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A photograph of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, seated at a conference table. King Salman is on the left, wearing a white thobe and ghutra, looking towards the camera. Crown Prince Mohammed is on the right, wearing a pink and white checkered ghutra and a white thobe with a yellow sash, looking down. In the background, another man in a white thobe and ghutra is visible, along with the American and Saudi flags.

# KING SALMAN AND HIS SON

WINNING THE US  
LOSING THE REST

MADAWI AL-RASHEED

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### **Cover Image**

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud attends the US–Gulf Summit in Riyadh, 21 May 2017. Photo by Bandar Algaloud / Saudi Royal Council / Handout / Anadolu Agency / Getty Images.

# King Salman and His Son: Winning the US, Losing the Rest

Madawi Al-Rasheed

## About the Author

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## Abstract

This article assesses the prospects for new directions in Saudi foreign policy following the appointment of Muhammad ibn Salman as crown prince in June 2017, highlighting its continuities and discontinuities under the new leadership of King Salman and his son. It draws tentative conclusions that amidst a series of foreign policy failures, winning the favour of the US under Trump has been the major achievement of the new Saudi leadership. However, Saudi foreign policy in Europe has taken a back seat, where there are serious doubts as to the merit of the assertive interventionist Saudi regional policy. With an erratic and failing bid to control the region and emerge as a regional power on a par with Iran, Turkey and Israel, King Salman and his son have proved to be unwilling to extinguish the many fires that are currently raging across the Arab world.

## Introduction

With the appointment of Muhammad ibn Salman as crown prince in June 2017, Saudi foreign policy has become the subject of fevered speculation. Although at the time of writing King Salman is still in office, we can assume that his son Muhammad had been the de facto orchestrator of Saudi foreign policy even before he was confirmed in his new role. In terms of relations with the US, Muhammad ibn Salman succeeded in establishing a momentary strong rapport with President Donald Trump and his administration, thanks to serious investment in public relations companies, lobbyists in Washington and the promise to inject funds in the US economy. Relations with Europe look to have cooled, with European leaders still unsure of how to assess the young prince. Many are nevertheless keen to win him over with the prospect of financial rewards and stronger military ties for their own economic, strategic and security reasons. In the Arab region, the young Saudi prince has already cemented new, albeit shaky, partnerships with countries such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in order to further isolate his archenemy, Iran, and more recently Qatar.

This article assesses the prospects for new directions in Saudi foreign policy, highlighting its continuities and discontinuities under the new leadership of King Salman and his son. It draws tentative conclusions that amidst a series of foreign policy failures, winning the favour of the US under Trump has been the major achievement of the new Saudi leadership. However, Saudi foreign policy in Europe has – as ever – taken a back seat and today in several European capitals there is serious doubt as to the merit of this newly assertive and interventionist Saudi regional policy, considered by some to be destabilising the Arab world. With the US once again the old Saudi patron and ally, King Salman and his son see little need to pay attention to Europe, and are instead continuing on their erratic and failing bid to control the region and emerge as a regional power on a par with Iran, Turkey and Israel.

Within the Gulf, Saudi policies have fractured the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with two countries – Oman and Qatar – choosing to break ranks with Saudi Arabia over several issues, from Iran to the role of Islamist movements in the Arab world. This latest episode in Saudi regional assertiveness will no doubt embarrass its international partners who will eventually be expected to choose sides in this new Gulf conflict, whether or not doing so corresponds with their own national interests. The new young prince is swift in rewarding allies and punishing those reluctant to support him in each of his foreign policy stands.

The paper concludes with the observation that King Salman and his son have proved to be risk-takers, unwilling to extinguish the many fires that are currently raging across the Arab world. In fact, their foreign policy is based on a single doctrine, namely establishing the supremacy of Saudi Arabia, so as to allow it to become the sole arbiter of Arab affairs and the main point of entry for all international powers into the region. Saudi Arabia under King Salman seems determined to pursue this objective even if it contributes to greater insecurity and upheaval in the Arab world, with serious human, social and political consequences beyond this troubled region.

