

1 “Securing the throne for young Mohammed has been the  
2 main driver of many policies sold to the public as reforms  
3 that would transform Saudi Arabia . . .”

4 **Brute Force and Hollow Reforms**  
5 **in Saudi Arabia**

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8 *Academy and a visiting professor at the Middle East Centre*  
9 *of the London School of Economics. Her latest book is The*  
10 *Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia (Hurst,*  
11 *2020).*

12 The contradiction<sup>1</sup> between reform and repression provides  
13 a useful prism through which to view Saudi Arabia under  
14 the current ruler King Salman bin Abdulaziz and his son  
15 Crown Prince Mohammed<sup>2</sup> bin Salman.<sup>3</sup> Many respectable  
16 academics, media pundits, and policymakers have argued  
17 that this duality is inevitable: reforming the Saudi economy  
18 and society is necessarily a violent process that must be  
19 carried out by an authoritarian, even brutal, new ruler. Such  
20 assertions about repression as a necessary precondition for  
21 tolerant Islam<sup>4</sup>, gender equality, a vibrant liberal economy,  
22 fun culture, and empowered, entrepreneurial youth build on  
23 defunct notions of oriental despotism. Embedded in this  
24 outdated paradigm is the mistaken belief that a socially  
25 conservative, religiously radical, and economically lazy  
26 society will never shed the shackles of the past without  
27 coercion.

28 Saudi Arabia needs to be understood better than the  
29 conventional wisdom's credulous reception of successive  
30 monarchs and their visions for transforming the country

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31 <sup>1</sup> Perhaps make this "tension"?

32 <sup>2</sup> We generally follow NY Times style for names.

33 <sup>3</sup> Maybe insert a transitional phrase to set up the next sentence, e.g. "But it can be distorting if the observer is not  
34 careful"?

35 <sup>4</sup> makes this something like "a more tolerant form of Islam than Wahhabism, the puritanical Sunni doctrine long  
36 promoted by the kingdom"? (Seems a mention of Wahhabism would be worth including for general readers)

37 from tradition to modernity, with an inevitable degree of  
38 repression. The Saudi regime is, in fact, an autocracy in  
39 which only superficial social liberalism is allowed to  
40 flourish.

41 When he became king in 2015, and then named his son  
42 crown prince two and a half years later, Salman missed an  
43 opportunity for a genuine relaunch of Saudi Arabia. During  
44 the reign of his predecessor, King Abdullah (2005–15),  
45 calls for political reform were already prevalent and  
46 growing louder. Saudi activists, Islamists, and feminists  
47 demanded improvement of the country's human rights  
48 record, freedom for detained political prisoners, and  
49 empowerment of women. Some also pushed for  
50 transforming the absolute monarchy into a constitutional  
51 one, restricting the royal household's privileges, and  
52 establishing an elected national assembly to replace the old  
53 appointed consultative council.

54 Civil society enjoyed a fleeting moment of optimism<sup>5</sup> that  
55 some of these demands would be met. But King Salman  
56 and his son had more urgent priorities: namely, establishing  
57 the crown prince as the new face of Saudi Arabia,

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58 <sup>5</sup> Briefly indicate what this optimism was based on? Signals or minor concessions from government?

59 consolidating his power, and eliminating rivals for the  
60 throne. Securing the throne for Mohammed has been the  
61 main driver of many policies sold to the public as reforms  
62 that would transform Saudi Arabia from a conservative and  
63 radical society to one that promotes openness, tolerance,  
64 and economic liberalism.

## 65 **POWER MOVES**

66 Since 1933, succession to the Saudi throne has been  
67 horizontal, moving from one son of the founder of the  
68 monarchy, Ibn Saud, to another, without necessarily  
69 following seniority. Neither foreign observers of Saudi  
70 royal politics nor Saudis themselves expected Salman to  
71 skip the handful of surviving senior brothers or eligible  
72 second-generation princes when selecting his successor.

