these students may be exposed to throughout their lives, which means that what a professor delivers will have an impact. What is thus troubling is to hear devastating conclusions about 1.5 billion people and their struggles. Even worse are the dismissive conclusions that Riyadh may not have the required capabilities to lead, which, logic implies, will translate into more or less permanent chaos.

comparison. Be that as it may, though what is even more intriguing is Professor Bernard Haykel’s answer to the alleged Al Sa’ud “state of flux” question, notably because of the accession to the position of Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman. The professor opined that Prince Muhammad bin Salman was consolidating power, the likes of which the Kingdom had not “witnessed since the founding King Abdul Aziz.” In his own words: “Saudi Arabia is now run by someone who is very dynamic, charismatic, but also has very harsh ideas about Iran and the economic diversification of the country, advocating a number of regional and internal reforms.” When asked whether such a figure can lead the Sunni World in ongoing crises, presumably with Shi’ah Persia on the opposite side, Bernard Haykel concluded that

“Sunnism is much like Protestantism, in the sense that there has never been a single pole that controls it. The Shiite world is different, because it is a minority world, where there is a hierarchy of clergy, with a state that is Iran and a doctrine that centralizes power with a cleric. The Sunni world has almost never been unified except in the Middle Ages, so I do not believe that Saudi Arabia will be able to centralize the power of the Sunnis. It will remain a world that is scattered and decentralized.”¹⁰¹

Time will tell whether Sunni Muslims, all 1.5 billion, will lose strategic advantages to the Shi’ah axis stretching from Iran to Lebanon and including Iraq and Syria, although, realistically, recent gains in the last two “countries” may be temporary. According to Haykel, there was an American-Russian entente over the fate of the Ba’ath regime in Damascus and, equally important, he interpreted the significant Mosul victory by Iraq’s Shi’ah militias against the so-called Islamic State as evidence “that the bursting of the Sunni world can be even more important than it is now.” Haykel is naturally entitled to his opinions but so are others who see a breath of fresh air when they argue the opposite. To be sure, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia faced serious challenges but, mercifully, doubts about the future of the Sunni World were not one of those concerns. He, and the vast majority of his audiences may not believe it, but extremism is not how one defined Sunnism, though the burden was on King Salman and Heir Apparent Muhammad

101. Caroline Hayek, “Le Monde Sunnite va Rester Éparpillé et Décentralisé,” *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 8 December 2017, at <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1066923/-le-monde-sunnite-va-rester-eparpille-et-decentralise.html> [my translation from the French].

bin Salman to lead the Sunni World from positions of moral as well as physical strengths. While the latter encompassed practical features and even more practicable considerations, the former was the key linchpin for any success. The Kingdom will substantially strengthen its position when genuine updates of all legal mechanisms are introduced and practiced, since “the last fruit of the most mature society” is enjoyed within the framework of “an excellent judicial system.”

Chapter 3

Regional and Global Trials

American Challenges

Ties with the United States of America: The Obama Terms

Ties with the United States of America: The Donald Trump Juggernaut

“Together We Prevail”

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Chapter 3. Regional and Global Trials

By virtue of its geopolitical weight, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia played and continues to enjoy a key role in regional and global affairs, though it recently confronted a series of existential threats that determined its outlook and is likely to define its future. While foreign policy directives tend to be constant over long-stretches of time, leaders can and do alter them on a periodical basis, which was what occurred after 2015 in Riyadh. Without being exhaustive, this chapter addresses several key relationships, starting with the vital Saudi-American relationships under the Obama and Trump administrations, followed by the Kingdom's complicated connections with Russia. Attention is then devoted to selected ties with Asian powers, including Pakistan, India, China and the Republic of Korea. Links with two major European countries, the United Kingdom and France examine recent policy choices between them and the Kingdom, before turning to selected contacts within the Arab World, focusing on Saudi Arabia's reactions to the so-called "Arab Spring" and the relevance of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of the War for the Yemen and an assessment of critical interactions with Revolutionary Iran.

American Challenges

If the United States pursued a twin-pillar policy throughout much of the twentieth-century in the Arabian Gulf area and perceived Iran and Saudi Arabia as vital regional allies, the 1979 revolution that altered Persia left an indelible impact on regional societies, and affected every government on the Arabian Peninsula. Washington experienced an unprecedented criminal crisis that saw fifty-two American diplomats held hostage for 444 days—from 4 November 1979 to 20 January 1981—and, in turn, Saudi Arabia, along with its fellow Arab monarchies, endured the wrath of anti-monarchical rhetoric that regularly translated into clashes at the annual pilgrimage that, more often than not, resulted in significant casualties. Iran stood as a defining threat before and after the 1979 revolution and seldom attempted to accommodate any of its neighbors. It remained a nemesis of the conservative Arab states, denigrating their governments and, even worse, forging military alliances with Shi'ah militias that worked towards internal ruptures. In short, it was a force that justified policies that spread havoc within the Arab World.

For nearly five decades, Iran contemplated hegemony, practiced it, and planned for more of the same for decades and centuries to come. Remarkably, Washington sought to isolate it before it chose to reconcile, ostensibly to prevent Persia from acquiring an atomic weapon, though successive American administrations used their putative leverage skills with Tehran to manipulate and dominate Arab Gulf States.¹⁰² While evolving ties with a variety of countries were of utmost importance, none of the interactions Saudi Arabia cherished with other societies were as important as those with the United States, which was often simplified by the accurate oil for security equation.¹⁰³

Ties with the United States of America: The Obama Terms

Few doubted that the World's major powers would sign an agreement with Iran by 30 June 2015 that, inter-alia, promised that Tehran would emerge as a nuclear state even after a short hiatus of a decade.¹⁰⁴ In light of that inevitable reality, President Barack Obama invited the leaders of the six conservative Arab Gulf monarchies to Camp David where he tried to assuage Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) concerns and,

102. For background materials on these relationships, see James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989; William O. Beeman, *The Great Satan Vs. the Mad Mullahs: How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005; William R. Polk, *Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know—From Persia to the Islamic Republic, From Cyrus to Ahmadinejad*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Actions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; and Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2017. On Saudi ties with Iran, see Fahad M. Alsultan and Pedram Saeid, *The Development of Saudi-Iranian Relations since the 1990s: Between Conflict and Accommodation*, Abington, Oxon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2017; Faisal bin Salman al-Saud, *Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Power Politics in Transition*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2003; and Maaïke Warnaar, Paul Aarts, Luciano Zaccara, eds., *Iran's Relations with the Arab States of the Gulf: Common Interests Over Historic Rivalry*, Berlin and London: Gerlach Press, 2016.

103. For a thorough examination, see Islam Yasin Qasem, *Oil and Security Policies: Saudi Arabia, 1950-2012*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012.

104. As stated above, this chronicle focuses on the post-2015 period and will, therefore, skip over important topics covered elsewhere.

perhaps, offer ironclad security guarantees. As expected, both sides engaged in careful spin, though the summit meeting fell well short of Obama's ambitions that, regrettably, produced serious consequences for everyone concerned.¹⁰⁵ President Obama articulated long-term American interests with Arab Gulf monarchies even if his heart was not in it. He chose to reduce Washington's political footprint within the Arab World at large and with Arab Gulf States in particular, even if U.S. interests required a healthy presence on the Arabian Peninsula, which entered its eighth decade of mutually beneficial ties.

Remarkably, and while Obama came out against all wars as a matter of principle throughout his campaign and during his first days in office, he nevertheless fought with gusto.¹⁰⁶ Strangely, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008, barely into the first year of his administration, and though he proudly declared: "A decade of war is now ending" during his Inaugural Address, he was largely ineffective vis-à-vis the post-2010 Arab Uprisings that perpetuated several wars and started a few new ones.¹⁰⁷ Of course, Obama opposed the War for Iraq, and while he brought most of the troops home in 2011, the subsequent collapse of that hapless country into more or less perpetual chaos, sucked Americans back in—this time to fight the so-called Islamic State. By 2016, that is Obama's last year in office, Washington had bombed seven Muslim countries, often using unmanned drones, which turned out to be the president's preferred instrument of destruction. Sadly, he chose to acquiesce to Bashar Al Assad in Syria when, in 2013, Obama conveniently walked away from his own "red line" to deter the Damascene from using chemical weapons against civilians. Admirers justified this volte-face by insisting that what the 44th American President did was to simply turn down offers to

engage troops on the ground, and pointed out, instead, to his determination to authorize the raid on an Abbottabad compound in Pakistan that killed 'Usamah bin Ladin. In the event, Obama offered various justifications to skip bombing Syria, though his reticence led to the destruction of a hapless country with over 500,000 killed by the end of 2018, along with five million refugees scattered throughout the world and at least 10 million internally displaced.¹⁰⁸

Politically, Obama's restraints emboldened Iran and Russia, both of which filled the void with relative ease. It was as if the American was glad to hand Syria on a platter to Iran and allow Russia's Vladimir Putin, a leader Obama refused to understand and

Figure 7. King Salman and President Obama



Source: © Yonhap News.

105. Agence France Presse, "Gulf Nations Say Reassured by Obama's 'Ironclad' Pledge," 16 May 2015, at <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/179075-gulf-nations-say-reassured-by-obama-s-ironclad-pledge>.

106. President Obama's ties with the Arab World will require careful assessment and are beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that the 44th American head-of-state was not particularly impressed with Arabs in general and with Arab Gulf leaders in particular. See Joseph A. Kéchichian, "Barack Obama's Legacy in the Middle East," *Dirasat*, Number 4, May 2015, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: King Faisal Center for research and Islamic Studies, 2015; available at <http://www.kfcris.com/en/view/post/44>.

107. "President Obama's Inaugural Address," Washington, D.C.: The White House, 21 January 2009, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

108. Ben Rhodes, *The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*, New York: Random House, 2018, pp. 126-141. Rhodes, who served as deputy national security advisor to Obama regretted the lack of action against the Bashar al-Assad regime but was, apparently, always overruled. *Ibid.*, pp. 223-240.

confront, to have a free-hand too. In fact, Putin hoodwinked Obama over the chemical weapons issue, as the United States and its hapless allies entrusted the matter to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which meant well but could not prevent the recurrent use of weapons of mass destruction by the Ba'ath regime. In the end, Obama's choices raised undeniable questions about whether or not the United States would stand by its word, which many doubted. Nowhere was this more evident than in the drawn out negotiations between the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany—the P5+1 composed of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, Russia and Germany—with Iran.¹⁰⁹

It was because he was aware that the “Iran Deal” would be a hard sell throughout the Arabian Peninsula that President Obama invited GCC members to a Camp David meeting in May 2015, perhaps to explain, and even balance what appeared to be an incredibly sophisticated and difficult sale. Though hesitant, Arab Gulf participants gathered at Camp David, even if few expected the summit to erase existing doubts about Washington's real but hidden intentions. Most hoped that Americans would erase some of the mistrust GCC leaders harbored towards President Obama's steadfast policy preferences, especially with respect to Iran, and while none of the monarchs or their representatives expected Obama to accept their interpretations of perceived threats, or share their visions of unity to confront the latter (since everyone was aware that Washington was persuaded Iran was a force of good in the Gulf region and throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds), they at least intended to communicate “understandings and misgivings.”¹¹⁰

109. For an examination of the accord, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, see Parsi, *Losing an Enemy*, *op. cit.* See also, Statement from Nuclear Nonproliferation Specialists, *The Comprehensive P5+1 Nuclear Agreement With Iran: A Net-Plus for Nonproliferation*, Washington, D.C.: Arms Control Association, 17 August 2015, at https://www.armscontrol.org/files/Nonpro_Specialist_statement_on_Iran_Deal_Aug_2015.pdf; Dennis C. Jett, *The Iran Nuclear Deal: Bombs, Bureaucrats, and Billionaires*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; and Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Case Against the Iran Deal: How Can We Now Stop Iran from Getting Nukes?*, New York: Rosetta Books, 2015.

110. Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: Politics, Gulf Security, and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, CRS Report RL 32048, 19 August 2016. See also The Royal Institute for International Affairs, *Iran's Politics and Foreign Policy*, London: Chatham House, August 2016.

Heralded as a major gathering, the first U.S.-GCC Summit failed to deliver after King Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, less than four months on the throne, opted to stay away. King Hamad bin 'Isa Al Khalifah of Bahrain, Sultan Qabus bin Sa'id Al Sa'id of Oman and Shaykh Khalifah bin Zayid Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates opted not to attend either, sending instead their lieutenants. It was a snub, even a diplomatic disaster, and highlighted basic problems that existed between Obama and Arab Gulf leaders.¹¹¹ In the end, however, what GCC states got from Obama was a pledge to strengthen existing bilateral strategic partnerships, enhance cooperation in matters of defense, supply fresh—but not necessarily the most sophisticated—arms, cooperate on critical counter-terrorism plans, coordinate maritime and cyber security initiatives, and defend against ballistic missiles that, presumably, would come from Iran. To be sure, these were valuable pledges even if Arab Gulf States were amply aware that their relationships with Washington stood a notch below full-fledged alliance commitments, and that the United States intended to move forward with Iran on a nuclear deal especially after Obama explained that he wanted to be “very clear.” A few weeks before the P5+1 deal was signed, Obama declared: “The purpose of security cooperation” with GCC member-state “is not to perpetuate any long-term confrontation with Iran or even to marginalize Iran.” He insisted on this point and while none of the Arab Gulf States wished to either go to war with, or even disregard, their neighbor, all were wary of Tehran's hegemonic aspirations over them.¹¹² This was the crux of the matter and while nothing leaked to confirm whether GCC leaders reminded the Obama team of Iran's deeds as the summit progressed at the presidential retreat in the Maryland countryside, Washington was particularly timid towards Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps attack on a Singapore-flagged cargo vessel in international waters inside the Gulf, opting to

111. David Osborne, “US-Gulf Summit: Saudi King ‘Snubs’ President Obama over his Perceived Inattention to the Region,” *The Independent*, 13 May 2015, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/usgulf-summit-saudi-king-snubs-president-obama-over-his-perceived-inattention-to-the-region-10248240.html>.

112. Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama in Press Conference after GCC Summit,” Washington, D.C.: The White House, 14 May 2015, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/remarks-president-obama-press-conference-after-gcc-summit>. See also Emile El-Hokayem and Matteo Legrenzi, “The Arab Gulf States in the Shadow Of the Iranian Nuclear Challenge,” Washington, D.C.: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 26 May 2006, at https://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/The_Arab_Gulf_States_in_the_Shadow_2006_1.pdf.

transform its timidity into partial acquiescence.¹¹³ How such a blatant infraction could be overlooked was a mystery. Naturally, it was logical to assume that summiters discussed salient concerns ranging from Iranian backing of extremists in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere, though no signs emerged that the White House linked GCC fears with Iranian intentions. The joint communiqué along with its more comprehensive annex dotted the i's and crossed the t's, though on Iran it simply pledged to "continue consultations on how to enhance the region's security architecture" and to "cooperate in countering Iran's destabilizing activities in the region."¹¹⁴

Of course, American officials assured Arab Gulf leaders that "the objective [was] to deny Iran the ability to obtain a nuclear weapon," though few knew the terms of the putative deal. It fell on 'Adil al-Jubayr [Adel al-Jubeir], the Saudi foreign minister and former ambassador to the U.S., to warn that Riyadh would wait to decide "what we accept, what we don't accept," based on the fine print.¹¹⁵ More forcefully, and speaking at the annual ASAN Institute Plenum in Seoul [the Republic of Korea] in 2015, Prince Turki al-Faysal [Faisal], the former Saudi intelligence chief did not mince his words. Prince Turki delivered an impeccably unambiguous statement when he hammered that "whatever the Iranians have, we will have, too," which was probably the blunt message that Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Nayif carried from King Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz to President Obama in mid-May 2015.¹¹⁶

Indeed, the Saudi monarch's determination was lauded throughout the Gulf region, with Ahmad al-Jarallah, the editor-in-chief of the Kuwaiti newspapers *al-Siyassah* and *Arab Times*, carrying the torch. Al-Jarallah called on the American head-of-state to

113. "Iranian Navy Fires Warning Shots at Cargo Ship in International Waters in Gulf," *The Guardian*, 14 May 2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/14/iranian-navy-fires-warning-shots-at-cargo-ship-in-international-waters-in-gulf>.

114. Barack Obama, "Joint Statement by the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council," 14 May 2015. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=110199>.

115. "President Obama and the Gulf Arabs" (Editorial), *The New York Times*, 15 May 2015, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/16/opinion/president-obama-and-the-gulf-arabs.html>.

116. HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal, "Reordering the World Order: A Saudi Perspective," Seoul, Korea: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 29 April 2015, at <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/forums/photo-hrh-prince-turki-alfaisal-alsaud/>.

"Stop 'Pacifying' Us," as he clarified that while GCC States led by Saudi Arabia wished "to keep the region away from war," Arab Gulf leaders were determined to defend themselves "when war [was] imposed" on them.¹¹⁷ On that score, at least, Riyadh and Washington saw eye-to-eye since Washington did not contemplate fresh wars in the region as the Obama Administration sought political solutions to several crises. Even the U.S. "War on Terrorism," once flouted as a perpetual engagement until the end of time, was fought with remote-controlled drones and intermittently. What everyone presumably wished to avoid were escalations between Saudi Arabia and Iran since a full-scale war would drag the U.S. back in an arena Obama wished to extricate the country from. Nevertheless, what Washington and Tehran were oblivious to was the direct linkage between Iranian policies in so many Arab countries, and increased tensions. GCC leaders assembled in Camp David in May 2015 were aware that the long-standing American goal was to prevent any regional or international force from gaining a hold over the oil-rich Gulf region. That was the chief reason why GCC representatives adopted a realistic strategy, one that banked on sheer determination to defend oneself—alone or with allies—and on time. Time to acquire the necessary wherewithal. Time to acculturate new leaders to rapidly changing political environments. Time to engage with friend and foe alike without capitulating to either.

Denigrators of Saudi leaders read the absence of the monarch at Camp David as both a rebuke as well as a sign of Arab disquiet with American diplomacy, which was only partially correct. Although King Salman did not join fellow rulers, he delegated his heir, Prince Muhammad bin Nayif and deputy heir/defense minister Prince Muhammad bin Salman. The two men added their voices to the discussions even if they, along with other attendees, were not persuaded by Obama's justifications over the substance of the deal that the American was preparing with Tehran. Notwithstanding customary photo opportunities and spin declarations, GCC rulers remained skeptical of U.S. views over the implications of the accord for regional stability. King Salman and President Obama understood what was at stake even if the two seldom connected.¹¹⁸

117. Ahmed Al-Jarallah, "Obama, Stop 'Pacifying' Us," *Arab Times*, 12 May 2015, pp. 1, 4.

118. Although President Obama—who was in India in early 2015—made a stop in Riyadh on 27 January 2015 to offer both his condolences on the death of King 'Abdallah as well as meet the newly elevated monarch, he did not really know King Salman and what motivated the Saudi.

The two leaders finally convened in September 2015 (see below), but only held a comprehensive meeting on 20–21 April 2016, when Obama visited Riyadh to attend a GCC Summit. Observers insisted that this was a strategically timed visit, as the Saudi ruler shared his apprehensions with President Obama over the P5+1 accords with Iran. Nevertheless, it was unclear whether the monarch managed to impress on his guest the genuine concerns he harbored, especially since he was persuaded that the Iran deal was bound to accelerate an undesirable arms race. What were Salman’s arguments and how did Obama receive them?

There was no doubt, as White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest told reporters accompanying the U.S. delegation aboard Air Force One that the visit “underscored the importance of the strategic partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia.” That was well understood even by adulators who regularly belittled the Saudi ruler because he, allegedly, suffered from various ailments. At the time, and while few GCC leaders have said so, there was unanimity over the Obama administration’s perceived naiveté on Iran—which was and is a serious power with specific plans to assert itself not only throughout the Muslim World but also, and far more dangerously, over the entire Arab World, where sectarian tensions were and are on the rise. King Salman did in fact share his assessments with Obama who listened but failed to hear what the Saudi ruler confided. Salman shared his concerns over Tehran’s posture vis-à-vis Syria and its support of President Bashar al-Assad, a man who lost his legitimacy after 2011, even if Obama flip-flopped on the Damascene. The Saudi monarch imparted insights on the malevolent influence that Iranian mullahs enjoyed over Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar Al ‘Abadi at a time when even Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali Sistani—the leading Iraqi Shi’ah spiritual leader—insisted on comprehensive political reforms to reduce or end Tehran’s sway in Baghdad. He disclosed how Iranian mullahs backed Huthi rebels in Yemen and what kind of support the latter received from Iran even if the latter was using a major GCC member-state, the Sultanate of Oman, to reach a political settlement in the ongoing war. He revealed specifics of the mischief that Iranian agents were causing among Shi’ahs in Bahrain and in Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province and, even if oil prices were low, of lingering dangers to vulnerable facilities that needed to be defended. Last, but not least, he also touched upon the Question of Palestine that Obama, like his predecessor, chose to overlook and neglect.

Obama, of course, anticipated all of these quandaries and looked beyond 21 January 2017, as he envisaged a wealthy post-presidential career. Beyond exchanging ideas, the

two men evaluated inherent fissures in their ties, largely brought upon by Washington’s recent policies towards the Arab World. As Obama mistrusted Arabs—especially Sunni Arabs—through and through, and perceived them as a source of existential threat to the United States, it was a foregone conclusion that discussions would be far less productive than many hoped for. Remarkably, Obama apparently concluded that the “Saudis had let him down [in the past by] refusing to take Gitmo [Guantanamo] detainees and holding back on a peace gesture with Israel.”¹¹⁹ According to one of his aides, Obama was “irritated” after a meeting with the late King ‘Abdallah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud, whose frank discourse was legendary, and who chastised the American for his handling of President Husni Mubarak of Egypt in 2011.¹²⁰

In the event, and after the P5+1 deal was sealed in July 2015—which meant that crippling international sanctions against Iran would be lifted—King Salman and his GCC allies confronted specific threats to regional and internal security. It was then that Riyadh announced that the Saudi King would visit Washington in early September 2015, when he intended to secure necessary “steps to counter Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region,” as well as “ways to further strengthen the bilateral relationship, including ... joint security and counterterrorism efforts,” between the two countries.¹²¹ Naturally, these initiatives were bound to translate into fresh arms sales, and while there was no doubt that the sale of anti-ballistic missiles would enhance regional security by equipping the Kingdom with critical defensive weapons, what truly mattered was to reach an understanding over effective solutions to dissuade Iran from backing extremists in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere. What was unclear was whether King Salman managed to dissuade Obama that Sunni Islam was not a source of threat to the United States, and that Saudi Arabia, which was and is part of the U.S.-led coalition fighting the so-called Islamic State, was determined to fight and defeat all extremists.

At the end of King Salman’s 4 September 2015 visit to Washington, the White House—presumably with the consent of the Saudi Palace—issued an 854-word “Joint Statement” that reiterated the “enduring relationship” between the two countries. The

119. Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

120. Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

121. David Francis, “Saudi King Salman to Visit Washington Next Week,” *Foreign Policy*, 27 August 2015, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/27/saudi-king-salman-to-visit-washington-next-week/>.

Statement acknowledged that ties grew “deeper and stronger over the past seven decades in the political, economic, military, security, cultural and other spheres of mutual interest,” which was telling in light of recent tensions.¹²² As expected, Obama and Salman stressed the importance of strategic ties, which also emphasized the Kingdom’s leadership role in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Beyond correct diplomatic pronouncements, was the monarch’s visit to the U.S. successful and, in the affirmative, how?

Notwithstanding photo opportunities and spin declarations, Obama was taken aback when the Saudi ruler skipped the 14 May 2015 Camp David Summit with GCC leaders, even though Riyadh signed on to the proposition that the U.S.-GCC defense and security partnership would be strengthened, which was a given because of what was at stake for everyone concerned. Where divergences existed, and raised anxieties, was over Iran and the latter’s attempts to destabilize the Gulf region. Ironically, King Salman’s September 2015 trip coincided with serious security breaches in Kuwait and Bahrain that were directly traced to Iranian operatives, and which an astute observer analyzed with aplomb.¹²³ Dramatic developments in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where Tehran continued to play critical roles, were also evident. Indeed, and notwithstanding confidential discussions on these matters, one could surmise that the Saudis reminded Washington of their fears, and while they respected and understood American intentions to develop ties with Tehran, they hoped that these would not be at the expense of long-term American commitments to regional security. In reality, most GCC officials concluded that President Obama appeared to be a hesitant leader with little or no interest in the Arab world, which troubled far more than appeased. The 2015 visit, consequently, was unproductive and only reinforced the monarch’s fears.

There was plenty of evidence to back this assertion after the U.S. changed its established positions, sometimes overnight, as was the case over Obama’s imaginary red lines

122. “Joint Statement on the Meeting between President Barack Obama and King Salman bin Abd al Aziz Al Saud,” Washington, D.C.: The White House, 4 September 2015, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/04/joint-statement-meeting-between-president-barack-obama-and-king-salman>.

123. Abdullah Al Shayji, “Nuclear Iran Worries GCC States More: The Obama Administration in its Wishful Thinking Believes that the Nuclear Deal will Moderate Iran’s Behavior,” *Gulf News*, 6 September 2015, at <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/thinkers/nuclear-iran-worries-gcc-states-more-1.1579489>.

concerning President Bashar al-Assad and the use of chemical weapons at al-Ghouta on 21 August 2013. Likewise, American hesitancy over the backing of extremist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, were not about to be forgotten anytime soon. What was even more egregious was the fact that Riyadh was kept out of the U.S.-Iran talks although the 4 September 2015 joint statement affirmed the need to “counter Iran’s destabilizing activities.” That sentence spoke volumes because it readily acknowledged that Washington accepted Tehran’s undermining behavior, and although King Salman expressed his support for the P5+1 accord with Iran, what was even more telling was the monarch’s emphasis that the Kingdom did “not need anything” but was “interested in the stability of the region” because he perceived Saudi-American cooperation to be useful for the entire world.

Of course, the Kingdom wanted to make sure that Iran would indeed be prevented from obtaining a nuclear weapon, something that could enhance everyone’s security, though questions lingered after the expiration of the 10-year moratorium on various activities. Few should therefore be surprised that Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies would plan for the period after 2025, and while many would dismiss such planning as being atypical of Arabs, most were bound to be surprised. Be that as it may, and beyond the suspicion that Washington perceived Sunnis as sources of extremism, which led American officials to seek enhanced ties with Iran, there was an agreement between President Obama and King Salman over the so-called Islamic State, which was neither. Both men and their teams “underscored the importance of confronting terrorism and violent extremism,” and pledged to cooperate against the extremist group’s hateful propaganda. This was a given since Riyadh was a clear target and could neither condone nor finance the group even if accusations to the contrary persisted. The monarch reinforced the concept of territorial integrity and national unity for both Iraq and Syria, the two countries where Islamic State terrorists roamed at will, something that the American President affirmed too. Even Lebanon, which was threatened with partition, received a mention in the September 2015 communiqué.

To their immense credit, the Saudis insisted that the joint statement underscore the importance of revisiting the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative to help solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well, in order to reach a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement that would produce two states living side-by-side in peace and security. At a time when few were even thinking of this fundamental question, the King’s resolve to address the question, and the president’s concession to advance the two-state solution, was a major

victory. Far more serious were the divergences over Syria and Yemen, where rising sectarian wars threatened to engulf the entire region in accelerated clashes, and though both sides hoped for a lasting solution based on the principles of Geneva 1—which meant that Bashar al-Assad had to go, something the joint statement said explicitly—what could not be fathomed was how to accomplish that objective without destroying vital institutions that would be required to preserve Syria’s unity and territorial integrity.

Similarly, Riyadh and Washington stressed the urgent need to implement relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions concerning Yemen, to facilitate a political solution based on a GCC initiative and the outcomes of the National Dialogue that the Riyadh-based regional alliance backed. Even as both leaders expressed concerns about the humanitarian crisis that emerged, neither spoke of the ongoing war, which was bound to continue until pro-Iranian Huthis were defeated. At a time when sycophants derided the Saudi monarch, Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz showed his mantle, and displayed the Kingdom’s “will-to-power.” His visit was not a pompous affair but one that illustrated an established resolve. One that endured for nearly eight decades and was bound to continue even though Obama was not an ideal partner.

U.S. friendship with Saudi Arabia remained strong in 2016, the last year in office for President Obama and the first completed year of King Salman’s reign, as the latter shouldered heavy baggage, some of which weighed on the Saudi ability to lead at a time when its guidance was a necessity. On 23 January 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry stopped in Riyadh to meet with the monarch—as well as GCC foreign ministers—not only to go over the most recent Western overtures towards Iran, but to also convey America’s long-term commitment to regional stability. Beyond friendship, observers wondered whether the U.S. declarations of “mutual interest” and “mutual defense” were credible. Were there any doubts lingering among GCC countries that the United States would “stand with them against any external threat and defend them, if necessary”?¹²⁴

124. Anthony H. Cordesman, *Gulf Security: Looking Beyond the Gulf Cooperation Council*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 12 December 2017, at https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/171213_GCC.pdf?hm10rj5lnKMJtrpQ_yY_GJr8lmubYoxk. See also Karen E. Young, “Foreign Policy Analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Breaking Black Boxes and Explaining New Interventions,” in *The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States*, London: London School of Economics, LSA Middle East Centre, Collected Papers, Volume 1, April 2015, pp. 4-12.

The questions were important because of the ongoing anti-Saudi campaign that reached unprecedented levels in recent years. Unashamedly, instant experts filled the airwaves and print media outlets with assessments of the Sunni faith, which bordered on the absurd. Some opined with metaphysical certitude about topics they hardly mastered. A few boldly went where objectivity and scholarship required caution. For many, “Wahhabism” was associated with extremism that, truth be told, was facile to declare and utterly wrong. The list of similar pontifications was long and may well be the work of clever intelligence services that strove on chaos.¹²⁵ Amid the unrelenting campaign, rumors were added to King Salman’s health, although the early 2016 upsurge took on a particularly bizarre twist. Carefully orchestrated narratives appeared to help mere

125. For a flavor, see (alphabetically), As‘ad AbuKhalil, *The Battle for Saudi Arabia: Royalty, Fundamentalism, and Global Power*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004; Sami Alrabaa, *Veiled Atrocities: True Stories of Oppression in Saudi Arabia*, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2010; Ardavan Amir-Aslani, *Arabie Saoudite: De l'influence à la décadence*, Paris: l'Archipel, 2017; John R. Bradley, *Saudi Arabia Exposed: Inside a Kingdom in Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; Pierre Conesa, *The Saudi Terror Machine: The Truth About Radical Islam and Saudi Arabia Revealed*, New York: Allworth Press, 2018; Kristin Decker, *The Unveiling: An American Teacher in a Saudi Palace*, College Station, Texas: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing, 2006; Karen Elliott House, *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines—and Future*, New York: Vintage, 2013; Mark Hollingsworth with Sandy Mitchell, *Saudi Babylon: Torture, Corruption and Cover-Up Inside the House of Saud*, Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 2005; Dore Gold, *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism*, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003; Pascal Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism and Road Revolt*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Laurent Murawiec, *Princes of Darkness: The Saudi Assault on the West*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005; Gerald Posner, *Secrets of the Kingdom: The Inside Story of the Saudi-U.S. Connection*, New York: Random House, 2005; Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed., *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, London: Hurst & Company, 2018; Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018; Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa‘ud from Tradition to Terror*, New York: Doubleday, 2002; Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam's Holiest Shrine*, New York: Anchor, 2008; Craig Unger, *House of Bush, House of Saud: The Secret Relationship Between the World's Two Most Powerful Dynasties*, New York: Scribner, 2004; Simon Ross Valentine, *Force and Fanaticism: Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and Beyond*, London: Hurst, 2015; and Terence Ward, *The Wahhabi Code: How the Saudis Spread Extremism Globally*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 2018.

mortals gain insights into “the man in charge of the ‘most dangerous man in the world’,” which was touched upon above but was so critical that it surely deserved repetition to help explain a specific mindset. The reference to Muhammad bin Salman was ugly though Mohsen Milani topped the rant catalog in a *Foreign Affairs* essay that concluded the Kingdom was “desperate” even if the adjective was both inaccurate and frantic.¹²⁶

Along with his father, Defense Minister Muhammad bin Salman was placed under the microscope, as everyone attempted to assess his capabilities, with scores deriding his limited skills. Gratuitous rhetoric reached new heights after the execution of a convicted Saudi national, the Shi‘ah Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr, with Bruce Riedel, a former CIA analyst, adding insult to injury when he wrote that the move signaled royal worries.¹²⁷ It took the enviable skills of ‘Adil al-Jubayr, the affable Saudi foreign minister, to silence such nonsense when he challenged Western leaders to respect the Kingdom’s legal system and, equally important, to stand by it against extremist forces that threatened all GCC States. In fact, the very purpose of the January 2016 Kerry visit to Riyadh was to address Saudi and GCC concerns, not only its peculiar anti-Saudi and anti-Sunni drives, but also the far more critical strategic ties that prompted Washington to go to war on the Arabian Peninsula. “We have as solid a relationship, as clear an alliance and as strong a friendship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as we have ever had,” declared Kerry in Riyadh, adding: “and nothing has changed because we worked to eliminate a nuclear weapon with a country in the region.”¹²⁸ This was as clear a declaration as ever, uttered by a high-ranking American official who, to his credit, was not shy to

126. Samuel Osborne, “King Salman: The Man in Charge of the ‘Most Dangerous Man in the World’,” *The Independent*, 23 January 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-king-salman-the-man-behind-the-most-dangerous-man-in-the-world-a6827716.html>. See also Mohsen Milani, “Saudi Arabia’s Desperate Measures: The Domestic and Regional Fears Fueling Riyadh,” *Foreign Affairs*, 10 January 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2016-01-10/saudi-arabias-desperate-measures>.

127. Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Executions Signal Royal Worries,” *Al-Monitor*, 4 January 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/saudi-arabia-iran-execution-nimr-al-nimr-concerns-stability.htm>.

128. “Kerry Reassures Saudi Arabia of ‘Solid Relationship’,” *Al-Arabiya*, 24 January 2016, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/01/24/Kerry-reassures-Saudi-Arabia-of-solid-relationship-.html>.

acknowledge past errors.¹²⁹

Indeed, and though few may wish to turn the page after a deal was reached with Iran over its nuclear capabilities, history may well record that the United States of America led a global coalition to liberate Kuwait in 1991 after Saddam Hussein invaded and occupied the Shaykhdom. GCC leaders, led by Saudi officials, have not forgotten and remained confident that Washington was committed to their alliance not only because of existing friendships among their respective peoples but also because of “mutual interest” and “mutual defense” needs. Still, disagreements lingered, particularly over Syria, extremism, and support to militias and unsavory characters, and while Kerry and the Saudi monarch discussed long promised peace negotiations, what was unclear was whether opposition factions unacceptable to Damascus or its Russian and Iranian sponsors would or could be allowed to participate. Although some pretended to know what transpired at that level, Kerry highlighted that negotiations were ongoing and that Iranian meddling in the affairs of Arab nations, particularly those of the GCC, Syria and Lebanon, were unacceptable. He emphasized, and his Saudi counterpart confirmed, that his country would intensify support to the moderate opposition and present a united front on Syria and Iran, which sounded important, though King Salman waited to see progress on the ground. In the event, the top U.S. diplomat reassured GCC allies that Washington would “stand by them against any external threat,” adding that the Obama Administration understood the importance of the partnership and the commitment towards making it a success.

129. Kerry, then a 27-years-old Vietnam veteran who served with distinction as a U.S. Navy Lieutenant, testified on 22 April 1971 to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where he famously declared: “A monster in the form of millions of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence ... and who were given the chance to die for the biggest nothing in history.” This was a major speech that left an impact. See, “John Kerry’s Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate, 22 April 1971, at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/John_Kerry%27s_testimony_before_the_Senate_Foreign_Relations_Committee. It was unclear whether Kerry shared his family history with any Saudi official that, at least for some, may well have raised a few questions if divulged. Secretary Kerry’s youngest daughter, Dr. Vanessa Kerry, married a fellow physician, Dr. Brian Vala Nahed—whose parents emigrated from Iran to the United States—in 2009. See Vincent M. Mallozzi, “Vanessa Kerry, Brian Nahed,” *The New York Times*, 9 October 2009, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/11/fashion/weddings/11KERRY.html>.

Remarkably, however, it fell on former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates to clarify matters when he declared that the administration's attempts to prevent Iran from stomping around the Middle East was "very weak." In a comprehensive interview with Christopher Dickey in *The Daily Beast*, Gates called for

"something much broader than just more special ops forces to fight ISIS, and so on. I am talking about a major U.S. initiative in terms of an increased military presence, increased military support for our friends and allies, a major effort to get them to work together as a regional security effort, and a comprehensive strategy on how you push back against Iranian meddling."¹³⁰

Gates, a former Secretary of Defense, Director of the CIA, deputy National Security Council Advisor and President of Texas A&M University, reflected the most meaningful American political and military outlook towards the GCC States. Beyond "mutual interest" in, and "mutual defense" programs with, the GCC countries, it was clear that the time was ripe to elevate the backing of the alliance into a permanent fixture. One that fully trusted the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies though it was unclear whether Barack Obama was keen to follow-up. Even if there was a mistaken belief that differences between Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners on one hand and the United States on the other were deep and growing, critics—whose numbers increased in the aftermath of unsettling post-2011 Arab Uprisings—honed on Riyadh as a source of profound instability allegedly because Hanbali/Unitarian ["Wahhabi"] interpretations of Islam promoted intolerance and militancy. While such unbecoming pronouncements reflected ignorance and, even worse, an unprecedented streak of spitefulness because they mixed politics with theology—a deadly combination among every imaginable faith—few denied that Washington and Riyadh confronted serious dilemmas. Still, what mattered were core interests, which almost always determined policies. Barack Obama appreciated these truths, which was why he returned to Riyadh in 2016, both to reiterate American commitments and to further seal tight defense relationships.

It was worth remembering that—notwithstanding Obama's arms-length preferences—

130. Christopher Dickey, "Wise Man Robert Gates Trashes Donald Trump, Doubts Obama's Spunk," *The Daily Beast*, 25 January 2016, at <https://www.thedailybeast.com/wise-man-robert-gates-trashes-donald-trump-doubts-obamas-spunk>.

American presidents weighed the Arab World's importance starting with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Indubitably, Obama stood out in his predilections, confiding to Jeffrey Goldberg that several allies in the Gulf—as well as in Europe—were "free riders" eager to drag Washington into grinding sectarian conflicts that did not promote American interests that, understandably, reflected confusion.¹³¹ Of course, Obama chastised Saudi Arabia for not "sharing" the region with Iran and emphasized that both countries—that is both the Kingdom as well as the Islamic Revolutionary regime—were guilty of fueling proxy wars throughout the region, he nevertheless used convoluted prose that left the impression Washington no longer perceived GCC States as allies. When Malcolm Turnbull, the newly-elected prime minister of Australia, asked the American head-of-state what happened to the U.S.-Saudi relationship, Obama answered that the Saudis and other Gulf Arabs were imposing their preferences by funneling money and large numbers of imams and teachers into several leading Muslim states. Incredulous at this avowal, Turnbull asked: "Aren't the Saudis your friends?," to which Obama smiled and replied: "It's complicated."¹³²

Such complications aside, and beyond the "free riders" insult—which cannot possibly pass for policy—what Obama conveyed in his carefully tailored *Atlantic* interview was the level of frustration he encountered with Arabs because the latter failed to play ball with his preferred options. Simply stated, Obama thought that Saudi Arabia and the

131. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. President Talks Through his Hardest Decisions about America's Role in the World," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>. This interview received wide attention and helped define the so-called "Obama Doctrine," it was, nevertheless, far from being a clear perspective. Goldberg reported how Obama turned down an offer from Samantha Power, then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, who argued for arming Syrian rebels based on her partisanship of the doctrine known as "responsibility to protect," which held that "sovereignty should not be considered inviolate when a country is slaughtering its own citizens." Power apparently lobbied the president to endorse this doctrine in the speech he delivered when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, but Obama declined, allegedly because he did not believe a president should place "American soldiers at great risk in order to prevent humanitarian disasters, unless those disasters pose a direct security threat to the United States." Interestingly, Obama defined his own doctrine in more colorful terms: "Don't do stupid shit." See Rhodes, *The World As It is*, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

132. Goldberg, *Ibid.*

GCC States as a whole ought to accept his policy to bring Iran back from the cold and create a balance of power in the Muslim World between Sunnis and Shi'ahs. His unassuming aim wished to exploit the Sunni-Shi'ah schism essentially to weaken, perhaps even destroy, Sunni power. Why could GCC States not understand that popular revolts that intended to overthrow Arab Gulf monarchies was in the U.S. interests? How could reliable GCC allies not accept the U.S. support for the Muslim Brotherhood that toppled Egyptian President Husni Mubarak who stood as an American ally for over three decades? What was the GCC problem when Obama backtracked in 2013 on his infamous red line to act in Syria after it was conclusively determined that President Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons to kill civilians?

Cynicism aside, Obama was flabbergasted that Riyadh raised doubts about the 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and the P5+1 countries, which merely postponed by a decade the rise of a nuclear Iran. Under the circumstances, and outside of the White House, few were surprised when Saudi Arabia decided to match Iran in every step of the way, because it perceived the Islamic Revolutionary State as a threat to the stability of the entire Arabian Peninsula and well beyond it throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds. The Obama team did not approve but such an outcome was tied to the president's policy preferences. Moreover, and while an Iranian return to the international fold as a peaceful country was certainly a positive development, GCC States refused to genuflect in front of a regime that loathed them and, far more important, fomented internal dissent to usher in regime change. Obviously, President Obama did not see it that way, and showed little sympathy for GCC States when he dismissed extremist threats orchestrated by Iran. He scorned those who demurred to his nuclear deal with Iran, unwilling to concede that the moratorium would eventually necessitate robust follow-ups, long after his counsel would no longer be required. It was worth recalling that a few days after the Goldberg interview was published, Prince Turki al-Faysal, a statesman, diplomat and former head of the *Ri'asat Al-Istikhbarat Al-Amah*, the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP) also known as the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) between 1977 to 2001, responded in one of his memorable opinion essays, published in both Arabic and English. Prince Turki, who assumed the chairmanship of the *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, started his admonition with: "No, Mr. Obama. We are not 'free riders'," adding that the Kingdom helped Washington with vital intelligence and offered boots on the ground to fight in Syria, Yemen and backed various counter-terrorism measures. Al-Faysal rejected the Obama "curve-ball" and reminded the American of the late King 'Abdallah's "no more

red lines" plea, insisting that the Kingdom led from the front, accepted its errors and rectified them. He closed with a diplomatic slam-dunk when he underscored the Saudi character that emphasized how the *badu* stood with their allies "shoulder-to-shoulder" and never abandoned their partners.¹³³

Although "irritated," this was not the reason why the White House revealed that Obama would go to Riyadh in April 2016 where he hoped to hold three specific sessions with GCC leaders, to discuss (1) regional stability, (2) devise mechanisms to defeat the so-called Islamic State, and (3) agree on terms regarding Iran. His team, which included Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, planned to deliberate with GCC defense leaders on the best ways to "enhance GCC capability, interoperability and how to confront asymmetrical threats," all of which meant that a GCC-wide missile defense system was in the pipeline. Ironically, such improved military packages highlighted how important GCC States were, and why it was absolutely critical to protect them from regional hegemons. In short, the Obama Administration realized that GCC States were valuable allies, even though the president was inclined to accept a blurred vision of their diminished significance to American national security.

Nevertheless, and inasmuch as Washington entrusted its GCC allies to shoulder their responsibilities to ensure regional stability, it could not possibly impose its own interests on GCC States and demand that Saudi Arabia prostrate in front of its archenemy, Iran. Even if puzzling to Obama and his supporters, Riyadh perceived Tehran mullahs as a source of peril, and believed that the Sunni-Shi'ah theological schism was not ground for political surrender. This was something Sunni leaders shunned and while other considerations existed, Washington failed to take note of how deep the schism was between Saudi Arabia and Iran that, truth be told, could not be pushed under the proverbial rug.