## Salman's Coups

On 23 January 2015, the old King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz Al-Saud (b. 1924) passed away. Within hours his half-brother Crown Prince Salman (b. 1935) became king and Deputy Crown Prince Muqrin (b. 1945) was promoted to crown prince. Interior Minister Muhammad ibn Nayef (b. 1959) became deputy crown prince. Such arrangements confirmed that King Salman was respecting his deceased brother's succession plan. Before his death, King Abdullah had made it clear to other senior princes that the succession should remain as he had stipulated and confirmed in his royal orders. Saudis and outside observers breathed a sigh of relief over the swift and smooth transition. Many Saudis considered that the succession reflected unity within the royal family. The smooth transfer of power was believed to silence those outside observers and dissidents who had long speculated about rivalries among senior royals.

However, King Salman felt free to alter this succession plan within two months of becoming king. In April 2015 he sacked his younger brother Crown Prince Muqrin and promoted his nephew, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Nayef, to crown prince. He went further when he appointed his youngest son Muhammad (b. 1985) to the position of deputy crown prince. Young prince Muhammad became second Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, Chief of the Royal Court and Chair of the Council of Economic Development Affairs. No other prince has ever held as many key positions at such a young age as Muhammad ibn Salman.<sup>1</sup> Even at the height of creating a centralised state, King Faysal (d. 1975) did not hold so many responsibilities. Since these appointments, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad has been assumed to be the key power behind the throne. King Salman is 'possibly the last member of the Al Saud who will be able to enjoy the unquestioned authority and prestige to impose his will irrespective of family consensus'.<sup>2</sup>

On 21 June 2017, King Salman issued an expected royal decree, sacking Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Nayef and promoting his young son Muhammad as the designated heir. During the lifespan of the third Saudi state (1932–), such a move has happened only once before, in 1933, when Abdul Aziz ibn Saud appointed his own son Saud as crown prince and excluded all his brothers. Salman's bold decision may not be the last episode in these royal shuffles. It remains to be seen whether King Salman will abdicate and allow himself to see his beloved son settle into his new role as king. Given the frequency of royal decrees that relate to succession since Salman became king, his abdication would not be a surprise given his age – he is over eighty years old.

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<sup>1</sup> After the rise of Muhammad ibn Salman to power, commentators described him as Saudi Arabia's Gamal Mubarak, the son of deposed Egyptian president Husni Mubarak. See Steven A. Cook, 'Saudi Arabia's Gamal Mubarak', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 June 2016. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/saudi-arabias-gamal-mubarak> (accessed 11 September 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ali al-Shihabi, *The Saudi Kingdom: Between the Jihadi Hammer and the Iranian Anvil* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2016), p. 158.

These bold succession decisions, dubbed by foreign observers a ‘palace coup’ and a ‘quiet revolution’, ignited new rumours and speculations about royal intrigue.<sup>3</sup> These are further strengthened by the fact that Muhammad ibn Nayef, Crown Prince until June 2017, has not yet produced a male heir, curtailing the possibility that he could have appointed a son of his own at the expense of his cousin should he had been allowed to stay in power and become king. Furthermore, reports about ibn Nayef’s poor health had already been circulating, especially among foreign intelligence observers in Washington. As the prince was totally sidelined in Salman’s bold royal reshuffle, reports abounded that he was being held under house arrest in Jeddah immediately after being sacked, though this remains unconfirmed.<sup>4</sup>

The young prince Muhammad ibn Salman is preparing to inherit the throne, provided that no further succession changes take place during the king’s lifetime. But in Saudi Arabia nothing can be taken for granted or expected to follow a rational plan. King Salman’s new appointments in June 2017 are destined to generate more ambiguity and speculation after he dies, especially as concerns Saudi Arabia’s international relations. New directions in foreign policy with the US, Europe and the region coincided with the promotion of his own son immediately after Salman became king in 2015.