73 Within months of taking the throne, Salman had promoted  
74 his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, to the position of  
75 crown prince, while making Mohammed bin Salman, one  
76 of his own youngest sons, deputy crown prince. Rumors  
77 about a rivalry between the crown prince and his deputy  
78 were rampant, and observers expected the conflict to break

79 out into the open. In June 2017, Salman exercised his  
80 prerogative as an absolute monarch and one of the eldest  
81 surviving sons of the nation's founder to remove Nayef by  
82 royal decree and elevate his son to heir apparent.

83 Saudi Arabia can now truly be called *al-mamlaka*  
84 *al-salmaniyya*, Salman's kingdom, as it has been named by  
85 observers astonished at the speed with which the king  
86 shifted the succession in favor of his own son, whose own  
87 sons are now expected to succeed him. Salman has yet to  
88 appoint a new deputy crown prince, setting up Mohammed,  
89 who is just 35, to be the monarch for a very long time. The  
90 crown prince is already the de facto ruler of the kingdom,  
91 though he cannot become de jure monarch until his father,  
92 now in his mid-eighties, passes away.<sup>6</sup>

93 Within months of his elevation, Mohammed detained  
94 several senior princes in the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Riyadh,  
95 including the powerful Miteb bin Abdullah, son of the late  
96 King Abdullah, who was in charge of the National Guard.  
97 A dozen members of the business elite were also  
98 imprisoned. Mohammed presented this drastic measure and  
99 unprecedented humiliation as part of a campaign against

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps make this statement less categorical, since there has been much speculation that he may abdicate?

100 corruption, but few were convinced. Perhaps suspecting  
101 that his relatives had felt sidelined by his sudden elevation,  
102 he may have wanted to show that he was capable of  
103 ruthlessness if anyone dared challenge his newly acquired  
104 powers.

105 None of the detainees appeared in open court; they settled  
106 matters privately with the crown prince and his private  
107 aides and secretaries. They were gradually released after  
108 paying ransoms<sup>7</sup>. Mohammed appropriated huge  
109 sums—reportedly over \$100 billion—from the detainees.

110 None of the prince's other cousins were detained, reflecting  
111 the selective nature of the purge and belying the  
112 anticorruption pretext. In addition to sending a chilling  
113 warning to potential rival princes, the detention of some of  
114 the most senior members of the ruling family and seizure of  
115 their assets sent a stark message to the Saudi people about  
116 how far the young crown prince was prepared to go in his  
117 determination to become the undisputed future king.

118 The detention of princes was the first in the history of the  
119 kingdom but not the last. Prince Ahmad, the king's brother,

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<sup>7</sup> Clarify how these "ransoms" were publicly presented by the govt? As seizures of embezzled/corruptly gotten funds that were being rightfully returned to the state treasury?

120 and the deposed crown prince Nayef, together with a  
121 handful of others, faced a second round of detention and  
122 interrogation in March 2020. The successive waves of  
123 humiliation and coercion reflect may insecurity on  
124 Mohammed's part about his standing in the absence of  
125 royal consensus on his leadership. The main threat to his  
126 power, he seems to believe, is neither revolutionary  
127 movements nor the demands of activists for political rights,  
128 but fellow members of the royal family.

129 Salman still occupies the throne, but he has retreated from  
130 view and from the centers of power due to his advanced  
131 age and deteriorating health. In August 2020, when he was  
132 discharged from the hospital after minor surgery, he took  
133 up residence in [sc]NEOM[/sc], a futuristic city under  
134 construction on the Red Sea. He had previously presided at  
135 major state events and banquets when foreign dignitaries  
136 visited the kingdom, and stepped up his appearances during  
137 times of crisis. Yet in the summer of 2020, when crises  
138 ranging from the [sc]COVID-19[/sc] pandemic to plunging  
139 oil revenues have hammered the kingdom, he seems to  
140 have abandoned the capital, leaving his son in charge.