To his credit, and before leaving office, President Obama vetoed the *Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act* (JASTA) bill, though Senators and Congressmen overrode his

133. Turki al-Faisal, "Mr. Obama, We Are Not 'Free Riders'," *Arab News*, 14 March 2016, at <http://www.arabnews.com/columns/news/894826>.

veto.¹³⁴ Regrettably, Obama—an attorney par excellence—did not fight to save this veto though he chastised those who catered to 9/11 families, who were persuaded that Saudi Arabia was behind the attacks even though the official 9/11 Commission said otherwise. For months on end, men like former senator Bob Graham, who headed the Senate Intelligence Committee that compiled a classified report in 2002, alleged that Saudi officials provided assistance to the 9/11 hijackers.¹³⁵ When the mysterious 28 classified pages that were originally withheld were finally released, Saudi Arabia was exonerated.¹³⁶ That did not matter, however, because hungry attorneys looked for fresh political/financial bait, instead of assuming their governance responsibilities. Indeed, there was little doubt that JASTA was promoted to squeeze Riyadh and Saudi citizens for putative terrorism allegations although Washington opted to overlook a designated state sponsor of terrorism, Iran, when it rushed to sign a nuclear deal with the latter a few months earlier. Senators and Congressmen who appeared in front of television cameras to condemn the Kingdom assumed that no one was paying attention and, even worse, rushed the JASTA bill without much of a debate. That was, unfortunately, not an unusual phenomenon, since lawmakers seldom read most of their own bills.

Be that as it may, JASTA opened a Pandora's box because the law targeted everyone, not just the Kingdom. In what was a truly bizarre twist, JASTA also beleaguered the United States, which intrepid lawmakers overlooked in their zeal to exact revenge on

what was a highly contentious matter. In fact, because JASTA abrogated the principle of sovereign immunity, a necessary change in the law to allow an American citizen to sue a foreign government in a U.S. civil court, other governments were now easily empowered to replicate it. This was a double-edged sword as foreign governments and citizens, for example in Japan over the World War II attacks at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or in Iraq for the 2003 occupation and the many unlawful killings that occurred there, could retaliate with their own versions and force Washington into their own courts for sponsoring terrorism. The list of countries that could presumably enact such legislation was truly long and included Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and many others. JASTA was bad news for Americans not only because many could be sued for actions embarked upon by their governments over the years but also because it added a new component to the conduct of international affairs, namely various judiciaries whose rules and regulations might be—and often were—diametrically opposed to those adopted by leading Western powers. One could imagine a Russian judge rendering such a decision in a case that involved a U.S. diplomat. Of course, Senators and Congressmen who backed JASTA were hungry for cash and believed that Saudi Arabia had a lot of assets that could be confiscated, without realizing that the U.S. had far more. Ironically, 9/11 families did not need JASTA because existing laws allowed citizens to sue in courts, as demonstrated by the indictment of Iran over the June 1996 Khobar Towers bombings in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 American military personnel, a Saudi civilian and wounded nearly 500, that awarded over \$2 billion to victims and their families.¹³⁷ Interestingly, the Obama Administration did not support those judgments for political reasons, and there was a lesson here for JASTA backers: the White House had not allowed payments to the Khobar Towers victims from Iran's frozen accounts, which meant that a future administration might do likewise, though this was what passed for politics under the Obama Administration. A U.S. federal judge in Washington, D.C. ordered Iran to pay \$104.7 million to victims of the bombing though it was unclear when and how plaintiffs might collect.¹³⁸

134. For details, see, Karoun Demirjian, "Obama Vetoes 9/11 Bill, Likely Setting Up First Congressional Override of his Presidency," *The Washington Post*, 23 September 2016, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/09/23/obamas-911-bill-veto-is-coming-down-to-the-buzzer/?utm_term=.2c25880ce56a. See also Jennifer Steinhauer, "Congress Votes to Override Obama Veto on 9/11 Victims Bill," *The New York Times*, 28 September 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/us/politics/senate-votes-to-override-obama-veto-on-9-11-victims-bill.html>; and "Saudi Arabia and 9/11: Enter the Lawyers—The President's Veto is Ringingly Overturned by Congress," *The Economist*, 1 October 2016, p. 39.

135. Bob Graham with Jeff Nussbaum, *Intelligence Matters: The CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failure of America's War on Terror*, Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008, especially pp. 235-268.

136. J. Weston Phippen and Matt Vasilogambros, "The Missing 28 Pages: A Newly Declassified Section of an Investigation into the 9/11 Attacks Alleges Connections Between Saudi Officials and the Perpetrators," *The Atlantic*, 15 July 2016, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/07/28-pages-saudi/491552/>.

137. Lawrence Hurley, "U.S. Top Court Rules Iran Bank Must Pay 1983 Bomb Victims," *Reuters*, 20 April 2016, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-court-iran-idUSKCN0XH1R6>.

138. Jonathan Stempel, "Iran ordered to pay \$104.7 million over 1996 truck bomb attack: U.S. judge," *Reuters*, 11 September 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-court-decision/iran-ordered-to-pay-104-7-million-over-1996-truck-bomb-attack-u-s-judge-idUSKCN1LQ2HW>.

Ties with the United States of America: The Donald Trump Juggernaut

Notwithstanding his anti-Arab and anti-Saudi rhetoric throughout 2015 and 2016, representatives for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates allegedly offered assistance to the Donald J. Trump presidential campaign during an August 2016 meeting in New York. Reports emerged that this meeting, among others, were under investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller, with the possibility that foreign governments in the Middle East illegally influenced the 2016 U.S. presidential election.¹³⁹ While it was impossible to verify this allegation, the *New York Times* reported that Erik Prince, the former head of the private security firm Blackwater and brother of Betsy DeVos, Trump's Secretary of Education, arranged such an encounter. The *New York Times* further reported that George Nader, a Lebanese-American businessman, along with an Israeli social media executive named Joel Zamel, funneled several million dollars to the Trump campaign. What was interesting to note, at least for the purposes of this chronicle, was to learn whether and how the Trump campaign allowed Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to influence Trump on the Iran nuclear deal, which lifted economic sanctions on that country in exchange for a halt to its nuclear weapons program. If true, this would be a critical revelation, although the Trump Administration advanced an "alternative fact" about Saudi Arabia when it claimed that the Kingdom had not and was not treating the United States fairly. That was during the bizarre campaign that was truly strange but hugely entertaining. Unfortunately, and even if King Salman and other Saudi leaders believed that their country and the new Trump Administration were in "perfect alignment" on the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, many were shocked to hear the American complain that Riyadh was not treating Washington fairly, and that the U.S. was losing a "tremendous amount of money" defending the Kingdom.¹⁴⁰

This missive came in a Trump interview with *Reuters*, in which the president confirmed his intention to visit Saudi Arabia in the second half of May, either before or after the

scheduled NATO Summit on the 25th in Belgium. At the time, it was unclear what the purpose of such a visit might be save, perhaps, to acknowledge the vital role that the Kingdom played on the regional checkerboard, especially in the ongoing combat against terrorism and, inevitably, to further strengthen economic and military ties. Moreover, and inasmuch as Trump needed to bone up on the financial relationships between the two countries, there were two related common hurdles that needed to be crossed if the visit was to be successful: the commitment to seriously fight terrorism and the need to address Iranian hegemonic aspirations.

Comically, when he was asked about the fight against Da'ish, the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], Trump reiterated that the extremist group must be defeated at all costs as if this was something new and that little or nothing was done about it by numerous governments in the region and around the world. Riyadh nevertheless fully agreed with Trump on this score because Saudi Arabia and its Arab Gulf allies were the primary targets for such violence and wished to eradicate ISIS from the face of earth. Remarkably, the American president's language was strong on rhetoric rather than on substance—"I have to say, there is an end. And it has to be humiliation,"—Saudi Arabia was determined to fight and defeat all extremists instead of drawing red-lines and then abandoning them, or engaging in pin-prick attacks that killed civilians rather than terrorists. To be sure, Riyadh and the GCC member-states perceived Trump as a burly president who might reverse the Barack Obama Administration's tilt towards Tehran, though no moves were made against the nuclear deal in early 2017. Still, all six conservative Arab monarchies backed Washington's renewed presence in the area, both to strengthen strategic ties with reliable partners as well as help contain Persian hegemony throughout the region. Indeed, GCC leaders truly believed that their defense was directly tied to U.S. security and energy interests, notwithstanding periodic criticisms over specific concerns like the 2003 American War for Iraq. For their part, GCC governments hoped that President Trump would translate his campaign promises into reality, but 100 days in office was too soon to see any concrete results even if many hoped for concrete steps before other concerns preoccupied the White House.

Beyond these two common interests, and despite Riyadh's nearly eight decades long security ties with Washington, the latest inexcusable reproaches for alleged free loading were bound to throw a monkey wrench in the otherwise well-oiled engine. In fact, it would be fair to say that Saudi Arabia was not cashing in, as the evidence proved the

139. David Z. Morris, "Trump Jr. Reportedly Met With a Saudi, UAE Representative About Helping With Election Campaign," *Fortune*, 20 May 2018, at <http://fortune.com/2018/05/20/trump-jr-saudi-uae-rep/>.

140. Stephen J. Adler, Jeff Mason and Steve Holland, "Exclusive: Trump Complains Saudis Not Paying Fair Share for U.S. Defense," *Reuters*, 27 April 2017, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-mideast-exclusive/exclusive-trump-complains-saudis-not-paying-fair-share-for-u-s-defense-idUSKBN17U08A>.

opposite. Over the years, the U.S. sold Saudi Arabia just about everything in its arsenal short of nuclear weapons, ranging the gamut from small arms to fighter jets, and from tanks to Patriot Missile batteries. Billions of dollars were made on total arms sales, with the Obama Administration signing lucrative contracts for more than \$115 billion between 2009 and 2017. According to William Hartung, 42 separate deals for weapons and the most advanced gear, various military equipment and training services were negotiated with Riyadh, which belied Trump's limited knowledge of the subject. Hartung, a researcher at the Center for International Policy, published a comprehensive report in December 2016 titled *U.S. Arms Transfers to Saudi Arabia and the War in Yemen*, which provided some of the details for what the Saudis actually purchased.¹⁴¹ None of it was a giveaway, something that the Department of State painstakingly listed in its annual Foreign Military Financing budget requests. On the contrary, while Saudi Arabia paid for its purchases, the top recipients of American foreign military assistance remained Israel (\$3.1 billion in 2017), Egypt (\$1.3), Jordan (\$350 million), Pakistan (\$265 million), and Iraq (\$150 million), all of which were on the dole. Few raised the question but it was important to reiterate that the governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE made direct payments to the United States, Britain and France for military expenses associated with the 1991 War for Kuwait, to cite this one example. According to the *Conduct of The Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, President George H.W. Bush secured financial pledges from fellow coalition members, estimated at \$61 billion, of which two-thirds came from Arab Gulf states and one-third from other countries, largely Japan and Germany. Saudi Arabia pledged \$16.8 billion, \$12 billion of which were paid in cash and \$4.8 billion paid in kind for oil and other necessities. Washington received all of the money by March 1992.¹⁴² Such developments were worthy of recollection precisely to separate the wheat from the chaff and the propagandist from the specialist, as well as place the post-2015 discussions in perspective, given that President Trump was clearly looking forward to fresh sales.

Of course, Trump's rhetoric catered to the uninitiated and intended to do harm. Throughout his bizarre election campaign, the candidate repeatedly accused the

Figure 8. Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman and President Trump



Source: © Yonhap News.

Kingdom of not pulling its weight in paying for the U.S. security umbrella, declaring: “Nobody’s going to mess with Saudi Arabia because we’re watching them. ... They’re not paying us a fair price. We’re losing our shirt.”¹⁴³ Spewing such alternative facts was unbecoming for a great nation like the United States and the time was long overdue to rein in challenged political demons though that was easier said than done when the bully pulpit was a more or less confiscated arena in the hands of expert manipulators. In reality, not only did the Kingdom carry its own weight, it also continued to be a reliable ally, which was priceless.

It was with this background in mind that King Salman and his son, Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman, approached the Trump Administration, having identified the American president's intrinsic weaknesses, which seemed to be topped by particular strains of arrogance and paranoia. According to one observer of the Kingdom, Muhammad bin Salman, “the de facto orchestrator of Saudi foreign policy even before

141. William D. Hartung, *U.S. Arms Transfers to Saudi Arabia and the War in Yemen*, Washington, D.C.: Security Assistance Monitor—Center for International Policy, 6 September 2016, at <https://securityassistance.org/blog/us-arms-transfers-saudi-arabia-and-war-yemen>.

142. United States of America, *Conduct of The Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, April 1992, pp. 445, 634.

143. Stephen J. Adler, Jeff Mason and Steve Holland, *op. cit.*

he was confirmed in his new role” [as Heir Apparent], “succeeded in establishing a momentary strong rapport with President Donald Trump and his administration,” promising “to inject funds into the U.S. economy,” oblivious to how miniscule such putative investments were in the largest global economy.¹⁴⁴ Beyond ephemeral conclusions that “King Salman and his son will pay little attention to Europe, but will continue with an erratic—and probably ultimately unsuccessful—bid to gain decisive power within the Middle East and emerge as a regional power on a par with Iran, Turkey and Israel,” it was fair to ask what were the key motivations that compelled Muhammad bin Salman to turn, once again, to the Kingdom’s traditional and most reliable ally?¹⁴⁵

Indubitably, candidate Trump underscored how all of America’s allies ought to help Washington finance its global security arrangements, even if this rationale was tangential. At no time since World War II was the United States in a subservient position vis-à-vis its security commitments because of financial pressures. On the contrary, Washington was the chief beneficiary of its alliances, notwithstanding Trump’s propinquity to look for, or even create, “alternative facts.” Nevertheless, when candidate Trump described the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as being a free loader and devoid of everything except money, he touched a raw nerve that, to their credit, Saudi leaders quickly deflected. Muhammad bin Salman recognized what was at play and set out to address the challenge head on.

Trump’s disastrous anti-Muslim travel ban, which gathered global scorn and ridicule on an unprecedented level, did not stand in the way and, once again, it was to Muhammad bin Salman’s credit to disentangle fact from fiction.¹⁴⁶ Unlike the Obama

Administration—whose perception of the Kingdom was nearly identical to that of the incoming executive, namely as a cash cow to upload as estimated \$115 billion (worth of arms) into the U.S. Treasury—that was high on rhetoric but short on diplomacy, Muhammad bin Salman saw a rare opportunity with Trump whose frank, and at times colorful language stood out.¹⁴⁷ The young prince correctly deduced that he could turn around Obama’s legendary carelessness towards the Arab Sunni world into a goldmine of good will with an incoming head-of-state determined to govern along anti-Obama lines. Moreover, Trump’s antipathy towards the nuclear deal with Iran stood as an equally important Saudi justification, to cajole the egocentric American. Remarkably, Trump and his entourage harbored a deeply felt anti-Iran posture, which surpassed their loathing of Obama. To his credit, and precisely to advance Saudi interests, Muhammad bin Salman was quick to back the one leader who also declared that Mullahs in Tehran governed over a terrorist “state,” a conclusion that corresponded to Trump’s own assessments. Whether Muhammad bin Salman and Trump exchanged specific ideas during the American presidential campaign was difficult to know. Presumably, they could have at least pondered the idea as to how they would tackle Iran’s preponderance in the Arab World, though Muhammad bin Salman must have done something right to secure the newly elected American president’s first overseas visit to the Kingdom.

Besieged by a series of Gargantuan blunders during the first few weeks of his term, Trump looked to Muhammad bin Salman and a trip to Saudi Arabia as a salvage operation. His presidency lacked basic legitimacy, with close aides resigning or being forced out so fast that few had the time to assume any governance responsibilities. The president’s first National Security Advisor, General Michael Flynn, lasted twenty-four days in the job.¹⁴⁸ FBI Director James Comey, who was in the fourth of his 10-years term, was unceremoniously fired three-and-a-half months after Trump became head-of-state.¹⁴⁹ Dozens of other officials were either quickly dismissed or ridiculed by a

144. Madawi Al-Rasheed, “King Salman and His Son: Winning the USA, Loosing the Rest,” in Al-Rasheed, *Salman’s Legacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

145. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

146. For details on the Muslim ban, see Adnan Ahmed, “A Ban by Any Other Name,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 45:3, September 2017, pp. 348-349; Abed Ayoub and Khaled Beydoun, “Executive Disorder: The Muslim Ban, Emergency Advocacy, and the Fires Next Time,” *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 22:2, 2017, pp. 215-241; Banu Gökarıksel, “The Body Politics of Trump’s ‘Muslim Ban’,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 13:3, November 2017, pp. 469-471; and Moustafa Bayoumi, “The Muslim Ban Ruling Legitimizes Trump’s Bigotry,” *The Guardian*, 27 June 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/27/muslim-ban-ruling-trumps-bigotry>.

147. Yara Bayoumy, “Obama Administration Arms Sales Offers to Saudi Top \$115 Billion: Report,” *Reuters*, 7 September 2016, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-security/obama-administration-arms-sales-offers-to-saudi-top-115-billion-report-idUSKCN11D2JQ>.

148. Luke Harding, *Collusion: Secret Meetings, Dirty Money, and How Russia Helped Donald Trump Win*, New York: Vintage Books, 2017, p. 137.

149. Harding, *Ibid.*, pp. 176-193. See also James Comey, *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership*, New York: Flatiron Books, 2018, especially pp. 211-277.

leader with a peculiar sense of management.¹⁵⁰ This pattern continued throughout Trump's first two years in office with major replacements at the departments of state and defense.¹⁵¹ Changes were so swift and vulgar that few managed to keep track of all the permutations.¹⁵² What Trump needed to do was to divert attention from his growing domestic woes. Nothing satisfied that criterion more than a foreign policy success story, one that would shine light on his alleged deal-making skills, away from intricate lawyerly negotiations that defined political business in Washington. Whether Trump acted voluntarily or whether his advisors persuaded him of the fact were less important than his "discovery" of Muhammad bin Salman, vilified by critics as a "voluble, open, and expansive [character], a charmer and an international player, a canny salesman rather than a remote, taciturn grandee." According to facile interpretations, Muhammad bin Salman was in pursuit of "a vision—quite a Trumpian vision—to out-Dubai Dubai and diversify the economy."¹⁵³ Goaded by Michael Flynn's early tutoring regarding Iran posing a vital threat to U.S. national security, Trump turned to Saudi Arabia to balance his vision of the region. Wary Saudis, who perceived Tehran as a foe with good reason and who shared geographic proximity with their large neighbor to the north, seized on the golden opportunity that Trump presented to re-start Saudi-American ties that were significantly disparaged between 2011 and 2017.

To his credit, Muhammad bin Salman emerged as a brilliant strategist when he reached out to Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, even when Secretary of State Rex W.

150. The pattern continued as dozens were either fired outright or coaxed to resign. See Denise Lu and Karen Yourish, "You're Hired! You're Fired! Yes, the Turnover at the Top of the Trump Administration Is ... 'Unprecedented'," *The New York Times*, 29 August 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/16/us/politics/all-the-major-firings-and-resignations-in-trump-administration.html>.

151. John Cassidy, "Rex Tillerson Gets Fired the Day After He Criticized Russia," *The New Yorker*, 13 March 2018, at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/rex-tillerson-gets-fired-the-day-after-he-criticized-russia>. See also Blake Hounshell, "Why Mattis Had to Go: The defense secretary could no longer serve a president who no longer thinks he needs to listen to anybody," *POLITICO*, 20 December 2018, at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/12/20/mattis-resignation-trump-foreign-policy-223418>.

152. Denise Lu and Karen Yourish, *op. cit.*

153. Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018, p. 225.

Tillerson was a far more likely candidate for such a mission, given the latter's intimate familiarity with the Kingdom in his capacity as Chairman of the Exxon Mobil Corporation between 2006 and 2017. Kushner had little foreign policy expertise though Muhammad bin Salman understood how tribal Trump was. A favorite son-in-law was far more useful to the Saudi than skeptical Foggy Bottom experts who did not believe that Saudi Arabia could or would change to fit their preferred mold. Among the few who genuinely grasped the Trump aura early on, Muhammad bin Salman stood out as he spoke a new language, one that placed Trump at the center of everything. The exercise was Machiavellian but spot-on with an individual prone to large doses of acute narcissism. Moreover, Muhammad bin Salman approached his subject far less aggressively than other global leaders, preferring to nurture Kushner, a malleable novice who was young and inexperienced.

To be sure, Muhammad bin Salman shared similar traits, though the Saudi benefitted from two hidden assets: his father's seasoned counsel and his own carefully reasoned plans for the future of the Kingdom. This stood in clear contradiction of what instant experts pontificated about the Al Sa'uds in general and Muhammad bin Salman in particular. One boldly asserted that "like the entire Saudi leadership, MBS had, practically speaking, no education," adding that "MBS and Trump were on pretty much equal footing," even if this was condescending.¹⁵⁴ Jane Kinninmont, the former Deputy Head and Senior Research Fellow of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs [Chatham House] think-tank in London perceived the challenges that confronted Riyadh in more rigorous terms. Her sharp analysis focused on how Muhammad bin Salman's policies "disrupt[ed] the traditional model of Saudi government on a number of fronts at once," with the exception of political reforms. Beyond economic projects that preoccupied the young prince, Kinninmont believed that the future monarch muffled moderate voices, which meant that "the only serious challengers to the system [were] the extremist jihadi groups—ISIS and Al-Qaeda—which have recruited thousands of Saudis, but have alienated the majority of the country's population, who don't want violent upheaval."¹⁵⁵ Kinninmont

154. Wolff, *Ibid.*, p. 226.

155. Jane Kinninmont, "Saudi Arabia's New Crown Prince Promises Reforms to Everything Except Politics," Expert Comment, London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs—Chatham House, 24 July 2017, at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/saudi-arabia-s-new-crown-prince-promises-reforms-everything-except-politics>.

concluded her comment with a plea for genuine political development and reform to stand against extremist ideas, especially since she foresaw a future in which Saudis were “no longer guaranteed a job, and no longer certain they can depend on the U.S. for their security, ... with significant political implications.” Even the astute Dexter Filkins, a renowned reporter with several eye-witness war books to his credit, asserted that one of Muhammad bin Salman’s longtime friends told him that the man was “not soft. He has a lot of charisma. He’s a lot like Bill Clinton. He makes you feel like you’re super important when you’re talking to him. He really puts on a charm that is unmistakable,” all of which hinted at Prince Muhammad’s Trumpian ambitions.¹⁵⁶ “Knowing little” apparently made Trump and Muhammad bin Salman “oddly comfortable with each other” that was, to say the least, a juvenile assertion, even if hugely amusing.¹⁵⁷ What was not infantile, nevertheless, was how easy it turned out for Muhammad bin Salman to figure out what the “Trump Doctrine” would be. Prince Muhammad grabbed Kushner’s offer to make his father-in-law look good, which was a high priority, if not the only priority for the American aspiring business mogul, though credit must go where it is due, to Muhammad bin Salman, for figuring this out rather fast. A shrewd reader of the dramatic changes that brought Trump to power, Muhammad bin Salman carefully studied the president’s anti-everything and anti-everyone agendas and concluded that the only way to win him over was by stroking his oversized ego.

Interestingly, and while Saudis were royally maligned by Trump throughout the long and ugly presidential campaign that reached new lows even by forlorn American standards, the Al Sa’ud stood firm in their assessments because they correctly discerned what motivated the property speculator: family loyalty and self-aggrandizement. Muhammad bin Salman could be straightforward with his interlocutor, Kushner, who, at thirty-six was only six years older. Kushner persuaded his father-in-law to welcome Muhammad bin Salman at the White House in March 2017, thereby becoming one of the first foreign dignitaries to call on the freshly elected president, for what turned out to be much more than an oval office photo-op. Prince Muhammad planned very carefully for this crucial trip, and long before he pledged to cut lucrative deals with the

United States, he secured an official state visit from Trump to travel to the Kingdom. Kushner turned out to be a good salesman too, as he secured a win for his father-in-law, though the real winner was Muhammad bin Salman who was catapulted on the global scene when he was still short of his coveted title of Heir Apparent.

“Together We Prevail”

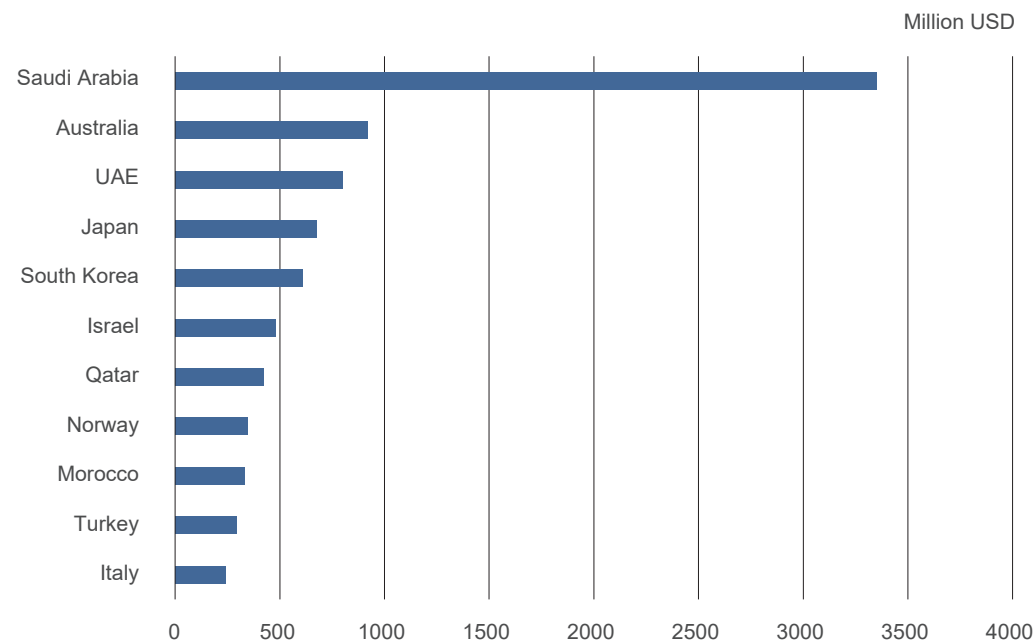
If Trump perceived his first-foreign visit as a panacea to his growing domestic woes (as numerous predecessors sought solace in overseas trips when the heat grew at home), Muhammad bin Salman was the true Machiavellian authority who helped plan what turned out to be a grandiose affair as he defined the trip’s effective theme: “Together We Prevail.” In what was a rare accomplishment for all concerned, the visit produced tangible results, even if some of the agreements were to stretch over the next few years. Riyadh signed several contracts to buy \$110 billion’s worth of American arms, with additional purchases—for a total of \$350 billion—extended until 2028. Far more important was Washington’s agreement to work together with Riyadh to fight terrorism, as Saudi Arabia established a brand new center to fight extremism. Trump co-inaugurated the facility that aimed to counter violent information technology (IT) messaging over social media networks, as well as monitor and disrupt sophisticated money laundering schemes that facilitated financing terrorist organizations. Even better, Muhammad bin Salman orchestrated the first ever U.S.-Muslim World conference, as King Salman hosted fifty Arab and Muslim leaders. The American leader also held a GCC-U.S. Summit.

On 20 May 2017, Trump arrived in Riyadh to a royal welcome, which endeared his hosts to his heart. In what was a stroke of genius, but worth repeating because they were so critical developments, Muhammad bin Salman squeezed two additional firsts to this extraordinary reception: the first ever U.S.-Muslim Summit, in the presence of fifty leaders as well as a U.S.-GCC Summit that introduced Trump to the six conservative Arab Gulf monarchs and their representatives. Trump’s 21 May 2017 address stood in direct contrast to Barack Obama’s 2009 Cairo homily that emphasized his commitments to democracy and human rights, even if Obama wasted immense opportunities during two terms in office to advance democracy and human rights and ended-up neglecting both. Trump was a bit more honest. He spoke about financial and business deals, promising little except an appetite to forge even closer economic associations around the world, including around the Muslim world. Arab and Muslim leaders, especially in the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies seldom pretended to promote democratic visions, perhaps with the exception of Kuwait, because most

156. Dexter Filkins, “A Saudi Prince’s Quest to Remake the Middle East: In his Work with the White House, is Mohammed bin Salman Driving Out Extremism, or Merely Seizing Power for Himself?,” *The New Yorker*, 9 April 2018, at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>.

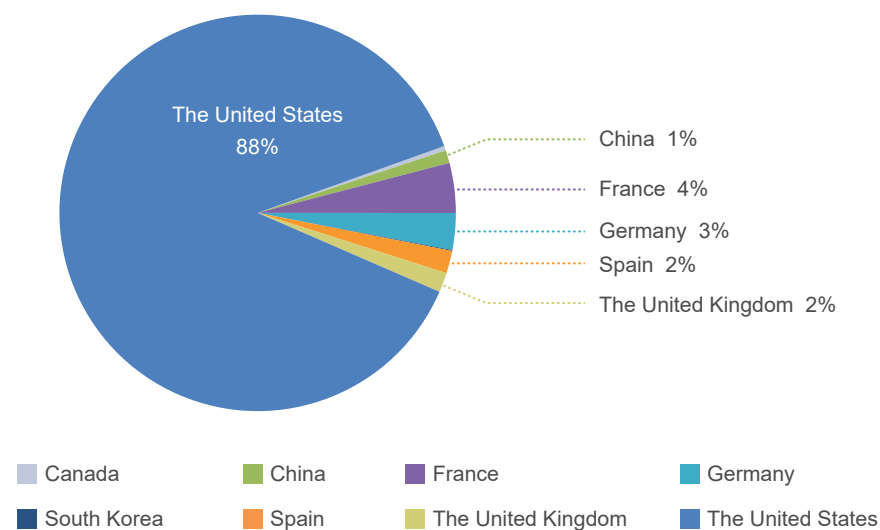
157. Michael Wolff, *Fire and Fury*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

Figure 9. United States Arms Exports, 2018



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, 2019.

Figure 10. Arms Imports by Saudi Arabia, 2018



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, 2019.

believed that their conservative societies preferred paternalistic rule.¹⁵⁸ Ironically, Trump maintained a straight face when he made these declarations while, simultaneously, his Secretary of Homeland Security empowered the Transportation Security Administration to oversee draconian new security measures over the traveling public in the United States.

Within weeks of the Trump trip, Muhammad bin Salman was Heir Apparent, and seemed determined to benefit from Trump's focus on Iran and Shi'ah Islam that, at least to some geo-strategists, appeared to challenge establishment Sunnism.¹⁵⁹ In fact, as the American president delivered a rabid anti-Iranian speech that concentrated on its involvement in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and elsewhere, and aware of the risks involved in recalibrating the Saudi-American alliance, chances were good that Riyadh was on solid grounds to benefit from the opportunities presented by the unpredictable American leader.¹⁶⁰ To be sure, Washington's vast civilian and military bureaucracies did not always accept Trump's tilt towards Saudi Arabia, pointing to differences over Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Qatar, though these were not of the earth shattering varieties. Beyond oil price concerns and steady arms sales, both of which were the priorities that the White House and the Congress agreed upon, Washington was loath to find a better Arab ally than Saudi Arabia. Indeed, traditional Arab interlocutors confronted existential challenges, with Baghdad mired in its decades-long struggle for power; Beirut wallowing in unprecedented political confusion over its identity; Cairo struggling with sectarian confrontations amid a war against the Muslim Brotherhood; Damascus permanently nestled in self-inflicted nihilism; Sana'a mired in imported ideological irrelevances that fueled a vicious civil war that turned into a regional conflict; and Tripoli lost in a search for tranquility amid never-ending jockeying for power by beady-eyed barons of fortune. The semiliterate Trump, who limited himself

158. 'Abd al-Khaliq 'Abdallah, *Lahzat al-Khalij fi al-Tarikh al-'Arabi al-Mu'asir* [The Gulf Moment in Contemporary Arab History], Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2018, pp. 230-231.

159. Nabil Khalifé, *Istihdaf Ahl al-Sunnah: Man Yataza'am al-'Alam al-'Arabi-al-Islami—Al Sa'udiyyah am Iran? Al-Mukhattat al-Istratijih lil-Gharb wa Isra'il wa Iran lil-Saytarah 'ala al-Sharq al-Awsat wa Iqtida' al-Nufuz al-Sunni al-'Arabi Minhuh!*, Byblos, Lebanon: Markaz Byblos lil-Dirasat, 2014. For the English language version, see Nabil Khalifé, Translated and Introduced by Joseph A. Kéchichian, *The Attempt to Uproot Sunni-Arab Influence: A Geo-Strategic Analysis of the Western, Israeli and Iranian Quest for Domination*, Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, January 2017.

160. Al-Rasheed, "King Salman and his Son," in Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

to juvenile tweets mostly filed in the wee hours of each day on what was an open social media outlet in staccato sentences, bragged about his ties with Muhammad bin Salman. It was a grand-scale affair that enticed Vladimir Putin of Russia to emulate, but what surprised everyone, including Putin, was the May 2018 announcement that the United States was withdrawing from the so-called Iran nuclear deal, a decision with long-term consequences that remained murky as of early 2019.¹⁶¹

Relations After the Khashoggi Affair

In the aftermath of the Khashoggi Assassination, and as discussed in detail in chapters 4 and 5, American officials set out to corner Muhammad bin Salman on two grounds: (1) that he was no reformer, and (2) that he assumed full responsibility for the tragic death. The rants were best described by Glenn Greenwald on 15 October 2018, and were soon followed by Roula Khalaf in *The Financial Times*, who declared that Westerners “routinely confuse youth with a commitment to change.”¹⁶² This was the tone on which American officials erected their political anti-Saudi wall, which threatened Riyadh and the White House alike. A few perceived the tragedy as an ideal vehicle to help usher Muhammad bin Salman out of the limelight and into oblivion. Senator Lindsey Graham [R-South Carolina], raised eyebrows when he told *Fox News* that the Saudi Heir Apparent “has got to go,” hoping and praying that the Al Sa‘ud would do the job for him. The French newspaper *Le Figaro* reported that “at least seven representatives of the clans that make up the royal family are meeting in ‘utmost discretion’ to chart a course out of the diplomatic mess created by the disappearance of journalist Jamal Khashoggi,” though no such meeting(s) occurred. Everyone relied on tested anti-Saudi hands like former CIA officer and a regular contributor to *Al-Monitor*, Bruce Riedel, who declared: “At this point we’re in uncharted waters. ... Almost anything could happen, and it’s also possible that MBS could bluff his way through this whole thing

161. Lesley Wroughton, “U.S. Secretary of State Names Brian Hook Special Envoy for Iran,” *Reuters*, 17 August 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa/us-secretary-of-state-names-brian-hook-special-envoy-for-iran-idUSKBN1L129X>.

162. Glenn Greenwald, “The Washington Post, as it Shames Others, Continues to Pay and Publish Undisclosed Saudi Lobbyists and Other Regime Propagandists,” *The Intercept*, 15 October 2018, at <https://theintercept.com/2018/10/15/the-washington-post-as-it-sham...udi-lobbyists-and-other-regime-propagandists/>. See also Roula Khalaf, “The Enduring Myth of the Young Arab Reformer,” *The Financial Times*, 18 October 2018, at <https://www.ft.com/content/1ca1a9a4-d142-11e8-a9f2-7574db66bcd5>.

and come out the other side.” Riedel went further with his assertion that Prince Muhammad had “gone to great lengths to increase the climate of fear,” and added: “He could be assassinated. He knows that, and he’s taking extreme measures to prevent it.”¹⁶³ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, a fellow at Rice University’s Baker Institute, chimed in, affirming that he “thought [Graham] was sending a message to Trump that MBS has embarrassed us,” and, since the United States presumably “backed him all the way,” the “eloquent” Senator was livid and refused to be treated so badly. Ulrichsen believed that “it was very clear and very strong.”¹⁶⁴ Other experts weighed in too, with Daniel Benjamin lamenting that Muhammad bin Salman was a reckless man, even if he condemned past Saudi practices too and concluded that the purported recklessness was par for the course.¹⁶⁵

In early November, Thomas Lippman, a former *Washington Post* reporter and the author of several volumes on the Kingdom, penned that “an international consensus [was] emerging about how to respond: deplore the crime, demand justice, but don’t cut ties with the kingdom. In particular, don’t cut off Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the man widely believed to have ordered the killing of the dissident journalist.”¹⁶⁶ Lippman condemned the Heir Apparent and doubted that the Saudi leader would ever again “receive another lavish welcome in Silicon Valley any time soon”—thereby ignoring a key principle of capitalism that insisted on short memories—but also fathomed that Muhammad bin Salman had “become the diplomatic equivalent of

163. “Intel: Can the Khashoggi Case Really Spell the end of MBS?,” *Al-Monitor*, 18 October 2018, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/intel-can-khashoggi-case-end-mbs-saudi-arabia.html>.

164. *Ibid.*

165. Daniel Benjamin, “Not His Father’s Saudi Arabia: The Khashoggi Affair Reveals the Recklessness of MBS,” *Foreign Affairs*, 18 October 2018, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2018-10-18/recklessness-of-mohammed-bin-salmans-saudi-arabia>. Benjamin was not the only analyst who relied on the reckless nomenclature though he and his coauthor recycled this theme again in 2019. See Michael Hirsch, “Reckless in Riyadh,” *Foreign Policy*, 25 December 2018, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/25/reckless-in-riyadh/>; and Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, “Reckless in Riyadh,” *The New York Review of Books*, 27 June 2019, at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/06/27/mohammad-bin-salman-reckless-riyadh/>.

166. Thomas W. Lippman, “Not a Reformer but Too Big to Fail,” *LobeLog*, 5 November 2018, at <https://lobelog.com/mohammed-bin-salman-too-big-to-fail/>.

some big banks: too big to fail.”¹⁶⁷ This was clever journalism but the fact of the matter was that no global leader intended to ostracize the prince or even curtail lucrative commercial, military and strategic ties with Saudi Arabia.

Irrespective of a slew of negative commentaries, of which the above was a small sample, President Trump and senior officials walked a fine line almost from the beginning, as they criticized the crime and promised sanctions against those found responsible, while emphasizing the value of longstanding U.S. strategic and economic ties with Riyadh. Trump denounced what he called “the worst cover-up ever,” but repeated that he did not “want to curtail arms sales because doing so would cut jobs for American workers.” This practical explanation did not please Senators and Representatives, who requested testimonies from various senior officials in hastily assembled hearings, including the head of the Central Intelligence Agency. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who travelled to Riyadh to learn at first hand various details, acknowledged that the President of the United States “made very clear not only do we have important commercial relationships, but important strategic relationships, national security relationships with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and we intend to make sure that those relationships remain intact.”¹⁶⁸ For his part, the commander of the United States Central Command [USCENTCOM] since March 2016—and before that commander of the United States Special Operations Command—General Joseph Votel, confirmed that there were “no change[s] with any military relationship we have with Saudi Arabia” since, from “the military perspective, I characterize the relationship as strong, deep, and I think a beneficial one for us. They have been a—they’re an extraordinarily important security partner in the region.”¹⁶⁹

In the end, however, it fell on President Trump to identify what Washington sought from Riyadh. On 20 November 2018, the White House issued a strongly worded

statement, titled “America First!,” which essentially stated that Saudi Arabia would not be sanctioned over the Jamal Khashoggi murder.¹⁷⁰ It was an extraordinary declaration that infuriated several senators, including presumed Trump allies like Lindsey Graham and Bob Corker (R-Tennessee), as well the Independent Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont), who co-sponsored a measure with Mike Lee (R-Utah), to censure the Kingdom. The resolution passed and called on the U.S. military to withdraw all aid for Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen. It also blamed Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman for the murder of the journalist.

The historic vote was the first time any chamber of the U.S. Congress agreed to pull U.S. forces from a military conflict under the 1973 War Powers Act, though the measure was symbolic and unlikely to become law because the House was not ready to follow suit. In the event, the non-binding resolution merely called on President Trump to remove American forces engaged in hostilities in Yemen, except for those combating Islamist extremists, which was interesting since the only combat units deployed on the Yemen theatre were fighting al-Qa’idah. Ironically, and not as a direct response to the Senate resolution, Washington had ended its refueling flights of Saudi fighter planes several weeks earlier. The uglier aspects of the Senate resolution targeted Muhammad bin Salman, with Bernie Sanders stating: “Today we tell the despotic government of Saudi Arabia that we will not be part of their military adventures,” while Senator Bob Corker told *MSNBC*: “If he was before a jury, the crown prince, he would be convicted in my opinion in 30 minutes,” which was a trivial response because the Saudi heir apparent was not on trial.¹⁷¹

On the same day American senators engaged in verbal gymnastics, the United Nations Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, praised Muhammad bin Salman as the leader who facilitated ongoing negotiations to end the war in Yemen.¹⁷² Guterres’ declaration fell on deaf ears as *the Washington Post* praised Senators for their important decision to

167. *Ibid.*

168. Karen DeYoung “Trump Administration Appears in no Hurry to Judge Saudi Arabia for Khashoggi Killing,” *The Washington Post*, 2 November 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-appears-in-no-hurry-to-judge-saudi-arabia-for-khashoggi-killing/2018/11/02/86f79544-ddfd-11e8-85df-7a6b4d25cfbb_story.html?utm_term=.5a450c2dd5b4.

169. Kevin Baron, “‘Extraordinarily Important’: Top US General Defends Saudi Relationship, Yemen War,” *Defense One*, 29 October 2018, at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2018/10/extraordinarily-important-top-us-general-defends-saudi-relationship-yemen-war/152407/>.

170. “Donald Trump Stands with Saudi Arabia—Statement in Full,” *The Guardian*, 20 November 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/nov/21/donald-trump-stands-by-saudi-arabia-khashoggi-statement-in-full>.

171. “Senators Vote to End US Backing for Saudi War on Yemen,” *BBC News*, 14 December 2018, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46561520>.

172. “UN’s Guterres: Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Contributed to Reaching Yemen Agreement,” *Arab News*, 14 December 2018, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1420451/middle-east>.

hold the “Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accountable for the murder of Post contributing columnist Jamal Khashoggi.” In a scathing editorial, the Post perceived the “vote [as] a powerful repudiation of President Trump’s refusal to accept, or act upon, the truth about the crown prince—and it should cause the president to reconsider.”¹⁷³ Interestingly, the Kingdom’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally rejected the resolution, and was seconded in that assessment by the religious establishment that fully backed Muhammad bin Salman in what was a rather strong endorsement among the clergy.¹⁷⁴

Ahmed Al-Jarallah, the Editor-in-Chief of the Kuwait dailies *al-Siyasah* and its English-language sister publication *Arab Times*, best summed up the Arab perspective on the Senate resolution in a truly powerful editorial that intended to send a clear message. Al-Jarallah started by declaring that Saudi Arabia was “not a banana republic,” and its “sovereignty [was] not a public entity for the United States Congress to transfer its internal dispute or its disagreement with President Donald Trump to Riyadh in order to interfere with the latter’s affairs.”¹⁷⁵ He believed that members of Congress engaged in “heretical politics” since the Khashoggi case was now in “Saudi courts where justice is taking its natural course,” and should not interject local disputes into international affairs. In blunt language, the Kuwaiti editorialist called upon American officials to “realize that Saudi Arabia is not the US backyard where it moves as it pleases” and, more explicitly, pointed out to the contradictions between Washington’s “fight against Iran’s interference in the internal affairs of other countries [as it] considers Tehran a terrorism sponsor, yet the Congress wants the Kingdom to refrain from

confronting this danger,” in Yemen. He closed his essay with a plea to the American Congress to understand that “diktats will not succeed with Riyadh.”

Ties with Russia

Muhammad bin Salman perceived Vladimir Putin, who first came to power in 1999 as Russian Prime Minister for the astute strategist he is, whose will-to-power stood in direct contrast to that of Barack Obama, universally perceived as an aloof leader, anxious to accommodate rather than confront ideologues determined to alter the global balance-of-power. While Obama was anything but a peace-loving president, Putin projected the image of a shrewd intelligence officer, which was his chosen career long before he was elevated to the presidency in 2000. The Russian head-of-state served between 2000 and 2008 before exchanging office with his Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, and returned to the presidency in 2012. He could well rule until 2030 and beyond under peculiar electoral machinations that stood out among available nation-state tools to empower strongmen.