## Muhammad ibn Salman and Trump: A Successful Momentary Symbiosis

Muhammad ibn Salman visited the US several times with a view to making himself known in Washington<sup>5</sup> and promoting himself at the expense of his cousin Muhammad ibn Nayef, who had already maintained close contacts with the US intelligence and defence community as a result of his involvement in War on Terror efforts since 9/11.<sup>6</sup> Immediately after Donald Trump’s election, the young prince rushed to court him, promising greater Saudi investment in the US economy and more weapon purchases, both pledges welcomed by Trump. During his election campaign, the latter frequently declared that the US would not continue to support its traditional partners in Europe, Asia and the Middle East without all of them committing greater financial resources to cement the military

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<sup>3</sup> David Blair, ‘Saudi Arabia’s Quiet Revolution as King Salman Changes Royal Succession’, *The Telegraph*, 29 April 2015. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/11571482/Saudi-Arabias-quiet-revolution-as-King-Salman-changes-royal-succession.html> (accessed 6 July 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Ben Hubbard, ‘Deposed Saudi Prince is Said to be under House Arrest’, *The New York Times*, 28 June 2017. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/28/world/middleeast/deposed-saudi-prince-mohammed-bin-nayef.html> (accessed 18 July 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Simon Henderson, ‘Young Saudi Leader’s Landmark U.S. Visit’, *The Washington Institute*, 13 June 2016. Available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/young-saudi-leaders-landmark-u.s.-visit> (accessed 18 June 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Julie Hirschfield Davis, ‘Trump Meets Saudi Prince as U.S. and Kingdom Seek Warmer Relations’, *The New York Times*, 14 March 2017. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/world/middleeast/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-trump.html> (accessed 18 June 2017).

partnerships that the US had helped to forge since World War II. He did not hesitate to describe Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, as void of everything except money. Trump's repeated attempts to ban Muslims from travelling to the US and his anti-Muslim rhetoric have not detracted from the new – mutually beneficial – opportunities for close cooperation between him and Muhammad ibn Salman. It seemed that both leaders were determined to go back to the status quo ante – before the election of Barack Obama – when Saudi Arabia and the US had enjoyed a close and unchallenged partnership.

A short-lived period of troubled relations with the US occurred during Barack Obama's presidency. The relationship reached a nadir as Obama declined to indulge Saudi Arabia and accede to its constant requests to bomb its archenemy, Iran, or topple Syria's Bashar al-Assad. The Saudis made the first request in 2008 and the second after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. Saudi Arabia considered the Iran Nuclear Deal that Obama and several European leaders signed in 2013 a potent threat, signalling that the US was determined to end four decades of Iranian isolation and diversify its interlocutors in the Middle East after having relied on Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, the Gulf and Israel as its main partners in the region. Despite this, under the Obama administration the US sold more than \$115 billion of arms to Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup>

While Trump did not fully acquiesce to Saudi requests regarding Iran and Syria, he made enough vague noises to endear the Saudi leadership and restore the troubled relations to their pre-Obama harmony. Trump's anti-Iranian rhetoric that he immediately ramped up once elected, his repeated threats to reconsider and perhaps abandon the Nuclear Deal, his willingness to impose new sanctions on Iran and his description of Iran as a terrorist state pleased the Saudis and paved the way for his historic visit to Riyadh. On Syria, immediately after he became President, Trump authorised limited airstrikes that barely affected the balance of power against al-Assad. Nevertheless, such a hasty move was positive signal enough for Riyadh to think that Trump was on their side and would pursue regime change in Syria.

On 20 May 2017 Trump arrived in Riyadh accompanied by a large entourage of family advisors, consultants and businessmen. He was welcomed with great fanfare and pomp. The Saudis offered him much-needed rehabilitation not only inside Saudi Arabia but across the Muslim world. Muhammad ibn Salman assembled over fifty Muslim leaders for a Muslim summit and gave the President the opportunity to address them in a historic speech.<sup>8</sup> This speech was meant to counter Obama's famous Cairo speech in 2009 when he emphasised the US' commitment to democracy and human rights in the world and its respect for Islam as a religion. Obama called on history to show that Islam is an integral part of America by drawing on his mixed parentage, especially his Muslim Kenyan father.

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<sup>7</sup> Yara Bayoumy, 'Obama Administration Arms Sales Offers to Saudi Top \$115 Billion', *Reuters*, 7 September 2016. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-security-idUSKCN11D2JQ> (accessed 20 June 2017).

<sup>8</sup> For the main points of Trump's speech see 'Donald Trump's Saudi Arabia Speech: Eight Key Points', *The Telegraph*, 21 May 2017. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/21/donald-trumps-saudi-arabia-speech-eight-key-points/> (accessed 18 July 2017).