141 The crown prince has wasted no time consolidating his  
142 hold on power, adding an array of other titles, including  
143 second deputy prime minister, minister of defense, chief of  
144 the royal court, chair of the Council of Political and  
145 Security Affairs, and chair of the Council of Economic  
146 Development Affairs. He also heads an array of newly  
147 created foundations and organizations for the promotion of  
148 art, entrepreneurship, and youth empowerment. Thus, he  
149 now oversees domestic political decisions, regional and  
150 international relations, and security, intelligence, financial,  
151 and even cultural affairs. No other prince has ever held so  
152 many positions at such a young age. Yet he still cannot  
153 count on rival princes to accept their marginalization and  
154 humiliation.

155 **UNSETTLING VISION**

156 To consolidate his cult of personality and burnish his image  
157 as a champion of reform, Mohammed needed to stage a  
158 charm offensive designed to show the world a new, modern  
159 Saudi Arabia. As part of this public relations campaign, the  
160 Saudi and international media were given unprecedented



161 access to the young prince. He was photographed attending  
162 festivals and concerts, enhancing his reputation as a young,  
163 enlightened, and energetic future monarch guiding his  
164 country through a great revolution.

165 This narrative of a top-down national transformation is  
166 embedded in Vision 2030, which Mohammed first  
167 announced in early 2016 in interviews with two foreign  
168 media outlets, the *Economist* and Bloomberg News. After  
169 Saudis posted criticism online about his decision to  
170 announce such an important initiative in foreign  
171 publications, and in English, he outlined his agenda two  
172 months later, in April 2016, on the Saudi-owned Al  
173 Arabiya television network, whose owner was among those  
174 detained at the Ritz Carlton.

175 The most controversial provisions of Vision 2030 included  
176 a plan to raise capital by privatizing five percent of Saudi  
177 Aramco, the national oil company, in an initial public stock  
178 offering<sup>8</sup>, while curbing government welfare and subsidies.  
179 Defending those proposals to a skeptical national audience,  
180 Mohammed noted that Saudi Arabia had stood up to British  
181 colonialism at a time before the nation's vast oil reserves

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<sup>8</sup> added detail about privatization taking form of IPO, since it was big news at the time--OK?

182 were discovered, suggesting that it would now be unfazed  
183 by dwindling oil revenues. Vision 2030 would diversify the  
184 economy, he explained, and in the meantime, increasing  
185 Aramco's transparency<sup>9</sup> would enable it to generate more  
186 revenues for the state. Most of the rest of the company  
187 would be privatized at a later date, he implied.<sup>10</sup>

188 Jamal Farsi, Isam al-Zamil, and Abdul Aziz al-Dakhil were  
189 among many economists and intellectuals who voiced their  
190 criticism<sup>11</sup> online and in lectures attended by members of  
191 the educated Saudi elite. <sup>12</sup>In 2020, Farsi, al-Zamil, and  
192 al-Dakhil remain in prison.

### 193 **ILLUSIONS OF OPENNESS**

194 As part of his social reform program, the crown prince  
195 pledged to restore a moderate form of Islam in Saudi  
196 Arabia. Implemented without any consultation or debate,  
197 these reforms have proved controversial.

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198 <sup>9</sup> insert "as required by a stock offering"?

199 <sup>10</sup> add parenthesis on how the IPO eventually went?

200 <sup>11</sup> briefly note the main thrust of their criticism of Vision 2030?

201 <sup>12</sup> To clarify, start this sentence, "They were soon/later arrested," or note when they were arrested?

202 The state religion had allegedly<sup>13</sup> been corrupted by Saudi  
203 Islamists since 1979. The king<sup>14</sup> imposed restrictions on the  
204 infamous Committee for Commanding Right and  
205 Prohibiting Vice, known as the religious police. He also  
206 revoked the law that prohibits women from driving.