Notwithstanding the anomaly that the Soviet Union was the first country to establish full diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of the Hijaz and Najd in 1926—instead of the United Kingdom which was the principal backer of King ‘Abdul ‘Aziz—Moscow demonstrated its political savvy long before the 1932 restoration of the Third Saudi monarchy. Britain and the United States were not enthusiastic about Soviet revolutionary ties with the critical Arab monarchy, which was why they channeled every imaginable grievance through the Cold War prism that, helter-skelter, defined Saudi ties with the USSR. Relations cooled significantly after Moscow backed Arab revolutionary republics and dictatorships in the 1950s and 1960s, and were more or less frozen after the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Riyadh closed its diplomatic legation in Moscow in 1938 and refused to reestablish relations until after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the Russian Federation was formally established in 1990.¹⁷⁶

Beyond strong political differences, Riyadh welcomed a number of Soviet Muslim

173. “The Senate’s Resolution was a Powerful Repudiation of Saudi Arabia—and Trump” [Editorial], *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/the-senates-resolution-was-a-powerful-repudiation-of-saudi-arabia--and-trump/2018/12/13/e51e5364-ff1e-11e8-83c0-b06139e540e5_story.html?utm_term=.1830662b0f60.

174. “Saudi Arabia Denounces U.S. Senate Resolutions on Khashoggi, Yemen,” *Reuters*, 16 December 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-khashoggi/saudi-arabia-denounces-u-s-senate-resolutions-on-khashoggi-yemen-idUSKBN1OF0W3>. See also “Kibar al-‘Ulamah al-Sa‘udiyyah Tarfidu Mawqaf al-Shuyukh al-Amriki” [Council of Senior Scholars Refuses the Position of American Senators], *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 17 December 2018, at <https://aawsat.com/node/1508391/>.

175. Ahmed Al-Jarallah, “US Senate’s ‘Diktats’ Will Not Succeed with Riyadh,” *Arab Times*, 20 December 2018, at <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/us-senates-diktats-will-not-succeed-with-riyadh/>.

176. For a recent Russian perspective on the Arab World, see Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, New York: Basic Books, 2009.

citizens to perform the annual pilgrimage, and maintained contacts with its co-religionists throughout Central Asia. With their post-1990 independences, Muslim leaders in the republics renewed traditional contacts with Saudi authorities, although these were of the modest variety.¹⁷⁷ The tempo picked up with the 11–12 February 2007 Vladimir Putin visit to Riyadh, to meet King ‘Abdallah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, which was the first ever official visit for a Russian leader to the Kingdom. Interestingly, then Governor Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz welcomed Putin and escorted him to see the sovereign, which created an opportunity for the two men to know each other. As expected, ‘Abdallah and Putin discussed a variety of subjects, including regional security concerns and oil prices. King ‘Abdallah was already familiar with his Russian guest after his own trip to Moscow in 2003 when he was the Regent. Inasmuch as the leaders of these two countries knew but did not trust each other, the two visits clarified key contentions and, perhaps, helped clear the air.

To be sure, Moscow backed Arab revolutionary powers in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, to name just these four states, though Putin was far more pragmatic than his ideological predecessors. It was one thing to back Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad after the 2011 Uprisings that shook that hapless country, but something entirely different to look after Russian energy and security interests with vital Arab Gulf monarchies. Similarly, while the Russian support to Qatar and Turkey drew Saudi ire, it was worth the effort for Riyadh and Moscow to talk with each other precisely to coordinate oil production and price levels. Of course, the proverbial applecart was upset after Moscow’s direct military intervention in Syria starting in September 2015, which prompted King Salman to offer a reduction in its own oil production levels in exchange for a Russian reassessment.¹⁷⁸ Moscow rejected the apparent proposal, which upset the Saudi monarch, and that compelled him to deploy Royal Saudi Air Force fighters and bombers to Turkish bases in 2016. Riyadh offered to send ground troops to Syria too, though this did not occur, perhaps because of secret understandings reached between Vladimir Putin and Muhammad bin Salman, since the two men had already met on 18

June 2015 at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum.¹⁷⁹

Profound differences remained over Syria, though relations improved significantly after a 30 May 2016 meeting between Putin and Muhammad bin Salman on the sidelines of the Hangzhou, China, G20 Summit. Saudi Arabia and Russia agreed to cooperate in world oil markets to tackle the then global glut, agreeing to limit output and hope to reverse price drops. Russia further agreed to join OPEC commitments to reduce oil output, with cuts taking effect from 1 January 2017 to last for at least six months.¹⁸⁰ Not surprisingly, these pledges were renewed at the 2019 Osaka, Japan G20 meeting, which were expected to be finalized during President Putin’s visit to Riyadh in October 2019.¹⁸¹ This level of cooperation was confirmed by Muhammad bin Salman who revealed that King Salman wished to convince Moscow that Riyadh was a better bet for Russia than Iran and that the main goal of Saudi Arabia’s overtures was to encourage Putin not to place all of his regional cards on Iran in Syria or throughout the region.¹⁸²

Irrespective of such accords, Putin extended the red carpet to the Saudi King on 4 October 2017, when Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz embarked on a three-day visit to Moscow. This was the first official trip to Russia by a reigning Saudi monarch, whose symbolism was noteworthy as Riyadh sought better ties with Russia at a time when leading Western powers were reevaluating their global commitments. Whether the trip was a success was too soon to know, though the rapprochement between two traditional foes

177. Gerald Segal, *Openness and Foreign Policy Reform in Communist States*, Abingdon, Oxon, U.K.: Routledge, 1992.

178. “Saudi Oil Is Seen as Lever to Pry Russian Support From Syria’s Assad,” *The New York Times*, 3 February 2015, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-is-said-to-use-oil-to-lure-russia-away-from-syrias-assad.html>.

179. Ian Black, “Saudi Arabia Offers to Send Ground Troops to Syria to Fight Isis,” *The Guardian*, 4 February 2016, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/saudi-arabia-ground-troops-syria-fight-isis>.

180. “Russia and Others Join OPEC in Rare, Coordinated Push to Cut Oil Output,” *The New York Times*, 10 December 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/10/business/russia-opec-saudi-arabia-cut-oil-output.html>.

181. Reuters, “Russia and Saudi Arabia Agree to Extend Deal with Opec to Curb Oil Output,” *The Guardian*, 30 June 2019, at <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jun/30/russia-saudi-arabia-extend-deal-opec-oil-output>.

182. David Ignatius, “A Young Prince is Reimagining Saudi Arabia. Can He Make his Vision Come True?,” *The Washington Post*, 20 April 2017, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-young-prince-reimagines-saudi-arabia-can-he-make-his-vision-come-true/2017/04/20/663d79a4-2549-11e7-b503-9d616bd5a305_story.html.

was undeniable. ‘Adil Al Jubayr, the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs hailed it as a “historic” journey, which it certainly was, even if American media outlets suggested that the Saudi government was sending a signal of disapproval to Washington.¹⁸³ In the event, Salman and Putin signed several accords that ranged from oil to military contracts, including a three billion dollars weapons deals to produce anti-tank missiles, rocket and automatic grenade launchers, among others. Even the purchase of the long-range S-400 anti-aircraft missile system was contemplated although no formal agreement was reached on that item.¹⁸⁴ The key parts of these agreements, nevertheless, were Saudi promises to invest over a billion dollars in Russian energy projects and the building of a major Russian gas processing and petrochemicals plant in the Kingdom.¹⁸⁵

All of these developments highlighted King Salman’s (and Muhammad bin Salman’s) pragmatism at a time when the Kingdom rejected isolationism and called on its allies to help it confront Iran. In the words of a seasoned observer of Washington politics, “maybe [Muhammad bin Salman’s] deal with Putin to manage oil prices through a so-called ‘OPEC Plus’ matters more than any promise to Trump,” something that was probably triggered by the American loss of influence in the region because successive American officials opted to revert back in the country’s isolationist mood. Such a voluntary outcome on the part of the United States created opportunities for others to fill in the gaps, though it was not accurate to conclude that King Salman and Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman saw Vladimir Putin or China’s Xi Jinping, as their role models. What they did perceive, and that was crystal clear, was the following: Confronted by a gradual and unmistakable American military and diplomatic retreat from what many considered to be America’s traditional global role at least since World War II, the current and future kings of Saudi Arabia sought to devise relationships that

would protect their country in the decades ahead.¹⁸⁶ This was a pragmatic step to take, and that illustrated Najdi political savvy, which ensured survival and prosperity.

Moreover, and in the aftermath of the Khashoggi affair (see Chapter 4), Muhammad bin Salman understood, perhaps better than most, that Putin craved *thymos* (recognition/respect) and that he was an astute player of global politics. His warm salutations with the Saudi heir apparent at the 2018 Argentina G-20 Summit provided the best illustration of Russian bravura at a time when muddled Western leaders sought to isolate Muhammad bin Salman.¹⁸⁷ Warm contacts between the Russian head-of-state and the Saudi heir apparent were renewed in late June 2019 at the Osaka G20 gathering, where even President Donald J. Trump—who did not even glance at the Saudi Heir Apparent during the traditional family portrait sitting in Buenos Aires—shook hands and exchanged greetings with Muhammad bin Salman, standing next to him.¹⁸⁸

183. Adam Taylor, “Why Washington Will Be Watching the Saudi King’s Visit to Moscow,” *The Washington Post*, 4 October 2017, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/04/why-washington-will-be-watching-a-saudi-kings-visit-to-moscow/>.

184. Patrick Wintour, “Saudi King’s Visit to Russia Heralds Shift in Global Power Structures,” *The Guardian*, 5 October 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/05/saudi-russia-visit-putin-oil-middle-east>. See also Maria Dubovikova, “Saudi-Russian Relations Reach New Heights,” *Arab News*, 6 October 2017, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1173081/middle-east>.

185. “Saudi King Signs Lucrative Deals on Landmark Russia Visit,” *BBC News*, 5 October 2017, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41512759>.

186. David Ignatius, “The Unintended Consequences of U.S. Disengagement in the Middle East,” *The Washington Post*, 14 August 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-unintended-consequences-of-us-disengagement-in-the-middle-east/2018/08/14/702affd2-9ffe-11e8-93e3-24d1703d2a7a_story.html.

187. President Putin’s quest for *thymos* was all too evident since he was unable to offer his nation the economic basket that liberal democracies and conservative Arab Gulf monarchies could, and often did, even if he ushered in “order” after Boris Yeltsin unleashed the oligarchs on hapless Russia. See Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, New York: Riverhead Books (Penguin), 2013; and Karen Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014. For the Putin-Muhammad bin Salman high-five, see Tom Barnes, “Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Share High-Five at G20 Summit in Argentina,” *The Independent*, 1 December 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/putin-bin-salman-mbs-high-five-handshake-g20-summit-argentina-saudi-arabia-russia-khashoggi-ukraine-a8662461.html>. For the most recent meeting, see Ilya Arkhipov, Javier Blas and Grant Smith, “Putin Says Russia and Saudi Arabia Will Maintain Oil Cuts for as Long as 9 Months,” *Bloomberg*, 29 June 2019, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-29/putin-says-russia-saudis-agree-to-maintain-oil-cuts-6-9-months>.

188. Peter Baker, “A Breakfast Invitation Helps Rebuild a Crown Prince’s Standing,” *The New York Times*, 28 June 2019, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/world/middleeast/breakfast-bin-salman-trump-osaka.html>.

Ties with Asian Powers

One of the Obama Administration's first strategic objectives was the stillborn "pivot-to-Asia" scheme that, presumably, signaled an American shift away from major Middle East security issues. Obama and his business backers aimed to position the United States towards what many believed were lucrative commercial initiatives, oblivious to the fact that Washington was already immersed in very close ties with China, Japan, the Republic of Korea and several other Asian countries. In reality, the contemplated "pivot-to-Asia" was little more than an attempt to break decades old diplomatic and military focus on the Arab World. Ironically, and while the American rotation effort flopped, Saudi Arabia seems to have reversed the mechanism in order to perform an "Asia-pivot" of its own.

Much like his predecessor who travelled extensively throughout Asia both as Regent as well as ruler, King Salman embarked on several tours, topped by a three-week long trip in March 2017 that included stops in China, Japan, Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia. Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman preceded him with visits to China and Japan, a country he discovered during his honeymoon, a few years ago. Observers correctly concluded that the time devoted to meeting with various heads of state indicated the seriousness with which the Kingdom assessed Asia's potential in the decades to come, both for investment purposes as well as security commitments, even if Riyadh did not intend to break with Washington. *Vision 2030* investment requirements necessitated such political steps, especially as Saudi authorities perceived the need to foster closer ties with booming Asian economies. China and Japan, in particular, occupied privileged positions since both stood as the fourth and fifth export markets for Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom was the largest supplier of petroleum for both countries, a phenomenon that was expected to stay steady, even grow. With increased Chinese demand for oil, Japan's similar predicament, and Korea's energy needs, it was a foregone conclusion that all three depended on Riyadh for fairly priced and reliably available resources. Yet, and beyond oil, what King Salman and his heir apparent wished to secure from Asian partners were an equally fair examination of *Vision 2030* programs, as the Kingdom looked for direct foreign investments and diversified revenue sources. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was keenly interested in Chinese, Japanese and Korean know-how, as it aggressively pursued *Vision 2030*'s multi-pronged goals.

How did the Kingdom's ties with key Asian powers evolve after 2015, and what kind

of relationships were the Al Sa'ud and their partners, anxious to contemplate for the next few decades? Pakistan and India, as the two closest states, were certainly priorities and Riyadh devoted attention to both countries. Further east, rapprochements with China and Korea were equally important. It was thus fair to enquire whether economic ties topped the agenda, or whether other critical reasons existed, to better clarify the Kingdom's "Asia-pivot."

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Despite similarities in the official name of the country with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan enjoyed very close ties.¹⁸⁹ Robert Lacey identified Pakistan as "Saudi Arabia's closest Muslim ally," though the Kingdom displayed impartiality in the South Asian contentions ever since 1947 when Islamabad seceded from Delhi.¹⁹⁰ Undeniably, successive Pakistani officials affirmed that their relationship with Saudi Arabia stood above all else and, to confirm their perceptions, highlighted their extensive security ties with Riyadh. Over the years, various allegations emerged that the Kingdom had invested in Pakistan's nuclear weapons projects, though these were denied.¹⁹¹ Still, few

189. Yoel Guzansky, "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: How Special are the 'Special Relations'?", The Institute for National Security Studies, *INSS Insight*, Number 797, 16 February 2016, at <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/pakistan-and-saudi-arabia-how-special-are-the-special-relations/>.

190. Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia*, New York: Viking, 2009, p. 294.

191. Kokab Farshori, "Saudi-Pakistan Military Ties Getting Stronger," *Voice of America*, 19 February 2014, at <https://www.voanews.com/a/saudi-pakistan-military-ties-getting-stronger/1855116.html>. See also Richard L. Russell, "A Saudi Nuclear Option?," *Survival* 43:2, Summer 2001, pp. 69–79. According to unverified reports, Pakistan deployed an estimated 20,000 servicemen to Saudi Arabia between 1982 and 1987. There were also several thousand troops serving in various branches, though these could not be verified from open sources. See Sana Haroon, "Pakistan Between Saudi Arabia and Iran: Islam in the Politics and Economics of Western Asia," in Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Pakistan at the Crossroads: Domestic Dynamics and External Pressures*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, the quotation is on page 307. See also Colin Freeman and Taimur Khan, "Pakistan in Talks with Saudi Arabia to Send Combat Troops to Protect the Kingdom," *The National*, 13 March 2017, at <https://www.thenational.ae/world/pakistan-in-talks-with-saudi-arabia-to-send-combat-troops-to-protect-the-kingdom-1.44396>.

doubted that the Kingdom was financially generous, in exchange for concrete Pakistani military assistance, including after the Makkah Grand Mosque Seizure in 1979 as well as the deployment of a Pakistani brigade to protect key installations. Over the years, Saudi Arabia supported Pakistani positions, provided it with extensive financial and political support, including when Islamabad backed the Taliban and the Mujahiddin in Afghanistan, though relations cooled a bit when Pakistan stood with Saddam Hussein after the latter invaded and occupied Kuwait in 1990. This did not prevent Islamabad from deploying troops to the Kingdom, although King Salman was disappointed when Pakistan rejected a request to contribute troops to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen.¹⁹² Imran Khan invited the Kingdom to join his country in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, with hopes to further strengthen existing economic ties, as he embarked on his first international visit to Riyadh after his election to the Pakistani premiership.¹⁹³ While no official details of Saudi Arabia's eventual participation were released, observers concluded that Saudi investments would concentrate on the port city of Gwadar on the southwestern coast of Baluchistan, which China was developing as an oil hub for the region. Such a commitment could transform Riyadh into Islamabad's "third strategic partner," which Pakistani sources hoped would generate a \$10 billion investment to revive that hapless country's moribund economy.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, King Salman pledged billion in assistance to Islamabad, which stabilized the Pakistani Government's finances, and allowed the new premier to embark on specific and sorely needed economic

192. Syed Raza Hassan, Kay Johnson, and Nick Macfie, "Pakistan to Send Troops to Saudi Arabia to Train and Advise," *Reuters*, 16 February 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-saudi/pakistan-to-send-troops-to-saudi-arabia-to-train-and-advise-idUSKCN1G00YI>.

193. Adam Whitnall, "Imran Khan Visits Saudi Arabia in First Overseas Trip as Pakistan Prime Minister 'to Seek Financial Aid'," *The Independent*, 19 September 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/imran-khan-saudi-arabia-pakistan-prime-minister-medina-muslim-jidda-a8544441.html>.

194. Khurshid Ahmed, "Pakistan, China on Same Page Over Inviting Saudi Arabia Into CPEC," *Arab News*, 21 September 2018, at <http://www.arabnews.pk/node/1375731/pakistan>.

reforms.¹⁹⁵

Interestingly, several of these projects were finally approved on 17 February 2019 when Prime Minister Imran Khan welcomed Muhammad bin Salman to Pakistan, accompanied with a large delegation that included over 100 Saudi businessmen. Several memorandums of understanding were signed, estimated to be worth \$21 billion in various sectors, including mineral, chemicals, agriculture, and food processing, among others. Critically, authorities announced that the Kingdom would finance the construction of an oil refinery in Gwadar, now part of China's "One Belt One World" infrastructure model that could well channel Saudi crude oil all the way to Xinjiang province. By all accounts, Khan sought to mend neglected ties with the Kingdom, especially after Islamabad rejected Riyadh's call for assistance in the Yemen conflict.¹⁹⁶

Importantly, it was critical to note that nearly a million Pakistanis lived and worked in the Kingdom, and that Saudi Arabia invested in a variety of civilian programs throughout Pakistan. Last but not least, it was crucial to note that expatriate remittances represented a major source of foreign currency for Pakistan, and while the numbers were estimated to hover around the US\$10 billion per year, Islamabad sought to reach additional bilateral trade accords to further strengthen existing ties.

195. "Saudi Arabia's \$6 Billion Aid Pledge Lifts Pakistan Stocks," *Arab News*, 24 October 2018, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1392986/business-economy>. Even if Western sources denigrated Prime Minister Khan for returning to Riyadh in late October 2018 to attend the opening ceremonies of the Future Investment Initiative (FII), Khan served his nation well, and secured Saudi Arabia's long-term assistance. See Saeed Shah, "Pakistan Gets \$6 Billion in Saudi Aid at Controversial Investment Conference," *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2018, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pakistan-gets-6-billion-in-saudi-aid-at-controversial-investment-conference-1540324438>. See also Ken Sengupta, "'We are Desperate for Money': Pakistan's Imran Khan Flies into Political Storm in Saudi Arabia," *The Independent*, 22 October 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/pakistan-imran-khan-saudi-khashoggi-trump-address-imf-economy-a8595206.html>.

196. Baber Ayaz, "MBS in Pakistan," *Daily Times* [Lahore, Pakistan], 22 February 2019, at <https://dailytimes.com.pk/357197/mbs-in-pakistan/>.

The Republic of India

Proximity as well as historical relations meant that India and Arabia were destined to maintain the closest relationship possible even if few ever imagined the role that Indian expatriate workers would play in contemporary Saudi affairs. Over the centuries, Arab traders involved in the spice trade between India and Europe plowed the seas, as Delhi became one of the first nation-states to establish formal ties with the Al Sa'ud in 1932, at a time when Indian merchants were active investors and lenders. Diplomatic relations were established soon after India gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1947, with Saudi Arabia quickly becoming the largest supplier of petroleum products to India.¹⁹⁷

After independence, Delhi has sought to maintain strong ties with Saudi Arabia, exchanging high-level delegations and, more important, spending millions of its citizens to toil on the Arabian Peninsula. It is nearly impossible to know how many Indian nationals lived and worked in the Kingdom, although the figure was probably in the millions. Remarkably, India's strategic relationships with Saudi Arabia were not affected by the latter's ties with Pakistan, notwithstanding inevitable policy clashes. The 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, as well as the Kashmir conflict, were two such examples but Riyadh seldom allowed either the Cold War, or Delhi's putative pro-Soviet policies from affecting its contacts. Indeed, Saudi patience paid-off as Delhi grew tired of socialist rhetoric, and forged far more solid relationships with leading Western societies. The one irritant that preoccupied the Kingdom was India's 1990 neutrality in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of the Shaykhdom of Kuwait, though several other countries adopted similar stances.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, India received observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as it was home to more Muslims than every country around the world except for Indonesia and Pakistan. Successive Saudi leaders, but especially King Faysal bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, perceived the vital role that Delhi would eventually play in inter-religious affairs, and supported full OIC

backing.¹⁹⁹ One of his successors, King 'Abdallah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz received full honors in January 2006 when he attended national day celebrations in the Indian capital. At the time, the monarch and the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed a fresh agreement that envisaged a strategic energy partnership—the “Delhi Declaration”—that provided for a “reliable, stable and increased volume of crude oil supplies to India through long-term contracts.”²⁰⁰ Several other accords followed this major agreement, all of which ensured that India received its petroleum needs, in exchange for sustained Indian investments in Arabia. Food items, textiles and garments, machinery, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, health services, information technology, and many other items formed part of the joint ventures that mushroomed between the two countries. India even agreed to set up institutes of higher education and research, provide educational opportunities for Saudi students and expand cooperation between the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and the Saudi Arabian Standards Organization (SASO).²⁰¹ Trade levels skyrocketed to reach nearly US\$25 billion in 2010 when about 2 million Indian expatriates were working in the Kingdom.²⁰² By 2015, Saudi imports from India topped the \$7 billion figure, nearly 3% of India's overall exports, while Saudi exports reached \$21 billion or 5.5% of India's overall imports.²⁰³ In 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Riyadh to further strengthen the close ties that existed between the two countries. Inasmuch as both Riyadh and Delhi perceived each other as true strategic partners, relations between them were bound to improve, especially since millions of Indian expatriate workers continued to live and toil in the Kingdom. Even if not by design, such a presence colored interactions between

197. For background materials, see Nejma Heptulla, *Indo-West Asian Relations: The Nehru Era*, Columbia, Missouri: South Asia Books, 1992; Edmund Richard, *India's Pro-Arab Policy: A Study in Continuity*, New York: Praeger, 1992; and Joseph Kostiner, *The making of Saudi Arabia, 1916-1936: From Chieftaincy to Monarchical State*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, especially pp. 141-184.

198. Prithvi Ram Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, London: I.B.Tauris, 1994, pp. 69-97.

199. Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Faysal: Saudi Arabia's King for All Seasons*, Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2008, pp. 74, 174-181, 258n21.

200. Zakir Hussain, “India-Saudi Arabia Relations: New Bilateral Dynamics,” Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 25 April 2017, at <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/india-saudi-arabia-relations-new-bilateral-dynamics>.

201. Farah Naaz Gauri, “Indo-Saudi Trade Relations,” *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review (Nigerian Chapter)* 1:2, 2013 pp. 45-57.

202. See Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, “India-Saudi Arabia Relations,” [Fellows' Seminar Transcript prepared by Princy Marin Georgel], Delhi: The Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 6 January 2012, at <https://idsa.in/event/IndiaSaudiArabiaRelations>.

203. See “Top 10 Indian Imports from Saudi Arabia,” 2017, at <http://www.worldsrichestcountries.com/top-india-imports.html>; and “Top 10 Indian Exports to Saudi Arabia,” 2017 at <http://www.worldsrichestcountries.com/top-india-exports.html>.

the two different cultures, though all sides benefitted. Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman visited India during his February 2019 Asian tour, when he met the Indian prime minister, as well as a number of high officials. Several trade agreements were signed, as Riyadh was keen to see improved ties, especially after American sanctions on Iran necessitated Indian imports of Saudi oil. Prince Muhammad declared that Saudi investments in India over the course of the next few years could well reach \$100 billion, which was a significant figure.²⁰⁴ Moreover, it was further agreed to increase the number of Indian pilgrims performing Hajj to 200,000 per year.²⁰⁵

The People's Republic of China

As stated above, China was slated to play far more important roles around the globe in the decades to come, which was why King Salman and President Xi Jinping embarked on major exchanges. The latest memorandum of understanding between Riyadh and Beijing identified US\$65 billion worth of investments between Chinese and Saudi firms in sectors ranging from energy to renewables. ARAMCO and SABIC, in particular, were poised to invest in oil and petrochemical ventures in both countries. What was truly unique to this incredibly sophisticated economic relationship was its success over such a short period of time. In fact, the first official Beijing-Riyadh meeting took place in the Sultanate of Oman in November 1985, following several years of heightened contact between them, aware that Saudi Arabia had, at the time, full diplomatic ties with the Republic of China, or Taiwan. The absence of formal ties did not prevent Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, then the Saudi Ambassador to the United States to secretly visit Beijing to establish formal diplomatic relations, and for his brother, Prince Khalid bin Sultan bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, who was appointed the Commander of the Joint Forces that helped liberate Kuwait in 1991, to purchase the country's first guided missiles from Beijing. This successful mission earned him the honorary title of "Father of Saudi Arabia's Missile," though Prince Khalid was fully authorized by King Fahd bin 'Abdul 'Aziz to engage with his Chinese interlocutors,

and was not a free-lancer.²⁰⁶

Diplomatic ties were only established between the Kingdom and the People's Republic of China in July 1990, which ended the isolation that existed amongst them. The process was slow but far more effective as Riyadh corrected several steps, especially after Beijing first expressed an interest to embark on such a diplomatic venture as far back as 1975, which Riyadh simply refused at the time.²⁰⁷ Much has changed since then, with a basic realization on both sides that mutually beneficial contacts would produce positive consequences. In less than a single generation, Saudi Arabia and China established close partnerships, which resulted in favorable perceptions. In fact, 61.3% of Saudis expressed a favorable view of China in a 2007 public opinion poll, while only 28.5% were unfavorable.²⁰⁸ More recently, and in the aftermath of China's *One Belt One Road* initiative, followed by King Salman's and Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman's visits to China, positive sentiments increased by leaps and bounds.

Building on several high level visits, most notably President Jiang Zemin's historic

204. "Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Visits Great Wall of China," *Arab News*, 21 February 2019, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1455651/saudi-arabia>.

205. "Saudi Arabia Raises India's Haj Quota to 200,000, Releases 850 Indian Prisoners," *Saudi Gazette*, 20 February 2019, at <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/559623/rss>.

206. See David B. Ottaway, "Saudis Hid Acquisition of Missiles," *The Washington Post*, 29 March 1988, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/03/29/saudis-hid-acquisition-of-missiles/cac710e3-b559-453d-8127-c911d6099be3/>; Jeffrey Lewis, "Why Did Saudi Arabia Buy Chinese Missiles?: The Real Question Is Why Are We Only Hearing About It Now," *Foreign Policy*, 30 January 2014, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/30/why-did-saudi-arabia-buy-chinese-missiles/>; and Khaled Bin Sultan with Patrick Seale, *Desert Warrior: A Personal View of the Gulf War by the Joint Forces Commander*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, especially pp. 137-152.

207. For background materials, see Hashim S. Behbehani, *China's Foreign Policy in the Arab World, 1955-75*, London: Kegan Paul International Ltd, 1981; Steve A. Yetiv and Lu Chunling, "China, Global Energy, and the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal* 61:2, Spring 2007, pp. 200-218; and Mohamed Mousa Mohamed Ali Binhuwaidin, *China's Foreign Policy Towards the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Region, 1949-1999*, Durham theses, Durham University, available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/4947/>. For Relations with Taiwan, see T. Y. Wang, "Competing For Friendship: The Two Chinas and Saudi Arabia," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 15:3, Summer 1993, pp. 63-82.

208. "Arab/Muslim Public Opinion Polls: Public Opinion in Saudi Arabia," *Jewish Virtual Library*, Chevy Chase, Maryland: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 5 December 2007, at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/public-opinion-in-saudi-arabia>.

1999 trip that opened new chapters—including an agreement that allowed the Kingdom to build oil refineries in China—followed by King ‘Abdallah’s heralded visit in January 2006 that was crowned with five major accords on energy cooperation including finalizing a 2005 deal that allowed SINOPEC—China’s state-run oil company—to explore gas in the Rub’ al-Khali (Empty Quarter) and tap the vast area in the Kingdom, relations improved significantly.²⁰⁹ At the time, Chinese President Hu Jintao exclaimed that this bilateral cooperation would “write a new chapter of friendly cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in the new century,” which materialized.²¹⁰

President Hu Jintao landed in Riyadh on 22 April 2006 and delivered a major address to the Majlis al-Shurah, a significant honor in its own right, but illustrative of increasingly close contacts. Whether this was the result of disenchantment with leading Western powers or whether Riyadh appreciated the “no strings attached” Chinese preferences were difficult to know. Suffice it to say that mutually beneficial economic concerns gelled ties that, in turn, warmed political ones even if Riyadh was intrinsically dependent on Western security guarantees.²¹¹ Hu Jintao clarified that “war and military force [were] never ... permanent solution[s] to a problem,” as he underscored the need to “persist with a just and fair handling of conflicts and bridging of differences through political means.” He did not refer to human rights matters and concentrated most of his presentation to vitally important economic issues.²¹² This did not mean that highly confidential discussions were not held on security matters but that the preference was to engage on those conversations in private.²¹³ Hu Jintao returned to the Kingdom in February 2009 for additional discussions, as well as to preside over the opening of a

209. Harsh V. Pant, “Saudi Arabia Woos China and India,” *Middle East Quarterly* 13:4, Fall 2006, pp. 45-52. See also Muhammad S. Olimat, *China and the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: Strategic Partnership in a Changing World*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016, pp. 179-207, especially pp. 189-197.

210. Yetiv and Lu, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

211. For an interesting read on these subtle changes, see Ben Simfendorfer, *The New Silk Road: How a Rising Arab World is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, especially pp. 154-173

212. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

213. Joseph A. Kéchichian, “Saudi Arabia and China: The Security Dimension,” Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 9 February 2016, at <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/saudi-arabia-and-china-security-dimension>.

Chinese-build cement plant.

The bridge to China improved in the post-2015 period as various economic programs expanded. In January 2016, President Xi Jinping returned to Riyadh where he expressed his country’s interest to reach a free trade agreement with all of the GCC countries, led by the Kingdom.²¹⁴ In fact, 2016 recorded significant gains as nearly half of China’s oil imports (7.6 mbpd) came from the Middle East, mostly from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Several new joint venture agreements were reached, including one between SABIC and the China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation—a polycarbonate complex in Tianjin. By that time, ARAMCO held 22.5% of a refining

Figure 11. King Salman and President Xi Jinping



Source: © Yonhap News.

214. Naser al-Tamimi, “China’s Rise in the Gulf: A Saudi Perspective,” in Al-Rasheed, Salman’s Legacy, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-271, the quotation is on page 255.

and fuel marketing company in Fujian in South-East China too, with the chief executive of SABIC, Yusuf ‘Abdallah al-Binyan, claiming “that the company investments in China amounted to about \$6 billion, while SABIC sales in China reached \$7 billion, or 30 percent of SABIC’s total sales.”²¹⁵ These significant investments were accompanied by equally critical expenditures, but of the far more lasting variety, as nearly 650 Saudi students studied in China in 2016 even if the number was trifling compared to those earning degrees in the United States (80,000). Still, and while modest, Saudis were relying on a form of soft power, acculturating themselves with Chinese history and customs. Riyadh continued to rely on Washington for defense needs but it, progressively, looked east for credible alternatives, should such options be required at a future date.

Remarkably, Chinese foreign policy evolved in the Middle East—from securing energy security to promoting economic and energy relations—without massive intervention. Still, beyond good intentions, and despite heavy investments—US\$23 billion in loans and aid to Arab states committed during the past few years (2014–2017)—earmarked for infrastructure and reconstruction projects, Beijing lumped all Arab needs under one umbrella: that of national development and economic revitalization.²¹⁶ This was certainly the case in such countries as Egypt or the Sudan but hardly the case for Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, for example. A focus on economic growth was naturally the priority for Cairo or Khartoum, though what mattered most in Kuwait City and Riyadh was security, the latter perceived to be beyond China’s intrinsic capabilities at least until very recently. Chinese leaders correctly believed that what ailed Middle Eastern societies lied in development concerns, which was undoubtedly the case for some, but shied away from the kind of commitments that the region as a whole required above all else, given raw geo-strategic competition that went well past Western imagination or needs. Thus, China avoided a serious regional military footprint, even if the question that arose was whether Beijing could afford to stay away from such commitments, while it immersed itself in economic affairs.

It was important to underscore the fact that while Beijing was likely to stick to its

traditional noninterventionist foreign policy, and remained unlikely to actively support the U.S.-led multilateral campaign against the Islamic State over the short-term—especially as this further isolated the Donald Trump Administration with which Beijing retained Gargantuan trade disputes—this, in effect, meant that China could not protect and defend its national security interests through quiet diplomacy alone. Instead, what Beijing hoped to accomplish through its 2016 “China’s Arab Policy Paper,” was to establish a “1+2+3” cooperation framework, which was certainly a new and very sophisticated paradigm.²¹⁷

The first leg of this security tripod was to build on energy cooperation as the core feature of all ties, while infrastructure construction, and trade and investment facilitations were the two wings of the policy. Thus China saw itself as an imposing power with intrinsic capabilities, ranging from financial might to security commitments, even if its power projection capabilities were relatively limited for the time being. Yet, and beyond massive financial ties, China saw numerous opportunities in the Arab Gulf monarchies, precisely to expand this “1+2+3” paradigm. In the UAE, for example, it signed a major partnership accord with Cosco, China’s largest shipping company, to build new cargo terminals to support expected increases in the flow of trade along the One Belt One Road maritime routes.²¹⁸ Such investments required protection that could not simply be outsourced, especially when approximately 60 per cent of China-UAE trade would be devoted to re-export markets throughout Africa and Europe. When one contemplated future expansions in alternative energy sources, artificial intelligence projects, robotics, and many other fresh initiatives that aimed to diversify local economies, China could not possibly be reluctant to leave its investments defenseless. To their credit, the Chinese were well poised to benefit from opportunistic mercantilism that could, in time, necessitate that they also provide regional security. The current paradigm, with the United States assuming that burden certainly benefitted the Chinese, but this was bound to change not only because Washington telegraphed

215. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

216. “China’s Xi Pledges \$20 billion in Loans to Revive Middle East,” *Reuters*, 9 July 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-arabstates/chinas-xi-pledges-20-billion-in-loans-to-revive-middle-east-idUSKBN1K0072>.

217. “China Issues Arab Policy Paper,” *Xinhua*, 13 January 2016, at http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-01/13/content_23252187.htm. For the text of the paper, see “China’s Arab Policy Paper: January 2016,” *Xinhua*, 14 January 2016, at http://www.china.org.cn/world/2016-01/14/content_37573547.htm.

218. “China’s Cosco Plans \$200 Million Abu Dhabi Container Terminal Expansion,” *Reuters*, 10 December 2018, at <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/transport/chinas-cosco-plans-us200m-abu-dhabi-container-terminal-expansion>.

its desire to distance itself from Arab entanglements, but also because Arab governments, especially those on the Arabian Peninsula led by Saudi Arabia, have shed lingering concerns regarding long-term Chinese intentions.

The Republic of Korea

Relations between the Republic of Korea and Saudi Arabia were first established in 1962, with a Korean International School opening in Jiddah to teach the Korean syllabus in the Korean language. This was a significant achievement, on par with leading countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and France, all of which offered similar school facilities to their nationals and those who were interested to join them. Korean was not a language familiar to most Western-centric Saudis but the interest was there and a few foresightful families took note. Indeed, business ties between the Kingdom and Korea grew exponentially, because of the high quality of the work at reasonable prices. Infrastructure projects and major power plants were built on a turnkey basis as thousands of skilled Korean expatriate workers spend years in the country. According to the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, over 5,000 Korean nationals lived and worked in Saudi Arabia in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which was a significant number for a medium-size country.²¹⁹ As one of the fastest growing global economies, Korea stood as an ideal partner for Saudi Arabia, notwithstanding language and cultural differences. Towards that end, several hundred Saudi students were sent to Seoul for language training as an important number of Korean students increased their Arabic language skills too. There was even interest in Korean nuclear expertise for power plants that were sorely needed as the Kingdom's socio-economic needs grew rapidly. Saudi officials described Korea as a "core" partner for *Vision 2030*, noting progress in joint efforts to flesh out various cooperation schemes, to accomplish specific goals. It was, in short, the kind of relationship that truly brought the eleventh and sixteenth largest global economies (by GDP) closer to each other.²²⁰ What were the reasons why these two countries forged such close ties with each other when so much more separated them?

219. Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Jeddah," n.d., at http://overseas.mofa.go.kr/sa-jeddah-en/brd/m_11476/list.do.

220. *World Economic Outlook: Challenges to Steady Growth*, Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund, October 2018, p. 153, at <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2018/02/weodata/index.aspx>.

First, and among all other reasons, was the notion of relative stability that was prized in both capitals. Seoul appreciated that Riyadh, along with the other conservative Arab Gulf monarchies, were the true practitioners of regional security, economic prosperity, and political steadiness. Notwithstanding some of the intrinsic problems associated with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Riyadh and its allies were impressed by unprecedented progress recorded in Korea, which was the result of an incredible work ethic, even if everyone understood that the American military umbrella guaranteed affluence.

The second reason was economic prosperity, which was a long-standing accomplishment, although prospects improved after 2012 when ARAMCO opened an office in Seoul and embarked on a variety of joint ventures. By 2016, two-way trade volume between the two countries reached US\$29 billion with Korea exporting cars, electronic goods, steel and other items to the Kingdom while importing oil and other petrochemical products from it.

Third, and while the Kingdom embarked on a unique trade relationship, particularly in the energy sector, Korea maintained close ties with Iran that, at least for a period of time, represented no problems. Seoul cherished its even-handed preferences even if it was increasingly evident that its global interests necessitated far closer associations with Saudi Arabia. To their credit, Korean officials accepted that their Middle East policies required them to take into account not just raw economic interests, but also the regional interactions between different states. Indeed, what passed for relatively objective and equidistant contacts between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the last few decades of the twentieth century, were no longer convenient in the twenty-first. For example, while Seoul could remain neutral in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, it was increasingly obligated to note that its positions towards the Syrian and Yemeni crises affected ties with Riyadh and Tehran alike. Korea was placed between a rock and a hard place in May 2016, after President Park Geun-hye visited Tehran with representatives from 236 Korean companies, which presumably aimed to gain new markets in the aftermath of the P5+1 nuclear agreement. To be sure, Iran looked for economic projects that allowed it to develop, as well as illustrate to its own citizens how the P5+1 agreement could result in massive economic benefits, though most of these projects fell through for a variety of reasons.

With the announcement of *Vision 2030*, however, and the realization that long-

term prospects were far more lucrative with Riyadh—especially under the Trump Administration that was determined to isolate the Iranian regime and place the severest imaginable sanctions on Tehran and on those that traded with it—the writing was on the wall. In fact, *Vision 2030* opened unprecedented new economic cooperation windows between Korean companies and the increasingly critical Saudi private sector that assumed its responsibilities, which surpassed any previous expectations. Seoul identified key sectors, including energy, automotive and health industries, for which it could provide vitally important assistance that were expected to be mutually beneficial.

According to the outgoing Korean Ambassador to Riyadh, Kwon Pyung-oh, 40 joint projects were identified as part of their shared collaboration within the *Vision 2030*

Figure 12. Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman and President Moon Jae-in



Source: © Yonhap News.

framework.²²¹ A joint panel was created to spur fresh opportunities focusing on five key sectors, namely “energy and manufacturing, smart infrastructure and digitalization, capacity building, health care and life sciences, as well as SMEs and Investment.” The Korean official revealed that significant progress was achieved across 16 projects between late 2017 and early 2018. The diplomat pointed out that Saudi Arabia was Korea’s sixth largest source of imports and a primary energy provider, whereas Seoul was the Kingdom’s fifth largest export market. Interestingly, Kwon Pyung-oh, joined the state-owned Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) as its chief executive officer and president, which essentially meant that his focus would remain on *Vision 2030* and how he may assist his successor, Jo Byung-Wook.²²²

The Saudi Minister of Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources, Khalid al-Falih, reinforced this sense of optimism during his May 2018 visit to Korea, where he met President Moon Jae-in and Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy Paik Un-gyu. Press reports concentrated on the Korean head-of-state’s emphasis on nuclear energy technology, which highlighted the country’s record in building and operating safe nuclear power plants for more than four decades. Saudi Arabia and Korea were working closely on nuclear safety and security issues and the Kingdom has previously send nearly 50 experts to Seoul for training and learning to design, construct and develop nuclear plants based on System-integrated Modular Advanced Reactor (SMART) technology. In fact, the “King ‘Abdallah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy” and the “Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute” have already signed a SMART pre-project engineering agreement (September 2015), which was renewed in November 2018.

In early August 2018, the CEO of the state-run Korea Electric Power Corporation, Kim Jong-kap, met with Khalid al-Sultan, president of the “King ‘Abdallah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy,” in Riyadh to submit Seoul’s bid to construct two

221. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, “Saudi Arabia, Korea Identify 40 Joint Projects Within Framework of Vision 2030,” *Arab News*, 26 March 2018, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1273646/saudi-arabia>.

222. Rashid Hassan, “New Korean Ambassador Signals Golden Age of Ties with Saudi Arabia,” *Arab News*, 16 June 2018, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1322381/saudi-arabia>.

nuclear plants in the Kingdom.²²³ KEPCO revealed that the company was shortlisted for the new 2.8-gigawatt nuclear power plant project, along with the United States, France, China and Russia. Although the winner was expected in 2019, KEPCO was ideally positioned because of Korea's successful legacy in building nuclear power plants in the United Arab Emirates. It was unclear whether Riyadh intended all ten of its anticipated nuclear plants—to secure a total of 17 gigawatts capacity of electricity by 2040—to be built by the same company, which opened the door for two contenders to compete for the facilities. When he was asked about Korea's bid, Kwon Pyung-oh (KOTRA) declared: "KEPCO has already submitted a proposal to the Saudi government to participate in the National Project for Atomic Energy which is expected to transform Saudi Arabia's energy industry." He clarified that Seoul had earned "a reputation for building world-class nuclear reactors—on time and within budget over the last 40 years," and highlighted that KEPCO was the world's only contractor with experience of building nuclear reactors in desert climate, referring to the power plants in the United Arab Emirates.²²⁴ In the event, it was amply clear that Korea was keenly interested in revising its investment options, to benefit from what many believed would be the start of the long awaited "Second Middle East boom," to mimic and even surpass the political and economic benefits that resulted from the first boom in the 1970s and 1980s, even if circumstances changed.²²⁵ Seoul valued its ties with Riyadh and, after the Trump Administration imposed severe new economic sanctions on Iranian oil exports in late 2018, Korea limited its oil imports from Tehran, notwithstanding temporary waivers.²²⁶

In June 2019, Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman became the first high-ranking Saudi official to visit Korea in more than two decades, a few days before he and the

Korean President Moon Jae-in travelled to Osaka to attend the G20 meeting. In Seoul, President Moon Jae-in welcomed the Saudi guest at the presidential Blue House where he expressed his ample satisfaction that economic ties, as well as defense contacts, reached new heights. According to press reports, negotiations covered the gamut, as both countries were keen to boost exchanges in a variety of industrial sectors, including information and communications technology, hydrogen energy, robots, health, medical service and culture.