In contrast, Trump announced in Riyadh that:

We signed historic agreements with the Kingdom that will invest almost \$400 billion in our two countries and create many thousands of jobs in America and Saudi Arabia. It should increasingly become one of the great global centers of commerce and opportunity. This region should not be a place from which refugees flee, but to which newcomers flock.<sup>9</sup>

While Muhammad ibn Salman was pleased that Trump emphasised economic ties, he was more eager to hear Trump's denunciation of Iran, so he must have been thrilled when he heard Trump pointing to Iran's disruptive role in the region:

For decades, Iran has fuelled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror. It is a government that speaks openly of mass murder, vowing the destruction of Israel, death to America, and ruin for many leaders and nations in this room [...] Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve.<sup>10</sup>

Saudi Arabia urgently wanted Trump to absolve it from any responsibility for the deadliest crisis to have befallen the Arab world, namely terroristic sectarian conflict. There was no mention of how, like Iran, Saudi Arabia resorted to sectarianism as a counter-revolutionary force to derail the 2011 Arab uprisings in Bahrain, Syria and most recently in Yemen. Its religious ideology, known as Wahhabism, has appeared indistinguishable from that adopted by the Islamic State (IS), with the latter incorporating Saudi religious texts into the Raqqa school curriculum and enforcing a social and sectarian policy very similar to that practised in Saudi Arabia. Sex segregation, anti-Shi'a rhetoric and beheading point to a common ideological affinity between the religious ideology of IS and Wahhabism.

Furthermore, Trump refrained from mentioning the role played by Saudi Arabia in spreading this radical version of Islam around the globe. The Saudi role had been criticised since 9/11, but Trump absolved the Kingdom from any responsibility for the expansion of a global jihadi trend that it had initially promoted, together with several Western governments, notably during the Reagan and Thatcher years in the 1980s as an antidote to Soviet Communism and the occupation of Afghanistan. The promotion of Saudi Wahhabism was a project conceived during the Cold War, during which the country was elevated to the status of global player in the Muslim world, but it was specifically useful in Afghanistan when it was expected to contribute ideologically, financially and personally to the country's liberation from Soviet occupation. Trump was not interested in a deeper understanding of the roots of the global jihadi menace, which would implicate both the US and Saudi Arabia in addition to many partners in both the West and the Muslim world. Both Muhammad ibn Salman and Donald Trump felt comfortable turning the page and sinking into historical amnesia. From now on, the Saudi-US relation

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

is set to reinstate itself as a pragmatic marriage of convenience, void of any ideological underpinnings, such as concerns over human rights, democracy or any other terminology that makes Riyadh uncomfortable. Vague incremental social and political reform rather than military intervention or promotion of democracy is Riyadh's preferred option.

It is important to understand how the two leaders managed to strike an alliance, though it may well prove to be momentary, set as it is against a background of tension and animosity. Like Muhammad ibn Salman, Trump is unpredictable and the two men may fall out over minor differences in the future. However, they will keep the facade of agreement on main issues and maintain a traditional, albeit revived bargain: the Americans shall continue to offer unconditional and unequivocal support to Saudi Arabia while the latter continues to pay for the privilege of remaining the main US ally after Israel in the region. This bargain had until recently appeared shaky and perhaps lacking in enthusiasm on the American side. However, Trump and ibn Salman share a common belief that 'money talks', hence their common outlook is based on the assumption that in both business and politics only this cherished currency has the potential to solve almost all problems, from terrorism to failing economies. Both have no deeper understanding of the current challenges of the Arab world, a disdain for any 'deep thinking' and an insatiable appetite for public relations companies, lobbyists and the pomp that comes with sudden acquisition of power. So far, the two leaders appear to be in lockstep at least over a number of key issues from Syria to Yemen, but deep down the administration around Trump does not seem to share his overt enthusiasm for Saudi regional policies. In Yemen, Syria and Qatar, the three hot spots in 2017, both the Pentagon and the US State Department tempered Trump's hasty announcements, thus indicating that contradictions exist within his administration, parts of which are prepared to force climb downs from the President, at least with regards to brash announcements like those he made when visiting Riyadh, where his comments were understood at the time to fully endorse Muhammad ibn Salman's regional wars and interventionist policies.