207 Other steps toward gender equality were also top priorities.  
208 Greater visibility for women in public and private sector  
209 employment would help present a picture of reform. The  
210 guardianship system was relaxed, allowing women to take  
211 jobs without the permission of their male guardian, which  
212 had previously been required. However, such a requirement  
213 remains in place for marriage and foreign travel. In 2019,  
214 official newspapers announced that a committee had been  
215 formed to study the possibility of abolishing the  
216 guardianship system for nonminor.<sup>15</sup>

217 A succession of royal decrees also led to greater openness  
218 in public spaces—men and women began to intermingle  
219 freely.<sup>16</sup> But at the same time, the crown prince has pursued  
220 an unprecedented crackdown on civil society, detaining  
221 intellectuals, economists, university professors, journalists,

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222 <sup>13</sup> Clarify if it was MBS who alleged this?

223 <sup>14</sup> At MBS's behest?

224 <sup>15</sup> Clarify what the age cutoff for minor status is?

225 <sup>16</sup> Note typical venues for this, e.g. malls, coffee shops?

226 feminists, and above all, Islamists of all shades. Any  
227 criticism of his social, economic, and religious policies, or  
228 his regional strategies, such as the war in Yemen, rift with  
229 Qatar<sup>17</sup>, and clandestine but close ties with Israel, became  
230 taboo.

231 After successive waves of arrests since 2017, hundreds of  
232 detainees have languished in prison, including religious  
233 scholars of the Islamist movement, such as Salman  
234 al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali, and the prominent feminist  
235 and women's rights activist Lujain al-Hathloul. Young  
236 activists who have been critical of Saudi leaders on social  
237 media were also targeted. While pledging to empower  
238 youth<sup>18</sup>, Mohammed has made them targets of his pervasive  
239 repression.

240 To contain young people and foster creativity, the prince  
241 has attempted to co-opt the arts. He founded the Prince  
242 Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Foundation  
243 ([sc]MiSK[sc]), which according to its website<sup>19</sup> is  
244 “devoted to cultivating learning and leadership for the

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245 <sup>17</sup> To clarify, make this “moves to regionally isolate Qatar” or some such?

246 <sup>18</sup> make this “youth and women” since the crackdown on feminists at the same time as the end of the driving ban  
247 has drawn a lot of attention?

248 <sup>19</sup> Not clear from this quote what the foundation's connection with the arts is--briefly clarify? e.g. does it provide  
249 grants for certain kinds of arts projects?

250 Saudi Arabia of tomorrow.” To serve as chairman of the  
251 MiSK Initiative Center and head of his private office, he  
252 selected Bader al-Asaker, who gained international  
253 notoriety in 2019 when he was linked to a scandal  
254 involving an attempt to infiltrate Twitter to uncover the  
255 identity of critics of the Saudi regime. Saudi dissident Fuad  
256 Ibrahim has alleged that MiSK is a cover for espionage and  
257 related activities “linked to the crown prince.”

258 Perhaps the most controversial component of the prince’s  
259 Vision 2030 social reforms is the General Entertainment  
260 Authority. It was headed<sup>20</sup> by another of Mohammed’s  
261 close aides, Turki al-Sheikh, who had previously been in  
262 charge of sports. He immediately launched an ambitious  
263 entertainment program that staged events featuring Arab  
264 and Western pop stars, circuses, and other acts at newly  
265 constructed stadiums and concert halls. Saudi youth had  
266 previously been deprived of such offerings.

267 However, a global campaign by human rights activists to  
268 name and shame Western pop stars who accepted  
269 invitations prompted several to cancel their appearances.

270 Only days before Nicki Minaj was scheduled to perform at

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271 <sup>20</sup> until when?

272 the Jeddah Festival in the summer of 2019, she announced  
273 on Twitter that she had had “educated” herself about Saudi  
274 Arabia’s record on human rights and [sc]LGBTQ[/sc]  
275 rights, and decided to pull out.”