This was no ordinary visit as the luncheon hosted by Moon Jae-in assembled Korea's business tycoons, including Lee Jae-yong, vice chairman of Samsung Electronics; Chung Eui-sun, vice chairman of Hyundai Motor Group; Chey Tae-won, chairman of SK Group; LG chairman Koo Kwang-mo; and Chung Ki-sun, senior executive vice president of Hyundai Heavy Industries. A total of 16 memorandums of understanding (MoUs)—valued at an estimated \$8.3 billion—including agreements related to eco-friendly automobile technology and hydrogen energy, were signed before Muhammad bin Salman travelled to Samsung's VIP guesthouse in Itaewon where he held discussions on business partnerships with young Korean representatives.²²⁷

The Heir Apparent pledged to assist Korea's oil import requirements and promised to work with Seoul to ensure that there were no disruptions to its estimated over three million barrels per day imports as Saudi Arabia became Korea's largest oil supplier in 2019. In fact, there was no denying that Korean companies anxiously looked towards their government to help pave the way for limited risk opportunities and, particularly useful, to avoid inept maneuvers that could derail mutually beneficial relationships.²²⁸ Given past behavior, chances were excellent for these ties to prosper, something that Saudi and Korean officials worked in earnest to guarantee.

223. Shin Ji-hye, "Korea Ramps Up Efforts to Win Saudi Arabia Nuclear Project," *The Korea Herald*, 2 August 2018, at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180802000628>.

224. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, *op. cit.*

225. "S. Korea, Saudi Arabia Agree to Step Up Nuclear Cooperation," *Yonhap News Agency*, 13 March 2018, at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/business/2018/03/13/0502000000AEN20180313007200320.html>.

226. Osamy Tsukimori and Jane Chung, "Japan, South Korea Plan to Resume Iran Oil Imports from January: Sources," *Reuters*, 19 November 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-sanctions-japan-southkorea/japan-south-korea-plan-to-resume-iran-oil-imports-from-january-sources-idUSKCN1N00R4>.

227. Jeff Sung, "How the Crown Prince's visit to South Korea is advancing Vision 2030," *Arab News*, 28 June 2019, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1516736/saudi-arabia>.

228. Alon Levkowitz, "Can South Korea Capitalize on a Second Middle East Boom?: South Korea hopes that the Middle East is the answer to economic woes, but Seoul will have to tread carefully," *The Diplomat*, 25 August 2016, at <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/can-south-korea-capitalize-on-a-second-middle-east-boom/>.

Ties with Europe

In this chronicle, ties between the Kingdom and both of the United Kingdom and France receive special attention because of intrinsic contacts that defined Riyadh's foreign policies towards Western societies. London and Paris stand out because leaders in both capitals perceived Saudi Arabia as a vital ally, both before and after the 1973-1974 oil crisis and price hikes that created more or less permanent associations and, equally important, because of lucrative military sales from Europe to the Arab Gulf State. In the post-2015 period, the United Kingdom and France were expected to retain their privileged positions, perhaps even improve conditions, despite opposition forces that called on the two Western governments to distance themselves from the Al Sa'ud.

Relations with the United Kingdom

By all accounts, successive British governments and the Al Sa'ud have long been the closest of allies, whose origins date back to the 1915 Treaty of Darin between London and 'Abdul 'Aziz bin 'Abdul Rahman. The status of a protectorate, which that treaty ensured, was replaced by the 20 May 1927 Treaty of Jiddah with the then Kingdom of Najd. As the United Kingdom was among the first states that recognized 'Abdul 'Aziz's sovereignty—as early as 1926—and set-up a diplomatic legacy in Arabia, it was natural for the monarch to exchange notes with his British counterparts and enter into a variety of accords. The Saudi sovereign send his son Faysal to London in 1919 on what was the first of numerous encounters with British officials, and opened an embassy to the Court of St. James in 1930, led by Hafiz Wahbah.²²⁹ Over the decades, London and Riyadh forged the kind of ties that were close to the strategic variety even if these were mired by frequent controversies, including a few tragic episodes that hindered the development

229. For background details, see Clive Leatherdale, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939: The Imperial Oasis*, London: Frank Cass, 1983; Askar H. al-Enazy, *The Creation of Saudi Arabia: Ibn Saud and British Imperial Policy, 1914-1927*, Abingdon, Oxon, U.K.: Routledge, 2013; Shafi Aldamer, *Saudi Arabia and Britain: Changing Relations, 1939-1953*, Reading, U.K.: Ithaca Press, 2003; Haifa Alangari, *Struggle for Power in Arabia: Ibn Saud, Hussein and Great Britain, 1914-1924*, Reading, U.K.: Ithaca Press, 1998; Matthew Fallon Hinds, *The US, the UK and Saudi Arabia in World War II: The Middle East and the Origins of a Special Relationship*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2016; and Joseph A. Kéchichian, Faysal, *op. cit.*, pp. pp. 26-31.

of a unique relationship. In 1980, a British television program titled *Death of a Princess* that described the life of a young Saudi princess and her lover—who were executed for adultery—led Riyadh to request that Ambassador James Craig leave the country. The deeply offensive program hurt trade contacts that took several years to repair. Equally important was the 1985 al-Yamamah arms deal between British Aerospace and the Saudi Ministry of Defense. Accusations that more than £6 billion were paid to Saudi officials to gain the multi-billion contract for hundreds of advanced fighter-bombers, a range of weapons, radar, spares and pilot-training programs, added fuel to the fire.

Despite these setbacks, however, contacts were maintained and improved, with more than 200 joint ventures between British and Saudi Companies estimated to be worth at least US\$17.5 billion in 2018. Some 30,000 British nationals lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, which meant that Riyadh was the United Kingdom's primary trading partner in the entire Middle East in 2018.

More recently, and after King Salman's accession to rulership, London reacted to the March 2015 start of the War for Yemen, after Huthi rebels took control of that hapless country and ousted president 'Abid Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi. When a coalition of Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia imposed a naval blockade on the country and launched airstrikes against Huthi strongholds, Britain lodged formal complaints. It called on the pro-Western coalition to limit various attacks, though neither the United Kingdom nor the United States imposed any restrictions. Ironically, and despite such parallel declarations, Saudi Arabia was and continued to be assisted by London and Washington as well as the armies of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Sudan and Egypt. Jordanian and Moroccan forces participated too, as did Qatari Air Force units, before the latter were withdrawn in 2017. Britain licensed £3.3 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia between early 2015 and December 2016, despite numerous protests.²³⁰ Critics skirted the bloody roles that the Huthis played in the war, seldom focused on Iran's military assistance to Huthi rebels, and refrained from expressing similar outrages about the hundreds of thousands killed in Syria. Still, the *Campaign Against Arms Trade* non-governmental organization gained permission from the British High Court in

230. "The Use of UK Cluster Bombs by Saudi Arabia is characteristic of a Brutal War and a Brutal Regime," London: Campaign Against Arms Trade, 19 December 2016, at <https://www.caat.org.uk/media/press-releases/2016-12-19>.

June 2016 to bring a judicial review against the government over British arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Importantly, on 10 July 2017 Lord Justice Burnett and Mr. Justice Haddon-Cave found that the British Secretary of State's decision to carry on the arms trade was not unlawful as London stood by its allies. Others attempted to circumvent the government's decisions but Prime Minister Theresa May was adamant in her backing of the Saudi Government on national security grounds.

Few denied that the War for Yemen was highly controversial and violent though calls for independent investigations into violations of International Humanitarian Law proved to be tangential because Riyadh and its coalition partners acknowledged several incidents that, regrettably, resulted in civilian casualties. Beyond the repercussions of the War for Yemen, London routinely met most of the requirements of the Saudi armed forces, as British contractors completed the Saudi Arabia National Guard Communications Project, which aimed to improve the communication capabilities of the National Guard.

The Syrian uprisings, along with the clandestine assistance that London and Riyadh provided anti-Bashar al-Assad forces fighting against the pro-Iranian regime, affected Britain's recent relationships with the Kingdom too. Critics berated the British government, allegedly as the foreign affairs committee noted: "Democratic governments such as the UK face a challenge in trying to reconcile their liberal constituencies at home with the need to maintain relationships with undemocratic and conservative regimes that are important to their interests on a regional and global level," though this was selective umbrage at best.²³¹

London was far more interested in the reforms under way in Saudi Arabia, which King Salman and his heir apparent pushed with a vengeance, than any peripheral concerns. Inasmuch as numerous Saudi dissidents escaped reprimands on account of their presence in the United Kingdom, it fell on the Saudi monarch and Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman to defend their country's interests against the odds. This was no simple task as the most recent controversies were added to the list of similar outrages

231. Ian Black, "UK's Troubled Ties with Saudi Arabia Under Growing Strain," *The Guardian*, 13 October 2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/13/uk-saudi-arabia-relationship-under-growing-strain>.

of the past, though seasoned diplomats on both sides separated the wheat from the chaff. Simply stated, much more united the two Kingdoms than many assumed that, truth be told, could and would not be jeopardized. In fact, and as Prime Minister Theresa May clarified during her 7 December 2016 address to the Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, London perceived the security of the Arabian Peninsula to be vital to its own. Consequently, chances were excellent that London and Riyadh would continue to strengthen their long-term relationships over the next several decades, with aplomb.

Relations with France

France and Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations in 1926, although Paris opened its first consulate in Jiddah in 1839, as it competed with London on and around the Arabian Peninsula. In 2018, the two countries may be said to enjoy strong economic, military and political interests, as officials coordinated putative actions on a slew of concerns, including the Arab-Israeli Conflict, the War for Syria and, most critically, on Iran's nuclear program that preoccupied them equally. In the words of President François Hollande, the two countries shared a "global strategic partnership," which was certainly the case in the twenty-first century.²³²

It was fair to state that, at least to a certain extent, this strategic evolution was directly tied to General Charles de Gaulle and his incontrovertible pro-Arab policies after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. De Gaulle was not necessarily pro-Arab and certainly not anti-Israeli but he saw an injustice and tried to introduce a modicum of a balance in what were imbalanced and very unhealthy ties between Westerners and Arabs.²³³ His successors pursued similar policies, perhaps with the exception of Nicolas Sarkozy, although Paris displayed its streak of independence in 2003 when President Jacques

232. "France and Saudi Arabia Enjoy Close and Confident Relationship," *Arab News*, 13 July 2016, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/953251/saudi-arabia>. For background details, see Faisal Almejfel, *Les Relations entre la France et l'Arabie Saoudite: de 1967 à 2012*, Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2014; and Sébastien Wesser, *L'Arabie Saoudite Entre Évolution et Révolution(s)*, Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2016.

233. Charles Saint-Prot, *La France et le Renouveau Arabe: De Charles de Gaulle à Valéry Giscard d'Estaing*, Paris: Copernic, 1980. See also Dominique Vidal, "Politique Arabe de la Ve République," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2015, at <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2015/02/VIDAL/52652>.

Chirac, through his Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin, defied George W. Bush at the height of the War for Iraq. Earlier, Paris stood with Washington after the 1990 Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait (and participated in the 1991 Desert Storm military deployments), but did not believe that the United States made the case in the search for weapons of mass destruction in 2003. Riyadh took note of the subtle differences and while it seldom commented on such controversies, Saudi Arabia nevertheless hoped that the French would impose their diplomatic verve against Iran, whose quest for a nuclear capability was of an entirely different nature. In the event, by the time the War for Yemen started in 2015, and despite the fact that France was party to the 14 July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, it unhesitatingly condemned Huthi ballistic missile attacks against Saudi targets.

In the post 2015 period, King Salman welcomed President François Hollande in May of that year, or barely after acceding the throne, when the French leader was the guest of honor at the Gulf Cooperation Council. Earlier, Hollande welcomed then Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Nayif, on whom he bestowed the Legion of Honor, a high distinction whose recipients are designated by the French president. King Salman visited Southern France, and while his visit was cut short, Paris welcomed Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman who signed a variety of contracts, which the *al-Arabiya* network heralded as signs of a “much stronger Saudi-French alliance.”²³⁴ Of course, and topping these deals were fresh arms purchases, including for 23 Airbus H145 helicopters, and several naval patrol boats.²³⁵

Beyond arms sales, and much like the United States and the United Kingdom in the post-2015 period, France embraced the Arab Gulf monarchies in general and Saudi Arabia in particular because it was preoccupied by the War for Yemen, as well as the continued struggles against extremists. Arab Gulf monarchs, who gathered in the Kingdom for a GCC Summit with François Hollande on 5 May 2015, coordinated various planks and secured French assistance to counter Iranian aspirations to dominate

Arab security concerns. In fact, Hollande became the first Western leader to attend and address a GCC Summit since the creation of the alliance in 1981 that, in what was a major development, raised eyebrows in Washington and London.²³⁶ In fact, and while Paris was a pillar of Western interests, this particular invitation was meant to send specific messages to Washington and London, even if King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz ushered in the most pro-American team ever in his country’s history. It was, in all likelihood, a reminder that the overtures to Iran under the Obama Administration and the consequences of Tehran’s emboldened initiatives throughout the Arab World were closely tied and not necessarily perceived to be positive steps.

At least five specific concerns were discussed by GCC officials during the critical May 2015 Summit that deserved attention, since they clarified Riyadh’s views of France, and what the latter could hopefully add to the fray.

First, and inevitably, the focus was on Yemen, as GCC leaders tried to figure out how to permanently defeat the Huthis, which was not a done deal as of mid-2019. Notwithstanding the spin, King Salman and his allies appraised how François Hollande could help—beyond siding with Sunnis, which was not a French policy even if various experts advanced it as such, simply because France did not pursue sectarian preferences. Naturally, the same was true for Barack Obama who was not necessary tilting towards Shi’ahs (though he seemed to express a preference for Iran, which was something different, given the minority status of Shi’ah Persians in their own country), even if both were engaged in the fight against extremist groups like Fahish, to use Prince Turki

234. “Saudi Arabia and France ink \$12bln deal,” *Al-Arabiya*, 24 June 2015, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/06/24/France-Saudi-Arabia-to-ink-12bln-arms-deal.html>.

235. “France and Saudi Arabia Sign Contracts Worth 10 Billion Euros,” *Reuters*, 13 October 2015, at <http://en.rfi.fr/economy/20151013-france-and-saudi-arabia-sign-contracts-worth-10-billion-euros>.

236. The diplomatic dance that followed in recent years was somewhat comical as President Barack H. Obama attended the 36th GCC Summit held in Riyadh on 22 April 2016 and British Prime Minister Theresa May addressed the 37th GCC Summit held in Manama, Bahrain on 7 December 2016. As stated above, President Donald J. Trump held an American-GCC Summit during his May 2017 trip the Kingdom. To her credit, Prime Minister May delivered the clearest message when she underscored that “Gulf Security is our security” and, importantly, mentioned security 26 times in her speech. See Roberta Rampton, “Obama Reaffirms U.S. to Deter Aggression Against Gulf Arabs,” *Reuters*, 21 April 2016, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-obama-summit-idUSKCN0XI0UB>; and Government of the United Kingdom, “Prime Minister’s Speech to the Gulf Co-operation Council 2016,” 7 December 2016, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-to-the-gulf-co-operation-council-2016>.

al-Faysal's term for Da'ish, the so-called Islamic State that was not one.²³⁷

Second, one assumed that the assembled leaders focused on Iran and wondered how they could balance the expected consequences of a potential P5+1 agreement (pushed for by the United States even if European powers displayed mixed views on the matter at the time) by 30 June 2015, with long-term GCC interests that focused on stability and prosperity. Hollande probably accepted to attend the Summit to carve a role for France in the next phase, and while it was natural for him to advance French interests, it was ironic to note that the King Salman tilt towards Paris mimicked the late King Faysal's preferences for Paris under Charles De Gaulle, while it cajoled Washington by appointing the latter's favorite princes to positions of authority.

Third, and in the same vain, it was natural for GCC States to recalibrate their responses to a putative Iranian acquisition of an atomic weapon over the long-term because, and this must be acknowledged openly, a P5+1 accord only postponed the inevitable. Indubitably, Washington emphasized its nuclear umbrella that was last argued by then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton when she offered Riyadh and its regional partners such protection, though GCC leaders insisted on yet another balancing factor, namely much closer military ties with France and Britain, which was what Hollande sold the assembled. For his part, King Salman asked the French head-of-state whether he would sacrifice Marseille for Riyadh in the same way De Gaulle asked John F. Kennedy whether Washington would sacrifice New York to save Paris in 1961. Not surprisingly, the monarch was likely to hear a similar response—no—and that was why he and his GCC allies persevered and demanded reciprocity and the acquisition of advanced weapons to create a credible deterrence against Iran. In this same line, Hollande, who was a Western leader through and through—which meant he placed Western interests ahead of GCC ones—further raised the roles of Russia and China and, based on what he heard from GCC leaders, recalibrated French/Western policies towards Moscow and Beijing. In turn, and based on these same conversations, GCC leaders adjusted

237. Prince Turki al-Faysal, the Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh coined the term Fahish [or Fahesh], which means obscene in Arabic, to refer to Da'ish, since the so-called Islamic State is neither Islamic nor a State. See "Daesh 'Neither Islamic Nor State'," *Arab News*, 19 September 2015, at <http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/808606>. For background details on ISIS, see Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, London: Verso, 2015.

their ties with India and the Republic of Korea as new alliances emerged over the horizon, features in GCC policies that were poorly understood but increasingly vital for indigenous decision-makers.

Fourth, summiteers honed on various ideas about the price of oil and the impact that a P5+1 deal with Iran may well have after the latter reentered the markets, once sanctions were lifted. Lest one assume that these were esoteric subjects that were seldom negotiated at high-level Summits, these were in fact what truly interested Western powers—access at reasonable prices—and GCC oil producers—access at secure rates.

Finally, and since this meeting occurred a week before the Camp David gathering between Obama and GCC leaders, several items on that agenda—secret for outsiders but not to participants—were raised too. Remarkably, and while few took note, the Hollande-GCC Summit was a perfect dress rehearsal as King Salman and his heir apparent coordinated what they would practice henceforth and in an assertive way that intended to protect and promote the Kingdom's core interests. Riyadh threw down the gauntlet with the support of France no less. The objective was far more complex than bilateral ties and that was what Riyadh intended to pursue.

Ties with the Arab World

When President Jamal 'Abdul Nasir [Gamal Abdel Nasser] of Egypt died in 1970, the Arab world lost one of its most charismatic leaders, a statesman who enjoyed unprecedented legitimacy. Few wished or managed to replace him after his untimely demise, though Mu'ammar al-Qaddhafi of Libya, Hafiz al-Assad of Syria, and Saddam Hussayn [Hussein] of Iraq tried to replicate his achievements. Even after the devastating 1967 Arab-Israeli War, whose 50-year anniversary was largely ignored in 2017, Nasir commanded the kind of loyalty that was and is the envy of many officials. Still, Nasir advocated secular pan-Arabism that failed to galvanize Arab masses outside of his country, as most preferred to remain true to their traditions nestled in faith. Those who anchored their political visions in Islam, like King Faysal bin 'Abdul 'Aziz in Saudi Arabia and Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan Al Nahyan in the United Arab Emirates, for example, distanced their nations from ideological whirlwinds. They backed Arabism but rejected secularism, liberalism, socialism, and communism alike, preferring to base their outlooks on concepts that satisfied Muslim aspirations.

Beyond Nasir's charisma, which many Arab orators duplicated though few enjoyed the collusion from literate men like Fahmi Huwaydi and Muhammad Haykal—the first a columnist and the latter then editor of Egypt's state-run newspaper *al-Ahram*,—most Arab leaders invested in building their intelligentsia, develop their countries, and defend themselves from excessive nationalisms that pretended that whatever wealth existed in any Arab country literally belonged to the entire Arab nation. In fact, Nasir penned an opus in 1954, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, in which he revealed his vision of the Arab World in the clearest terms possible even as he emphasized that Egypt, by virtue of its unique geostrategic position at the crossroads of the African, Arab, and Islamic worlds, ought to play the pivotal leadership role. He called for the use of oil as an economic weapon as he conceptualized a framework that elevated petroleum into a unique category, and pointed out that Arabs could use oil as a weapon to free themselves from foreign domination.²³⁸ It was destiny, he believed, and wrote:

“The annals of history are full of heroes who carved for themselves great and heroic roles and played them on momentous occasions on the stage. History is also charged with great heroic roles for which we do not find actors. I do not know why I always imagine that in this region in which we live there is a role wandering aimlessly about seeking an actor to play it. I do not know why this role, tired of roaming about in this vast region which extends to every place around us, should at last settle down, weary and worn out, on our frontiers beckoning us to move, to dress up for it and to perform it since there is nobody else who can do so.”²³⁹

Modesty aside, this remarkable paragraph set the stage for the Cairenese's vision for himself as he aspired to be the leader of nearly 60 million Arabs and, perhaps, the approximate 450 million Muslims in the mid-1950s. The thesis further elaborated his views on unity and the kind of obstacles that stood in its way that, the Pan-Arab hero posited, were all based on “suspicion” as well as the mistake in how Arab leaders defined power. “Power is not merely shouting aloud,” Nasir wrote, but it “is to act positively with all the components of power,” which he identified as being tailored of three components: “spiritual and material bonds” that gave Arabs “traits, components and

civilization;” “important strategic situation” that was “the crossroads and the military corridor of the world;” and petroleum, “the vital nerve of civilisation, without which none of its means can exist.”²⁴⁰

To be sure, Nasir balanced his strategic objectives by playing the two rival superpowers against each other, but the 1967 War ended his aspirations. It fell on King Faysal bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz to rescue Egypt from economic, political, and military irrelevance. The man who was a hero of the Nonaligned Movement, rubbing shoulders with anti-imperialist leaders like Tito of Yugoslavia, Nehru of India, Nkrumah of Ghana, and Sukarno of Indonesia, finally understood that legitimacy was earned not pilfered. Fifty years later, his successors continued to grapple with instability and various other challenges, now with the added burden of extremist movements like al-Qa‘idah and the alleged Islamic State adding fuel to the fire. Yet, and drawing clear lessons from the Nasir legacy, a different kind of leadership emerged in Saudi Arabia and Gulf Cooperation Council states, not only to retain independence but to also embed power in Arab hands.

Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

Confused observers were ashen with surprise when the first waves of the “Arab

238. Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Buffalo, New York: Smith, Keynes & Marshall, 1954.

239. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

240. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

Uprisings” failed to take root in Saudi Arabia.²⁴¹ The Kingdom remained stable, something that literally bothered those salivating with a putative opportunity to bring down the Al Sa‘ud or, at the very least, see it significantly weakened. To be sure, a few groups, including Shi‘ah Islamists that took their cues from the Islamic Revolution in Iran, mobilized in the Eastern Province, even if calls for “the people want the downfall of the regime” [*Al-Sha‘ab Yuriduh Iskat al-Nizam*] fell on deaf ears. A call for a “Day of Rage” gathered little momentum, with the vast majority rejecting the Shi‘ah solidarity campaign against the ruling family.²⁴² Even the occasional Qasim demonstrations between 2010 and 2018, especially in the city of Buraydah, were too feeble to leave an impact. Notwithstanding short uprisings in Qatif and Buraydah between 2011 and 2013, Saudis did not chant *al-Sha‘ab Yuriduh Iskat al-Nizam* like Levantines who took to the streets and brought about fundamental political transformations in several Arab countries. They [that is the population of the Kingdom] were far more interested in tangible reforms that would improve conditions and ensure higher quality of life for the majority. In fact, the overwhelming majority looked askance to fifth columnists as a motley crew of troublemakers who thrived on internal and regional challenges, and backed the monarch’s reform agendas. Most young Saudis, along with a majority of Arab Gulf citizens, welcomed Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman’s overtures and

241. “Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Absolute Monarchy Holds the Line,” *The Guardian*, 30 September 2011, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/30/editorial-saudi-arabia-arab-spring>. See also Davin Hutchins, “Will There Be an Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia?,” *Voice of America*, 15 May 2012, at <https://middleeastvoices.voanews.com/2012/05/will-there-be-an-arab-spring-in-saudi-arabia-52415/>; and Martin Peretz, “Arab Spring, My Foot,” *The New Republic*, 6 October 2011, at <https://newrepublic.com/article/95834/arab-spring-saudi-arabia-israel-turkey-qadaffi>. A few die-hard believers were impatiently waiting for the uprisings to start in the Kingdom. See, Viktor Mikhin, “‘Arab Spring’ on Saudi Arabia’s Doorstep,” *New Eastern Outlook*, 3 September 2018, at <https://journal-neo.org/2018/03/09/arab-spring-on-saudi-arabia-s-doorstep/>; and Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2016. Mercifully, one source attempted the impossible, and saw a positive sign in Muhammad bin Salman. See Zev Chafets, “Saudi Prince’s Revolution Is the Real Arab Spring,” *Bloomberg*, 9 November 2017, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-11-09/saudi-prince-s-revolution-is-the-real-arab-spring>.

242. Uri Friedman, “Eight Reasons Why Saudi Arabia’s ‘Day of Rage’ Fizzled,” *The Atlantic*, 11 March 2011, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/03/eight-reasons-why-saudi-arabias-day-rage-fizzled/348780/>.

truly hoped for the success of projects that intended to improve conditions, empower the business community to invest, encourage the creation of wealth, and otherwise usher in a new socio-economic renaissance. Arab Gulf citizens in general and Saudis in particular understood that the challenges that confronted them were disproportionate though most were confident that Arab Gulf rulers were adequately equipped to handle whatever crises emerged. Notwithstanding this optimism, there were serious differences among GCC leaders over a slew of concerns, including the role that Iran wished to play on the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere, which threw a monkey-wrench in GCC affairs. Observers wondered whether the alliance remained relevant in 2018 or whether it was about to collapse.

The GCC and the Qatar Crisis

Admittedly, GCC fora allowed regional leaders to discuss political and economic issues and, occasionally, resolve differences over the course of nearly four decades of joint initiatives. Nevertheless, some doubted whether the body could wither at the proverbial vine, allegedly because of the crisis that pitted Qatar to several of its traditional allies. A few lamented the grand ambitions that created the regional security pact, even if most of the GCC’s accomplishments were in the economic and political spheres. One news account concluded that the GCC was “nearly defunct and a frustrated Saudi Arabia [was] reduced to discussing whether to dig a ditch across its border with Qatar, in effect turning the Qatar peninsula into an island.”²⁴³ A leading analyst offered an equally categorical assessment, implying that a carefully written open letter that was published in *Okaz*—a major Saudi newspaper—and endorsed by the 200 surviving male descendants of Muhammad bin ‘Abdul Wahhab, the founder of the creed practiced in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, amounted to an expulsion of the Qatari ruler from the religious community. According to Bruce Riedel, a former CIA analyst, the front-page letter was addressed to none other than Shaykh Tammim bin Hamad Al Thani, accusing him of failing to follow the true path of the Unitarian movement. It also demanded that the name of the chief mosque in Doha be changed from its current

243. Patrick Wintour, “Donald Trump Hoping to Call Gulf States to Washington Summit: US hopes to defuse simmering dispute between Qatar and other key states in the region,” *The Guardian*, 27 July 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/27/donald-trump-hoping-to-call-gulf-states-to-washington-summit>.

name, the Muhammad bin ‘Abdul Wahhab Mosque that, presumably, was a clear signal of excommunication with dire consequences. For Riedel, “this religious expulsion [created the kind of conditions that were] ... far more difficult to resolve [because] political disputes” were “malleable” whereas religion was “doctrine” and, thus, much more difficult to resolve.²⁴⁴

Ultimately, what Riedel and others hinted at was the sheer absence of trust—a key ingredient for effective alliance behavior—as the major reason why the GCC allegedly expired in 2017. In reality, GCC founding leaders hoped that the organization would strengthen member-states that, and this was worth recalling, joined forces in 1981 to defend themselves from the spillover consequences of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. While other reasons motivated Arab Gulf leaders to create the alliance, including the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 and the coup attempts in Bahrain and Kuwait, it was the Iranian Revolution that was the catalyst that justified the actions taken to join forces and it was utterly illogical to assume that one of its members could unilaterally place aside the core rationale of the organization’s *raison d’être*.

To be sure, Qatar benefitted from most of the GCC’s achievements, including from the 2015 customs union as well as the 2009–2011 common electricity grid, but there should be few doubts that the very purpose of the GCC was and would clearly remain to protect the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies, including Qatar, from Revolutionary Iran.²⁴⁵ To assume otherwise was a gigantic blunder because the key dispute between Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Manama and Cairo on one hand and Doha on the other, was and remains ideological. Simply stated, what the 2017 crisis brought forth was a particularly blatant ideological schism within the GCC that, like all such divisions, cannot be

healed with familiar compromises.²⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt, asserted that Qatar supported terrorist groups around the region and referred to themselves as the “anti-terror quartet,” which spoke volumes. This was, therefore, not a mere dispute over minor contentions but a profound ideological schism that aimed to politically isolate the Al Thani ruling family for their views about specific extremists and their support to the latter. Facile commentaries quickly concluded that two years after the quartet launched its boycott of Qatar, it was difficult to identify what Riyadh and its associates accomplished.²⁴⁷ They pointed out to Doha’s remarkable survival skills and undeniable achievements, which were accurate, though few offered any concrete evidence that the quartet’s core differences were wrong. On the contrary, there was plenty of evidence that the Al Thani ruling family reached dramatic ideological conclusions that further enlarged the gap between this ruling family and its traditional Arabian Peninsula allies, other ruling families with which the Al Thani shared far more than some were willing to accept. This was the root-cause of the dispute: ruling families

246. Although an ideology is a collection of normative beliefs and values held by individuals or groups, the term’s origins—rooted in the bloody French Revolution—allocated very specific meanings to it, namely its very close association with terroristic behavior that elaborated a rational system of ideas, presumably to oppose irrational mob impulses. Of course, ideology need not be pejorative and can be used as a neutral term in analyzing various political opinions, but the most accurate assessment is “what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination.” For Aleksander I. Solzhenitsyn, whose magisterial work revealed how otherwise good men could practice evil, ideology was “the social theory which helps to make [such an evildoer’s] acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes, so that he won’t hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors.” Solzhenitsyn added: “That was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations.” See Aleksander I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, Volume One*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973, p. 174.

247. Ihsaan Tharoor, “The Blockade of Qatar is Failing,” *The Washington Post*, 18 July 2017, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/07/18/the-blockade-of-qatar-is-failing/>. See also Gabriel Collins, “Anti-Qatar Embargo Grinds Toward Strategic Failure,” Houston, Texas: Rice University’s Baker Institute For Public Policy, *Issue Brief*, 22 January 2018, at <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/7299ac91/bi-brief-012218-ces-qatarembargo.pdf>.

244. Bruce Riedel, “Is the GCC dead?,” *Al-Monitor*, 18 June 2018, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/06/gcc-dead-saudi-arabia-qatar-dispute-salman-mbs.html>.

245. R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East*, Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, pp. 3-18.

that no longer shared similar political outlooks. In the larger context of Arab Gulf political ties, this family schism was the primary reason why negotiations to find a new *modus vivendi* were so difficult. Indeed, this was also why the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its partners were loath to compromise, because it was impossible to make concessions in a clear ideological dispute.

Equally important for our narrative was the role that Riyadh played and was bound to lead in the period ahead. A leading analyst concluded the schism meant the six GCC member-states were now divided into three distinct groups, with Qatar on its own, a trio of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while Kuwait and Oman apparently adopted a middle way between feuding neighbors.²⁴⁸ Undeniably, Kuwait and Oman sought compromises, with a clear eye on their northern neighbor, Iran, whose ideological omnipresence could not be ignored. Still, both the Shaykhdom and the Sultanate were firmly committed to the GCC for a variety of reasons, even if short-term necessity compelled them to adopt blurred policies. Omanis, in particular, maintained an open channel of communication with Tehran. This was useful and earned Muscat significant accolades from the United States and other global powers that sought the Sultan's assistance to act as a vital diplomatic go-between. Similarly, Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah, a seasoned Kuwaiti leader who was first entrusted Kuwait's diplomatic portfolio back in 1963—long before most of the current Arab Gulf leaders were born—and who forgot about regional affairs much more than what most would ever know, sought to appeal to core interests. That was why he acted as a conciliator and hosted Shaykh Tammim bin Hamad Al Thani on several occasions—as well as visited the Qatari ruler in Doha on several trips—all to find a mutually satisfactory formula to end the dispute. GCC leaders might yet find an ideal solution although what needed to be addressed was the above-mentioned ideological schism. In the meantime, neither Kuwait nor Oman could simply abandon the GCC because they would lose far more than many believed, and both were immensely aware of the benefits that the GCC presented in so many fields. What none of the GCC States could truly afford to do was to undermine the organization even if short-term bilateralism may be on the rise. Herein lied a serious challenge to the GCC that Doha, as well as Kuwait City and

248. Anthony Cordesman, "Gulf Security: Looking Beyond the Gulf Cooperation Council," Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 12 December 2017, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-security-looking-beyond-gulf-cooperation-council>.

Figure 13. Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, 2019



Source: © Yonhap News.

Muscat, cannot afford because their ultimate strengths necessitated cooperation and coordination rather than obstruction and hindrance. What was clearer was that the alliance required a leader as it could not possibly operate like a hydra with six heads all vying for supremacy.

Indeed, if the Saudi-UAE Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC)—which was announced in December 2017 on the eve of the GCC Kuwait Summit that failed to resolve pending disputes—were to gain momentum and cover “all military, political, economic, trade and cultural fields, as well as others, in the interest of the two countries,” other GCC member-states may well be isolated on the Arabian Peninsula.²⁴⁹ To be sure, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi cooperated along several venues and their forces were deployed

249. Mosaed al-Zayani, “UAE President Orders Joint Cooperation Committee with KSA,” *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 5 December 2017, at <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1104051/uae-president-orders-joint-cooperation-committee-ksa>.

Muslim worlds as little more than benign intrusions that truly meant well.²⁶¹ Was Iran a threat and, in the affirmative, what were its objectives?

Iran was a country with which all regional states intended to co-exist in peace on account of good neighborliness. The revolutionary regime was, however, something else. When pro-Iranian elements affiliated with the Islamic State apparently attacked the 'Ali bin Abi Talib Mosque near Qadhih [close to al-Qatif] in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on 23 May 2015, 21 worshippers were killed and over 100 were injured, some severely.²⁶² Livid at the loss of life, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman instructed then Heir Apparent and Minister of the Interior Muhammad bin Nayif, to impose the harshest penalty on those who allegedly plotted, supported, cooperated, executed, or even sympathized with the criminals. At the time, many wondered who stood to gain from this latest atrocity? According to the Interior Ministry spokesman, Major General Mansur al-Turki, preliminary investigation results revealed that the "Islamic State" was the guilty party, although another Saudi officer, Brigadier General Bassam 'Attiyah, affirmed that these operatives worked on dividing the Kingdom along geographical, sectarian and economic lines. Naturally, while 'Attiyah advanced the notion that the "Islamic State" harbored three clear objectives—target security personnel, incite sectarian strife and kill foreigners—presumably to spread chaos, it was amply evident that a marginal terrorist organization was not the ultimate decision-maker on the matter. In fact, the two officers provided details on several recently arrested operatives, and linked them with organizations operating out of Syria and Iran.

Targeting Saudi interests was nothing new, though Tehran customarily relied on its

261. Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat and Jennifer Li, eds., "Arab Perceptions of the Iranian Threat," in *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2009, pp. 129-152. See also Rami Khoury, "The Real Threat to Arab Countries is from Within," *Agence Global*, 20 February 2016, at <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/real-threat-arab-countries-within>; and Mehrdad Khonsari, "Bullying Iran Will Not Work," *openDemocracy*, 10 December 2018, at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/mehrdad-khonsari/bullying-iran-will-not-work>.

262. "Qatif Attack 'Divisive Design'," *Arab News*, 23 May 2015, at <http://www.arabnews.com/featured/news/750391>.

militia clients like Hizballah in Lebanon or the Huthis in Yemen, to vent and strike. Over the years, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) representatives lashed out at Riyadh, accusing the Sa'udis for being "treacherous" and, an all-time favorite by any standard, for "following in Israel's footsteps" since they presumably were "Wahhabi-takfiri-sahyuni-amiriki" stooges [thus associating in their vivid imaginations Hanbali/Unitarians with extremists, Zionists and Americans]. In fact, the takfiri (apostasy), sahyuni (Zionist) and American epithets were used so often that Arab comedians delved into various compositions widely available on YouTube and other entertainment channels. Beyond the comical, however, Tehran perceived Saudi Arabia's reinvigorated "will-to-power,"—which *The Economist* of London correctly identified as "uncharacteristic boldness" that transformed the Kingdom into "the leading force in the Arab world,"—as a potential source of aggression that demanded tough Iranian responses that, unfortunately, was bound to raise tensions.²⁶³

Indeed, the IRGC's Major General Muhammad 'Ali Ja'afari regularly lashed out at Saudi Arabia, and Hizballah deputy secretary-general Na'im Qasim often warned that Riyadh would "incur very serious losses" and "pay a heavy price" for its Yemen campaign. Extremist Shi'ah clerics and Persian or pro-Persian commentators galore added to a long list of threats that, under the circumstances, were perfect excuses for continued warfare. Of course, the most renowned character who wrote a few scripts of his own was the IRGC Quds [Qods in the Farsi translation] Force commander Qasim Sulaymani [Qasem Soleimani], whose frequent Damascus, Baghdad and Moscow excursions took on folkloric features. Sulaymani deployed in Syria, conducted incredibly sophisticated battles, instructed Hizballah and Syrian Arab Army operatives, and left for Baghdad after divine victories. In Iraq, he engaged the enemy in Tikrit, led armies, liberated cities, cajoled tired devotees, and otherwise prepared for his next accomplishments somewhere on the planet. In Moscow, he negotiated with the

263. "The New Saudis: Chaos in the Middle East Casts Saudi Arabia as the Arab world's Leader. But it Must Reform Faster," *The Economist*, 21 May 2015, at <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2015/05/21/the-new-saudis>.

in Yemen, but what was intriguing was the speed with which the JCC ushered in political coordination. In fact, the first session of the JCC was held in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia on 6 June 2018, jointly chaired by heir apparents Muhammad bin Salman and Muhammad bin Zayid. Press reports revealed that the two countries may have identified at least sixty projects they planned to tackle together over the next five years. Interestingly, the Kingdom set up a separate bilateral coordination council with Kuwait, with the agreement signed on 18 July 2018 by Shaykh Sabah al-Khalid Al Sabah and 'Adil al-Jubayr, respectively the foreign ministers of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. While plans for this council remained somewhat vague, the brilliant Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah read the "tea leaves" rather well. The Kuwaiti ruler understood that an alliance needed a single leader, one that defended the institution and all its member-states, without exception, but only when there was unity. He comprehended that Riyadh was ready to foster regional multilateralism but would use short-term bilateralism to seal a new multilateral GCC without the Shaykhdom of Qatar if necessary.²⁵⁰

This was a remarkable new development and a significant departure from past policies, but reasonable on ideological grounds and few ought to be surprised when an even more ambitious GCC Union would be created before long. Indeed, and as discussed in detail elsewhere, the GCC was slowly but surely moving towards full-scale union as initially proposed by the late Saudi monarch, 'Abdallah bin 'Abdul 'Aziz in 2011, and which would require teamwork around foreign, defense, as well as economic policies.²⁵¹ If the smaller GCC member-states feared Saudi dominance of the alliance in the past, few could afford to prevent full political integration especially as the entire Arabian Peninsula—indeed, the entire Arab World—confronted an ideological foe. Even the Sultanate of Oman, whose ruler held on to his country's independence, was no longer predisposed to drag its feet on joint initiatives or simply pull out of them. To be sure, Oman was not anxious to embark on what it perceived as regional adventurism, but few in Muscat had any illusions as to which direction the GCC was headed. The Sultanate preferred to retain its formidable negotiating skills, but the GCC was no longer confronted with simple challenges that could be addressed within a family gathering.

250. "Saudi Arabia, Kuwait Sign Minutes to Establish Coordination Council," *Saudi Gazette*, 18 September 2018, at <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/539335/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Arabia-Kuwait-sign-minutes-to-establish-coordination-council>.

251. Joseph A. Kéchichian, *From Alliance to Union: Challenges Facing Gulf Cooperation Council States in the Twenty-First Century*, Brighton, Chicago, Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2016, pp. 259-260.

If Oman withstood the pressure of a common currency in 2006, or if the United Arab Emirates pulled out of the same project in 2009 because the Gulf Central Bank was scheduled for the Saudi capital, what only mattered after 2017 was political cohesiveness and core economic interests that served member-states in full.²⁵²

Although King Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz invited Shaykh Tammim bin Hamid Al Thani to attend the 39th Summit held in Riyadh on 10 December 2018, the Qatari delegation was headed by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Sultan bin Sa'ad Al Muraykhi. In the event, summiteers failed to resolve their differences but Doha, which had earlier expressed its decision to withdraw from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), remained a GCC member-state.²⁵³ For some analysts, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had already "cast aside the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) by choosing to isolate Qatar as punishment for Doha's support for the Muslim Brotherhood and openness to dealing with Tehran," though others saw the crisis as a temporary political glitch.²⁵⁴ There was an element of truth that Riyadh dismissed American pleas for a rapprochement between its Gulf allies but the reason for such emancipation was directly tied with the accumulated evidence of Qatari support to various extremist

252. Critics of the GCC pointed to the most recent accord to introduce a value-added tax (VAT) across the bloc in January 2018 and how the mechanism was ignored by most member-states as a further illustration of internal schisms. Indeed, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia were the first two countries to meet the deadline and while several other countries argued that VAT would increase inflation at a time when local economies were under pressure, the agreement authorized members to adopt the system at their own paces. To read more sinister motivations into putative delays were comical though not surprising. See Suparna Dutt D'Cunha, "UAE and Saudi Arabia End Tax-Free Living, Roll Out 5% VAT as Oil Revenue Slump," *Forbes*, 1 January 2018, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/suparnadutt/2018/01/01/uae-and-saudi-arabia-end-tax-free-living-roll-out-5-vat-as-oil-revenue-slump/#1a0617e12021>.

253. "Qatar Decides to Leave OPEC: The decision is more about the Gulf's troubled politics than oil prices," *The Economist*, 3 December 2018, at <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/12/03/qatar-decides-to-leave-opec>. See also "GCC Summit Ends Without Roadmap to Resolve Ongoing Crisis," *Al-Jazeera*, 10 December 2018, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/gcc-summit-ends-roadmap-resolve-ongoing-crisis-181210074639694.html>.

254. International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Muhammad bin Salman and the New Saudi Arabia," *Strategic Comments* 24:39, December 2018, at <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2018/muhammad-bin-salman-and-the-new-saudi-arabia>.

groups, which Saudi Arabia feared at its very core. Whether King Salman harbored a stubborn position or not was a secondary concern because he, as the ruler of the Kingdom, could not possibly tolerate Muslim Brotherhood extremism or perceive them as the work of boy-scouts. Likewise, it would be a breach of responsibility for Riyadh to glint at Muslim Brotherhood sponsors, most notably Qatar, since doing so would not—and did not as of this writing—downgrade the GCC’s importance or rendered it irrelevant. On the contrary, the patient decision simply displayed resolve, something that Kuwait and Oman backed as they counseled reconciliation, since all GCC States, including Qatar, faced the wrath of a major regional foe.

