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Saudi Arabia and Its New Leadership in 2030

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Introduction

Observers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have anticipated and continue to believe that the demise of the Al Sa‘ud ruling family from power is imminent, as many, if not most, concluded that King Salman’s reign was tainted by the presence of Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman in the number 2 position. Long before either man assumed the burdens of power, selected experts of the country believed and some cherish the view that the vast country, whose physical size is nearly half that of the continental span of the United States, could be divided into smaller Amirates 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 the questions where *Saudi Arabia in 2030: The Emergence of a New Leadership* picks-up the story, as it provides a fresh assessment in light of recent developments, and tests several hypotheses.¹ Without any pretensions of absolute certainty that the Al Sa‘ud will permanently prevail, the paper investigates the stability of the Government of Saudi Arabia under King Salman bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz, and evaluates the most likely scenarios for Muhammad bin Salman to succeed his father, precisely to probe whether continuity may prevail.

Perceptions of Saudi Arabia and Its Leadership

To be sure, and while Saudi leaders remained resolute to help an increasingly educated and technologically awakened population to “create wealth,” as well as to encourage entrepreneurship, perceptions of Saudi society—both at the population and leadership levels—tended to be skewed. In 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 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 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 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.

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 as of late 2019. 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 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—became a viable activity after 2015 (but especially after Prince Muhammad was appointed Heir Apparent on 21 June 2017), though this simply highlights acute biases. These attitudes gained traction in late 2018, especially after the tragic Khashoggi assassination, 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. He was a member of the banned Muslim Brotherhood and may have cooperated with foreign countries to usher in permanent political change in the Kingdom. 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 Leadership

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.

Of course, and notwithstanding trifling commentaries that denigrate recent reforms, it is fair to ask what kind of social changes are under way and whether Riyadh will succeed in implementing all of the recommendations included in *Vision 2030*, a major blueprint that will dramatically transform the country. Among the many steps taken in recent years, none were or are as important as the state’s plans to meet internal challenges, even if equally valid concerns regarding gender matters and the Kingdom’s rapidly evolving legal trials. Naturally, leading internal challenges are various economic questions, which *Vision 2030* aims to address as Saudi Arabia diversifies.

- **Economic Reforms in a Rentier-State**

Saudi Arabia plans to place its 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*.⁸ 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.

- **Budget Deficits Need Attention**

Because of oil price fluctuations, budgets were 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 2017.⁹ 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 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.¹⁰ Clearly, 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.¹¹ Naturally, this was ambitious but doable, especially as non-oil revenues increased, even if subsidies continued, including bonuses and allowances for public sector workers.

- ***Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program***

Together, *Vision 2030* and the *National Transformation Program* proposals were, in effect, Muhammad bin Salman's responses to critics who concluded that Saudi Arabia was permanently mired in an economic quagmire. While detractors dismissed both and declared their failures long before any of the envisaged or planned projects were implemented, 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. Truth be told, *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 the country where it mattered most—among able-bodied and creative youths.

- **ARAMCO IPO**

At the heart of the Kingdom's economic reforms was the ARAMCO IPO that angered some and confused others when implementation plans were postponed. What was the concern and how did Riyadh respond? *Vision 2030* intended 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.¹²

Global Trials and the Khashoggi Affair

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. In 2019, several key relationships were tested, starting with the vital Saudi-American relationships under the Obama and Trump administrations, followed by the Kingdom's complicated connections with Russia. Fresh reappraisals were under way with key Asian powers, including Pakistan, India, China and the Republic of Korea. Links with two major European countries, the United Kingdom and France, further altered policy choices between them and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as various challenges emerged within the Arab World, especially in the aftermath of the so-called "Arab Spring" that, inter alia, raised the vital relevance question for the Gulf Cooperation Council. How Riyadh conducted the War for the Yemen, and how it interacted with Revolutionary Iran were critical issues, which preoccupied senior Saudi decision-makers.

In the whirlwind of major foreign policy transformations, and though Western government officials believed that Muhammad bin Salman was a *dangerous* man, ready to use the Kingdom's vast wealth to punish critics and/or enemies, the Khashoggi Affair garnered attention on the Heir Apparent. There was no debate over the assassination, which the Saudi government acknowledged, even if many questions were raised as to whether the Heir Apparent ordered the murder or even knew about it. Suffice it to say that critics used this terrible tragedy to further lambast Muhammad bin Salman and question whether he was qualified to rule over the Kingdom. As discussed in detail in the report, the fate of the presumed assassins was in the hands of the Saudi judiciary, which was embarked on a thorough legal investigation to try 21 individuals, with the public prosecutor asking for the death penalty in the case of 5.

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 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. 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.¹³

Regardless of 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.

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.¹⁴ It was as if many were disenchanted that no gloom and doom materialized although we could surely look forward—according to many “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.¹⁵

- **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.

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.¹⁶

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.

- **Muhammad bin Salman Appoints Heir**

As described above, Muhammad bin Salman had three fundamental objectives: political stability at home, myriad projects to ensure sustainable economic development, and opening 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 to era, whenever that day arrived. In the meantime, Riyadh wished to embark on sound economic programs, adopt financial responsibility by spending according to well-define 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.

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.”¹⁷ 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, 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.”¹⁸

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.

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.

All of this, it was worth remembering, before the 2 October 2018 Istanbul assassination, 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.¹⁹

Notwithstanding eruptions of confusion spewed by Burleigh 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.²⁰ 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.”²¹ 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.

Conclusion

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 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 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. Muhammad bin Salman will guide the vast majority of Saudis away from extremism to encourage the creation of wealth that will ensure a more prosperous future.

¹ Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Saudi Arabia in 2030: The Emergence of a New Leadership*, Seoul: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, August 2019, available at <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/saudi-arabia-in-2030-the-emergence-of-a-new-leadership/>.

² Among the many strategic analyses that advanced 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.

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>.

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.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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>.

¹⁰ 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->

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¹² 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>.

¹³ 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/>.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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>.

¹⁶ Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 36.

¹⁷ 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>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The quotation is on the BrainyQuote web-page at https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/napoleon_bonaparte_150168.

²⁰ 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 Riyadh Bank for a merger,” *Arabian Business*, 24 December 2018, at <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/article/410293>.

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