276 For their part, some Saudis<sup>21</sup>, expressing their views in the  
277 only way they can—anonously and online—condemned  
278 the provocative shows organized by the Entertainment  
279 Authority. To fend off the criticism, the Authority  
280 announced<sup>22</sup> that it had organized a competition open to all  
281 Muslims in Quran recitation and the call to prayer, with a  
282 generous prize of 12 million riyals (more than \$3 million).

### 283 **MURDER IN ISTANBUL**

284 While many older activists and young people in Saudi  
285 Arabia, preferring silence over detention, have withdrawn  
286 from the public sphere in the face of repression, those  
287 abroad have felt freer to speak out. But the October 2018  
288 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi  
289 consulate in Istanbul in demonstrated how far Mohammed  
290 would go to pursue critics abroad. Khashoggi had requested

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291 <sup>21</sup> make this “some conservative Saudis”?

292 <sup>22</sup> when?

293 a document confirming his status as a single person so he  
294 could marry his Turkish fiancée, Hatice Cengiz. By the  
295 time he arrived to pick it up three days later, a rapid  
296 intervention squad had been dispatched from Saudi Arabia  
297 with a secret mission to assassinate him. After entering the  
298 consulate, the journalist was never seen again. His body  
299 was reportedly chopped up and disposed of, either by  
300 dissolving it or by packing it into plastic bags for shipment  
301 back to Saudi Arabia.

302 Khashoggi had been living in the United States since 2017,  
303 and was a columnist for the *Washington Post* who regularly  
304 criticized Mohammed's policies and repression. He was  
305 apparently regarded by the crown prince as a national  
306 security threat because he had been closely associated with  
307 senior princes, having worked as spokesman for Saudi  
308 ambassador Turki al-Faisal in Washington and London.  
309 Khashoggi had been a defender of King Abdullah but was  
310 marginalized after Salman ascended to the throne in 2015.

311 The journalist's cruel murder exposed Mohammed's bold  
312 talk about empowering women, restoring moderate Islam,  
313 and opening up society and the economy as hollow  
314 propaganda. The carefully marketed image of the crown

315 prince as a young and energetic reformer, fit to lead a  
316 young society in the twenty-first century, was replaced with  
317 a darker picture of a ruthless and brutal autocrat.

318 **ACTIVISTS ABROAD**

319 Mohammed's campaign of repression has driven an  
320 increasing number of Saudis to seek asylum abroad. Data  
321 collected by the United Nations High Commissioner for  
322 Refugees show a rise of more than 300 percent in the  
323 number of Saudi asylum seekers, from 200 in 2012 to 815  
324 in 2017. Many other Saudis, fearing persecution if they  
325 return, stay abroad in a state of forced self-exile without  
326 applying for asylum. (Self-exile may be a misnomer, since  
327 political reasons often leave them little choice.) Jamal  
328 Khashoggi was one of them. It is only when their passports  
329 expire and Saudi embassies refuse to renew them that they  
330 might feel compelled to apply for asylum.

331 The growing but still small number of asylum seekers does  
332 not worry the regime. But their increasingly effective  
333 activism abroad is a cause for concern. Since Khashoggi's  
334 murder, dissidents abroad have successfully engaged in



335 lobbying at the United Nations, the European Union, and  
336 the [sc]US[/sc] Congress, playing a central role in  
337 generating a backlash against Saudi Arabia<sup>23</sup>.

338 The government has pursued multiple strategies to silence  
339 them. The assassination of Khashoggi represented one  
340 tactic. An internal government study conducted after the  
341 murder recommended a less confrontational approach.  
342 Emissaries from the regime often call dissidents, inform  
343 them that the crown prince wants a rapprochement, and  
344 invite them to return. When some accepted the overtures,  
345 the government publicized their return to encourage other  
346 exiles to follow suit. But so far, dissidents have not  
347 returned in great numbers. The Khashoggi murder  
348 precipitated a new exodus.