The GCC Defense Challenge

Notwithstanding the myriad problems confronted by the GCC as a security alliance, “new developments showed that over the long run there was a likelihood of a strategic response to the stalemate in Yemen and to other Iran-related problems in the form of an upgrading of the scattered and divided Arab coalition into a formal and organized infrastructure similar to NATO.”²⁵⁵ In addition to tackling serious ideological challenges, GCC allies have tried military cooperation, even if past endeavors did not produce stellar results. A military wing of the GCC, called the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), was set up on 1984, though it was not sufficiently developed to take part in the campaign to push Iraq out of Kuwait following the 1990 invasion, nor to engage in subsequent campaigns. A contingent of PSF troops was sent into Bahrain in 2011 to quash pro-democracy demonstrations, however, but that was a Saudi decision in the first instance, seconded by Kuwait City and Abu Dhabi that deployed troops as well. Under President Barack Obama, the United States maintained that it wished to encourage the GCC to act as a single unit when it came to military matters, particularly in areas such as maritime security and missile defense, which was a good omen though the follow-up was lukewarm at best. Washington made clear its preference for a multilateral Gulf security architecture during the United States–Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Cooperation Forum in Riyadh in 2012, but ultimately there was little to show for from such discussions. Subsequent talk of a unified military command lingered. The new Saudi Minister of Defense, Muhammad bin Salman, was determined to see the process

255. Irina Tsukerman, “Towards an Arab NATO?,” *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 907*, 27 July 2018, at <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/arab-nato/>.

through, however.

During the first two years of his term, President Donald Trump contributed to the splits in the GCC, which confused local officials far more than they enlightened, especially after the White House first backed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the dispute with Qatar. Trump reversed himself and called on all sides to resolve their differences but his efforts to convene a GCC Summit in the United States came to naught as of this writing in mid-2019. It was thus critical to ask whether the GCC as an organization could survive the current period of regional upheavals without the guidance of a leader, presumably Saudi Arabia because of the latter’s intrinsic capabilities, or continue to rely on others to do what clearly needed to be accomplished by the Arab Gulf States themselves. Nowhere was this more evident than in the war for Yemen that upset the balance of power on the Arabian Peninsula.

The War for Yemen

A painful chapter in contemporary Arab history, the long-standing Yemeni Civil War took on a particularly tragic turn in 2015 after two factions emerged, each claiming to constitute the legitimate government, even if Huthi rebel forces that controlled the capital city of Sana’a and its suburbs, did not win an electoral contest. Home to the al-Qa’idah in the Arabian Peninsula and some so-called “Islamic State” operatives, Sana’a was isolated after 2011, when the Yemenis were only left with the GCC countries to rescue them from Huthi rebels that wished to rule with impunity with Iranian backing.²⁵⁶ Tehran send arms but failed to include any food in its generous packages, and it fell on GCC leaders to propose a mechanism to resolve the crisis that enveloped the Yemen, as well as bring the raging civil war to an end. Regrettably, the war barely ended when the Iranian-backed Huthi coup occurred, making the intervention of the Saudi-led Gulf coalition inevitable in order to prevent the transformation of Yemen into another Somalia.²⁵⁷ Huthis occupied Sana’a in March 2015 when the Supreme Revolutionary

256. For background details on the most recent developments, see Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-Liberalism and the Disintegration of a State*, London: Saqi Books, 2017, and Asher Orkady, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962-68*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

257. Emile Hokayem and David B. Roberts, “The War in Yemen,” *Survival* 58:6, November 2016, pp. 157-186.

Committee declared a general mobilization to overthrow President ‘Abid Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi in an offensive that grouped military forces loyal to former President ‘Ali ‘Abdallah Salih. It was not long before Huthis scored net gains, which forced al-Hadi to flee the country, with promises for a complete meltdown of authority that would see Iran secure its long cherished foothold on the Arabian Peninsula. A coalition led by Saudi Arabia and fully backed by the United States and leading Western powers launched military operations against Huthi forces to restore the al-Hadi Government. According to United Nations sources, an estimated 8,670 to 13,600 people were killed in Yemen from March 2015 to December 2017, of whom at least 5,200 were civilians, many of whom children. By late 2018, casualty figures stood at nearly 60,000—according to Andrea Carboni, a researcher on Yemen for the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), at least 57,538 people (civilians and combatants) were killed between 2016 and late 2018—though many of these casualties were the victims of malnutrition and diseases like malaria and typhoid.²⁵⁸ Thousands more were wounded and, in the aftermath of reports that the war resulted in famine, efforts were launched to meet humanitarian needs as best as possible. Leading countries sharply condemned the Saudi-led intervention, though few had the courage or the wherewithal to find any responsibility to the Iranian-armed Huthis, which routinely lobbed rockets on the Kingdom. Few commentators addressed the Huthi threat to the Yemen during the last three-and-a-half years and even fewer elaborated on the reasons why Iran seldom offered to reach a cease-fire or contemplate a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In reality, it was amply clear that Tehran threatened regional security and stability, and actually benefitted from the war as the latter allowed it to continue its interferences in Arab affairs. No commentaries appeared to condemn Huthi attacks on ships and navigation routes as well as the booby traps set in Yemeni waters. Huthi attacks on Saudi oil tankers barely registered, even if the acts were brazen displays of Iran’s oft-repeated threats to shut down strategic waterways, whether Bab al-Mandib or the Straits of Hormuz.

258. See Lee Keath, “Civilian Death Toll in Yemen Mounting Despite US Assurances,” *Associated Press*, 10 November 2018, at <https://www.apnews.com/24ee4b33373a41d389e2599c5aa7bbfa>. See also, Patrick Cockburn, “Yemen War: At Least Six Times as Many Killed in Conflict than Previously Thought, Report Says,” *The Independent*, 11 December 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yemen-war-death-toll-saudi-arabia-coalition-military-assistance-uk-a8678376.html>.

Irrespective of these threats, it was amply clear that Riyadh was not about the roll-over and play dead, and it was not willing to allow Tehran to strengthen its military presence anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula. King Salman and his heir were determined to assume their responsibilities and fulfill their duties towards the international community by guaranteeing safe passages through vital waterways. Of course, while GCC States were mired in a prolonged war, it was unconscionable to even contemplate a Huthi victory. In the words of a leading Arab Gulf editorialist, world leaders were called upon to revert their views of Saudi Arabia regarding “the serious threats hurled by Huthi militants backed by the foremost world-branded terrorist nation—Iran.”²⁵⁹

Ties with Iran and the Threat from the Revolution

It was very difficult to see how a sorely needed dialogue with Revolutionary Iran could be held when Tehran seemed determined to interfere in Arab affairs—and against the wishes of the overwhelming majority of Arabs—all to secure its unhindered hegemonic aspirations. Still, it was worth remembering the words of the late Prince Sa‘ud al-Faysal—who served four monarchs as Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1975 and 2015—when he placed his finger on the wound as he declared: “We do not cherish war, but if we are threatened, we will rise to the occasion.”²⁶⁰ Ever the consummate diplomat, Sa‘ud al-Faysal weighed the consequences of the sustained Iranian incursions throughout the Arab world, something the new heir apparent was equally cognizant of as Muhammad bin Salman pledged to take the war to Iran if need be. In a moment of candor, he affirmed that the country’s weapons were not meant to display during military parades but to defend the country’s national security interests, something that was perfectly logical to uphold and defend the Kingdom’s sovereignty. Skeptics doubted that Iran threatened Saudi Arabia and pretended that Tehran wished to live in harmony with its neighbors. Some perceived violent Iranian incursions throughout the Arab and

259. Ahmed Al-Jarallah, “Saudi and Gulf Position to Wake the World from its Slumber,” *The Arab Times* [Kuwait], 28 July 2018, at <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/saudi-and-gulf-position-to-wake-the-world-from-its-slumber/>.

260. ‘Abd al-Khaliq ‘Abdallah, Lahzat al-Khalij, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

Russian President and his associates, as if he were a head-of-state.²⁶⁴

Sulaymani was not the first such “traveller” and, lest we forget, ‘Ayatallah Ruhallah Khomeini wrote extensively against the very institution of monarchy. He also authorized Iranian pilgrims to repeatedly demonstrate in Makkah at the height of the annual pilgrimage [Hajj], ostensibly to liberate the holy city from usurpers, which redefined ugliness. Even if Khomeini did not directly call on anyone to storm the Makkah Mosque, confrontations between Shi‘ah pilgrims and Saudi security forces became regular occurrences throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century.²⁶⁵ In early June 1984, Saudi F-15s shot down two American-built Iranian F-4 fighters near an islet named al-‘Arabiyah, about 60 miles northeast of Jubayl, to prevent an Iranian assault on ships inside Saudi territorial waters. When Tehran sent up 11 more F-4s, Riyadh put 11 F-15s into the air though the standoff ended after the Iranian fighters broke off and returned home. It was a useful lesson for all concerned and yet Iran continued to challenge Saudi Arabia.²⁶⁶ Regrettably, a stampede in Makkah killed more than 400 people in 1987 which further polarized radical Saudi Shi‘ahs and, in July 1989, two-dozen Saudi and Kuwaiti Shi‘ahs were arrested for smuggling weapons near

264. For some of Sulaymani’s achievements, see, Dexter Filkins, “The Shadow Commander: Qassem Suleimani is the Iranian Operative who has been Reshaping the Middle East. Now he’s Directing Assad’s War in Syria,” *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>. See also Joanna Paraszczuk, “Iran’s ‘Shadow Commander’ Steps Into the Light: Why is Tehran Waging a Public-Relations campaign on Behalf of the Formerly Secretive Qassem Suleimani?,” *The Atlantic*, 16 October 2014, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/irans-shadow-commander-steps-into-the-limelight/381558/>; and Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, “How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow,” *Reuters*, 6 October 2015, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>.

265. Fahad M. Alsultan and Pedram Saeid, *The Development of Saudi-Iranian Relations since the 1990s: Between Conflict and Accommodation*, Abingdon, Oxon, U.K.: Routledge, 2016.

266. Richard Halloran, “2 Iranian Fighters Reported Downed by Saudi Air Force,” *The New York Times*, 6 June 1984, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/06/world/2-iranian-fighters-reported-downed-by-saudi-air-force.html>. See also Horus, “1984: Saudi F-15s shot down Iranian F-4 Phantom II’s,” *Pakistan Defence*, 13 July 2013, at <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/1984-saudi-f-15s-shot-down-iranian-f-4-phantom-iis.263493/>.

the Holy Mosque, several of whom were tried, found guilty of terrorism, and executed.

Such responses mobilized extremists who then mounted the Khobar Towers bombing near the Dhahran Saudi ARAMCO headquarters in June 1996. Nineteen American servicemen were killed and nearly 500 individuals of various nationalities were wounded in that attack, and although the late King ‘Abdallah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz ushered in reconciliation initiatives, the die was cast. Over the course of several decades, Iran smuggled explosives into Saudi Arabia, conducted terrorist operations against Gulf targets, and otherwise embarked on anti-Arab Gulf policies to assert its hegemony. It confronted the United States directly in the Gulf and when Washington retaliated, Tehran went after pro-Western Arab Gulf governments, several of which opted to look the other way.

Until recently, that is, simply because every GCC peace initiative was met with fresh instigations. Whether Iranian leaders, especially the Supreme Leader Sayyid ‘Ali Husayni Khamana’i approved of these policies was impossible to know though common sense suggested that he did. Consequently, few Saudis and, for that matter, very few Arabs perceived Iranian intrusions in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere, as signs of Muslim solidarity with the *mustaz‘afin* [*mostazafin* in Persian], meaning the wretched or dispossessed. Rather, most Arabs (but not Hizballah’s Shaykh Na‘im Qasim) saw Iranian interventions in Arab affairs as unwelcome signs, even if in the Gulf, such prying was correctly seen as nothing more than salvos in Tehran’s long-running anti-monarchy outlook.

Iranian provocations continued after King Salman acceded the throne and on 10 May 2017, the Iranian Minister of Defense threatened to wipe Saudi Arabia off the map, if the latter ever got close to its borders.²⁶⁷ Although there was no evidence that Saudi Arabia planned to escalate regional tensions into an open confrontation with Iran, the Kingdom broke the regional stalemate and restored pride to Arabism when it included the firebrand Shi‘ah cleric Nimr al-Nimr among the 47 men executed on 2 January 2016. Iran responded by torching the Saudi embassy in Tehran and authorizing its

267. Rebecca Perring, “Iran Threatens to DESTROY Saudi Arabia over Kingdom’s Battle Warning,” *The Daily Express*, 8 May 2017, at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/801799/Iran-Saudi-Arabia-destroy-prince-battle-warning> [uppercase in original].

Lebanese ally Hassan Nasrallah to spew anti-Saudi venom—further isolated itself and, not a negligible point, highlighted its existential dilemma in dealing with Arab governments. Remarkably, analysts raised various objections including ulterior motives that presumably led Saudi authorities to carry out these executions at the time they did although, it is worth repeating, there was no evidence to imply foul play. Indeed, those executed, 43 Sunnis and 4 Shi'ahs, were tried and convicted for the murder of dozens of people in crimes committed between 2003 and 2014. Moreover, and as the last appeals court rendered its verdict in November 2015, the execution of Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr—whose inclusion raised objections—was not rushed through, and it certainly was not meant to add fuel onto the fire since most of the executed individuals were Sunnis.²⁶⁸

Whatever outrage the death of a convicted criminal generated ought not overlook that the man was a vociferous critic of the regime for decades, found refuge in Iran for many years, and was allowed to return to the Kingdom in 1992 after he accepted the monarch's pardon. In 2009, Nimr launched a full-fledged attack on senior members of the ruling family using excessively vile language, incited young Shi'ahs to rise against the state, and was involved in at least one case where he participated in an armed assault on police officers. There was an attempt to portray him as a leading scholar but that was not the case since he failed to publish any academic tomes, which was what learned clerics engaged in. In certain ways, Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr was best compared to 'Usamah bin Ladin, who was executed by the United States even if the latter never personally harmed a single American that we know of.

Of course, by virtue of its geography and human resources, Iran is and will remain a major regional power though Riyadh was resolute in its decision not to allow Tehran to determine the fate of the Arab World. Under the circumstances, what was one to make

268. For background, see "Saudi Arabia Executes Top Shia Cleric," *Reuters*, 2 January 2016, at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35213244>. See also Tracy McVeigh and Martin Chulov, "US Warns Saudi Arabia's Execution of Prominent Cleric Risks Inflaming Sectarian Tensions," *The Guardian*, 2 January 2016, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/02/saudi-arabia-cleric-execution-unrest-predicted-shia-areas>; and Will Worley, "Iranian Supreme Leader Vows 'Divine Vengeance' on Saudi Arabian Politicians After Execution of Nimr al-Nimr," *The Independent*, 3 January 2016, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/nimr-al-nimr-execution-saudi-arabian-embassy-in-tehran-attacked-by-protesters-a6794271.html>.

of Saudi Arabia's decision to cut relations with Iran, and will the latest developments threaten stability on and around the Arabian Peninsula? To be sure, the decision to cut ties effectively meant that Riyadh exercised its "will-to-power" and, in a clear departure from past behavior, refused to kowtow to Iranian diktats in the region. That much was now certain, and while some may be reading Machiavellian initiatives to scuttle the American-led P5+1 accords with Iran over the latter's nuclear programs, in reality what surfaced was a clearer perspective on what Riyadh desired and how it planned to go about it over the next few decades.

This was the crux of the matter because Saudis traditionally kept a low profile on regional matters, relying on reconciliation and riyal-diplomacy to achieve their goals. Yet, many of those options lost value after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when the Islamic regime embarked on its anti-monarchical policies. Lest we forget, 'Ayatallah Ruhallah Khomeini and his successors repeatedly called for the overthrow of the Arab Gulf ruling families that, naturally, did not go over well. More recently, conditions deteriorated after the Arab "uprisings" and wars in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and elsewhere, all of which created new facts on the ground that saw steady gains for Tehran that, to no one's surprise, the Saudis rejected.

In fact, few should forget the words of men like 'Ali Riza Zakani, a member of the Iranian Majlis, who declared that "three Arab capitals [Baghdad, Beirut, and Damascus], have already fallen into Iran's hands and belong[ed] to the Iranian Islamic Revolution," a particularly troubling assumption that went beyond bravura.²⁶⁹ Even fewer should neglect what it meant to see a fourth Arab capital, Sana'a, fall under Iranian colonial rule. One wondered whether the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps under the command of General Qasim Sulaymani deployed the infamous Quds Force militia in Iraq and Syria to fight alongside the Nuri al-Maliki and Bashar al-Assad regimes were doing so for pure entertainment. What was Saudi Arabia supposed to do to check the rise of Iranian colonialism over the Arab world?

What Riyadh intended to do under King Salman's rule, and presumably that of his

269. Arash Reisinezhad, "Why Iran Needs to Dominate the Middle East," *The National Interest*, 10 April 2015, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-iran-needs-dominate-the-middle-east-12595>.

successor, was to deny Iran the right to impose its will on the Arab World. Riyadh said no and was likely to reject any Iranian hegemonic attempts. Consequently, Iran and Saudi Arabia risked confrontations, because one was determined to impose its revolution everywhere while the other believed in evolutionary reforms and rejected the hegemony of its neighbor. For its part, Tehran believed that an anti-Iran coalition was formed, with unlikely members including the United States, Israel and the GCC States. In fact, Saudi and Israeli officials demanded that Tehran be punished for propping up the Syrian government, developing ballistic missiles and funding separatists in Yemen. Even more problematic for Iran was the Turkish position that Tehran intended to push for Shi'ah Muslim power. Ankara joined the de facto front against Tehran as Riyadh rejected an appeal from Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif for Sunni Gulf Arab states to work with the revolutionary regime to reduce violence across the region. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, used especially harsh language as he criticized what he called an Iranian "sectarian policy" aimed at undermining Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, but that was in 2017. This was no idle chatter as Çavuşoğlu affirmed that his country was against all divisions, whether they happened to be religious or sectarian. He further informed his audience at the Munich Security Conference that Turkey was normalizing ties with Israel that send yet another signal that it was at odds with Iran.²⁷⁰ Notwithstanding such rhetoric, the Zarif calls for dialogue to address "anxieties" in the region fell on deaf ears, because GCC States, among others, no longer trusted Iran. Indeed, after international sanctions on Iran were lifted when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) came into effect in 2015, some were concerned that Tehran's actions to destabilise the Middle East would not stop. When Tehran tested ballistic missiles, "anxiety" increased exponentially.

It fell on the Saudi Foreign Minister 'Adil al-Jubayr to set the record straight when he identified Iran as the main sponsor of global terrorism and to act as a destabilizing force in the Middle East. "Iran remains the single main sponsor of terrorism in the world,"

270. "Turkey, Iran in Spat on Eve of Syria Talks," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 21 February 2017, at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-iran-in-spat-on-eve-of-syria-talks-109982>. See also Semih Idiz, "Turkish-Iranian Rivalry Hits Peak as Syria Talks Kick Off," *al-Monitor*, 22 February 2017, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/turkey-iran-rivalry-spills-over-with-angry-exchanges.html>; and "Zarif Dismayed at Turkish Belligerence," *Financial Tribune* [Iran], 26 February 2017, at <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/60362/zarif-dismayed-at-turkish-belligerence>.

al-Jubayr told delegates at the conference, as it seems to be determined, he clarified, "to upend the order in the Middle East ... (and) until and unless Iran changes its behavior it would be very difficult to deal with a country like this."²⁷¹ It was vintage al-Jubayr who hammered that the regime in Tehran "was propping up the government of President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war, funding the Huthis in Yemen and fomenting violence across the region." Zarif responded in kind as he dismissed any suggestions his country would ever seek to develop nuclear weapons, though the JCPOA deal demonstrated that that was the ultimate goal, which scared GCC neighbors. He denied that Iran was a state sponsor of terrorism, though arms smuggling to the Huthis in Yemen, to co-religionists in Bahrain, and through the Hizballah militia in both Lebanon and Syria, told a different story.²⁷²

Time will tell what will happen over the next few decades and whether the Trump Administration's tough positions on Iran will translate into a full-fledged review of the nuclear deal. Short of a complete re-write, there could be fresh sanctions and, equally important, the emergence of new alliances within the GCC arena. Still, and despite the fact that GCC states, led by Saudi Arabia, accused Iran of using sectarianism to interfere in internal Arab affairs, that constation was no longer a concept but an established reality. Even the Israeli Defense Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, said at Munich that Iran's ultimate objective was to undermine Riyadh, and called for a dialogue with Sunni Arab countries to defeat "radical" elements in the region, claiming that "the real division is not Jews, Muslims ... but moderate people versus radical people," Lieberman told delegates.²⁷³ What was crystal clear was the focus on Iran's isolation within the international arena.

Observers concluded that it was unlikely for the Iranian regime to stay in the nuclear

271. "Al-Jubeir: Iran is the Main Sponsor of Global Terror," *Reuters*, 19 February 2017, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/02/19/Al-Jubeir-Iran-is-the-main-sponsor-of-global-terror.htm>.

272. Ayhan Simsek, "Iranian FM in Munich Proposes Regional Dialogue Forum," *Anadolu Agency*, 18 February 2017, at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iranian-fm-in-munich-proposes-regional-dialogue-forum/75365>.

273. John Irish and Andrea Shalal, "Saudi Arabia, Israel Present De Facto United Front Against Iran," *Reuters*, 19 February 2017, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iran-idUSKB N15Y09R>.

deal now that the Trump Administration suspended its own participation and imposed fresh sanctions on Tehran. If it too were to withdraw from the deal, European powers may well advise Iran not to jeopardize recent gains by restarting its nuclear programs. As anticipated, the “nightmare scenario would be one in which the withdrawal of the US, coupled with the failure of the international community to salvage the deal, creates enough disappointment among Iranian officials and citizens that it boosts extremist voices in Iran pushing for emulation of North Korea by withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty” though, mercifully, this did not occur by mid-2019.²⁷⁴ Importantly, however, and as Washington withdrew from the JCPOA to unravel “the signature foreign policy achievement of his predecessor, Barack Obama,” Iran was bound to pay a heavy price.²⁷⁵ Not satisfied with these measures, the Trump Administration imposed heavy sanctions on Tehran, which genuinely hurt the Iranian population.²⁷⁶

What Saudi Arabia could not tolerate was for Iran to accelerate the restart of its nuclear and ballistic-missile programs with “an eye to building significant hedging capabilities, or even a deliverable bomb,” which would be in a “much stronger bargaining position vis-à-vis both the United States and regional actors such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.”²⁷⁷ Beyond temporary steps taken by the United States that favored Israel and, peripherally, Saudi Arabia, the long-term consequences of a reinvigorated Iran stood as ominous threats to the Kingdom and its partners. Consequently, few should be surprised that Riyadh would embark on a full-fledged nuclear program, when Tehran acquires a nuclear-weapons capability.

274. International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The Future of the JCPOA,” *Strategic Comments* 24:15, May 2018, at <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2018/jcpoa>.

275. “Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned,” *The New York Times*, 8 May 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

276. “Iran Sanctions Explained: U.S. Goals, and the View From Tehran,” *The New York Times*, 5 November 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/05/world/middleeast/iran-sanctions-explained.html>. See also Patrick Wintour, “Package to Stop ‘Destabilising Activities’ Falls Short of Aim to Cut off Tehran’s Oil Industry,” *The Guardian*, 5 November 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/05/iran-launches-military-drill-response-return-us-sanctions>; and Thomas Erdbrink, “Iran’s Economic Crisis Drags Down the Middle Class Almost Overnight,” *The New York Times*, 26 December, 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/26/world/middleeast/iran-middle-class-currency-inflation.html>.

277. IISS, *The Future of the JCPOA*, *op. cit.*

Chapter 4

The Consequences of the Khashoggi Affair

Disturbing Developments that Targeted Saudi Arabia

Objective Muhammad bin Salman

2 October 2018

The Khashoggi Assassination

The Mysterious Khashoggi

Chapter 4. The Consequences of the Khashoggi Affair

In a 16 November 2017 opinion essay published in the *New York Times*, the Algerian writer and journalist (and the author of the novel *The Meursault Investigation* that retells Albert Camus's renowned 1942 novel *The Stranger*), Kamel Daoud wondered what would happen to Islamists outside of Saudi Arabia at a time when the Kingdom was embarked on real reforms. He reported that an Algerian cartoonist known as *Le Hic* summarized the situation well, depicting the Saudi monarch as a targeted man, as he announced “his resolve to combat terrorism while pointing a gun at his own head.” Daoud believed that the “entire Saudi paradox was distilled into that cartoon: The country produces, sponsors, shelters and feeds the Islamism that threatens its foundations and its future,” he opined, even if there was much more to the story that the North African imagined.²⁷⁸

Daoud *dutifully* went through the familiar anti-“Wahhabi” litany in his essay, labeling the movement as “an ultra-puritanical and extreme version of Islam it called the original Islam,” criticized the 1744 alliance between the Al Sa‘ud and the Al al-Shaykh, and affirmed that “Wahhabism” was “one of the matrices of global jihadism today: an ideological and financial source of the Islamists’ power and their constellation of fundamentalist mosques, television networks dedicated to sermonizing, and various political parties throughout the Muslim world.”²⁷⁹ In short, Daoud stated that the Al Sa‘ud used the annual pilgrimage to play a power game, and who paid lip service to reforms that were literally “impossible” allegedly because the ruling family could not possibly “manage to reject the clergy’s support, stop the financing of fundamentalist networks[,] and bring about nothing short of several revolutions regarding social

rights.”²⁸⁰ He then delved into an assessment of Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman, whom he identified as the “iron prince,” someone who could solve the “Saudi problem” and, in doing so, impact changes elsewhere throughout the Arab and Muslim Worlds.

Putting aside Daoud’s vivid imagination that the heir apparent was “the product of an American injunction,” the Algerian nevertheless concluded that while some Islamists in his country feared an end to their financial empires, another camp—that of the “Muslim Brotherhood stripe ... close to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey”—was concerned that a more moderate Riyadh would literally replace other moderates and, in doing so, pull “the rug from under their feet.” In what was a prescient conclusion, Daoud opined that the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood/Turkish camp, “bereft of its familiar markers, may turn against the Saudi kingdom to claim a new kind of legitimacy—and wage a sort of holy war against the holy land.” This was, to say the least, an immensely meaningful assessment though few could foresee what would unravel less than a year later. In fact, and as discussed throughout this study, the anti-Muhammad bin Salman appraisals abounded, often overlooking concrete Saudi contributions to fight extremism in all their forms.

To be sure, references to how Prince Muhammad bin Salman aimed to implement transformative socio-economic changes—which were nothing less than drawing a new social contract between the Al Sa‘ud and the Saudi people—appeared in the press and specialized outlets, though always couched in disbelief. Instead, and according to several sources, what was openly acknowledged was that Saudi Arabia “contributed billions of dollars since the early 1970s to movements and governments in a dozen countries to further Western, anti-Marxist interests, often at the urging of the United States,” with “such contributions ... generously made because they advanced Saudi national security interests—opposing Communism, promoting stability in Muslim countries, and earning American support.”²⁸¹ These meant that “Riyadh and Washington were privileged partners that shared core geo-political values,” even if these exchanges were apparently

278. Kamel Daoud, “If Saudi Arabia Reforms, What Happens to Islamists Elsewhere?,” *The New York Times*, 16 November 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/16/opinion/saudi-arabia-reform-islamists.html>.

279. For details on Wahhabi traditions and the socio-political alliance between the Al Sa‘ud and the Al al-Shaykh, see Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

280. Daoud, *op. cit.*

281. Steven V. Roberts, Stephen Engelberg, and Jeff Gerth, “Prop For U.S. Policy: Secret Saudi Funds,” *The New York Times*, 21 June 1987, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/06/21/world/prop-for-us-policy-secret-saudi-funds.html>.

seldom “based on explicit quid pro quos, though a few officials wondered whether the Saudis might perceive their generosity differently.”²⁸² There was a general acknowledgment that mutual obligations existed, and that were significantly strengthened over the years, notwithstanding the 9/11 catastrophe that caught both sides by surprise. In short, it was believed and accepted that specific geo-political interests existed before King Salman acceded rulership, and which were bound to endure under his successors.²⁸³ Riyadh was a privileged partner for several nation-states, whose leaders cherished decades old and carefully fostered associations.

Disturbing Developments that Targeted Saudi Arabia

Notwithstanding such close ties, and for murky reasons that belied President Trump’s open support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the White House reacted negatively to the 23 September 2018 address made by Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman to commemorate the Kingdom’s National Day. At the time, the heir apparent described his pride in the achievements of the country that celebrated Riyadh’s positions within the global, Muslim and Arab arenas as a vehicle for peace and security. He reiterated the Kingdom’s steadfastness to uphold “principles of tolerant Islam, a religion of moderation, and in fighting extremism and terrorism,” and warned that no one would “be allowed to attack the sovereignty of the Kingdom or tamper with its security.”²⁸⁴ This was a reaction to a steady build-up of assessments that praised the heir apparent’s sweeping economic and cultural reforms but that lamented his lack of interest to

“liberalize” the country’s political system as if that was the sole measure for genuine reforms. Leading observers, including those with peripheral expertise in, or knowledge of, Arabian Peninsula affairs, concluded that the young leader “eliminated or silenced nearly all potential opposition to his rule, ... replaced the generals in charge of the war in Yemen and pushed ahead with his plans to privatize Saudi Arabia’s oil industry.”²⁸⁵ One deciphered these permutations as little more than the imposition of “a climate of fear in which even the tamest criticism of the government was labeled disloyal,” purged his rivals and created “what amounted to a cult of personality,” which “appeared designed to place on M.B.S. the entire burden of governing and to leave the country’s institutions enfeebled.”²⁸⁶ Dexter Filkins quoted an anonymous American official stating that the heir apparent’s “success at home convinced him he could get away with the things he did abroad,” adding: “M.B.S. has always had a combination of vision, hubris, and arrogance, all of which are now playing out. What troubles me about M.B.S. is,” the journalist concluded, “he learns from his successes, but not his failures. That’s the danger.”

This was neither particularly significant nor revelatory, as it reflected the appraisal of a commentator who based his own assessments on questionable views held by anonymous American officials, the likes of which fed broadcasters and correspondents with presumed privileged intelligence for decades. Nevertheless, and remarkably, such discourses tended to be cumulative and that built on minor crises that received more attention than they deserved.

One of the best illustrations for such a trifling predicament was the one that pitted Riyadh to Ottawa (briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 above) and that provided fodder to the public debate on Muhammad bin Salman. Indeed, the heir apparent’s national day declaration followed an open dispute with Canada after the latter’s Minister of Global Affairs Chrystia Freeland fell back on a poorly worded 3 August 2018 tweet even while the Kingdom’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, ‘Adil al-Jubayr, recognized an inherent right to Ottawa to criticize Riyadh about human rights or women rights. What Saudi authorities objected to were the poorly worded tweets that demanded the “immediate

282. *Ibid.*

283. Michael Pregent, “Saudi Arabia Is a Great American Ally: While Tehran continues to sow anti-American terrorism across the Middle East, Riyadh holds the key to regional stability. This is not the time to back away from the House of Saud,” *Foreign Policy*, 20 April 2016, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/20/saudi-arabia-is-a-great-american-ally-not-iran/>; Daniel L. Byman, “The U.S.-Saudi Arabia Counterterrorism Relationship,” The Brookings Institution, 24 May 2016, at <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-u-s-saudi-arabia-counterterrorism-relationship/>; and “Trump: US Needs Saudi Arabia In Fight Against Terrorism,” *Arab News*, 18 October 2018, at <https://www.eurasiareview.com/18102018-trump-us-needs-saudi-arabia-in-fight-against-terrorism/>.

284. “Saudi Crown Prince: We Will Not Allow Any Attack on Our Sovereignty,” *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 24 September 2018, at <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1405506/saudi-crown-prince-we-will-not-allow-any-attack-our-sovereignty>.

285. Dexter Filkins, “The Ascent,” *The New Yorker*, 9 April 2018, at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>. See also Steven A. Cook, “Mohammed bin Salman Is Weak, Weak, Weak,” *Foreign Policy*, 7 August 2018, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/07/mohammed-bin-salman-is-weak-weak-weak/>.

286. Filkins—The Ascent, *op. cit.*

release” of certain detainees. “What are we a banana republic?” chimed in al-Jubayr, adding: “Would any country accept this? No, we don’t. If you do this, you play into the hands of the extremists who are opposing our reform process.”²⁸⁷

In the event, Saudi Arabia expelled the Canadian ambassador to Riyadh after the spat, recalled its own ambassador from Ottawa, and froze all new business and investment transactions with the North American nation. Riyadh halted payments for some 10,000 Saudi students enrolled at Canadian universities and moved all Saudi scholarship students out of Canada, even if some exceptions were made. It also transferred an estimated 5,000 patients undergoing treatment there, determined to extract an official apology, though none were delivered by mid-2019. Saudi officials explained to their Canadian counterparts that several of the detainees faced espionage charges, with serious national security implications. Foreign Minister al-Jubayr clarified that several of the individuals in detention “were accused of taking money from governments, accused of recruiting people to obtain sensitive information from the government and passing it on to hostile powers, accused of raising money and providing it to people who are hostile to Saudi Arabia outside of Saudi Arabia.” He added: “Some of them were released, others will go to trial and the evidence will be revealed to the world. The Canadians knew that this was not about [human] rights. And for a Tweet to come out in this manner from our perspective is outrageous,” he concluded.²⁸⁸ At the time, few realized that a prominent Saudi dissident in Montreal collaborated with Jamal Khashoggi (see below) to launch a virtual war on the Kingdom and that Riyadh (and presumably Ottawa) was privy to some of the machinations concocted to further sully the country’s reputation and to isolate, even destroy, the heir apparent’s carefully crafted image in Western nation-states.²⁸⁹

The Chrystia Freeland tweet was soon eclipsed by the 22 September 2018 terrorist attack in Ahwaz, Iran, where shooters killed 25 people, including soldiers of the Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps along with civilian bystanders watching a military parade. Iran accused the United States and the Arab Gulf states and vowed revenge but, far more important, what stood out was this development’s cumulative effect on what appeared to be an openly anti-Muhammad bin Salman agenda.²⁹⁰ Tehran had previously alleged that Saudi Arabia supported separatist activities among Iran’s Arab minority population, though the Ahwaz killings rattled the regime. Heir apparent Muhammad bin Salman was virtually charged with conceiving or, at least, orchestrating this event too, as critics lambasted his harsh methods to punish opponents and, in the case of an extremist cleric, to even seek, the death penalty.²⁹¹

This strict call for the application of Shari’ah Law in the Salman Al-Awdah case, along with ongoing disputes with Iran and Qatar, rattled critics even more. A former CIA Middle East analyst pretended to link the dots and chimed that whomever criticized Saudi Arabia would pay a price, unaware that such reactions were exactly how world powers defended their respective national security interests, and conducted what passed for international relations in the twenty-first century. When the Trump Administration declined to get involved in the Canada-Saudi Arabia dispute—at a time when Washington sought to abandon the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement with Ottawa and Mexico City—and counseled Canadians to work out their differences with the Saudis, various eyebrows were raised regarding the Heir Apparent’s muscular style and Trump’s tolerance for such bravura, again, defining a cumulative anti-Muhammad bin Salman agenda.²⁹²

Objective Muhammad bin Salman

Beyond what government leaders or former CIA analysts whispered, several believed that Muhammad bin Salman was a *dangerous* man, ready to use the Kingdom’s vast

287. “We’re not a Banana Republic, Saudi FM Tells Canada,” *Arab News*, 27 September 2018, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1378551/saudi-arabia>.

288. Isobel Coleman, “A Conversation With Adel al-Jubeir,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 26 September 2018, at <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-adel-al-jubeir>.

289. “Saudi-Canadian Relations and the Arms Seal: A Guide to the Story So Far,” *The Globe and Mail*, 18 December 2018, at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-saudi-arabia-canada-arms-deal-explainer>.

290. “Iran’s Rouhani Fumes at US after Ahwaz Parade Attack,” *BBC News*, 23 September 2018, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45617800>.

291. Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia Seeks Death Penalty in Trial of Outspoken Cleric,” *The New York Times*, 4 September 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-salman-al-awda.html>.

292. Ashifa Kassam, “‘We Don’t Have a Single Friend’: Canada’s Saudi Spat Reveals Country is Alone,” *The Guardian*, 11 August 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/11/canada-saudi-arabia-support-us>.

wealth to punish critics and/or enemies, “both in his bare-knuckled diplomacy and on the battlefield in Yemen.” This gem of a quotation was attributed to Bruce Riedel who fancied himself as an insider with privileged intelligence of ruling family affairs and, obviously, of full mastery for what passed as White House concepts regarding the incumbent’s foreign policy preferences.²⁹³ Riedel linked another dot, this time expressing concerns over the Yemen War that, apparently, led to a reconsideration of ongoing weapons sales, though leading industrialized countries benefitted from such transactions and, equally important, actually documented how Iran was deeply involved in ongoing clashes there that more or less fashioned Washington’s (and London’s as well as Paris’s) reactions.²⁹⁴

This was a key development before the Khashoggi Affair preoccupied global chancelleries on an unprecedented level and that took on bizarre turns. When Spain, for example, announced that it would halt a modest arms deal—to sell 400 laser-guided bombs to Riyadh—with Saudi Arabia, allegedly because it disapproved of the Kingdom’s conduct of the war in Yemen, observers took notice. This was followed by Belgium that also blocked selected arms sales to Riyadh. Norway joined the fray as it stopped deals with the Kingdom, and announced that it was suspending arms sales to the UAE, after carrying out a “comprehensive assessment of the situation in Yemen.” Germany adopted similar decisions, as one wondered what truly motivated such steps, and whether leading European powers wished to overlook Iran’s activities in Yemen to display their disapproval of the Trump Administration’s openly anti-Iranian policies as discussed

293. Jonathan Broder, “Why Donald Trump and Mohammed Bin Salman Need Each Other, Even as U.S.-Saudi Relations Fray,” *Newsweek*, 30 August 2018, at <https://www.newsweek.com/2018/09/07/donald-trump-mohammed-bin-salman-need-each-other-1096324.html>.

294. Dominic Dudley, “Why More And More Countries Are Blocking Arms Sales To Saudi Arabia and the UAE,” *Forbes*, 7 September 2018, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2018/09/07/why-more-and-more-countries-are-blocking-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia-and-the-uae/#4911bb04580a>.

above (Chapter 3).²⁹⁵

To be sure, Washington, London and Paris were aware of the consequences that the Yemen conflict generated among their own populations. In fact, the growing opposition in Congress to arms sales to Riyadh and the provision of support to the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen, witnessed sharp spikes. Therefore, and barely a few weeks before the Khashoggi Affair took on the international community by storm, the focus was already on Muhammad bin Salman.

2 October 2018

Two significant developments occurred on 2 October 2018, one in Istanbul, Turkey, and the other in Southaven, Mississippi. Both highlighted severe misunderstandings that, at least to some analysts, were somewhat related. First, Jamal Khashoggi walked into his nation’s consulate in Istanbul and, second, when President Donald Trump delivered a devastating attack on the Al Sa’ud.

According to Jamal Khashoggi’s Turkish “fiancée,” Hatice Cengiz, the Saudi national entered the consulate at about 1:30 p.m. to obtain a document he needed to get married. A Turkish journalist with the TRT network, Turan Kışlakçı, who shared Khashoggi’s fears that he might be kidnapped and returned to Saudi Arabia if he ever visited the consulate, relayed this information. Strangely, this “knowledge” did not dissuade the Saudi journalist from embarking on what he presumably knew was a dangerous move, though he apparently took several other precautions. It was Kışlakçı who told the world that Khashoggi’s avowed criticisms of senior Al Sa’ud officials, including the heir apparent, proved to be so sensitive that his Saudi colleague was forced to leave the Kingdom. His wife had remained in Saudi Arabia though their separation had led to a

295. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Spain sold \$352m worth of weaponry to Riyadh between 2014 and 2017. That represented a fairly small fraction of the \$13.2bn in arms purchases by Saudi Arabia over that period. In the 2014-2017 period, the largest arms suppliers to Riyadh were the United States, with \$8.4bn worth of sales, followed by the United Kingdom (\$2.6bn) and France (\$475m). See Pieter D. Wezeman, “Saudi Arabia, Armaments and Conflict in the Middle East,” Solna, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 14 December 2018, at <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2018/saudi-arabia-armaments-and-conflict-middle-east>.

divorce and, according to early news reports, he wanted to remarry, this time Hatice Cengiz. It was that requirement that apparently necessitated his visit to the consulate in Istanbul, as he needed a document certifying that his previous marriage had in fact ended. Towards that end, he had made a surprise walk-in visit a week before his detention, although in the first few days after his disappearance, no one bothered to explain why he could not receive this document in Washington, D.C., where he resided, or in any other spot. Equally puzzling was Khashoggi's decision not only to leave his cellphone with Hatice Cengiz before walking into the facility, but also in giving her specific instructions to alert his friends, especially Turan Kışlakçı, if he did not return.²⁹⁶

It was Kışlakçı, the head of the Turkish-Arab Media Association and a fellow member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who contacted Yasin Atkay, an advisor to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and informed the world through Turkish television TRT what Turkish authorities told him: "make funeral preparations" as Khashoggi had been killed "in a barbaric way" and his body parts dismembered. It was Kışlakçı who used choice words, "detained," "missing," "vanished," and, on 6 October 2018, "killed." It was Kışlakçı who organized the first demonstrations on 4 October 2018 with photographs of Jamal Khashoggi in front of the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Though few realized it at the time, Turkish authorities had bugged the Saudi diplomatic mission and knew that the Saudi journalist was murdered. Interestingly, Turkish authorities informed Reuters that a 15-member Saudi team was sent to Turkey "specifically for the murder," and that the murder "was premeditated and the body was subsequently moved out of the consulate."²⁹⁷

At first, Saudi authorities denied that Jamal Khashoggi was murdered with Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman telling *Bloomberg's* Senior Executive Editor for Economics, Stephanie Flanders (and five other *Bloomberg* journalists at a royal compound in Riyadh) that he was "very keen to know what happened to him" and that Riyadh would coordinate "with the Turkish government to see what happened to

Jamal there."²⁹⁸ When pressed by *Bloomberg* that "he went into the Saudi consulate," Muhammad bin Salman responded that his "understanding is [that] he entered and he got out after a few minutes or [after] one hour." He added: "I'm not sure. We are investigating this through the foreign ministry to see exactly what happened at that time." When pressed further with the visiting journalists asking: "So he's not inside the consulate?," the heir apparent replied: "Yes, he's not inside," even if Turkish officials have said he was still inside.²⁹⁹ Naturally, and as he was briefed by his staff, Muhammad

Figure 14. Jamal Khashoggi



Source: © Shutterstock.

296. Ben Hubbard, "Journalist Detained in Saudi Consulate in Istanbul," *The New York Times*, 2 October 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/world/middleeast/journalist-saudi-consulate-istanbul.html>.

297. Orhan Coskun, "Exclusive: Turkish Police Believe Saudi Journalist Khashoggi Was Killed in Consulate—Sources," *Reuters*, 6 October 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-politics-dissident/exclusive-turkish-police-believe-saudi-journalist-khashoggi-was-killed-in-consulate-sources-idUSKCN1MG0HU>.

298. Stephanie Flanders, "Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Trump, Aramco, Arrests: Transcript," *Bloomberg*, 8 October 2018, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-05/saudi-crown-prince-discusses-trump-Aramco-arrests-transcript>.

299. *Ibid.*

bin Salman did not know that Khashoggi was dead when he spoke with *Bloomberg*, notwithstanding Erdoğan's theatrical performances asserting the contrary as the Turkish President launched various accusations. He expressed his readiness to cooperate with the Turkish government, which was invited to search the consulate's premises even if these were sovereign territory, because Riyadh had "nothing to hide." This was a major concession on his part and while later events allowed Turkish authorities to canvass the consulate, the murdered journalist's body was not recovered.