349 An internal government report<sup>24</sup>, which is not publicly  
350 available, predicted that the number of Saudi exiles would  
351 rise to 50,000 by 2030. Despite the bad publicity generated  
352 by the gruesome murder of Khashoggi and the detention of  
353 young feminists, the regime continued to pursue exiles.  
354 Saad al-Jabri, a former intelligence officer, alleged in a

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355 <sup>23</sup> Against SA in general, or more specifically against MBS's rule?

356 <sup>24</sup> Is this the same study just mentioned?

357 lawsuit in US federal court in August 2020 that the Saudi  
358 regime had sent a squad to assassinate him in Canada  
359 shortly after the Khashoggi killing. He also said two of his  
360 children had been detained in Riyadh in a ploy to force him  
361 to return from exile.<sup>25</sup>

## 362 **A DIFFICULT YEAR**

363 Mohammed economic and social reforms were seriously  
364 undermined in 2020 by two global crises. Vast domestic  
365 expenditures and international investment will be needed to  
366 implement his agenda, but government revenue has been  
367 hit hard by a decline in oil prices, which began in 2014 and  
368 accelerated in the spring of 2020. Mohammed contributed  
369 to the slide by continuing to pump oil into a sluggish global  
370 market in an attempt to punish Russia for refusing to agree  
371 to production cuts.

372 The loss of revenue deprived Mohammed of the funds he  
373 would need to pursue his various projects, including  
374 NEOM, the new city by the Red Sea. That project was  
375 tarnished by the death of Abdulrahman al-Huwaiti<sup>26</sup>, who

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376 <sup>25</sup> Added some detail here to clarify what al-Jabri alleges—OK?

377 <sup>26</sup> clarify who this was, a tribal leader?

378 had refused to relinquish his land for the development and  
379 was shot dead in his house during a confrontation with  
380 police in April 2020. The biggest hurdle, however, has been  
381 the reluctance of international investors to back the project  
382 after the Khashoggi murder.<sup>27</sup> NEOM may turn into a Saudi  
383 version of Egypt's Sharm el-Shaikh resort, where aging,  
384 deposed leaders find luxurious refuge away from the public  
385 eye.

386 In anticipation of rising budget deficits, Saudi authorities  
387 announced in July 2020 that the value added tax would  
388 increase from 5 to 15 percent.<sup>28</sup> A cost-of-living allowance  
389 for Saudis employed in the public sector was suspended.  
390 The government may be forced to resort to further austerity,  
391 such as reducing public sector jobs or cutting the salaries of  
392 state employees.

393 Such measures alone may not be enough to prevent a fiscal  
394 crunch, but their political implications are even greater. The  
395 so-called Saudi social contract rests on a bargain<sup>29</sup>. The  
396 government provides extensive services, such as public  
397 sector jobs, education, housing, and health care—and now,

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398 <sup>27</sup> Perhaps begin this sentence with a transitional phrase to emphasize that Sharm is not what NEOM was supposed  
399 to be, e.g. "Far from realizing the grand designs for a city of the future,"?

400 <sup>28</sup> When?

<sup>29</sup> Perhaps make this "an authoritarian bargain"?

401 under Mohammed, entertainment and leisure opportunities.  
402 In return, citizens are expected to pledge allegiance to the  
403 leadership, accepting their total political marginalization,  
404 disenfranchisement, and even repression as the price to pay  
405 for security and affluence. A fiscally constrained regime  
406 may find it harder to uphold its end of the bargain.<sup>30</sup>

407 Along with the oil crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic reached  
408 Saudi Arabia early in 2020. The rate of infection rose  
409 steadily among the Saudi population, and was even higher  
410 among the more than 10 million immigrant workers  
411 residing in the country. By August, around 300,000 cases  
412 and over 3,000 deaths had been reported. Lockdowns and  
413 curfews were imposed in various cities.

414 The measures to contain the virus included suspending  
415 prayers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, curtailing the  
416 religious tourism that the crown prince had hoped would  
417 increase as part of his effort to diversify the economy.<sup>31</sup>  
418 Tourism initiatives in other parts of the country also  
419 received a heavy blow as the virus disrupted international  
420 travel. The entertainment program for 2020 was put on hold

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<sup>30</sup> Added this transitional sentence. Ok?

<sup>31</sup> Insert a sentence here noting that the authorities announced in June that they would allow only a “very limited” hajj this year, much fewer than the usual 2 million-plus?

421 as Saudis retreated to the safety of their homes and foreign  
422 performers canceled scheduled appearances.

423 **FOREIGN MISADVENTURES**

424 <sup>32</sup>The war in Yemen has been raging since 2015, when the  
425 Saudi military commenced airstrikes against Iran-backed  
426 Houthi insurgents seeking to oust a government supported  
427 by Riyadh. It continues with no end in sight. Saudi Arabia  
428 has pledged funds to help rebuild the devastated country on  
429 its southern border, but for now conditions in Yemen keep  
430 deteriorating. The warring parties agreed to a cease-fire in  
431 June 2020, but there is still no sign of a pause in the cycle  
432 of Saudi airstrikes and Houthi retaliation. In August,  
433 Houthi missiles reached Saudi territory yet again.

434 Meanwhile, the suffering of the Yemeni people, who have  
435 already endured a massive cholera epidemic during the war  
436 <sup>33</sup>, is compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. Saudi  
437 Arabia's military engagement in Yemen is a stain on its  
438 foreign policy. In the past, Riyadh prided itself on

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<sup>32</sup> Add a transitional sentence here, perhaps something like "Like his domestic initiatives, Mohammed's foreign policy record has been both aggressive and ill-judged"?

<sup>33</sup> added mention of cholera—OK?

439 deploying peaceful and diplomatic means to secure its  
440 national interest.

441 There have been other foreign policy blunders, notably a  
442 stalemate with Qatar<sup>34</sup> and the apparent fragmentation of  
443 the Gulf Cooperation Council, the unresolved rift with Iran  
444 <sup>35</sup>, and increasingly tense relations with Turkey. The  
445 ineffectiveness of Saudi foreign policy was striking in the  
446 response to the peace agreement between Israel and the  
447 United Arab Emirates ([sc]UAE[/sc]) announced on August  
448 13, 2020. Saudi Arabia kept silent on the matter until  
449 August 18, when Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan  
450 announced that the kingdom would continue to insist on a  
451 long-standing Arab peace proposal, which deems  
452 recognition of Israel impossible unless Jerusalem becomes  
453 the capital of a new Palestinian state, Israel withdraws to its  
454 1967 borders, and Palestinians in the diaspora are granted  
455 the right to return to what is now Israel. Although the  
456 foreign minister suggested that the king would not rush to  
457 follow the UAE's lead, Riyadh maintains relations with  
458 Israel that the Saudi leadership prefers to keep secret.<sup>36</sup>

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459 <sup>34</sup> rephrase to clarify, e.g. "the stalemated effort to isolate Qatar"?

460 <sup>35</sup> make this intensifying regional rivalry with Iran or some such?

461 <sup>36</sup> Briefly note the Israel–Bahrain agreement that followed the UAE one, and the common view that the Saudis  
462 probably blessed that deal, given their influence over Bahrain?

463 A Saudi endorsement of normalizing relations with Israel  
464 would have given Trump a much-needed boost in his bid to  
465 cast himself, in the closing weeks of his reelection  
466 campaign, as a peace broker. But if the Saudi regime were  
467 to publicly acknowledge its military, surveillance, and  
468 technological cooperation with Israel, it would risk the ire  
469 of its own citizens.

#### 470 **TEST OF LEGITIMACY**

471 The era of Mohammed bin Salman has begun with an  
472 unprecedented wave of repression and an array of proposed  
473 reforms. Since 2015, domestic politics has revolved around  
474 these opposing poles: moves toward liberalization of social  
475 and economic policy, coupled with criminalization of any  
476 political discussion or debate. The crown prince sought to  
477 roll back the state and move away from a state-centered,  
478 oil-dependent capitalist economy. Yet he has increased state  
479 control over the economy, society, and the media.