Although the major *Bloomberg* interview concentrated on economic concerns and touched on the murder, the heir apparent was also asked, point blank, about President Trump's epochal but eminently vulgar depiction that the Al Sa'ud would barely last two weeks in power without the backing of the United States military. This telling American declaration was vintage Trump, who tried to pile pressure on one of America's closest allies over the rising cost of oil, even before proper investigations were launched into the Khashoggi assassination. In fact, and speaking at a campaign rally in Southaven, Mississippi, for Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith on 2 October 2018, Trump told adoring fans—which reminded one of Roman circuses under the Emperor Nero—that he loved "the king, King Salman, but I said: 'King, we're protecting you. You might not be there for two weeks without us. You have to pay for your military, you have to pay'."³⁰⁰ Although the concern was about the price of crude oil prices, which was then at a four-year high, Trump used the mid-term elections excuse to repeat false claims that oil producers were "ripping off the rest of the world," and that Riyadh, in particular needed to increase its defense budget or face an uncertain future. Trump targeted the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries in general and Saudi Arabia in particular in numerous speeches he delivered over the years, but this was tactless as it insulted a sovereign nation-state, and its leaders. "OPEC nations are, as usual, ripping off the rest of the world and I don't like it," Trump said to his worshiping crowd, adding: "We defend many of these nations for nothing, and then they take advantage of us by giving us high oil prices. Not good. We want them to stop raising prices. We want them to start lowering prices and they must contribute substantially to military protection from

300. Tom Batchelor, "Trump Says Saudi Arabia's King Salman 'Would Not Last Two Weeks' Without US Support," *The Independent*, 3 October 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-saudi-arabia-king-us-military-support-mbs-salman-yemen-a8566556.html>.

now on."³⁰¹

Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz did not respond to Donald Trump but Prince Muhammad bin Salman told his *Bloomberg* interviewers that

"Saudi Arabia was there before the United States of America. It's [been] there since 1744, I believe more than 30 years before the United States of America. And I believe, and I'm sorry if anyone misunderstands that, but I believe President Obama, in his eight years, he worked against many of our agenda—not in Saudi Arabia, but also in the Middle East. And even though the US worked against our agenda we were able to protect our interests. And the end result is that we succeeded, and the United States of America under the leadership of President Obama failed, for example in Egypt. So Saudi Arabia needs something like around 2,000 years to maybe face some dangers. So I believe this is not accurate."³⁰²

When *Bloomberg* interviewers sought clarification about President Trump's insistence that the Kingdom should pay more for its security, the heir apparent added:

"Actually we will pay nothing for our security. We believe that all the armaments we have from the United States of America are paid for, it's not free armament. So ever since the relationship started between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America, we've bought everything with money. Before two years ago, we had a strategy to shift most of our armament to other countries, but when President Trump became president, we've changed our armament strategy again for the next 10 years to put more than 60 percent with the United States of America. That's why we've created the \$400 billion in opportunities, armaments and investment opportunities, and other trade opportunities. So this is a good achievement for President Trump, for Saudi Arabia. Also included in these agreements are that part of these armaments will be manufactured in Saudi Arabia, so it will create jobs in America and Saudi Arabia, good trade, good benefits for both countries

301. *Ibid.*

302. *Ibid.* How many lower-ranking but critical decision-makers throughout the bureaucracy perceived such an open statement was difficult to know, though few should doubt that most disapproved, and certainly factored their perspectives in any responses they might be called upon to deliver to various superiors.

and also good economic growth. Plus, it will help our security.”

What was bizarre in these exchanges was Trump’s ignorance of close military ties between the two countries, including in vital counter-terrorism operations against a slew of enemies over the years and, equally important, in actual arms sales and training programs that benefitted the United States to a far greater extent than successive American administrations acknowledged.³⁰³ Even more unaware of his own Mississippi declaration was Trump’s own 2017 deals reached at the Riyadh Summit, when both countries agreed to increase cooperation on maritime security, military preparedness, arms transfers, and cyber security. In fact, Trump cherished his close relationship with Saudi Arabia, which he viewed as a bulwark against Iran’s ambitions in the region.

Approximately ten days after the murder, a noticeable shift occurred in the extensive coverage, concentrating on Prince Muhammad bin Salman who, long before any investigations were completed or any trials were held either in Turkey or in Saudi Arabia, was fingered as the culprit. Overanxious commentators like Patrick Cockburn, for example, opined that Trump opted to humiliate Riyadh in his puerile Mississippi rally precisely to highlight Al Sa’ud fragility and, as far as Muhammad bin Salman was concerned, to exploit the Khashoggi death to harm the Kingdom and its leaders. Washington, and according to Cockburn, just about everyone else that truly mattered—read Westerners—drew-up a long list of impressive (but of the entirely alleged variety) failures attributed to Muhammad bin Salman, ranging from the “Saudi-led bombing in Yemen since 2015 ... [that] has produced the greatest manmade famine on earth; increased help for the Syrian armed opposition the same year [that] provoked Russian military intervention and has brought President Bashar al-Assad close to victory; the quarrel with Qatar [that] has weakened all the Gulf monarchies; confrontation with Iran [in] a conflict that can never be won,” leaving out much more to economize on

303. For a comprehensive examination of American-Saudi military ties, see the encyclopedic work that Anthony H. Cordesman produced over the years. See, especially, Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: National Security in a Troubled Region*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger (for the Center for Strategic and International Studies), 2009; Idem, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic, and Energy Dimensions* (Volume 1), Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003; and Idem, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Military and International Security Dimensions* (Volume 2), Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003.

what passed for analysis.³⁰⁴ Cockburn and others of course specialized in hyperbole but pretended to be objective Stewarts of history.

Interestingly, and within two weeks of his witty verbal assault, Trump changed his tune—as he habitually did on just about everything—and said that while he was concerned about Jamal Khashoggi’s disappearance, he quickly added that no one knew what actually happened. “Right now nobody knows anything about it, but there’s some pretty bad stories going around. I do not like it,” he added. Heather Nauert, the State Department spokeswoman reiterated that the United States was “not in a position to confirm” various reports and claims made by Turkish authorities.³⁰⁵ Even if Agnès Callamard, the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary executions at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, issued a highly controversial report on the Khashoggi affair in June 2019—in which she stated that Saudi Arabia was responsible for “premeditated execution”—her accusations were quickly dismissed as well.³⁰⁶ While some believed that she presented credible evidence, the fact of the matter was that the case was in front of Saudi judges, who were the only relevant authorities to adjudicate the case. Interestingly, Callamard relied mostly on

304. Patrick Cockburn, “How the Disappearance of a Journalist and a Humiliating Remark by Trump Shows Saudi Arabia’s Weakness,” *The Independent*, 5 October 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/saudi-arabia-missing-journalist-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-trump-jamal-khashoggi-a8570451.html>.

305. Anne Gearan, “President Says He Is ‘Concerned’ About Missing Saudi Journalist,” *The Washington Post*, 8 October 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/president-says-he-is-concerned-about-missing-saudi-journalist/2018/10/08/28a1a8c2-cb1a-11e8-a360-85875bac0b1f_story.html.

306. *Annex to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions: Investigation into the unlawful death of Mr. Jamal Khashoggi*, United Nations, Human Rights Council, Forty-first session, A/HRC/41/CRP.1, Geneva: United Nations, 18 June 2019, at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24713&LangID=E>. See Nick Hopkins and Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “Credible Evidence—Saudi Crown Prince liable for Khashoggi Killing – UN Report,” *The Guardian*, 19 June 2019, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/19/jamal-khashoggi-killing-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-evidence-un-report>. For a response from the Kingdom, see “Saudi Human Rights Commission Slams ‘Biased’ UN Report on Khashoggi Case,” *Arab News*, 22 June 2019, at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1514676/saudi-arabia>.

Turkish intelligence sources—without revealing that she earned a Masters degree from Başkent University that may have colored her impartiality—and while she did not dare criticize presidents Trump, Putin, Xi-Jinping and others for holding important meetings with Muhammad bin Salman at the 2019 G20 Osaka gathering, she found her victim in the Dutch Queen Maxima, who was not shaken by the disparagement.³⁰⁷

The Khashoggi Assassination

Although several journalists were killed between 1 January and 2 October 2018, and while the head of the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), Meng Hongwei disappeared in his native China on 25 September 2018, media sources more

307. “Dutch Queen Criticized Over Meeting with Saudi Prince,” *Reuters*, 29 June 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netherlands-queen-saudi/dutch-queen-criticized-over-meeting-with-saudi-prince-idUSKCN1TU0P8>.

or less focused on the mysteries surrounding Jamal Khashoggi’s death.³⁰⁸ While the intention here is not to compare China and Saudi Arabia—because one is a global power while the other is a regional entity—it was and is critical to mention Meng Hongwei precisely to focus on Western reactions to his presumed death. Surely Meng

308. It was truly surprising that so little attention was devoted to Mr. Meng Hongwei’s disappearance, given his prominent global position, though the alleged culprit in this instance was China, not Saudi Arabia. Few dared criticize Beijing and even fewer restrained themselves from launching blatant accusations against the Kingdom before having all the facts at hand. See Colin Drury, “Missing Interpol Chief Meng Hongwei Might Already be Dead, Wife Fears,” *The Independent*, 19 October 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/meng-hongwei-interpol-missing-china-france-disappearance-a8591811.html>. On 24 April 2019, Beijing revealed that prosecutors “decided to arrest Meng Hongwei on suspicion of accepting bribes” and, shortly thereafter, informed all concerned that Meng Hongwei has pleaded guilty for accepting bribes of over 14.5 million yuan, or \$2.11 million dollars. See AFP, “China Formally Arrests Ex-Interpol Chief,” *Sino Daily*, 24 April 2019, at http://www.sinodaily.com/reports/China_formally_arrests_ex-Interpol_chief_999.html. See also “Former Interpol Chief Admits Guilt in Chinese Court Hearing,” *Reuters*, 19 June 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-interpol/former-interpol-chief-admits-guilt-in-chinese-court-hearing-idUSKCN1TL0DQ>.

Likewise, no leading commentator bothered to lament the assassination of Javier Valdez, a prominent Mexican investigative reporter, who was shot dead in that hapless country’s ongoing slaughterhouse of journalists. No one accused Mexico City or prominent leaders there of collusion as was the case with Saudi Arabia. See “A Journalist Was Killed in Mexico. Then His Colleagues Were Hacked,” *The New York Times*, 27 November 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/world/americas/mexico-spyware-journalist.html>. It was worth noting that between 1 January and 22 September 2018, 8 journalists were killed in Mexico, with the 9th, El Heraldo de Chiapas reporter Mario Gomez—whose name is recorded here to at least give him as much attention as to that devoted to Jamal Khashoggi—coming on 22 September. See Agence France-Presse, “Journalist Murdered in Mexico, 9th in 2018,” 22 September 2018, at <https://www.rappler.com/world/regions/latin-america/212554-journalist-mario-gomez-murdered-in-mexico>. The story of the assassinated Mexican journalists disappeared from the front pages of *The New York Times* twenty-four hours after it was first reported, although it was comically replaced on 29 November 2018 with a dramatic improvement in US-Mexican ties. See also, Associated Press, “Journalist Death Toll: Retaliation Killings Nearly Double in 2018: Number of journalists killed worldwide died in retaliation killings rose to 34, says report,” *The Guardian*, 19 December 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/dec/19/journalists-death-toll-nearly-doubles-in-2018>.

Hongwei deserved as much attention as Jamal Khashoggi though he did not get much. To be sure, Western commentators sometimes asked solid questions but, more often than not, they merely relayed hearsay and, in the case of Jamal Khashoggi, peddled scuttlebutt stories made by dubious Turkish sources. In fact, unverified claims were repeated so often that one wondered what motivated this thirst, which picked up speed throughout October and most of November, before tired journalists led their guards down and delved on the even more mysterious guilt by association clauses that Muhammad bin Salman was behind the assassination.

One of the first to draw his guns was Thomas L. Friedman, *The New York Times* columnist who had used vile language at a Brookings Institution Saban Forum on 6 October 2017, when he ostensibly defended the reforms introduced by Muhammad bin Salman, but who now wished to “pray” for Jamal.³⁰⁹ Friedman recalled his 7 November 2017 column about Muhammad bin Salman and how he praised the heir apparent using Khashoggi’s own words, stating: “As a veteran Saudi journalist remarked to me of M.B.S.: ‘This guy saved Saudi Arabia from a slow death, but he needs to broaden his base. It is good that he is freeing the house of Saud of the influence of the clergy, but he is also not allowing any second opinion of his political and economic decisions’.”³¹⁰ Based on such an assessment, Friedman was even more troubled that the heir apparent would risk his reform programs, though he accepted Khashoggi’s declaration that the young official “had a dark side [that] was completely taking over,” especially when the Saudi asked the American journalist to “ring an alarm bell about the increasingly harsh crackdowns and the arrests of critics,” were he not to return from Turkey. Friedman concluded that Muhammad bin Salman “had undertaken a series of ill-considered steps that were hurting him, Saudi Arabia,” and the United States, urging Riyadh to display “more soft power, less bullying.” Moreover, he underscored, “If Jamal has been abducted or murdered by agents of the Saudi government, it will be a disaster

309. For the Brookings performance, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phQuw9IGvLc&feature=youtu.be&t=138>. See also “Praying for Jamal Khashoggi: Saudi Arabia Stands Accused of Killing Him. If it Did, it Will be a Disaster for the Regime of Mohammed bin Salman,” *The New York Times*, 8 October 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/08/opinion/jamal-khashoggi-missing-saudi-journalist.html>.

310. Thomas L. Friedman, “Attention: Saudi Prince in a Hurry: Are We Witnessing Reform or a Coup d’État?,” *The New York Times*, 7 October 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/opinion/saudi-prince-reform-coup.html>.

for M.B.S. and a tragedy for Saudi Arabia and all the Arab Gulf countries. It would be an unfathomable violation of norms of human decency, worse not in numbers but in principle than even the Yemen war. What Western leader, and how many Western investors, will want to stand alongside M.B.S. if it is proved that his government abducted or murdered Jamal?” adding: “So I am praying for Jamal. ... M.B.S. should be praying for him as well.” It was unclear whether Friedman prayed for Javier Valdez, Mario Gomez, or any number of Turkish journalists, or whether he bothered to ring alarm bells about Meng Hongwei.

In the event, the focus of the search for Jamal Khashoggi took on a dramatically different direction, within a short period of time. On 11 October 2018, *The Washington Post* revealed that U.S. intelligence intercepts pointed to the heir apparent as the person who “ordered an operation to lure ... Khashoggi back to Saudi Arabia from his home in Virginia and then detain him.”³¹¹ Interestingly, this “intelligence” was “another piece of evidence implicating the Saudi regime in Khashoggi’s disappearance,” although the writer of this report added that “Turkish officials” claimed that a “Saudi security team lay in wait for the journalist and killed him.” The Post’s source was a former U.S. intelligence official who “noted that the details of the operation, which involved sending two teams totaling 15 men, in two private aircraft arriving and departing Turkey at different times, bore the hallmarks of a ‘rendition,’ in which someone is extra legally removed from one country and deposited for interrogation in another.” Presumably, earlier intercepts that highlighted the rendition project forewarned Washington, though it was unclear why Trump Administration officials did not alert the Saudi journalist that he might be in danger if he ever ventured in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Furthermore, it was also unclear whether the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees the warning process, had such intercepts or whether Khashoggi had been contacted. At the time, the State Department declined to answer such “hypothetical questions,” when asked about them a few days later. What was undeniable was that certain intelligence materials existed and that the intelligence community shared some of it with a bipartisan group of senators who agitated for

311. Shane Harris, “Crown Prince Sought to Lure Khashoggi back to Saudi Arabia and Detain Him, U.S. Intercepts Show,” *The Washington Post*, 11 October 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/crown-prince-sought-to-lure-khashoggi-back-to-saudi-arabia-and-detain-him-us-intercepts-show/2018/10/10/57bd7948-cc9a-11e8-920f-dd52e1ae4570_story.html.

sanctions against the Kingdom. Senator Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), one of Trump's closest allies in the Senate, predicted a "bipartisan tsunami" of action if the Saudis were involved, and insisted that Khashoggi's death could alter the nature of relations between the two countries. As discussed below, Senator Graham found an albatross to hang around Muhammad bin Salman's neck, even if he and President Erdoğan refused to reveal what they presumably knew!

For their part, officials in Riyadh were ill prepared for the media onslaught, and wasted precious time before they confronted certain realities. Two weeks after the initial disappearance made the headlines, Saudi Arabia's deputy public prosecutor, Sha'alan al-Sha'alan announced that 11 suspects had been indicted over the death of Jamal Khashoggi and that he requested the death penalty for five of them. A few days later another ten suspects were detained—for a total of 21 people—and dismissed General Ahmad al-Assiri, who was responsible for specific Saudi intelligence operations. The prosecutor revealed that his preliminary investigation indicated that Khashoggi died from a lethal injection and that his body was dismembered and taken out of the consulate though he added that he was waiting for Turkish intelligence to pass over evidence of Khashoggi's death, including a purported audio recording that captured the dying man's last moments although Ankara refused to share it. A spokesman for the public prosecutor clarified that Prince Muhammad was not implicated, and might not have known what actually occurred, something which foreign minister 'Adil al-Jubayr echoed, telling a separate press conference: "Absolutely, his royal highness the crown prince has nothing to do with this issue," and continued: "Sometimes people exceed their authority," without elaborating.³¹²

These avowals corrected earlier statements that Khashoggi had left the consulate shortly after he entered the building or that he died in a fistfight as part of a "rogue operation," although few seemed to know at the time. Amazingly, the Saudi prosecutor's confirmation was deemed unsatisfactory by Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish foreign minister, as he called for "the real perpetrators ... to be revealed." Çavuşoğlu the

diplomat who played a criminologist, clarified his claims, saying: "Those who gave the order, the real perpetrators need to be revealed. This process cannot be closed down in this way," which was a direct assault on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its leaders.³¹³ Of course, Çavuşoğlu was only parroting his Prime Minister who had openly accused the "highest levels" of the Saudi leadership for being behind the killing without, naturally, presenting a shred of evidence to reach such a devastating conclusion though Recep Tayyip Erdoğan informed the entire world that he had "passed on" the tape to American, British, French, German, and Saudi Arabian officials. At the time, and though Erdoğan did not include Canada on his list, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his country's intelligence agents heard the recording, though French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian insisted that Paris never received it.³¹⁴

In the event, and as Erdoğan mugged news screens for weeks on end, the CIA Director Gina Haspel visited Ankara and, reportedly, heard a "recording" but Turkey did not allow her to bring a copy back to Washington.³¹⁵ A journalist with Turkey's state-run Daily *Sabah* newspaper told the *Al Jazeera* network that the audio featured Khashoggi telling his killers "I'm suffocating" and "take this bag off my head," though, again,

312. Aya Batrawy (Associated Press), "Saudis Distance Crown Prince from Jamal Khashoggi Murder Inquiry," *The Independent* [Dublin, Ireland], 15 November 2018, at <https://www.independent.ie/world-news/saudis-distance-crown-prince-from-jamal-khashoggi-murder-inquiry-37532568.html>.

313. Matt McGarry, "Saudi Official: Crown Prince Did Not Order Khashoggi Killing," *ABC News*, 15 November 2018, at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/saudi-arabia-seeks-death-penalty-suspects-khashoggi-killing/story?id=59214451>.

314. "Le Drian: France Does Not Have Khashoggi Tapes, Erdogan Playing 'Political Game'," *Al-Arabiya English*, 12 November 2018, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2018/11/12/Le-Drian-France-does-not-have-Khashoggi-tapes-Erdogan-playing-political-game-.html>.

315. "Germany, France, UK, US and Saudi Arabia 'Have Khashoggi Tapes'," *Reuters*, 10 November 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/10/germany-france-uk-us-and-saudi-arabia-have-khashoggi-tapes>.

without providing any evidence as to its veracity.³¹⁶

Parallel to the speculations regarding the purported intercepts and tapes of what were included in them, and notwithstanding Erdoğan's unabashed indictment of Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the chief preoccupation focused on the heir apparent's alleged knowledge of what actually occurred and/or whether he actually ordered the rendition that went wrong. As doubts were raised, National Security Adviser John Bolton said that the recordings of the killings did not implicate Prince Muhammad. "I have not listened to the tape myself, but in the assessment of those who have listened to it, it does not, in any way, link the crown prince to the killing," Bolton said.³¹⁷

None of these declaration pleased Western observers, fed by an anonymous American intelligence source that, one commentator affirmed, "has concluded that the kingdom's ambitious young crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, personally ordered the execution of journalist Jamal Khashoggi."³¹⁸ Robin Wright revealed that these latest

316. "Khashoggi's Last Words: 'I'm Suffocating ... Take this Bag off my Head'," *MEMO: Middle East Monitor*, 12 November 2018, at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181112-khashoggis-last-words-im-suffocating-take-this-bag-off-my-head/>. Turkish leaks more or less came out on a regular basis, chiefly in *Sabah*, a pro-government newspaper. Interestingly, *Sabah* has been around for a long time, and was a favorite of Mehmed Talaat, better known as Talaat Pasha (1874-1921), one of the triumvirate that ruled the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Talaat, who, perhaps, ushered in better than most racist pan-Turanism that buried the Ottoman Empire, often relied on *Sabah* to peddle his views and attacks his challengers. In fact, the paper played über patriotism even if the methodology resembled yellow journalism par excellence. Like Talaat, Erdoğan offered various apologias, playing one Saudi side (the monarch) against another (the heir apparent) to advocate his perceived aggrandizement, but few bought into his shenanigans. For a solid study of Talaat and his relevance to today's Turkey, see Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide*, Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018 [the Sabah details are on page 121].

317. Deb Riechmann, Associated Press "Bolton Says Tape Doesn't Link Saudi Prince to Critic's Death," *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 November 2018, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-11-13/bolton-says-tape-doesnt-link-saudi-prince-to-critics-deat>.

318. Robin Wright, "Saudi Arabia's Investigation of Jamal Khashoggi's Murder Is a Tragic Farce," *The New Yorker*, 16 November 2018, at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/saudi-arabias-investigation-of-jamal-khashoggis-murder-is-a-tragic-farce>.

assessments were based on "a growing array of hard data as well as a psychological study of the thirty-three-year-old prince," but acknowledged that the mysterious Turkish audio recordings of the murder inside the consulate formed the bulk of the available evidence, and referred to a *Washington Post* report that putative electronic intercepts of conversations existed too.

Few raised concerns about such Turkish intercepts and whether the evidence was credible. One was reportedly between the heir apparent's brother Khalid bin Salman, then the Saudi Ambassador to Washington, and Khashoggi, which Prince Khalid denied. Still, Wright enhanced her assertions by quoting Bruce Riedel, who affirmed that the Saudi "story line is completely implausible—a team of fifteen killers travels to Istanbul where they take charge of a diplomatic facility with no instructions from the Saudi leadership and kill Jamal Khashoggi. The mastermind of the murder is undoubtedly the crown prince, which is why there is a coverup."³¹⁹ This was hearsay, even for a former CIA agent, who presumed to know what happened when he did not but could only guess. To balance the Riedel analytical battering, Wright called on F. Gregory Gause, the erudite and well-connected head of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A. & M. University, who acknowledged that what Riyadh wished to see "the actual executioners of the crime 'to be seen to be punished,' though he added: "In terms of determining the culpability of the top levels of the Saudi government, including the Crown Prince, the investigation has zero credibility," again, practicing legal gymnastics since it was imperative to let the Kingdom's judicial process to go through and, equally important, to give political leaders the benefit of doubt since no one really knew who, if anyone, actually ordered a murder. Yet, using such words as "zero credibility" when referring to the Saudi investigation was harsh, even if one was entirely free to make any number of assertions, although it was too early to ignore other equally valid allegations that certainly deserved investigation.

On 10 December 2018, for example, a video circulated online (available on YouTube) that provided shocking insights on alleged Turkish intelligence sources canvassing the area around the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul a week before Khashoggi was killed. The video maintains that various cameras and listening devices were installed inside and outside the facility several days before 2 October 2018, that more than one mysterious

319. Wright—Saudi Arabia's Investigation, *op. cit.*

telecom vans were positioned across the street displaying sophisticated gear and, even shows Khashoggi's Turkish fiancée sitting in front of the van.³²⁰ While it was impossible to know the origin of such a video, it behooved investigative reporters to at least look into the allegations, and refute its veracity if proven to be false though this was not attempted as of mid-2019.

Instead, focus remained on the media frenzy, which picked-up steam with Senator Graham, who declared that the powerful prince “has been unstable and unreliable, and I don't see the situation getting fixed as long as he's around.”³²¹ This declaration was precious in its own right, but ever since Khashoggi's murder the American Administration went through several permutations to regain control over the Turkish-driven (and as was revealed by a *Washington Post* article on 22 December 2018, Qatar-driven) media blitz.³²² At first, Washington explored legal ways to get the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to ease off pressure on Saudi Arabia—and halt the damaging leaks that he made on a clockwork schedule regarding the case, though he remarkably failed in this geopolitical endeavor. In fact, a senior adviser to the Turkish President alleged that Khashoggi's body was probably dissolved in acid, which was one of the more bizarre revelations, again without any evidence as to who performed such a complex assignment, where the acid came from and how it was both stored and disposed of and, if the assumption was that the liquid was thrown into the city's drainage system, how come Turkish forensic authorities that canvassed the neighborhood for weeks on end, were unsuccessful to discover it. “The alleged reason they dismembered Khashoggi's body was to dissolve his remains more easily,” Yasin Aktay told the Turkish media,

320. It was impossible to know the origin of this video, available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQxoCAd-Xus>, although the English-language commentary is supplemented with Arabic subtitles.

321. Gardiner Harris and Eric Schmitt, “Ahead of Peace Talks for Yemen, Senate Weighs Rebuke to Saudis,” *The New York Times*, 27 November 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/27/us/politics/trump-yemen-khashoggi.html>.

322. Souad Mekhennet and Greg Miller, “Jamal Khashoggi's Final Months as an Exile in the Long Shadow of Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Post*, 22 December 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/jamal-khashoggis-final-months-an-exile-in-the-long-shadow-of-saudi-arabia/2018/12/21/d6fc68c2-0476-11e9-b6a9-0aa5c2fcc9e4_story.html.

adding: “Now we see that they not only dismembered his body but also vaporized it.”³²³ This was farcical to say the least and, once again, devoid of any truth.

Parallel to these outlandish Turkish “revelations,” American intelligence elements with their own agendas embarked on a few leaks of their own, but when their efforts to feed Robin Wright with choice materials did not move the White House, the CIA jumped on the exposure bandwagon to further distance itself from political Washington. On 16 November 2018, the agency disclosed that Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman ordered Jamal Khashoggi's assassination, contradicting Riyadh's claims that he was not involved in the killing. This high confidence *assessment* complicated matters for the Trump Administration as it sought ways to preserve its relationship with a vital ally, although *The Washington Post*, which splashed the CIA conclusion on its front page, did not provide any new evidence. Instead, the report reiterated (1) the fact that a team of 15 Saudi agents flew into Istanbul on government aircraft in October and killed Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate; (2) examined the phone call that Khalid bin Salman allegedly had with Khashoggi that, *someone* thought, was made at Muhammad bin Salman's direction; (3) that as the Kingdom's de facto ruler who oversaw “even minor affairs,” Muhammad bin Salman must have known; and (4) that Prince Muhammad was a “good technocrat” but someone with was also “volatile and arrogant, someone who ‘goes from zero to 60, doesn't seem to understand that there are some things you can't do’.”³²⁴ All of these disclosures were little more than clever guilt-by-association measures that a minor league attorney could successfully and forcefully refute in a court of law. In response, a spokeswoman for the Saudi Embassy in Washington, Fatimah Ba'shin, denied that the ambassador and Khashoggi ever discussed “anything related to going to Turkey,” and while she flatly rejected the CIA claims as being “false” and merely “speculation,” *Post* reporters allocated undue credibility to their anonymous sources, which was routine coverage for most.

323. Paul Dallison, “Turkish Official: Jamal Khashoggi's Body Was Dissolved in Acid,” *POLITICO*, 2 November 2018, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/khashoggi-jamal-body-saudi-arabia-turkey-official-body-was-dissolved-in-acid/>.

324. Shane Harris, Greg Miller and Josh Dawsey, “CIA Concludes Saudi Crown Prince Ordered Jamal Khashoggi's Assassination,” *The Washington Post*, 16 November 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-concludes-saudi-crown-prince-ordered-jamal-khashoggis-assassination/2018/11/16/98c89fe6-e9b2-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d_story.html.

Importantly, and shockingly, the CIA could not provide any answers to President Trump regarding Khashoggi's body and, presumably, did not trust Turkish intelligence enough to affirm whether the Saudi journalist's body was dismembered and/or dissolved in acid. This was the only credible affirmation in the leaks, even if the agency did not, at least in public, delve into the methods used by their Turkish counterparts in and around the Saudi Consulate before 2 October 2018. What became a fact was how American intelligence officials assembled the audio recording from a listening device that the Turks had placed inside the Saudi consulate, although the *Washington Post* did not speculate as to when this device or devices, if there were more than one, were actually placed and how. Still, the newspaper revealed the audio recorded complaints from the Saudi Consul-General, Muhammad al-'Utaybi, who expressed "his displeasure that Khashoggi's body now needed to be disposed of and the facility cleaned of any evidence" but, again, without presenting any evidence. The CIA allegedly examined a call placed from inside the consulate after the killing by a member of the hit team—Mahir Mutrib to Sa'ud al-Qahtani, then one of the top aides to the heir apparent, to inform al-Qahtani that the operation had been completed—without stating whether this audio tape was a Turkish, American, or from an entirely different source. Interestingly, and according to the *Washington Post*, CIA analysts believed that Prince Muhammad bin Salman had a firm grip on power and was not in danger of losing his status as heir to the throne despite the Khashoggi scandal. "The general agreement is that he is likely to survive," an anonymous official told the reporters, adding that Muhammad's role as the future Saudi King was "taken for granted."³²⁵

On the last day of the year, *al-Jazeera* broadcast a video—leaked to Turkish media by Ankara—that showed the alleged Saudi "hit team in Istanbul carrying bags reportedly containing the remains of journalist Jamal Khashoggi."³²⁶ While the video showed four members of the team, each carrying a bag in each hand (thus, for a total of eight bags), none were seen burdened by the presumed weights of a human body, which is not light. *Al-Jazeera's* Sinem Koseoglu, the reporter in Istanbul, affirmed that the video first aired on Turkish news channel *A Haber*, which sourced the footage through Ferhat Unlu, a

journalist with the investigation unit of the Daily *Sabah* newspaper, the same newspaper that maintained close ties to Turkish intelligence. There were two additional interesting items in the broadcast, one the release of a new book by Ferhat Ünlü'nün, titled *Diplomatik Vahşet: Cemal Kaşıkçı Cinayetinin Karanlık Sırları* [Diplomatic Atrocity: The Dark Secrets of the Khashoggi Murder], which catalogues various atrocities. The second pertinent feature was the interview with Khalil Jahshan, now the executive director of the Arab Center in Washington, D.C., who believed that the release of the video was "very significant" because "we [now] have direct evidence showing that a van left the consulate office building, went to the nearby consul-general's house, and you see staff or members of the killing team unloading body bags or black bags of some sort. So, it leaves the impression that Khashoggi's body ended up at the consular's [sic] residence and that's what the investigation should focus now, what happened to it there."

Jahshan did not wonder why this video, which presumably was shot on 2 October 2018, was not released earlier, and what motivated Turkish authorities to withhold it. Second, he did not raise the fundamental question as for a need to verify the identities of the men carrying the bags, precisely to determine whether they were the same suspects who travelled from the Kingdom to carry out the deed. Third, and as there were no dates on the video, it was impossible to know when it was shot, or why it expertly zoomed on the entrance of the Consul-General's house from a relatively distant camera, assuming that the machine was an ordinary street camera installed around a diplomatic facility. *Reuters*, which immediately carried the *al-Jazeera* report without verifying it, also failed, like Jahshan, to check with local police authorities to know whether the video was tampered with, instead of just accepting the Turkish version. Importantly, and although *Sabah* splashed the revelation on its front page, the key story on *Hürriyet Daily News* on 31 December 2018 was a different *Reuters* report to honor the slain journalist at Times Square in New York City.³²⁷

325. *Ibid.*

326. "Video Shows Bags Believed to Contain Khashoggi's Remains: Report," *Al-Jazeera*, 31 December 2018, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/video-shows-bags-believed-khashoggi-remains-report-181230215116612.html>.

327. "Son dakika haberi: Cemal Kaşıkçı'nın parçalanmış cesedi böyle taşınmış," [Latest News: Jamal Khashoggi Dismembered Body Was Disposed of Like This], *Sabah*, 31 December 2018, at <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2018/12/30/son-dakika-haberi-cemal-kasikci-cinayetinde-flas-goruntuler>. See also "Khashoggi, Journalists to be Honored at Times Square New Year's Party," *Hürriyet Daily News*, 31 December 2018, at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/khashoggi-journalists-to-be-honored-at-times-square-new-years-party-140122>.

The Mysterious Khashoggi

Before concluding this chapter and turning to an examination of how the Khashoggi Affair may threaten Muhammad bin Salman's succession, it may be useful to briefly discuss who was Jamal Khashoggi—whose brutal murder cannot, and ought not go unpunished—but whose transformation into something he was not, deserved at least a careful examination.

According to the *Washington Post*, one of the theories developed by the CIA to decipher what may have supposedly pushed Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman to order Khashoggi's rendition was the latter's Islamism and membership in the terrorist organization.³²⁸ Reports speculated that several days after Khashoggi disappeared, Prince Muhammad told Jared Kushner and John Bolton, respectively President Trump's son-in-law and National Security Advisor, that Khashoggi was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood though Shane Harris, Greg Miller and Josh Dawsey, the *Post* reporters, did not verify or revisit this claim. Confirmation of Muslim Brotherhood membership was provided earlier by the columnist David Ignatius though, again, this information was embedded in a much larger essay that attempted to describe the Saudi journalist's long journey.³²⁹

It fell on Asa'ad Abu Khalil, a professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus, and a critic of the Al Sa'ud, to shed some light on this critical question. Sharmini Peries interviewed Abu Khalil on *The Real News Network*, and introduced his guest stating: "It's been odd to read about Khashoggi in Western media. David Hirst in *The Guardian* claimed Khashoggi merely cared about absolutes such as 'truth, democracy, and freedom.' Human Rights Watch's director described him as representing 'outspoken and critical journalism'," though he wondered whether any of it was accurate.³³⁰ Abu

328. *Ibid.*

329. David Ignatius, "Jamal Khashoggi's Long Road to the Doors of the Saudi Consulate," *The Washington Post*, 12 October 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/jamal-khashoggis-long-road-to-the-doors-of-the-saudi-consulate/2018/10/12/b461d6f4-ce1a-11e8-920f-dd52e1ae4570_story.html?utm_term=.9495ee00e225.

330. Sharmini Peries, "What the Mainstream Media Aren't Telling You About Jamal Khashoggi," *The Real News Network*, 18 October 2018, at <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/what-the-mainstream-media-isnt-telling-you-about-jamal-khashoggi/>.

Khalil did not mince his words, as he seldom does on his well-read blog titled *The Angry Arab News Service*, affirming that Khashoggi "was always a symbol of reactionary advocacy on behalf of the Saudi regime and militant Salafi Islam. That's what he stood for," adding: "The picture that is being painted in mainstream Western media is totally unrecognizable for anybody who bothers to read Arabic. Unfortunately, all the people who are commenting about the issue and commenting even about his record of journalism, so to speak, are people who have never read anything except in the *Washington Post*."

This was a harsh assessment but Abu Khalil insisted that it was critical to read Khashoggi in his Arabic-language writings that, he believed, reaffirmed the murdered man "was a passionate, enthusiastic, unabashed advocate of Saudi despotism," since he

"started his career by joining bin Laden and being a comrade of bin Laden. ... He fought alongside the fanatic mujahideen, who were supported by the United States in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan among others, against the communist, progressive side in that war. And he was unrelenting in his advocacy on their behalf, as well as for his praise for bin Laden. He got to be pretty close to bin Laden. That's not being mentioned in the media as well."

Abu Khalil elaborated that in his Arabic writings and on his Twitter account, Khashoggi "spoke a very different tone than what he wrote in *The Washington Post*," passionately defending Palestine though

"he never spoke about Palestine in English, and affirmed that we were all Trump when the American President ordered the bombing of Syria. He never spoke like that in the *Washington Post*. So, he was an agreeable token writing for *The Washington Post* who never challenged the Western media and their coverage of the Middle East. And for that, he was quite agreeable to them. He never spoke about the Palestinians. I bet you, if he was advocating for the Palestinians or for the Islamist line that he called for in Arabic, he wouldn't have lasted in his gig in *The Washington Post*."

Towards the end of his interview, Abu Khalil revisited the Muslim Brotherhood connection and asserted that the Brotherhood

“was his audience. His political line was very close to that of Turkey. For that, he had a very close relationship with the Turkish government. And as we read, when he went into the consulate, he gave his fiancée the phone number of the key presidential adviser to Erdoğan to call him if he [was] missing. And not every Arab journalist can call a close adviser of Erdoğan at a moment’s notice.”

This was certainly a very important point, which was altogether ignored by mainstream media sources, and that spoke volumes. Moreover, and in addition to the Turkish fiancée mystery, few Western media sources bothered to dig into allegations that Khashoggi failed to inform his Turkish fiancée and some of his adult children that he had married an Egyptian woman in a religious ceremony in the United States earlier in 2018.³³¹ The disclosure of this marriage, which Khashoggi may have kept hidden from his Turkish fiancée certainly merited in depth investigations since the very reason why Khashoggi went to Istanbul was to seek divorce papers from his first spouse, and that were presumably needed to marry a different woman in Turkey, although it was unknown why Hatice Cengiz did not travel to Washington, D.C.—as she did on at least one occasion in 2019—to secure said documents. The Egyptian woman, identified as Hanan El Atr in the *Washington Post*, cited concern for her security and her job for partially hiding her identity [at first she was identified as “H. Atr”], but wished to exert her rights “as a Muslim wife.” “I want my full right[s] and to be recognized,” she told reporters and provided the latter “with text messages that she and Khashoggi exchanged and photos of them together, including some from their wedding ceremony, which took place in June in a Washington suburb.” At least one witness to the wedding ceremony confirmed Hanan El Atr’s account but, again, spoke on the condition of anonymity because of safety concerns. When asked about this wife, Hatice Cengiz said she was not aware of Khashoggi’s relationship with Hanan El Atr, but questioned her motives, though this was about the time she dropped out of sight. She reappeared in 2019 to testify to a U.S. Senate panel, as she penned several opinion essays that were published in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and several other news outlets, calling on the international community to sanction the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

331. Greg Miller and Souad Mekhennet, “Woman Says She Married Khashoggi in Ceremony Kept Secret from his Fiancée and Some in his Family,” *The Washington Post*, 16 November 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/woman-says-she-married-khashoggi-in-ceremony-kept-secret-from-his-fiancee-and-some-in-his-family/2018/11/16/8cde0a6c-e9cc-11e8-a939-9469f1166f9d_story.html.

Chapter 5

Succession in Saudi Arabia after the Khashoggi Affair

The Initial Aftermath

Focus on Muhammad bin Salman Before 2 October 2018

Fallout of Recent Events on Succession Matters

Sophisticated Speculations

Succession after the Khashoggi Affair

The Evolving Aftermath

Chapter 5. Succession in Saudi Arabia after the Khashoggi Affair

In the aftermath of the 2 October 2018 Jamal Khashoggi affair, the “Succession in Saudi Arabia” debate in Western sources was largely *moderated* by several analysts, led by Madawi al-Rasheed, James M. Dorsey, Bruce Riedel, Simon Henderson and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen. These experts, along a few others, were repeatedly interviewed by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and a few other newspapers and magazines, ostensibly to shed light on the matter though they tended to confuse rather than clarify. A few others were asked to comment on specific aspects of potential repercussions that the death might have on the Al Sa‘ud, though these were not as frequent as the above listed experts. Moreover, and following detailed reportages in major dailies that essentially repeated the same allegations over and over again, leading opinion writers like David Ignatius and Simon Jenkins, to simply mention these two personalities, devoted several columns to the consequences of the Khashoggi affair on internal Saudi concerns. Over a very short period of time, specialized magazines like *POLITICO*, *The New Yorker*, and *The National Interest* carried several opinion pieces that reflected the views of anonymous sources and/or intelligence contacts, linking the Khashoggi death with the fate that allegedly befell Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman.

The Initial Aftermath

Although the two issues—succession matters and Jamal Khashoggi’s death—were only parenthetically related, what stood out was the direct link between the assassination at the hands of rogue elements with a decision that the monarch was expected to make without delay, namely to remove his designated heir from the succession line. In fact, Muhammad bin Salman was no longer eligible to rule, these commentators concluded, because his putative involvement in the Khashoggi death was a certainty. In addition to Senators Lindsey Graham and Bob Corker, a leading newspaper carried a critical opinion

essay that sought the heir apparent’s removal.³³² Most of these facile commentaries concluded that what happened was crystal clear though it was anything but. Few stopped to ask how they could have possibly reached such conclusions in the absence of investigations, which were ongoing, and whether it was wise for any of them to rely on hearsay. Even fewer raised skepticism about leaks, as most assumed that Turkish newspapers stood as paragons of objectivity even if no respectable independent investigator relied on their legacy, in a country that routinely muzzled journalists and jailed scores of them more or less on schedule.³³³

Amazingly, almost no one asked whether a specific agenda was on display, to further tighten the noose around Saudi Arabia’s neck, especially that of Muhammad bin Salman who, truth be told, was a favorite target for ridicule ever since he was appointment Minister of Defense in 2015. As discussed below, it is now open season on the heir apparent, though it is worth repeating that these relentless assaults did not start on 2 October 2018, but were carefully launched after the young leader was first appointed to office as Minister of Defense in 2015, therefore before he was chosen as King Salman’s heir on 21 June 2017. Interestingly, the consequences of such speculation by Western

332. Joe Gould, “Saudi Arabia is Losing Lindsey Graham, a Key Ally of US Arms Sales,” *Defense News*, 16 October 2018, at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2018/10/16/saudi-arabia-is-losing-lindsey-graham-a-key-ally-of-us-arms-sales/>; Kailani Koenig, “Lindsey Graham: ‘Impossible to Believe’ Saudi Crown Prince was Unaware of Khashoggi killing,” *NBC News*, 21 November 2018, at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/lindsey-graham-impossible-believe-saudi-crown-prince-was-unaware-kashoggi-n937661>; and Jordain Carney, “Corker to Introduce Resolution Holding Saudi Crown prince ‘Responsible’ for Khashoggi’s Death,” *The Hill*, 12 December 2018, at <https://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/senate/420707-corker-to-introduce-resolution-holding-saudi-crown-prince>. See also Madawi al-Rasheed, “Why King Salman Must Replace M.B.S.: To save its reputation and avoid becoming a pariah state in the aftermath of the Khashoggi murder, Saudi Arabia should replace its crown prince,” *The New York Times*, 18 October 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/opinion/saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi-crown-prince-murder-king-salman-must-replace-mbs-stability.html>.

333. An estimated 230 journalists were arrested in Turkey after 15 July 2016 and, according to the advocacy group Stockholm Center for Freedom, which tracks cases of prosecutions of Turkish journalists, 122 received jail sentences in 2018 because they did not kowtow to President Erdoğan. These numbers were strong indictments of Turkey. See “Jailed and wanted Journalists in Turkey- Updated List,” Stockholm Center for Freedom, at <https://stockholmcf.org/updated-list/>.

journalists along with a few analysts seldom pondered what would happen to the Kingdom if Muhammad bin Salman was removed from the succession line, though the welfare of Saudi Arabia did not seem to be a high concern to most. Even if unrelated, it was critical to take note of the Gargantuan reform initiatives under way in the Kingdom that gradually changed the face of Saudi society, where religious extremism was checked and where meaningful socio-economic transformations were under way.

Focus on Muhammad bin Salman Before 2 October 2018

The anti-Muhammad bin Salman bandwagon, so blatantly identified by Samuel Osborne and his “most dangerous man in the world” label,³³⁴ received a major push by James M. Dorsey who published 17 essays on the Kingdom between 2 October and 28 November 2018, though he first raised the succession dilemma on 21 October 2018.³³⁵ In one of his essays, titled “MbS: For Better or Worse,” Dorsey identified the heir apparent as an “embattled” leader who “could prove to be not only a cat with nine lives but also one that makes even stranger jumps,” before he opined that the monarch’s decision to entrust his “reckless and impulsive” son with the reorganization of Saudi intelligence would further embolden him. Dorsey relied on Graham E. Fuller, a former CIA official, “to identify the logic of the madness.”³³⁶ According to Fuller, and

334. Samuel Osborne, “King Salman: The Man in Charge of the ‘Most Dangerous Man in the World’,” *The Independent*, 23 January 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-king-salman-the-man-behind-the-most-dangerous-man-in-the-world-a6827716.html>.

335. James M. Dorsey, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies—an autonomous Singapore graduate school and policy-oriented think tank within the Nanyang Technological University—is also a co-director of the University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the New Books in Middle Eastern Studies podcast. Dorsey is also a non-resident Senior Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, and the author of *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* blog, a book with the same title and a co-authored volume, *Comparative Political Transitions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa* as well as *Shifting Sands, Essays on Sports and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*, and *China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom*.

336. James M. Dorsey, “Muhammad bin Salman: For Better or for Worse?,” 2 November 2018, *BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 994*, at <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/muhammad-bin-salman-reputation/>.

“as the geopolitics of the world change[d]—particularly with the emergence of new power centres like China, the return of Russia, the growing independence of Turkey, the resistance of Iran to US domination in the Gulf, the waywardness of Israel, and the greater role of India and many other smaller players—the emergence of a more aggressive and adventuristic Saudi Arabia [was] not surprising.”

Dorsey next quoted former U.S. Middle East negotiator Martin Indyk saying that “The problem [was] that under MBS, Saudi Arabia ha[d] become an unreliable strategic partner whose every move seem[ed] to help rather than hinder Iran. [The] Yemen intervention [was] both a humanitarian disaster and a low cost/high gain opportunity for Iran,” declared Indyk, which further confirmed Dorsey’s views that segments of the U.S. political elite were opposed to the heir.

Dorsey presented his criticisms through various interlocutors whereas Madawi al-Rasheed opted for full frontal assaults, first in her *Salman’s Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia* [published in early 2018 and discussed above] and, after 2 October 2018, in various opinion essays and media interviews. Although John Waterbury perceived *Salman’s Legacy* as a meritorious investigation, the book included several innuendoes, which Waterbury overlooked, claiming that “The merit of this collection of essays comes from the critical stance it takes toward the Saudi ruling family.”³³⁷ That was the measure through which an otherwise respected scholar pretended to explain the Kingdom to his readers. In the event, Waterbury credited al-Rasheed for arguing that “the top-down, arbitrary power acquired by the royal family over the past several decades cannot be explained by looking at the rational interests of the rulers and the ruled; rather, it involves religious and mystical factors.”³³⁸ Though highly critical of the Al Sa’ud, al-Rasheed launched a series of attacks on Riyadh in general and Muhammad bin Salman in particular, which bordered on the hysterical.

On 5 November 2018, al-Rasheed penned an essay titled “Why the U.S. Can’t Control MBS: Reining in the Rogue Prince,” which was published online by *Foreign Affairs*, in

337. John Waterbury, “Salman’s Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia, edited by Madawi al-Rasheed” (Review), *Foreign Affairs* 97:6, November/December 2018, p. 223, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2018-10-16/salmans-legacy-dilemmas-new-era-saudi-arabia>.

338. *Ibid.*

which she argued that “The murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2 has damaged the Saudi regime’s image and credibility worldwide.”³³⁹ She identified Riyadh as “an increasingly authoritarian regime,” concluding that “the Saudi monarchy has been transformed from one that rules by royal consensus to one in which a single individual holds absolute power.” Adding insult to injury, al-Rasheed focused on the question of succession, bemoaning the alleged irrelevance of the Allegiance Commission, which was established by King ‘Abdallah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz in 2007 and that consisted of 35 senior princes and their sons. The Commission oversaw the succession procedures though it was and remains the ultimate prerogative of a monarch to reach his final decisions. Al-Rasheed opined that “King Salman has since shattered the family’s cherished power-sharing arrangement,” overlooked his full-brother Ahmad as a potential successor, dismissed Heir Apparent Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, deposed Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Nayif in 2017, and settled on a primogeniture system when he designated his son Muhammad as his heir. These rapid changes, al-Rasheed believed, gave Muhammad bin Salman excessive power as the young man was entrusted a slew of positions, including the deputy premiership along with the positions of minister of defense, chairman of both the Council of Economic and Development Affairs and the Council of Political and Security Affairs [which was initially headed by Muhammad bin Nayif], head of ARAMCO, as well as a slew of other portfolios. All of these “hats” transformed the Kingdom, al-Rasheed ranted, “into a totalitarian regime in which all of the power of the state [was] concentrated in one person’s hands.” She further claimed that the Allegiance Commission was “dissolved after several of its members were detained in the so-called anticorruption crackdown in 2017,” as the heir “disbanded the royal assembly, marginalized the religious establishment, and detained critics as well as financial elites.”³⁴⁰ In fact, the Allegiance Commission was not disbanded, and the succession mechanism—that favored primogeniture—was updated with a powerful amendment, namely to allow other branches of the family access to power (See Chapter 1, section on *Muhammad bin Salman as Heir Apparent*).

339. Madawi al-Rasheed, “Why the U.S. Can’t Control MBS: Reining in the Rogue Prince,” *Foreign Affairs*, 5 November 2018, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2018-11-05/why-us-cant-control-mbs>.

340. *Ibid.*

For al-Rasheed, however, Muhammad bin Salman was a rogue and dangerous prince, and it befell Washington to tame him even if the United States, and in particular President Donald J. Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner, were unlikely to put any pressure on him, she concluded. The time was long overdue, she told her *Foreign Affairs* audience to “restrain a young power-grabbing prince who has so far displayed zero respect for the international community and has severely violated diplomatic trust, especially with Turkey.”³⁴¹

Fallout of Recent Events on Succession Matters

Writing in the *Financial Times*, David Gardner speculated that the Khashoggi affair could well disrupt the planned succession to King Salman who, the Englishman surmised, could well surprise everyone around the world. Remarkably, Gardner acknowledged that the Saudi Government’s decision to accept responsibility for the “savage assassination” was mendacious and looked “like a cover-up to shield Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom’s crown prince and de facto ruler.”³⁴² Like most Western commentators, Gardner touted semi-official Turkish media claims—which seldom provided any concrete evidence for their carefully leaked news stories—but added that the equally important questions concerned “real uncertainties about what [would]

341. Although not related to a discussion of succession matters, al-Rasheed launched into a particularly vicious attack on the Kingdom in a 1 November 2018 column in *The Washington Post*, in which she presumably set out to dismiss what she believed were myths: (1) Saudi Arabia is a good partner against Iran; (2) Saudi Arabia is a key ally in the fight against terrorism; (3) Saudi Arabians are Islamic fundamentalists; (4) Saudi Arabia’s leaders are directing revolutionary reform; and (5) Saudi Arabia is a stabilizing force in the Middle East. More objective scholars documented how Riyadh was a reliable ally against Tehran and in the fight against terrorism, that Saudis were not extremists, that their leaders intended to introduce gradual reforms, and that the Kingdom was a vital and now the most critical state in the Arab World. See Madawi al-Rasheed, “Five Myths About Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Post*, 1 November 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-saudi-arabia/2018/11/01/3de61f8c-dc5a-11e8-b732-3c72cbf131f2_story.html.

342. David Gardner, “The Khashoggi Affair Could Disrupt the Saudi Succession: King Salman has seized the wheel from his son before. What might he do now?,” *The Financial Times*, 7 November 2018, at <https://www.ft.com/content/c5761b60-e1b3-11e8-8e70-5e22a430c1ad?kbc=64b6eac1-efb0-4d1e-8e00-4d577c26771d>.

happen next.” The astute *Financial Times* Chief Leader Writer, Middle East Editor, and a previous correspondent in Europe, Latin America and South Asia, pronounced that the monarch could seize “hold of the policy steering wheel” as he apparently did twice in 2018, first when he shelved his heir’s plan to partially float the state oil company, ARAMCO and, second, when he reaffirmed support for a state of Palestine with Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem as its capital. Like most Western commentators who focused on these two questions, there was a consensus that Prince Muhammad stood with President Donald Trump when the latter recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital by moving the U.S. embassy there, though it was asinine to assume that the heir acted without consulting with his sovereign.

Still, what was far more important, and based on the precedent that King Salman overruled his heir, Gardner asked what the ruler might do after Riyadh admitted that Khashoggi was killed in its Istanbul Consulate? He hazarded that the most obvious measure “would be to reinstate the role of the wider royal family,” though he added that this matter was raised only because of the international community’s insistence that Muhammad bin Salman was tainted goods. Yet, and unlike routine policy questions, the implications for the succession to the throne and the future of the Al Sa‘ud were far more critical. Gardner believed that Prince Muhammad would “likely succeed his aged father sooner rather than later,” though he surmised that “His credentials as a would-be reformer have been shredded by a murder that, in its sheer incompetence and brazen arrogance,” highlighted inherent weaknesses. Such vulnerabilities, the Englishman continued, allowed outsiders—especially the Kingdom’s traditional Western allies—to choreograph various calls for an end to the War in Yemen, plans to end the blockade of Qatar, and otherwise lower overall sectarian tensions throughout the Muslim World engaged in a clash of civilizations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Where Gardner erred was in speculating that King Salman would be predisposed to usher in a redistribution of power to outlast him, and advanced unverified assertions that there were “palace coups” in 2017 [presumably when Muhammad bin Salman replaced Muhammad bin Nayif], “designed to crush Prince Mohammed’s rivals for the throne.” For some obscure reason, the 2017 change was perceived as a palace coup d’état, though this was mere speculation and an immensely powerful avowal of confusion. There were no revisions of the succession debate, nor were there any disputes about the Kingdom’s future, or even about the heir apparent’s proclivity to oppose dissent. Rather, what occurred in 2017 was a change in the succession method, passing into primogeniture

in this particular case (without sidelining other branches of the family as discussed in Chapter 1), something that would not be affected by the Khashoggi affair because the transformation was meant to stabilize Al Sa‘ud succession matters.

Of course, it was too soon to read the potential fallout from the Khashoggi incident though the most likely outcomes could well focus on foreign policy issues, including the war in Yemen and ties with several regional powers. What was not expected to change was the centralization of power even if David Ignatius—a journalist who became a renowned novelist that illustrated his penchants for fantasy—judged that the Al Sa‘ud would simply circle the wagons whenever they felt threatened.

In what was an erudite commentary titled “The Saudi Royal Family Circles its Wagons in the Khashoggi Crisis,” published in *The Washington Post* on 24 October 2018, Ignatius described the anguish that Prince Turki al-Faysal allegedly felt not only because he knew Khashoggi in person, worked with him, and even counseled him as appropriate but also, the columnist advanced, because “the loss of his longtime protégé ... shocked” him.³⁴³ Ignatius found it difficult to understand Prince Turki’s explanation that there was not going to be a change in the succession pattern. He, Ignatius, was incredulous that the vast majority of Saudis supported and would continue to back the heir apparent. Moreover, Prince Turki’s affirmation that the “more criticism there is of the crown prince, the more popular he is in the kingdom” fell on deaf ears. Though Prince Turki did not say so directly, Ignatius chose not to make a link between the two-years long criticisms of the heir apparent, with the Khashoggi murder. Rather, the columnist raised doubts over Prince Turki’s assertions that Saudis in general, and members of the ruling family collectively believed that the global criticisms—fueled by tainted Turkish media sources—strengthened Riyadh’s will-to-power. Somehow, such views, expressed by a moderate pillar of the Al Sa‘ud, weighed less than those expressed by the Turkish President. In fact, Ignatius gave the benefit of the doubt to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who accused the Saudis of committing a “gruesome murder,” while Ankara failed to reveal the evidence to confirm such a gratuitous assertion. The most shocking aspect of this

343. David Ignatius, “The Saudi Royal Family Circles its Wagons in the Khashoggi Crisis,” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2018 at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/the-saudi-royal-family-circles-its-wagons-in-the-khashoggi-crisis/2018/10/24/33a72d8a-d79c-11e8-aeb7-ddcad4a0a54e_story.html?utm_term=.76cb1f5a52b3.

Washington Post essay, which was widely read by policy wonks, was—and this is worth repeating—the disparaging conclusion that the Al Sa‘ud tended to circle their wagons in times of crises, which was parochial and acultural, to say the least. For some reason, Ignatius did not speculate whether Muhammad bin Salman would become King or whether the Al Sa‘ud ought to seriously consider finding someone else for the position, though he closed his opinion piece with the caveat that “Saudi Arabia will be different because of Khashoggi’s murder” that implied the Saudis better look elsewhere if they wished to preserve their stability.³⁴⁴

Sophisticated Speculations

Though Ignatius displayed diplomatic finesse, on 12 November 2018, Bruce Riedel embarked on disapproving invectives, writing that the Kingdom was “under siege by Turkey,” and that King Salman and his son were “trying to ensure their base at home.”³⁴⁵ The former CIA official identified what he thought was an “unprecedented royal tour, pardons and bonuses for workers,” along with carefully orchestrated events “to protect the embattled crown prince from the fallout from the Istanbul caper.” He supposed that Washington—especially Congress—was “a wild card in the still-evolving situation” and implied that the United States could punish Riyadh for the Khashoggi death by insisting that Muhammad bin Salman be removed from power. But rather than come out and say so directly, Riedel camouflaged his views by analyzing the Turkish President’s extraordinary prowess to devise clever policies even if such political gymnastics seldom served Ankara well in the past.

To be sure, Riedel was correct when he stated that Erdoğan “allowed a steady drip of leaks about the Saudi hit team that flew into Istanbul to commit the murder,” and periodically hinted that he knew more than he publicly admitted. The putative existence of an audio recording of the murder was one such piece of evidence though what interested Riedel was Erdoğan’s confidence that the Saudi monarch was innocent. This bold declaration was repeated several times and implied that the heir apparent was the

mastermind behind the murder. Riedel wondered whether Erdoğan had the evidence to prove this audacious claim, and relied on pro-government Turkish press reports to build his case against Muhammad bin Salman. He reported how a member of the hit team, made four telephone calls to Badr al-Asakar, the heir apparent’s chief of staff, on 2 October 2018, though no official verification was advanced to confirm whether these calls were placed, presumably recorded, or what they revealed. Riedel concluded that Turkish authorities probably tapped the calls and may even have “damning and revealing ... forensic evidence” though, once again, advanced the caveat that Erdoğan was apparently “in no hurry to get the truth out,” because he was “enjoying watching the Saudis squirm,” even if he did not have concrete evidence to blame Muhammad bin Salman.³⁴⁶

What was unbecoming in this analysis was a direct attack on Saudi Arabia, as Riedel dismissed the rogue operation explanation as a flimsy excuse, “undermined by the very nature of the crown prince’s track record for reckless micromanagement.” He stated that the Al Sa‘ud were in a damage control mode, which presumably explained—only to him—the ruler’s “first-ever tour of the kingdom” [it was a first in his capacity as ruler not as an Al Sa‘ud official who conducted such tours in the past], his issuance of pardons to prisoners, the allocation of billions of dollars in fresh projects, topped by the announcement that public sector workers, including the military, would receive bonus payments in January 2019. These steps, Riedel speculated, were mere public relations initiatives to solidify Al Sa‘ud backing and erroneously assumed there were none among the population, or that the Al Sa‘ud needed to buy their legitimacy, which was unintelligent. In fact, the vast majority of Saudis supported the ruling family and especially Muhammad bin Salman, notwithstanding suggestions to the contrary, even if the distribution of financial incentives was a long-standing tradition that started long before the founder of the Third Monarchy, ‘Abdul ‘Aziz bin ‘Abdul Rahman, unified the Arabian Peninsula in 1932. Riedel labeled such disbursements as bribery, which illustrated his skewed understanding of paternalism as practiced in the Kingdom, but that highlighted how poorly he served his masters in providing them with analysis on the country.

Adding insult to injury, Riedel’s 12 November 2018 essay, and which was published

344. *Ibid.*

345. Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Royals Rally Support at Home as Pressure Mounts,” *Al-Monitor*, 12 November 2018, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/saudi-mbs-rally-support-pressure-yemen-turkey-khashoggi.html>.

346. *Ibid.*

also online by *The Brookings Institution*, stated that “the Saudis have been confident that the U.S. administration is still in the crown prince’s pocket due to his close ties to Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump’s son-in-law,” which lacked insight since the president defended Riyadh for geo-strategic not philanthropic reasons. Right or wrong, and unlike the analyst who presumably studied the Kingdom much longer than the business mogul, Trump appreciated the burden of power and saw the danger that Iran posed, not just in Yemen, but also throughout the Muslim World and beyond. Trump tacitly grasped that King Salman was not ready to upset the succession applet, irrespective of what Congressional hawks fathomed, or desired.

Succession After the Khashoggi Affair

We now know that Jamal Khashoggi was killed though there is plenty of speculation as to whether the deed was on the orders of the heir apparent. Western media outlets advanced acute speculations—again, based on Turkish sources—which alleged the evidence pointed to Muhammad bin Salman, even if President Donald Trump declared that this was strongly denied by both the Saudi monarch and his heir. Whatever direct involvement was advanced was largely based on the identities of members of the team sent to Istanbul, while other explanations existed, including the presence of anti-Muhammad bin Salman elements on the latter’s staff who acted precisely to implicate the heir in this dastardly affair. To be sure, the individuals identified by Turkish media outlets were part of the Saudi Royal Guard, though the presence of undercover operatives working for a variety of powers cannot be excluded. Of course, some of these individuals may have behaved independently and well beyond their mandates, ostensibly because they were obsequious persons who sought to curry favor from their superiors that, if such were the case, must be attributed to incompetence rather than professionalism.

In hindsight, it was equally important to note that those who honored the heir apparent during the latter’s early 2018 visit to the United States could not presumably be all wrong even if few expressed any apprehension about his character at the time. On the contrary, just about everyone in leading universities, major Silicon Valley technology outlets, Wall Street gurus, and hard-nosed Hollywood moguls were all, presumably, taken by the young prince’s charms, notwithstanding Samuel Osborne’s “the most dangerous man in the world” label. Remarkably, even the Trump White House was allegedly hoodwinked basing its putative Middle East strategy on the vision and maturity of Muhammad bin Salman. Only seasoned analysts with specific agendas like Madawi

Al-Rasheed, Bruce Riedel and Dexter Filkins [obviously not an exhaustive list], were clairvoyant enough not to fall for what they presumably knew was fake-monarchism.

Critics of the Kingdom identified the White House error in settling on Muhammad bin Salman as an “agent of change,” someone who could presumably save Saudi Arabia from otherwise certain socio-economic doom, though these same detractors added that Jared Kushner was amateurishly wrong to persuade the president to boost him in lieu of his well-known and largely admired cousin, Muhammad bin Nayif. It could well be that the change ushered in by King Salman was never accepted by those in the American Government who liked Muhammad bin Nayif and who were, perhaps, disappointed that he was unceremoniously dismissed. Such denigrators further perceived President Trump’s visit to the Kingdom as “an orgy of mutual admiration and monarchical excess.”³⁴⁷

Sadly, and writing in *The New Yorker*, Dexter Filkins concluded that he knew the “truth” about Muhammad bin Salman. This was a “violent, impulsive character [that] was visible early on,” Filkins speculated, repeating the land-registry official’s tale propelled by Simon Henderson and that has been repeated ad nauseam without any shred of evidence.³⁴⁸ Filkins, like Henderson, repeated the rumor so often that the Abu Rasasa, or “father of the bullet” epithet soon stuck. The December 2017 Sa’ad Hariri resignation gossip was added to the list of wrongs for good measure, even if the Prime Minister of Lebanon denied the fabrication and actually sat on the same podium with Muhammad bin Salman a few months later. Hariri was allegedly and repeatedly “slapped” according to unnamed foreign diplomats, and while Filkins added the caveat that this was denied, the story gained momentum since it was repeated so often. In *The New Yorker* essay, a triumphant Hariri returned to his country as an apparent hero, after the strong-arm tactics failed, which meant to show yet another Muhammad bin Salman error. Again, neither Filkins nor any other Western journalist provided any evidence to verify the allegations but merely reiterated that a sitting Arab prime minister was “slapped” around, which provided yet another useful illustration of Muhammad bin Salman’s “violence.”

347. Dexter Filkins, “In the Wake of Khashoggi’s Disappearance, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Is Pushed to the Brink,” *The New Yorker*, 16 October 2018, at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/in-the-wake-of-khashoggis-disappearance-saudi-arabias-crown-prince-is-pushed-to-the-brink>.

348. *Ibid.*

Similar takes were weaved around the blockade of Qatar and the military intervention in Yemen. Few bothered to assess what could have prompted Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Cairo and Manama to isolate Doha. Even fewer bothered to measure the death toll in Yemen. No one denied that “at least sixteen thousand civilians [were] killed” in Yemen during the past two years, and that famine may have caused additional civilian deaths. The War for Yemen was an unparalleled tragedy but few bothered to decipher its causes, and what kind of humanitarian assistance Abu Dhabi and Riyadh provided, while Tehran helped the Huthis launch ballistic missiles on Saudi cities. Even fewer lamented the death of over 500,000 in Syria, largely with Iranian, Hizballah and Russian military assistance. What was important, at least for most challenged Western analysts, was Muhammad bin Salman’s proclivity for violence, not the lives of hundreds of thousands of human beings.

Of course, the heir apparent garnered additional wrath—which presumably showed his “autocratic streak”—after the November 2017 roundup of dozens of senior Saudis, including members of the ruling family. The Ritz-Carlton became a five-star prison, they claimed, where princes and other royals were held captive, where some were allegedly tortured, and where most signed over substantial shares of their fortunes without any trials. The fact that the King wished to crack down on corruption was dismissed as critics pointed to the heir apparent’s penchant for luxury. His preferences were placed under the microscope with the ultimate objective concentrating on the “fact” that all of these developments illustrated Muhammad bin Salman’s putative penchants for violence and narcissism. Unlike many who couched their abhorrence of the heir apparent in relatively safe academic prose, Dexter Filkins raised the key question that presumably confronted Saudi leaders—and American ones. Filkins asked point blank “whether M.B.S. can and should become king.” He answered his own question by speculating that it was “unlikely that King Salman would part with M.B.S., long his favorite son,” because the “humiliation for the House of Saud might be too much to endure.” Moreover, his clarification elucidated, “even if Salman were inclined to remove M.B.S. from the line of succession,” the writer wondered “who could replace him?” ostensibly because just about all potential rivals were either “imprisoned or humiliated.” This was a puerile opinion to say the least, and while Filkins and others can and do regularly repeat the same stories over and over again, doing so seldom shed light on what King Salman intended to do.

The Evolving Aftermath

Determined to shame Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman, Western commentators devised a new terminology on the eve of the 2018 G20 Summit in Argentina that, pseudo-detectives concluded, would be an awkward moment for the Saudi. It was not awkward in the bit, as Muhammad bin Salman landed in Buenos Aires, and was received according to protocol. Most leaders of the world’s strongest economies accepted him as a peer among equals, though the political theater—which rules such gatherings—prevented President Donald Trump from shaking hands with Prince Muhammad bin Salman mostly to placate U.S. Senate hawks who threatened to punish Trump if he even looked at the Saudi heir apparent. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan avoided him too, though Russian President Vladimir Putin laughed and chatted with the Saudi leader, even exchanged a high-five. Muhammad bin Salman met with President Xi Jinping who told the prince that China backed his push for economic diversification and called for the two of them to better integrate key economic programs—China’s *One Belt One Road* trade initiative and Saudi Arabia’s *Vision 2030*. British Prime Minister Theresa May used her meeting to prod the prince to hold those responsible for Khashoggi’s death to account, as did the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, who spoke to Prince Muhammad twice, not only calling for a credible explanation but also to try and figure out a way to end the ongoing diplomatic spat between the two countries. “I continue to believe that conversations, frank and direct conversations between leaders, is better than not talking,” Trudeau said.

The most talked about conversation in Buenos Aires was that held with a stern-faced Emmanuel Macron of France, who stood close and spoke intently for several minutes with the Saudi Heir Apparent. At one point Prince Muhammad clasped Macron on the arm as if reassuring an old friend. According to French sources, the Frenchman made the decision to stop and speak with the prince, because “we were not going to play hide and seek. Things had to be told frankly, and very, very, firmly.” A partial transcript of their exchange had Macron telling the prince “you never listen to me,” to which the Saudi royal replied: “I will listen of course.”³⁴⁹

349. Helene Fouquet, Jonathan Gilbert, and Alex Morales, “Saudi Prince Finds Both Friends and Disapproval at G-20 Summit,” *Bloomberg*, 1 December 2018, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-01/saudi-prince-finds-both-friends-and-disapproval-at-g-20-summit>.

The French President's *aparté*, which *al-Jazeera* reproduced in some detail, apparently included demands that international experts be part of the investigation into the murder of Khashoggi. This was something that the Saudi judiciary would have to take into account as it proceeded with its complicated work though in the video, Prince Muhammad bin Salman can be heard telling the French leader not to worry, to which the Frenchman replies: "I am worried." It is then that Macron told the Saudi: "You never listen to me," which was comical to say the least.³⁵⁰

The episode was problematic for three reasons: first, because it was deeply condescending; second, it came from a challenged leader who faced his own crises; and third, because it displayed genuine arrogance. It was condescending because Macron sounded as if he was lecturing his younger counterpart, as Prince Muhammad responded: "I do listen to you." It was challenging because as Macron was "working" Muhammad bin Salman, his own capital's symbol of power—the Arc de Triomphe [The Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile or Triumphal Arch of the Star], and that stood at the western end of the Champs-Élysées at the center of Place Charles de Gaulle—and that was also the resting place of France's Unknown Soldier from World War I—was the scene of massive demonstrations by angry mobs that destroyed part of the landmark, and damaged public and private properties throughout the capital city. What was precious was to receive counsel from one who needed to put his own house in order before offering to resolve others' dilemmas. Still, the Macron exchange was not surprising as other Western leaders pretended to know what was best for Saudi Arabia, a country most barely visited or understood.

A year later, Muhammad bin Salman stood next to the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, as the latter hosted the G20 gathering in Osaka. In turn, President Trump was on Prince Muhammad's right, as the two men shook hands warmly and even exchanged confidences. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—who apparently exchanged places with the

Chinese President Xi Jinping—stood on Trump's right, but the two men failed to make "contact" and while few heard what Trump told Muhammad bin Salman, the display was amazing. The American and Saudi delegations met for a working breakfast as Trump praised Muhammad bin Salman for doing "a really spectacular job." Even if this was vintage Trump hyperbole, the American specified: "It's like a revolution in a very positive way. I want to just thank you on behalf of a lot of people, and I want to congratulate you. You've done a really spectacular job," complimenting the Saudi for granting women the right to drive and for fighting terrorism.³⁵¹

Of course, critics demanded a change in leadership in Riyadh, and while Saudi Arabia has never been popular in America—even among major oil companies as Rex W. Tillerson's comments amply illustrated—few denied the country's strategic importance.³⁵² This might not be enough for challenged officials though the Al Sa'ud were and are master survivors, which means that they will do everything in their power to save and strengthen their ties with the United States. Those who insist that the foremost bastion of Saudi national security for three quarters of a century is slipping away are oblivious to such nuances though few should now be surprised that a mitigated political assault will leave negative consequences. Nevertheless, the Buenos Aires gathering added significant intellectual fuel to the fire, even if it was all of the peripheral variety that the

350. "Emmanuel Macron 'You Never Listen to Me': Macron Meets MBS on G20 Sidelines—French President is Reported to Have Given 'Very Firm Message' to Saudi Crown Prince Over Khashoggi Killing and Yemen," *al-Jazeera*, 30 November 2018, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/listen-macron-meets-mbs-g20-sidelines-181130183842583.html>. See also Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia's Estrangement," *Al-Monitor*, 4 December 2018, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/saudi-arabia-isolation-crown-prince-g20-congress-trump.html>.

351. Peter Baker, "A Breakfast Invitation Helps Rebuild a Crown Prince's Standing," *The New York Times*, 29 June 2019, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/28/world/middleeast/breakfast-bin-salman-trump-osaka.html>.

352. The former U.S. Secretary of State, Rex W. Tillerson, who also served as chief executive of one of the world's largest oil companies, Exxon, and who presumably developed keen insights on the world's largest producer of petroleum, mistrusted Saudis. According to Bob Woodward, and reporting on a "principals meeting" at the White House in March 2017 ahead of the President's visit to Riyadh, Tillerson apparently declared that "the Saudis always talk a big game. You go through the dance with them on the negotiations. When it comes time to putting the signature on the page, you can't get there." While the context of Woodward's script was Tillerson's putative doubts about the Trump 2017 Summit in Riyadh, it appeared that the Secretary was wrong, as several understandings were reached at the time. Yet, and much like Tillerson, many current and past American officials mistrusted Saudis, which was worth taking note of, despite the existence of one of the most successful strategic relationships Washington maintained with any country, and for decades. See Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018, p. 112.

Osaka congregation corrected.

In fact, when *The Guardian* boldly reported that Muhammad bin Salman was “sidelined” in Buenos Aires, or when *The Independent* concluded that the Putin High-Five was a “stomach-churning” greeting—playing the innocent babes in heaven at the approach of the Christmas holidays—or even when James M. Dorsey perceived the event as a “scandal,” everyone opted to over-read the impact that leadership contacts had or what protocol assignments deciphered. Some noted that the Saudi Heir Apparent was assigned a deliberate isolation on the far right in the commemorative photograph, oblivious to the sophisticated picks that are often negotiated by underlings, years ahead of any summit. In 2020, when Riyadh hosts the next G20 Summit, the honor to be at the center of the photograph will go to the Saudi monarch, King Salman (or his successor), which will silence such snide remarks. Unless, of course, Senator Graham and other American leaders force a cancellation of the G20 Summit because it will be held in Saudi Arabia, which is unlikely though not impossible. Of course, and this was far more important, Muhammad bin Salman participated in all of the sessions and held several bilateral meetings in Buenos Aires as well as in Osaka as the representative of the Kingdom.

When the 2018 G20 gathering passed without any new stomach-churning scandals, the verbal assault took on a different dimension, with Nicholas Kristof [*New York Times*] leading the list of the affronted, when he asked Saudis about their “murderous crown prince.”³⁵³ The 15 December 2018 opinion essay was utterly shameful since it pretended to pass for an erudite piece that was anything but. Kristof alleged that the leader of Saudi Arabia—he meant Muhammad bin Salman when the country’s ruler was King Salman—had a “penchant for starving children, torturing women or dismembering critics,” adding his congratulations to members of the United States Senate who voted to “hold M.B.S. accountable for Khashoggi’s murder and to end support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen.” Comically, he volunteered an amazing piece of information—that “Senior Saudis privately accept that M.B.S. ordered Khashoggi’s death but insist that

353. Nicholas Kristof, “So, I Asked People in Saudi Arabia About Their Mad, Murderous Crown Prince,” *The New York Times*, 15 December 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/15/opinion/sunday/saudi-arabia-yemen-khashoggi.html>. The New York City print version of the opinion piece carried an even more offensive title, “So, I Asked Saudis About Mr. Bone Saw,” which appeared on page SR11 of the 15 December 2018 edition.

the Saudi-U.S. relationship is more important than one man’s life”—which is impossible to verify and, most likely, the figment of the writer’s fertile imagination. In fact, it was highly doubtful that a member of the Al Sa’ud family believed such a fantastic tale and, even if one prince among so many held that view, Nicholas Kristof or, for that matter, any foreigner, would be the last person in the universe who would hear a particular comment of this variety.

Remarkably, this bellicose opinion essay intended to rattle Riyadh but did not, because the Kingdom’s leaders were determined to push ahead with their work, protect their citizens from regional foes, and promote gradual reforms at all costs. They knew of opponents, including in the Tehran-Ankara-Doha axis, which was equally determined to damage Saudi Arabia and strip it from its legitimate Muslim leadership mantle. Most dismissed the putative role that Qatar played in backing Riyadh’s opponents but the *Washington Post* finally revealed that Qatar may well have played a vital role in promoting Jamal Khashoggi in his anti-Al Sa’ud writings. Of course, neither the *New York Times* nor the *Guardian*, certainly two of the major news outlets that provided extensive coverage of the Khashoggi Affair, bothered with the latest *Washington Post* revelations as of 31 December 2018. None of the other major global newspapers, ranging the gamut from *Le Monde* to the *Financial Times*, identified the Qatar connection either, which was truly incredible.

In late December 2018, *The Washington Post* reported that some, maybe most, of Jamal Khashoggi’s 20 opinion essays published in the newspaper over the course of one year were written by Maggie Mitchell Salem, a senior executive official of the Qatar Foundation. Moreover, among Khashoggi’s friends in the United States were individuals with real or imagined affiliations with the Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood, and an Islamic advocacy organization, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, both of which expressed cautious support to the Arab Uprisings since late 2010. Khashoggi cultivated ties with senior officials in the Turkish government too, which was also viewed with deep distrust by the rulers in Saudi Arabia, especially after Ankara and Tehran sealed various regional accords.

Oddly, *The Washington Post*’s Greg Miller revealed that “Khashoggi sought to secure funding and support for an assortment of ideas that probably would have riled Middle East monarchs, including plans to create an organization that would publicly rank Arab nations each year by how they performed against basic metrics of freedom and

democracy.”³⁵⁴ He, Miller, raised the question of how problematic Khashoggi’s connections were, since the organization he approached was affiliated with the Qatari Government. The reporter confirmed that text “messages between Khashoggi and an executive at [the] Qatar Foundation International show[ed] that the executive, Maggie Mitchell Salem, at times shaped the columns he submitted to *The Washington Post*, proposing topics, drafting material and prodding him to take a harder line against the Saudi government.” This was devastating news because the newspaper was apparently “unaware of these arrangements” when it opened its columns to the Saudi who was not as transparent as many assumed he would be. Salem, Miller corroborated, had known Khashoggi since 2002 and considered him to be a friend who sought her help to succeed in the United States. She noted that Khashoggi’s English-language “abilities” were limited and said that the foundation did not pay Khashoggi nor seek to influence him on behalf of Qatar, though Jamal Khashoggi’s English was very good, and his written abilities even better.

Salem further denied that the Saudi was an employee or a consultant to the foundation although Miller further revealed that while “Khashoggi was never a staff employee of the *Post*, and ... was paid about \$500 per piece for the 20 columns he wrote over the course of the year [thus for a total of US\$10,000], he did not elaborate how he could afford to live in an apartment near Tysons Corner in Fairfax County, which he had “purchased while working at the Saudi Embassy a decade earlier,” nor to assume new expenses associated with a contemplated marriage in Turkey. Even his secret marriage to an Egyptian woman, Hanan El Atr, in Virginia, presumably cost some resources though Miller, once again, did not ask how Khashoggi could afford that. What Miller reported was that Khashoggi “sought out financial backers and turned for organizational help to Nihad Awad, the head of the Council on American-Islamic Relations,” and “cultivated friendships with people with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that he joined when he was a college student in the United States but subsequently backed away from.”³⁵⁵

354. Souad Mekhennet and Greg Miller, “Jamal Khashoggi’s Final Months as an Exile in the Long Shadow of Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Post*, 22 December 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/jamal-khashoggis-final-months-an-exile-in-the-long-shadow-of-saudi-arabia/2018/12/21/d6fc68c2-0476-11e9-b6a9-0aa5c2fcc9e4_story.html. The online version of the essay was penned only by Greg Miller.

355. *Ibid.*

Yet, and as Miller penned, Salem reviewed Khashoggi’s “work in advance and in some instances appears to have proposed language,” according to a voluminous collection of messages between her and the Saudi. In August 2018, Salem even “prodded Khashoggi to write about Saudi Arabia’s alliances from DC to Jerusalem to rising right wing parties across Europe ... bringing an end to the liberal world order that challenges their abuses at home.” The Saudi expressed misgivings and asked her to compose the essay, though she requested a draft from him incorporating sentences that she had sent him by text message. Aware that an association with a Qatar-funded entity could be perceived as a direct affront to Saudi authorities, both Khashoggi and Salem reminded one another to keep their arrangement “discreet.” Extraordinarily, she bullied him regarding his 7 August 2018 column at the draft stage, when she stated: “You moved off topic and seem to excuse Riyadh ... ITS HIGHLY PROBLEMATIC.” “The next day he wrote back that he had submitted the column, adding: ‘They’re going to hang me when it comes out’.”

The details mentioned in the newspaper certainly revealed a far more complicated relationship between Khashoggi and anti-Saudi elements in the West as well as the region. These deserved further investigations, although it was difficult to fathom who would conduct such exploratory work, when reporters and opinion writers concentrated on “scandals,” “stomach-churning” developments, all to condemn the “murderous crown prince” who stood falsely accused and was not on trial in a court of law.³⁵⁶

Equally problematic was the Graham/Corker-led verbal war against Muhammad bin Salman, which reached unacceptable levels as the Senator from South Carolina—whose use of colorful language during a failed run for the Republican Party nomination for president in 2016, coupled with his vile rants pronounced during the Senate hearings to confirm Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, were legendary—engaged in pretentious hyperbole. Saudi Arabia responded to the Senate resolutions on 16 December 2018 in a formal statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which insisted: “You do not insult our leaders.”³⁵⁷

356. “Washington Post Reveals how Qatar Foundation Shaped their Pieces by Khashoggi,” *Al-Arabiya English*, 23 December, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2018/12/23/Washington-Post-reveals-how-Qatar-Foundation-shaped-their-pieces-by-Khashoggi.html>.

357. For a copy of the Statement, see the Twitter page of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at <https://twitter.com/KSAmofaEN/status/1074445163446067200>.

At the end of December 2018, Riyadh announced a major reshuffle of the cabinet that consolidated even more power into the hands of King Salman’s son and heir, as key cabinet posts, military positions and governorships were placed in the hands of younger royal family members and other figures more closely allied with the heir apparent.³⁵⁸ The reshuffle elevated the former minister of finance Ibrahim Assaf to the post of foreign minister, which was a dramatic career turnaround after he was dismissed from his posts and held at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh in November 2017, with ‘Adil al-Jubayr assuming the position of Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. The tested Assaf underscored that Saudi Arabia was “not in crisis” over the Khashoggi Affair, adding: “we are going through a transformation.”³⁵⁹ As the year closed, and as most commentators adopted a wait and see approach, Russia “warned the U.S. against any effort to influence the royal succession in Saudi Arabia, offering its support to embattled Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.”³⁶⁰ President Vladimir Putin’s envoy to the Middle East affirmed that Prince Muhammad had every right to inherit the throne when the ailing 83-year-old King Salman passed away even if this was an exclusively internal matter. Mikhail Bogdanov, who is also a deputy foreign minister, chimed that the “King made a decision and I can’t even imagine on what grounds someone in America will interfere in such an issue and think about who should rule Saudi Arabia, now or in the future. This is a Saudi matter.” Of course Bogdanov was reacting to the blame-game that American lawmakers engaged in, with Lindsey Graham describing Prince Muhammad bin Salman as “crazy” and “dangerous,” but this was the level to which the discourse was brought down for purely political reasons.

358. Borzou Daragahi, “Saudi Arabia: Allies of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Given Top Jobs in Major Cabinet Reshuffle,” *The Independent*, 29 December 2018, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-cabinet-reshuffle-bin-salman-mbs-khashoggi-murder-yemen-civil-war-a8701091.html>.

359. Associated France Press, “Saudi ‘not in crisis’ over Khashoggi Affair: New FM to AFP,” *France24*, 28 December 2018, at <https://www.france24.com/en/20181228-saudi-not-crisis-over-khashoggi-affair-new-fm-afp>.

360. Henry Meyer, “Russia Warns US Against Interfering in Saudi Royal Succession,” *Bloomberg*, 26 December 2018, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-26/russia-warns-u-s-against-interfering-in-saudi-royal-succession>.

Chapter 6 Succession and Rule

King Salman’s Rule and Leadership Preferences

Muhammad bin Salman Becoming King

Muhammad bin Salman Appoints Heir

Speculation on Rule until 2030

Chapter 6. Succession and Rule

With a full political plate, King Salman and Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman confronted many challenges and were likely to encounter many more in the years ahead, though both were equipped to rise to every occasion and uphold the interests of the Kingdom. To impugn otherwise, as so many critics insist on doing, is pedantic and, frankly, illusory. It is a fact that King Salman changed the succession mechanism in place, which upset the proverbial applecart, but that is and will remain the prerogative of any monarch. Even before he acceded the throne, however, denigrators spread rumors about King Salman's mental health, suggesting that the ruler suffered from a debilitating disease that prevented him from reaching sound decisions, which was not accurate though the King was 84 years old (born on 31 December 1935). Opponents, both of the domestic variety as well as the globally-based type—who apparently benefitted from alleged insights on health matters that few were privy to—failed to present a shred of evidence to back their assertions, even if most carefully shielded their discussions in lofty prose that confused much more than they clarified. One went so far as to imply that some of these rumors originated within the family itself. Madawi Al-Rasheed relied on a Saudi source when she wrote that “in an attempt to identify the source of this rumour, [her contact] claim[ed] that the king's marginalized sons, who resent[ed] the rise to power of their half-brother Muhammad, [we]re behind it.”³⁶¹ The King's health concerns preoccupied so many after 23 January 2015, the day he assumed rulership, that one foresaw an abdication. Bruce Riedel reported that Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz allegedly had “pre-dementia.” The clever addition of a prefix to this uncorroborated claim—that the ruler suffered from dementia, whose symptoms included a decline in memory or other thinking skills, or even Alzheimer's, which is a chronic neurodegenerative disease that worsens over time—did not help matters.³⁶²

This was sheer madness, for to impugn that Sultan, Faysal or 'Abdul 'Aziz, to name just three sons of the monarch, can do such a thing was, well, quite silly. Likewise, to

speculate on an individual's health problems without providing any evidence were not only irresponsible but literally bordered on the superficial. Regardless of such gratuitous and futile talking points, presumably because the Al Sa'ud dealt with such “analyses” for nearly eight decades rather successfully, the pace accelerated after 2015 even if each and every one of these gossipy tales fell flat. Under the circumstances, and since so few bothered to raise legitimate questions without offending, a more useful approach may well concentrate on providing an assessment of the King's rule, evaluate the conditions under which the heir apparent may succeed his father, assess the kinds of decisions the next ruler may make, and then, and only then, speculate on Al Sa'ud rule until 2030.

King Salman's Rule and Leadership Preferences

Numerous essays and books, journalistic reportages and opposition figure declarations, as well as classified reports written by ambitious diplomats, anticipated the imminent collapse of the Al Sa'ud. Most if not all of these missives turned out to be mere wishful thinking though the industry continued to be quite productive even if these failed predictions seldom prevented doomsday soothsayers from adopting more reserved positions. Riyadh survived waves of Arab nationalist endeavors throughout the 1960s; the post-1974 oil boom scenarios that envisaged a break-up of the Kingdom; as well as the 9/11 aftermath, when predictions of abdications abounded. For some commentators, such exaggerations passed for polished testimonies, while others opined that little could rock the proverbial boat of the monarchy. A few observers have now gotten into the habit of expressing concerns about the future of Muhammad bin Salman and his policies, unwilling to acknowledge what may be under way.

It was safe to state that Muhammad bin Salman was a maverick, but so is his father. Like his sovereign, Muhammad bin Salman is a non-conformist, which makes him dangerous in the eyes of some, incapable for others, even amateurish for the non-initiated. Less charitable souls opined that the Heir Apparent was in over his head, which amounted to excessive vamping that said exactly nothing. For now, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was ruled by Salman bin 'Abdul 'Aziz, although speculations on his governance were ripe. A few wondered whether the family would survive a decade or two, some answering in the affirmative while others leaned towards more sinister outlooks. F. Gregory Gause, III, one of the more astute observers of the Kingdom and a student of the Al Sa'ud, believed that the ruling family would weather “the storms of the Middle East,” because of (a) the sophisticated oil-funded patronage-based system

361. Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Mystique of Monarchy: The Magic of Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia,” in Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-71, the quotation is on page 67.