480 An autonomous (or at least semiautonomous) public sphere  
481 vanished as Mohammed introduced his own initiatives  
482 targeting every aspect of public life, including the arts and

483 entertainment. Controlled social change from above has  
484 been imposed on a society deprived of the ability to stage  
485 resistance, engage in debate, and express its own  
486 aspirations. Highly publicized initiatives have failed to  
487 camouflage an autocratic drive to silence critical voices,  
488 narrowing the margins of free speech even further.

489 The future of Saudi Arabia under this duality of reform and  
490 repression may seem bleak, as more young people flee the  
491 country for safe havens abroad. This is a challenge to a  
492 society unaccustomed to exile and forced migration. Fear  
493 has settled over exiles since the Khashoggi assassination,  
494 even in relatively safety overseas. But the murder prompted  
495 more young Saudis to leave and become more vocal in their  
496 criticism of the regime.

497 The mobilization of exiles to join demonstrations outside  
498 Saudi consulates<sup>37</sup> in North America, Europe, and  
499 Australia, as well as lobbying international actors to  
500 pressure the regime to release prisoners of conscience, has  
501 only just begun. Saudi exiles have also become an active  
502 presence on social media, where they challenge regime  
503 narratives and highlight its severe abuses of human rights.

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504 <sup>37</sup> and embassies?



505 While this incipient diaspora is still fairly powerless, it is  
506 proving to be an embarrassment for the crown prince. The  
507 murder of Khashoggi demonstrated the regime's  
508 determination to silence Saudis even when they leave the  
509 country. Hacking into social media accounts and posting  
510 threatening messages on exiles' accounts has become part  
511 of a deliberate policy of intimidation. Without a serious  
512 reconsideration of Saudi domestic politics and pressure  
513 from the international community, many more Saudis will  
514 decide to flee the country and continue their struggle for a  
515 better life from abroad. This has already become a thorny  
516 issue between Riyadh and its Western partners, as more  
517 exiles seek refuge in countries that support the regime.

518 The real test for the crown prince's legitimacy will follow  
519 the death of King Salman, the aging figure<sup>38</sup> who has  
520 promoted and protected his ambitious and aggressive son.  
521 Saudi Arabia will stand at a crossroads, faced with a  
522 decision: either open the political sphere to genuine public  
523 participation and representation, or become a bastion of  
524 repression camouflaged as reform. If it chooses the latter,

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525 <sup>38</sup> make this "figurehead"?

526 scandals such as the Khashoggi murder will become the  
527 norm.<sup>39</sup>

528 The long-term prospects of the contradictory strategy of  
529 reform and repression are bleak. It will entrench Saudi  
530 Arabia in a spiral of violence and retaliation, alienating the  
531 youth that the regime supposedly wants to empower. With  
532 dwindling oil income, increased borrowing, and an ongoing  
533 pandemic, the future king may not be able to promise  
534 greater spending on welfare and services in order to pacify  
535 an agitated populace<sup>40</sup>. He has already started taxing a  
536 population not accustomed to paying high rates for  
537 consumption, and abolished monthly benefits<sup>41</sup> for state  
538 employees. The collapse of the regime will become  
539 inevitable,<sup>42</sup> with implications reaching far beyond Saudi  
540 domestic affairs.

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541 <sup>39</sup> Perhaps add a transitional phrase to set up next paragraph, e.g. “But Mohammed appears unlikely to change his  
542 autocratic approach”?

543 <sup>40</sup> add a phrase to remind reader of context: “—the old authoritarian bargain will become untenable”?

544 <sup>41</sup> briefly clarify what kind of benefit this is? A bonus payment?

545 <sup>42</sup> Make this something a bit less categorical, e.g. “Unless the crown prince changes his ways, collapse of the regime  
546 may become inevitable.....”?