362. Bruce Riedel, “Will Saudi Arabia's King Salman Abdicate?,” Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 23 June 2017, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/23/will-saudi-arabias-king-salman-abdicate/>.

in place, (b) the tight relations with legitimizing clerics, and (c) the existing cohesion within the family itself.³⁶³ While many predicted the demise of the Al Sa‘ud, Gause boldly called these oracles eternal pessimists, though most were parsimonious. Nevertheless, and though he expressed concerns about the implications of the Khashoggi assassination on Muhammad bin Salman, Gause cautioned American decision-makers to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of the Al Sa‘ud.³⁶⁴

Paul Aarts and Carolien Roelants, saw a Kingdom in “peril,” while John Hannah wondered whether the time was not right for Washington to start worrying about a “collapse of the Saudi government.” Even Walter Russell Mead, an otherwise erudite expert on American foreign policy, opined about the “specter of Saudi instability.”³⁶⁵ None of these thinkers topped Christopher Davidson, however, who boldly went where no one ventured before him. In his *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*, which was first published in 2009, Davidson “forecast the collapse of most of the Gulf monarchies within the next decade.” “In contrast,” he affirmed in his updated, “final 2012 version ... that most of these regimes—at least in their present form—*will be gone within the next two to five years.*”³⁶⁶ Bruce Riedel, as stated earlier, did not think that the monarchies had much of a future either, although his latest opus, which examined Saudi ties with successive American presidents since Franklin Delano Roosevelt, concluded that “there is little or nothing America can do to prevent a revolution in Saudi Arabia if the circumstances make one likely.”³⁶⁷ The conclusion was

hollow because the Al Sa‘ud were not suicidal and were very much interested in surviving. In fact, most of these critics failed to mention that the overwhelming majority of Saudis supported the ruling family and that there were no signs of a legitimizing loss on this vital front, which meant that the survival of the Al Sa‘ud was and remained more or less guaranteed.

Contemporary history confirmed that, against the odds, the Al Sa‘ud managed well, and that King Salman and his successor, were likely to continue the tradition. Indeed, and in the aftermath of the 1962 family crisis, which eventually ushered in Faysal bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz to the throne, few believed that the Al Sa‘ud could survive. At the time, leading commentators in *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*, for example, expected the monarchy to collapse too, but it did not.³⁶⁸ King Faysal proved to be a political genius as he applied a “ten-point program” that included improved education, enhanced social welfare, effective health services, and the development of an independent judiciary—though his critics insisted that he did not deliver political reforms. On the contrary, King Faysal kept all of his promises to President John F. Kennedy, including the request that he abolish slavery—though he was keen to pursue reforms for the sake of his nation.³⁶⁹ In doing so, Faysal preserved the monarchy and, notwithstanding critics, this was precisely what a monarch was supposed to do. In short, his reforms focused on creating wealth and improving quality of life for Saudis, which was also what his successors engaged in.

Few gave King Salman the benefit of the doubt, including the mere fact that he too was working to protect and promote the country’s interests, and that he was betrothed to look after and defend the ruling family. In a recent *Independent* column, Robert Fisk asked “how long can our Western leaders go on stroking and purring and fawning over—and arming—these Croesus-like autocrats” in Saudi Arabia? Less than elegant, he concluded that the “poor old Kingdom” would soon face calamities galore. “The revolution that threatens the monarchy,” Fisk opined, “will not come from Iran. Nor from Saudi Arabia’s own Shia minority, nor the country’s armed Wahhabists. It will come from within the royal family,” advancing the kind of fantasy that preoccupied

363. Gause, “Saudi Regime Stability and Challenges,” *op. cit.*, p. 31.

364. F. Gregory Gause, III, “Why the U.S. Should Stay Out of Saudi Politics: Let the Royal Family Do Its Job,” *Foreign Affairs*, 18 December 2018, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2018-12-18/why-us-should-stay-out-saudi-politics>.

365. Paul Aarts and Carolien Roelants, *Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom in Peril*, London: Hurst, 2015. See also John Hannah, “It’s Time for the United States to Start Worrying About a Saudi Collapse,” *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2015, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/07/will-the-united-states-help-if-saudi-arabia-starts-to-fall-apart/>; and Walter Russell Mead, “The Specter of Saudi Instability,” *The American Interest*, 4 October 2015, at <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/04/the-specter-of-saudi-instability/>.

366. Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*, London: Hurst, 2012, p. ix [emphasis in original].

367. Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018, pp. 202-203.

368. Lacey—The Kingdom, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

369. For details, see Kéchichian—Faysal, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-64.

observers for at least six decades but always withered on the vine.³⁷⁰ Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York and a former State Department official, held forth that “the internet, more than bombs, could be the government’s undoing,” since, apparently, the smooth transition we witnesses in January 2015 was mere theatrics. “Appearances can be deceiving,” wrote Haass in his *Financial Times* opinion essay, informing his readers that “Saudi Arabia faces long-term questions over political leadership and myriad immediate challenges,” affirming that the “succession issue has been shelved, not solved.”³⁷¹ More recently, Haass wrote “that the *Saudi government murdered the journalist* Jamal Khashoggi at its consulate in Istanbul” [emphasis added], and while he acknowledged that “we may never have absolute proof of the involvement of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman,” this is because “the Saudis [cannot] be trusted to carry out” an impartial investigation.³⁷²

In purely amateurish language that illustrated why we often get it wrong, Fisk, Haas and others displayed misunderstandings galore in the rush to anticipate gloom and doom, jumping to conclusions that were highly questionable. The first advanced the notion that Arabs have to allegedly tolerate “Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi ethics—the most purist, anti-apostate extremism and a ruling family of thousands whose cult-like worship was founded by a violent 18th-century Muslim preacher,” even if no such edict existed. The second pretended to possess superior geopolitical insights as he identified innate shortcomings that would add pressure on the “new collective leadership,” presumably “hamstrung by the existence of strong political fiefdoms and a relatively weak centre.” Mercifully, David D. Kirkpatrick answered both in a *New York Times* article that saw how “Saudis expanded their regional power as others faltered,” even if

this was before the late 2018 re-assessments that frightened most, including Kirkpatrick.³⁷³

What surprised analysts watching the Kingdom when Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz assumed rulership was the speed with which the new monarch confirmed the heir apparent’s designation, coupled with the pick of the heir to the heir apparent. If Prince Muqrin bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz was expected to fill his sovereign’s previous post whenever the latter acceded the throne, there was no consensus as to who might be designated second heir, or when that appointment would be made. Prince Muhammad bin Nayif was certainly one of the top contenders for the post though few were privy to internal deliberations that occurred among senior decision-makers that led to his selection. Still, what disappointed observers—as David Hearst posted an irrational speculation with his “A Saudi Palace Coup” that was long on imagination but short on facts—and even sympathetic commentators, was how uneventful the succession process turned out to be, without the sky falling over Riyadh.³⁷⁴ It was as if many were disenchanted that no gloom and doom materialized although we could surely look forward—according to these same experts—to the government’s undoing because, “a population that is young, poorly educated and underemployed” and who apparently resented the Kingdom’s “thousands of cosseted princes,” will surely revolt before long.³⁷⁵

In reality, the most critical aspect of Saudi succession was the winnowing of the sons of the founder, which the late King ‘Abdallah resolved by choosing Prince Muqrin as heir to the heir apparent. King Salman then opted for Muhammad bin Nayif before he settled on his son, Muhammad bin Salman, as his heir. To be sure, the monarch was confronted by a slew of challenges, including domestic contests, though he and his family knew—and this is worth repeating—that the overwhelming majority of Saudis backed them and were loyal to the ruling family. Of course, there were deteriorating conditions in Yemen, competition with Iran and, perhaps the greatest challenge of them all, self-styled extremists that pretended to have a writ to restore the Caliphate of yore, though none of these shook the Kingdom. Unlike those who were salivating at

370. Robert Fisk, “King Abdullah’s Friends in the West Stayed Loyal, but Revolution is on the Horizon in Saudi Arabia,” *The Independent*, 23 January 2015, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/king-abdullahs-friends-in-the-west-stayed-loyal-but-revolution-is-on-the-horizon-in-saudi-arabia-9999645.html>.

371. Richard Haass, “Saudi Arabia: Threat from Isis Will Only Grow,” *The Financial Times*, 25 January 2015, at <https://www.ft.com/content/868f3396-a319-11e4-9c06-00144feab7de>.

372. See Richard Haass, “US Must Shed its Illusions about Saudi Crown Prince,” *The Financial Times*, 19 October 2018, at <https://www.ft.com/content/1ae7f31e-d2d4-11e8-9a3c-5d5eac8f1ab4>. Haass was not the first American with such offensive depictions of Saudi officials. As discussed above, the former U.S. Secretary of State, Rex W. Tillerson, mistrusted Saudis too.

373. David D. Kirkpatrick, “Saudis Expand Regional Power as Others Falter,” *The New York Times*, 25 January 2015, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/26/world/middleeast/saudis-expand-regional-power-as-others-falter.html>.

374. David Hearst, “A Saudi Palace Coup,” *HuffPost News*, 23 January 2015, at https://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/a-saudi-palace-coup_b_6531246.html.

375. Haass, “Saudi Arabia: Threat from Isis Will Only Grow,” *op. cit.*

the prospect of a thirty-years-long Sunni-Shi'ah war, Saudi Arabia did not want to embark on this bandwagon, and may be expected to do everything in its power to prevent such an outcome. In fact, what King Salman avowed was his utter commitment to the nation-state system, and while the European experience that ushered in the Treaty of Westphalia, which confirmed nationhood under the protection of states, was not a panacea for all ills, this was still the only mechanism that ensured some peace and prosperity throughout the world. Many countries and head-of-states faced challenges, but only real leaders were called upon to rise up to the occasion. To assume that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—a modernizing country that lived through major transformations at all levels including an updated education system—was in a similar position to what ailed the European continent a few centuries ago was simply wrong. To conclude that Riyadh under King Salman could not manage its own affairs was an indication of calculated obliviousness.

Muhammad bin Salman Becomes King

No subject can be as important as succession in any monarchy anywhere. By its very nature, a monarch must first and foremost ensure his/her own succession and, in the case of Saudi Arabia—where an influential family with several contenders at any given time—the same ruler must put some order to the process, lest the exercise lead to confrontations. In constitutional monarchies, the process is relatively ordered, but that is a luxury that is yet unavailable in most Arab societies even if the trends point to their inevitability. For some, succession matters in the Kingdom highlighted “the indeterminacy and ambiguity of Saudi succession [that] contribute to a sense of irrationality, which in turn leads to the circulation of rumours about potential rights between senior members of the royal family.”³⁷⁶ Beyond indeterminacy, the phenomenon was also apparently “magical” because it “generates both hope and illusion,” while observers wallow in utter confusion, unwilling to accept the order that existed, endures, and will likely persist for some time to come.³⁷⁷

Muhammad bin Salman's appointment spilled a good deal of ink, with some authors insisting that the decision was so irresponsible that the monarch ought to resign or be

forced to abdicate. Calls to oust the ruler or to impose an abdication in favor of another son of the founder were comical if not tangential and, of course, highly improbable. In fact, it was safe to state that King Salman emulated his father, who restored primogeniture to the ruling family in 1933, when 'Abdul 'Aziz appointed his son Sa'ud as his heir.³⁷⁸ Less than two years in office, Muhammad bin Salman's achievements were significant even if the speed with which his reforms were implemented, proved to be dizzying. By all accounts, his calls for change led to errors, some of which were due to inexperience while others were institutional because so few Saudis were accustomed to living through, much less implementing such rapid transformations. Still, few could deny the heir apparent's enthusiastic endeavors, especially in the social and economic arenas.

From 21 June 2017 onwards, Muhammad bin Salman truly changed the Kingdom's global image, willing to take risks. He tackled serious economic challenges, but the present and future strategies articulated through the *Vision 2030* prism were epochal. Against a plethora of serious economic shortfalls, including significant drops in the price of oil and the absence of tax-based revenues, Riyadh first introduced this new plan in 2016, whose chief goals were to curb spending and stop the financial bleeding associated with bloating financial deficits. Muhammad bin Salman promised economic diversification, Saudization, a privatization process, social and educational reforms, entertainment initiatives, and many equally grandiose schemes. Saudi ARAMCO, the backbone of the economy, was to be privatized, he proposed, though only 5% of the major oil company's assets would be sold. Although the actual Initial Public Offering (IPO) or stock market launch was postponed, the project was still contemplated, albeit in a modified form. The Heir Apparent, who presided over the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, wished to end subsidies, streamline ministerial expenditures,

376. Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Introduction,” Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

377. Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-71—the quote is on page 48.

378. Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 36.

and address both nepotism and corruption.³⁷⁹ Even if the Al Sa'ud family sat "at the center of the omnipresent Saudi distribution state, and thereby has become an indelible fact of Saudi life," what ailed the system were "decades of patronage [that] seem to have removed ideological alternatives ... [and established a] ... rentier state, whose growth was once triggered by subversive challenges, [and which] seems to have done its work of undercutting independent opposition most thoroughly."³⁸⁰

Irrespective of what may be long-lasting and largely unforeseeable consequences, the economic reforms that Muhammad bin Salman envisaged were bound to be difficult to implement, or even for the population to absorb. Indeed, few understood the gigantic October 2017 NEOM investment project in line with the Kingdom's *Vision 2030* plans that, it was worth underscoring, aimed to transform the Kingdom into a global

379. An undetermined number of prominent Saudi princes, ministers, and business leaders were arrested on 4 November 2017 following the creation of an anti-corruption committee, which critics assumed was a means to collect monies by the Heir Apparent. This was tawdry analysis as the monarch meant to end, or at least significantly weaken, corruption throughout the land. Muhammad bin Salman was not the first leader who encouraged fellow Saudis to invest at home instead of seeing the country's wealth benefitting global economies. On 13 May 2002, his brother Sultan bin Salman—appointed Secretary-General of the High Tourism Authority—enticed Saudi businessmen and foreign investors to repatriate their financial resources from international banks and to capitalize them in local income-generating projects. It may thus be accurate to state that Al Sa'ud leaders waited until 2017, thus nearly fifteen years, to finally take matters into their own hands and demand that those who benefitted most from the system owed their allegiances to the state first and foremost, and only secondarily to their impressive portfolios even if his methods shocked and may have been excessive. Although difficult to document, one of Muhammad bin Salman's objectives in focusing on corruption was precisely to encourage investments in the domestic economy. For details on the Ritz-Carlton arrests and subsequent releases, see Thomas L. Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last: The Crown Prince has Big Plans to Bring Back a Level of Tolerance to his Society," *The New York Times*, 23 November 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>. See also Stephen Kalin and Katie Paul, "Saudi Arabia Says it Has Seized over \$100 Billion in Corruption Purge," *Reuters*, 30 January 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests-corruption/saudi-arabia-says-it-has-seized-over-100-billion-in-corruption-purge-idUSKBN1FJ28E>.

380. Steffen Hertog, "Challenges to the Saudi Distributional State in the Age of Austerity," in Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-96; the quotations are on pages 94 and 95.

economic pioneer. NEOM was bolstered with \$500 billion from the Saudi Public Investment Fund, as well as local and international investors, and may take nearly half-a-century to complete. This was not a development that could be created in a few years, which was why critics quickly concluded its failure, though such statements were facile. Likewise, and in addition to the NEOM and Red Sea projects, King Salman launched the al-Qiddiyyah Project that focused on recreation, sports and culture, all to play major roles in shaping the Kingdom's future. Located near the capital city, the al-Qiddiyyah Project was slated to provide some US\$30 billion in annual revenues and, equally important, create new job opportunities for Saudi youths. Again, it was easy to dismiss such grandiose schemes because few had the patience to see results that, at best, would take a decade or more to materialize. In the short-term, Saudi Arabia reopened cinemas in the Kingdom, which were expected to generate US\$1 billion in ticket sales per year and, given that fact that the under 30-years-of-age made up the majority of Saudi Arabia's population of 32 million in 2018, it was not particularly difficult to see that this would quickly become the largest market for moviegoers in the Arab world, save for Algeria and Egypt. No matter how convoluted some of the criticisms lobbed against *Vision 2030*, this much was accurate: most of the programs met decades-long demands for Saudis to move ahead; for youths to find meaningful work opportunities; for women to drive and attend sports events; and for both genders to create wealth. Naturally, none of this could be accomplished in a few years, perhaps not even in a single generation, but it was essential that the wheels of change be placed in motion. To his credit, Muhammad bin Salman was willing to take the risks, preferably with key partners in major economies, as he seemed determined to facilitate investments in the right places. He realized that Saudis spent nearly US\$230 billion a year outside of the Kingdom, a figure that was set to rise to US\$300-400 billion by 2030, and he wished to see some, if not most, of these resources invested at home. In a major interview with *Time Magazine*, the Heir Apparent explained how he envisaged his plans for *Vision 2030*, and it may be worth quoting him directly to get a feel for his outlook:

"We are now in the third Saudi Arabia which was established by King Abdulaziz, also known as Ibn Saud, my grandfather. And the first Saudi Arabia was established before 300 years, so after the time of King Abdulaziz and King Saud the establishment of the third Saudi Arabia, King Faisal came with a really great young team, and among his team were King Khaled, King Fahd, King Abdullah, King Salman, Prince Sultan, Prince Nayef, and many other people. And they've transformed the country from mud houses to world standard modern cities,

modern infrastructure, a country among the G20, among the top 20 economies around the world, a lot of things. And it's too hard to convince them that there is something more to do because what happened in their time, in that 50, 60 years, it's like what happened in the last 300, 400 years' history of the United States of America. And they've seen the whole movement in their lifetime.

But for us as a young generation, we've not seen this, because we were born in that great modern city. We lived in an economy that is already among the top 20 economies of the world, and our eyes are focusing on what we are missing, what we can't do. And we believe that Saudi Arabia until today used only 10 percent of its capacity, and we have 90 percent to go.

So the plans and the vision is [sic] shaped around this missing 90 percent: How can we implement it as much, as soon as possible. And we are shaping our plan based on our strength. Not trying to copy things. We are not trying to build a Silicon Valley. There's some media houses talking about Saudi Arabia building Silicon Valley in Saudi Arabia. This is not true. We are shaping our economy based on our strengths: oil downstream petrochemicals, materials, mobility, transportation, minerals, and gas. We have a lot of gas explorations in the Red Sea, we have local content, balance of payment. We spend \$230 billion US a year outside Saudi Arabia. If we do nothing, it will go up in 2030 to between \$300-400 billion US spent outside of Saudi Arabia.

The plan is to spend half of it in Saudi Arabia. We have many programs to do this. We have privatization. At the top of the pyramid we have the IPO of ARAMCO, pushing this money, pushing other government assets, pushing other assets, and other cash reserves into the public investment fund, and pushing it to be the biggest fund in the whole world, above \$2 trillion. Two years ago, the size of public investment fund was \$150 billion US. Today it's \$300 billion US. At the end of 2018 it will be around \$400 billion US. In 2020, it will be something between \$600-700 billion US, and in 2030 it will be above \$2 trillion. We will invest half of this money to empower Saudi Arabia, and the other 50 percent we will invest

it abroad to be sure that we are part of the emerging sectors around the world.”³⁸¹

To be sure, this was easier said than done, but one thing was not too difficult to forecast, namely that the Kingdom intended to encourage privatization precisely by encouraging Saudi investors to keep the bulk of their financial resources at home. Obviously, some perceived the brainchild of the heir apparent as “coming undone,” allegedly because King Salman “stripped away the central pillar of the project ... [to] open up ARAMCO, the national oil company, to outside investors,” though in reality, the step was merely postponed.³⁸² Be that as it may, to suggest as Bruce Riedel has done that the heir apparent's alleged “autocratic and repressive” measures prompted capital flight was truly a doozy. According to statistics published by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) foreign direct investments (FDI) flows contracted between 2016 and 2017, from US\$7.4 to 1.4 billion dollars. In its *World Investment Report 2018*, UNCTAD did in fact report a sharp decline, although the Kingdom was “traditionally one of the largest recipients of FDI in West Asia, [as it] saw its share of flows in the region decrease from 53% in 2009, to 27% in 2015 and barely 6% in 2017.” The stock FDI reached US\$232 billion in 2017 but, again, according to this source, divestments were the result of “negative intracompany loans by multinationals.” In other words, there was a decline in 2017 but it was not because of “autocratic and repressive” measures as fantasists pretended. In the first quarter of 2018, FDI in Saudi Arabia increased by US\$838 million, and averaged US\$4.4 billion between 2006 and 2018, reaching an all-time high of US\$11.7 billion in the fourth quarter of 2010, while

381. Karl Vick, “Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Talks to TIME About the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's Plans and President Trump,” *Time*, 6 April 2018, at <http://time.com/5228006/mohammed-bin-salman-interview-transcript-full/>.

382. Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Arabia's Ambitious Vision 2030 Plan in Trouble,” *Al-Monitor*, 7 September 2018, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/09/saudi-arabia-vision-2030-plan-trouble-yemen-aramco.html>. See also Irina Slav, “Saudi Oil Minister: ARAMCO IPO Not Canceled,” *OilPrice.Com*, 23 August 2018, at <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Saudi-Oil-Minister-Aramco-IPO-Not-Canceled.html>. Interestingly, *Al-Monitor* tended to publish pro-Syria and even pro-Hizballah essays, even if several independent scholars were on its board. Founded by Jamal Daniel, an Arab-American investor in 2012, *Al-Monitor* seldom hid its preferences. Daniel, who was born in Syria but raised in Lebanon, apparently purchased 20% of the pro-Hizballah Lebanese daily *Al-Safir*, which folded on 31 December 2016.

it recorded a low of US\$264 million in the fourth quarter of 2017.³⁸³ What these figures illustrated was rather simple: FDI fluctuated and it behooved serious analysts to allow for enough time to pass before reaching epochal conclusions. Plans to launch ARAMCO's initial public offering, and increasing investments worth \$2 trillion, were very much on Muhammad bin Salman's mind though no final timetable was published as of this writing.

The Heir Apparent had a full-plate and, besides his gigantic economic reform programs, pursued what could well turn out to be his most daunting challenge, namely how to reintroduce Saudi Arabia as the leader of moderate Islam. Lest denigrators dismiss this quest as an ephemeral goal, it may be safe to state that on the religious and ideological levels, Muhammad bin Salman's efforts were truly earthshaking as he stressed that Islam was not only a religion of peace, but that devout Hanbali/Unitarians rejected all extremists, ranging the gamut from the Muslim Brotherhood and other terrorist organizations like al-Qa'idah to pro-Persian militias like Hizballah in Lebanon, the Huthis in Yemen and the Hashd al-Sha'abi in Iraq. His vision rested on the notion that the Prophet Muhammad never advocated violence to re-establish the Caliphate. Moreover, the Heir Apparent was categorical in his *Atlantic* interview with Jeffrey Goldberg when he answered the journalist's questions as follows:

“Goldberg: Isn't it true, though, that after 1979, but before 1979 as well, the more conservative factions in Saudi Arabia were taking oil money and using it to export a more intolerant, extremist version of Islam, Wahhabist ideology, which could be understood as a kind of companion ideology to Muslim Brotherhood thinking?

MbS: First of all, this Wahhabism—please define it for us. We're not familiar with it. We don't know about it.

Goldberg: What do you mean you don't know about it?

MbS: What is Wahhabism?

Goldberg: You're the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. You know what Wahhabism is.

MbS: No one can define this Wahhabism.

Goldberg: It's a movement founded by Ibn abd al-Wahhab in the 1700s, very fundamentalist in nature, an austere Salafist-style interpretation—

MbS: No one can define Wahhabism. There is no Wahhabism. We don't believe we have Wahhabism. We believe we have, in Saudi Arabia, Sunni and Shiite. We believe we have within Sunni Islam four schools of thought, and we have the *ulema* [the religious authorities] and the Board of Fatwas [which issues religious rulings]. Yes, in Saudi Arabia it's clear that our laws are coming from Islam and the Quran, but we have the four schools—Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki—and they argue about interpretation.”³⁸⁴

Irrespective of one's views about how Muhammad bin Salman answered these questions, what stood out was his unobstructed perspective on what kind of Islam he practiced and how he refused to be labeled by those who knew little about the Holy Scriptures or of its practices in the Kingdom. This part of the interview was overtaken by his more provocative assessments of Iran and its leaders, going so far as to identify 'Ayatallah 'Ali Khamana'i, the Iranian supreme leader, to be worse than Hitler because he, Khamana'i, made Hitler look good. “Hitler didn't do what the supreme leader is trying to do,” he told *The Atlantic*, adding: “Hitler tried to conquer Europe. ... The supreme leader is trying to conquer the world.”³⁸⁵ There was, to be sure, some hyperbole in this categorization but what was absolutely clear was that Saudi Arabia confronted an ideological foe in Iran, and that Riyadh refused to have its Islam defined by others. What Muhammad bin Salman wished for was to reclaim “moderate Islam,” reform creeping extremism that made its ways inside the Kingdom, and allow believers to practice their true faith, which was what the overwhelming majority of Saudis wanted too.

383. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *World Investment Report 2018*, New York and Geneva, United Nations, 2018, pp. 65, 207.

384. Goldberg, “Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader ‘Makes Hitler Look Good’,” *op. cit.*

385. *Ibid.*

Muhammad bin Salman Appoints Heir

As described above, Muhammad bin Salman had three fundamental objectives: he strove for political stability at home, adopted a myriad project to ensure sustainable economic development, and sought to open the Kingdom to the global system precisely to end Riyadh's relative socio-political isolation. His quest for power went beyond rising to the throne, which was assured save for unforeseen circumstances beyond human capabilities, but to combine his unification skills with strict determination to use power, both soft and hard, more effectively. Indeed, it may be safe to state that his soft-power models were and are Japan, Korea, China, Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Although critics saw little more than autocracy and repression, Muhammad bin Salman's intrinsic skills included savvy organization capabilities, a willingness to take advice from elders he respected, and to harbor a vision about the kind of future he wants for his nation.

To be sure, that future was very much a work in progress, and it would be naïve to assume that an advanced high-tech society can emerge overnight. Saudi Arabia was an oil producer and would remain one for decades to come. Still, non-oil income was poised to increase the post-oil era, whenever that day arrived. In the meantime, Riyadh wished to embark on sound economic programs, adopt financial responsibility by spending according to well-defined mechanisms that prepared for the post-welfare state, unleash entrepreneurship to allow creative minds to do what they do best, and introduce entertainment facilities that permitted those who create wealth to enjoy life too.

Yet, and notwithstanding all of these potential accomplishments, Muhammad bin Salman's most important decision after he accedes the throne is to appoint his own heir. Naturally, the leader will likely scupper inevitable criticisms when he appoints an heir to the throne, a decision that will mark him for life. Assuming that he would want his own son to eventually succeed him, and because 'Abdul 'Aziz bin Muhammad bin Salman bin 'Abdul 'Abdul 'Aziz is a toddler, Muhammad bin Salman will need to rely on someone to fill the interim gap until his eldest offspring reaches adulthood. Whether he will appoint a brother or a cousin—like the late King Hussein bin Talal of Jordan who relied on this method in 1965, before he replaced Hassan bin Talal by his son 'Abdallah bin Hussein on 25 January 1999, sixteen days before he passed away—is

impossible to know.³⁸⁶ Suffice it to say that a number of candidates were available to fulfill that critical post, including several of his brothers—Sultan [a former Royal Saudi Air Force pilot who flew aboard the American *Discovery* Space Shuttle in June 1985 and who serves as Minister of the Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage since 2009];³⁸⁷ 'Abdul 'Aziz [a former assistant oil minister (2005–2017) and since April 2017 state minister for energy affairs]; Faysal [Governor of Madinah]; Sa'ud [an entrepreneur and business magnate]; Turki [the chairman of Tharawat Holding who served as the chairman of the Saudi Research and Marketing Group (2013–2014)]; and Khalid, a former Royal Saudi Air Force pilot who became Ambassador to the United States in 2017, and, on 23 February 2019, he was appointed deputy defense minister and was succeeded in Washington by Rimah bint Bandar Al Sa'ud. In addition to his brothers, Muhammad bin Salman had the privilege of calling upon dozens of cousins or uncles to fulfill this mission, if this was necessary. Of course, the choice was critical and would show the future King's mettle, though few should doubt his capabilities to satisfy such an objective.

As stated above, Muhammad bin Salman was also the Kingdom's Minister of Defense, which placed him in the eye of the storm. Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia held various maneuvers with Egypt, Turkey and other countries to train its forces, and while the GCC states created a joint military force known as *Dar'ah al-Jazirah* [Peninsula Shield] in 1983 that, in turn, conducted frequent modest bilateral joint exercises, the six GCC states took shy steps to meet growing threats. Riyadh perceived Peninsula Shield as a necessary regional unit that ought not replace its vanguard forces, though it would be a mistake to conclude that Riyadh did not see value in it. On the contrary, if the Kingdom's armed forces were the backbone of GCC armies, and the other five countries' troops were all vital components, the GCC force was its firm hand that gained more value after 2010. Indeed, this steadfastness was reinforced in April 2014 when Saudi Arabia conducted massive military exercises at Hafr al-Batin with the participation of

386. Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies: A Reference Guide*, Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008, pp. 362–367.

387. On 28 December 2018, King Salman appointed his son Sultan, the first Arab to travel into space in 1985, as chairman of the new *Hay'at al-Sa'udiyyah lil-Fada'* [Saudi Space Agency]. See "King Announces Plans to Set Up Saudi Space Agency," *Arabian Business*, 28 December 2018, at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/technology/410411-plans-revealed-to-set-up-saudi-space-agency>.

nearly 130,000 troops. Operation Sayf ‘Abdallah (Sword of ‘Abdallah), which was followed by a large parade at the King Khalid Military City attended by senior officials, showcased the Kingdom’s military might in a rare public display of combat aircraft, armor, and for the first time, the CSS-2 ballistic missiles.

The significance of showing the missiles intended to send multiple messages to state actors around the world and specifically Iran even before King Salman acceded the throne. In the words of the then Saudi Chief-of-Staff, General Husayn al-Qabayl, the Saudi armed forces were ready to “defend our holy places and our achievements ... and [while] we don’t intend to attack anyone because it’s not the Kingdom’s policy,” the officer clarified that the maneuvers intended to raise the training level of the armed forces, test their preparedness to deter enemy attacks, and defend the country from aggressors.”³⁸⁸ Though uncharacteristic, the show of force telegraphed to Iran as well as the Kingdom’s Western allies, the notion that Riyadh and the GCC States were ready, and could assume, a large portion of the defense burdens. Interestingly, the exercises emphasized that any future Gulf security architecture would have to take into account Saudi views, which could no longer be overlooked.

Speculation on Rule until 2030

No one summarized anti-Muhammad bin Salman concerns better than Michael Burleigh, the author of *The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: A History of Now* in a scathing London *Times* opinion piece that redefined “hysteria.” Burleigh launched his essay, aptly titled “Young Saudi Pretender’s Days are Numbered,” by concluding that the heir apparent’s reform projects—barely in their second year of implementation—“have come to nothing.”³⁸⁹ He believed that what Riyadh projected was hype, that King Salman was disappointed and showed “signs of doubt,” and that one of the monarch’s brothers, Ahmad bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, was persuaded “to distance the Saud family from Salman and his ambitious heir.” Beyond doubts raised about various economic projects,

388. Mansour al-Marzoqi al-Bogami, “Saudi’s Strategic Invitation to Iran,” *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, 12 August 2014, at <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/08/2014812114442948388.html>. See also Norman Cigar, *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons: How do Countries Think About the Bomb?*, Abington, Oxon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 2016.

389. Michael Burleigh, “Young Saudi Pretender’s Days are Numbered,” *The Times*, 14 September 2018, at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/3661f6aa-b789-11e8-9605-b6ff09b482a1>.

Burleigh audaciously claimed that Riyadh’s foreign policy initiatives have “damaged the kingdom,” citing the war in Yemen and its “more than 10,000 Yemeni civilians ... killed, and 8.5 million fac[ing] starvation, [while] Houthi rebels targeted by Riyadh [we]re growing stronger, not weaker, thanks to support by regional Shias.”³⁹⁰

None of this was new, of course, as many other commentators and analysts had repeated the same litany, but what was precious was Burleigh’s dismissal that Saudi Arabia, equipped with expensive American made Patriot missiles to intercept incoming ballistic missiles, could not overcome cheap Huthi attacks. Though the Englishman did not exonerate his own country’s leaders in the ongoing war, it was somehow given that the Kingdom should or ought to simply tolerate Huthi assaults, without explaining why. There was nothing in this essay about the terror that Huthi rebels inflicted on Saudi cities and Saudi citizens as if *their* lives did not matter. There was even less about where the Huthis acquired, and continued to receive, such ballistic missiles when Yemen, a relatively poor country, could barely afford to import necessities and survive. Burleigh did not raise these questions since they did not fit his anti-Saudi narrative. He did not bother to ask the most basic defense questions that he, as a British subject, would presumably ask—even demand from authorities—namely to defend the United Kingdom from any foe though, somehow, Saudis did not have the right to raise the same queries. Naturally, there was nothing in this essay about Iran’s prowess in Syria, where at least 500,000 were sacrificed between 2011 and 2018, along with massive destruction and misery for millions.

To be sure, there was a tragedy in the making in Yemen, with millions facing starvation, but our intrepid author could not find the space in his epistle to report that Riyadh committed “\$1.5 billion in new humanitarian aid for Yemen where it is supporting the internationally recognized government against Iran-aligned Houthis in a three-year-old civil war.”³⁹¹ Nor could he bring himself to discussing whether the Huthis and their Iranian allies might be partially responsible for the devastation that the hapless country lived through to satisfy the hegemonic aspirations of a non-Arab entity. On the

390. *Ibid.*

391. Stephen Kalin, “Saudi-Led Coalition to Give \$1.5 billion in Yemen Aid, Expand Port Capacity,” *Reuters*, 21 January 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-aid-saudi/saudi-led-coalition-to-give-1-5-billion-in-yemen-aid-expand-port-capacity-idUSKBN1FB00K>.

contrary, and against both logic and fact, he affirmed that the Huthis were actually in a stronger position today than at any previous time and that they continued to hurt Saudi Arabia by launching cheap missiles into it. Remarkably, Burleigh displayed the skills of an accountant—“Each time a US-supplied Patriot missile intercepts [Iranian supplied missiles], it costs Riyadh \$3 million”—but failed to show any compassion towards those on whose heads the missiles fell. It was unbecoming and somewhat cavalier for an opinion writer to display such lack of compassion towards Saudi victims, though his preferences came through loud and clear.

Burleigh’s anti-Saudi doozies continued with a distorted discussion of Qatar and Doha’s “alleged” support of the Muslim Brotherhood and other terrorist groups. Of course, he could easily mock as much as he wished, including make stale references to the 68-mile canal that proposed to cut Qatar off from the Arabian Peninsula and, interestingly, the success with which the Qataris managed to preserve and expand their economy. While no one desired to see the economy of a GCC partner collapse—and mercifully Doha was not about to experience such a predicament given its tiny population that benefitted from one of the highest per capita incomes anywhere—time will tell whether Qatar may weather the boycott.³⁹²

Still, *The Times*’ columnist reserved his strongest criticisms for the end of his diatribe, maintaining that Muhammad bin Salman’s claims as a modernizer were unbelievable because Riyadh repressed Saudi Shi’ahs in the Eastern Province. He cited the case of Isra’a al-Ghumgham [Ghomgham in the preferred Persian-language or Egyptian-English spellings], the first female human rights activist who was on trial for terrorism. It was too early to know what the verdict might be or whether the imposed sentence—death penalty in such instances—would be carried out. To be fair, Burleigh referred to what he called the “repression of prominent Sunni clerics (including an imam and judge in Mecca itself) who have enormous social media followings in the kingdom and

392. Patrick Wintour, “Gulf States Considering Plans to Bring End to Saudi-Led Qatar Boycott,” *The Guardian*, 7 March 2018, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/06/gulf-states-plans-end-saudi-arabia-qatar-boycott>. See also Abdulrahman al-Rashed, “Has Boycott of Qatar Failed?”, *Al-Arabiya*, 12 June 2018, at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2018/06/12/Has-boycott-of-Qatar-failed-.html>; “Qatar Takes UAE to Court Over ‘Racially Discriminatory’ Boycott,” *Middle East Eye*, 27 June 2018, at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/qatar-takes-uae-court-over-racially-discriminatory-boycott-387611879>.

beyond.” Few doubted that Shaykh Salman al-Awdah had a large following but trials were best left to courts of law instead of courts of public opinion. It may seem a harmless event for some, but the Muslim Brotherhood posed a threat to the Kingdom and the security courts were best equipped to assume their responsibilities as necessary.

Naturally, merely stating that Muhammad bin Salman was “not a reformer,” did not mean that he was not so. Moreover, writing that “his father can alter the succession [pattern] and strip [the Heir Apparent] of his power” with the “stroke of a pen” and that this “may happen soon, given the growing clamour from angry princes,” does not mean that these were or are in the works either. Of course, Burleigh was free to imagine whatever he wished, but few should pretend that any of his disparaging comments were of the credible variety. Our fearless publicist revealed his unfamiliarity with the subject, however, when he wrote that Muhammad bin Salman, knowing what his father was capable of and, perhaps, planned to remove him from power, “slept on a heavily guarded yacht moored off Jeddah all summer.” This was fiction at best but, mercifully, of the juvenile kind.

One of Burleigh’s readers seems to have been Bruce Riedel whose 23 September 2018 essay, “Saudi Arabia is at its least stable in 50 years,” repeated most of the points broached in *The Times* opinion essay. Riedel chose to publish his outburst on the day Saudi Arabia celebrated its 88th national day but one can assume that this was not intentional even if the irony should not be dismissed out of hand. He added a few “insights” of his own, including the assertion that senior family members were upset with Muhammad bin Salman; that he may have instigated the 22 September terrorist attack in Ahvaz, Iran (because he had publicly stated that he wanted “to fight Iran inside Iran”); and that the Heir Apparent feared for his life, which was the alleged reason why he “spend many nights on his half-billion-dollar yacht moored in Jeddah.” “It’s a floating palace longer than a football field and with many perks,” deciphered Riedel, who added: “It is also a potential escape hatch” that, clearly, was remarkably inventive.³⁹³

All of this, it was worth remembering, before the 2 October 2018 Istanbul assassination,

393. Bruce Riedel, “Saudi Arabia Is At Its Least Stable In 50 Years,” *al-Monitor*, 23 September 2018, at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/09/saudi-arabia-stability-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman.html>.

which further mobilized Western and Iranian public opinion against Arabs in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, with a special emphasis on the ambitious Muhammad bin Salman who rattled many feathers. The Heir Apparent made many enemies because he was and is ambitious for his country though, as Napoleon Bonaparte affirmed: “Great ambition is the passion of a great character. Those endowed with it may perform very good or very bad acts. All depends on the principles which direct them” that, truth be told, aroused unmitigated responses.³⁹⁴

Notwithstanding eruptions of confusion spewed by Burleigh, Riedel, Al-Rasheed and so many others, all of which pretended to play Cassandras and predict disasters galore and that presumably required London and Washington to distance the two major Western powers from Riyadh, the time was right to forget naysayers. While *Bloomberg* posited that some investors have already forgotten about *Vision 2030*, and that the kingdom’s expansionary new budget allegedly suggested that the “government lacked the resolve and the discipline to wean the country from its dependence on oil, shrink state handouts, and develop a viable private sector,” significant investors were more than happy to take on the long-term and embark on foreign direct investments.³⁹⁵ In fact, and as John R. Bradley wrote so eloquently, it was critical to believe what the Heir Apparent was saying he would do and what he was actually doing about a slew of subjects—topped by the dangerous “Islamist ideology” that threatened the Kingdom in the first instance and others too. In an interview with *The Spectator*, the Heir Apparent shared his views in “an extraordinarily frank assessment of how to combat terrorism.” This, believed Bradley, meant “rooting out Islamist ideology ... as much as sharing intelligence ... [and continued:] He presumably would take this blunt message to MI5 and MI6 in his meetings with those agencies, as well as to Theresa May’s National

Security Council.”³⁹⁶ Bradley, who worked as a journalist and editor in the Kingdom for three years in the early 2000s, wrote his share of skeptical essays on the country and seldom spared the Al Sa‘ud his opprobrium. He emphasized what he termed Riyadh’s “moral hypocrisy at home and terror-funding abroad” but warned “cynics who argue against being taken in by [Muhammad bin Salman’s] much-trumpeted embrace of a more moderate Islam,” to appreciate what the Heir Apparent was attempting to do. He sincerely believed that King Salman and his designated successor were honest as neither was talking about democratization, aware that Western-style pluralism was a long-term project, not necessarily associated with sorely needed reforms on so many other fronts. Rather, Bradley clarified, Saudi Arabia was and would remain a Muslim country. Moreover, he understood that whatever ailed this conservative society would need to be addressed without upsetting the social contract in place, which meant that Saudis would ultimately be responsible for putting order at home and devising a new social contract, if they determine that was what they required. Remarkably, he even took on the long-term view when he underscored how the ongoing “Arab Uprisings” have illustrated how wrong choices could and did lead to violence and chaos, which Riyadh masterfully avoided. Instead, King Salman and the Al Sa‘ud opted for their own solutions, which included the need to embark on genuine socio-economic transformations, hinting that, perhaps, Muhammad bin Salman was an admirer of the late Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew whose accomplishments spoke for themselves.

Bradley closed his essay with two critically important points that need to be emphasized in this chronicle. The first is that the period of transition that Saudi Arabia was bound to experience might stretch over several years, perhaps decades, though what was useful to remember was that adjustments that proposed to alter so much usually necessitated time. Equally important was his astute assessment that the risk of revolutionary upheaval in the Kingdom was “hugely overblown” because the Al Sa‘ud, and especially Muhammad bin Salman, were largely backed by the overwhelming majority of the population. To be sure, there was dissent at all levels of society and many were aware that poverty and unemployment were facts of life, though the country’s youths grasped the need to embark on fundamental changes in order to ensure greater freedoms. Few

394. The quotation is on the BrainyQuote web-page at https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/napoleon_bonaparte_150168.

395. See “Saudi Arabia’s Blurred Vision for Economic Reform: Extravagant spending in next year’s budget threatens to scare investors,” *Bloomberg*, 21 December 2018, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-12-21/saudi-arabia-budget-will-make-investors-miss-vision-2030>. See also “Top Silicon Valley Venture Capitalist Inks Deal to Help Saudi SMEs,” *Arabian Business*, 22 December 2018, at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/article/409608>; and “Saudi Arabia Eyes Deal to Create \$182bn Mega Bank: National Commercial Bank, Saudi Arabia’s biggest lender, says it has started initial talks with Riyad Bank for a merger,” *Arabian Business*, 24 December 2018, at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/article/410293>.

396. John R. Bradley, “Forget the Naysayers. Saudi’s Crown Prince is the Real Deal,” *The Spectator*, 31 July 2018, at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/03/forget-the-naysayers-saudis-crown-prince-is-the-real-deal/>.

wished to abandon conservative traditions, but most hoped that the conservatism they practiced would evolve, without unduly upsetting their cherished customs. The majority of Saudis are an extraordinarily warm and hospitable people, something that was not about to change, no matter what muddled analysts described. They are not the crazed folks that caricatures depicted, focusing on excesses to belittle an entire nation's cultural uniqueness. Bradley closed his essay by calling on his readers, presumably Western decision-makers who also, at least periodically, read *The Times*, to “back [Muhammad] bin Salman as he guides” the vast majority of Saudis away from extremism “toward a freer and hopefully more prosperous future.” This was the way to further strengthen the Kingdom's political stability until 2030.



Saudi Arabia in 2030

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