While ibn Salman may have won over Trump, he still faces uncertain votes in the House of Representatives and the Senate. In the past, American presidents with clear majorities were able to get both houses to approve important arm sales to Saudi Arabia. But since 9/11, the legislature's unequivocal support could no longer be taken for granted.

Having alienated the Saudis when he called them 'free riders' in his famous Atlantic interview,<sup>11</sup> Obama tried to mend the relationship in his last months in office. In September 2016, both the House of Representatives and the Senate overwhelmingly rejected his bid to veto the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA), which allows family members of 9/11 victims to sue Saudi Arabia in American courts.<sup>12</sup> This law may prove a serious obstacle to US–Saudi relations.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2016. Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (accessed 25 August 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Seung Min Kim, 'Congress Hands Obama First Veto Override', *The New York Times*, 9 September 2016. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/world/middleeast/trump-weapons-saudi-arabia.html?mcubz=0> (accessed 26 August 2017).

Tension between the American president, this time Donald Trump, and Congress resurfaced in 2017 over arm sales to Saudi Arabia. Immediately after Trump's return from Riyadh, he narrowly escaped the Senate's veto on a \$500 million deal to sell Saudi Arabia precision-guided munitions. With Saudi Arabia's erratic airstrikes killing many civilians in Yemen and the conflict reaching a stalemate almost three years after it started, opposition to arms sales will no doubt continue to grow in the US.

Trump wants to capture a historical moment in which Saudi Arabia is set to transition to a bright neoliberal economy open to global trade, accompanied by a minimalist welfare state weaned off oil. Privatisation, diversification and Saudisation are the backbone of Muhammad ibn Salman's Vision 2030 – an economic blueprint to deliver economic prosperity at times of falling oil prices and budget deficits. The expansion of the private sector and most importantly the announced partial privatisation of the Saudi oil company ARAMCO offer new economic opportunities that both leaders want to promote and benefit from. Should the national interest of the US coincide with that of Muhammad ibn Salman, the two leaders hope to closely cooperate in the future. However, both leaders can be erratic and capable of making ad hoc decisions that may backfire.

## Salman's Son and Europe: Secondary Partnerships

Having secured the support, even if fleeting, of Donald Trump, does Muhammad ibn Salman have the time or inclination to seek further partnerships with European countries beyond the historical alliances that have more recently become rooted in trade, arm sales and security concerns?

Since World War II, Saudi relations with leading European countries – namely Britain, France and Germany – were secondary to the project of greater military and security integration with the US. Many European countries, especially France and Britain, saw a window of opportunity to seek greater cooperation with the Saudis after 9/11 when they assumed the US would be unwilling to continue its unconditional support for the Kingdom after it became known that fifteen of the hijackers who attacked New York were Saudis. This proved to be a good moment to endear themselves to the Saudis by selling them arms denied to them by the US Congress, and by positioning Europe as the old ally who genuinely understood Saudi Arabia, its history and leadership more than the American neophytes. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, sought to diversify its arm sources and leapt at the opportunity to buy more weapons from Europe.

Under the Conservative government of David Cameron, Britain's arms sales to Saudi Arabia reached almost £6 billion,<sup>13</sup> with the country needing to boost its trade with the Gulf in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular, immediately after the financial crisis

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<sup>13</sup> Matt Broomfield, 'UK Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia Worth 5.6 billion under David Cameron', *The Independent*, 6 January 2016. Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/uk-has-sold-56bn-of-military-hardware-to-saudi-arabia-under-david-cameron-research-reveals-a6797861.html> (accessed 12 June 2017).

of 2008. Under pressure from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the British Prime Minister ordered an investigation into the Muslim Brotherhood in Britain with a view to banning the Islamist movement and limiting its global outreach. Saudi Arabia, keen to reverse the Brotherhood's success in Egypt after the uprising of 2011, banned the movement in Saudi Arabia itself. The investigation, led by ex-ambassador to Saudi Arabia John Jenkins, found no clear links to terrorism. The Muslim Brotherhood continues to organise in Britain. It took the British government several months to release the information gathered during the consultation period, and Saudi Arabia was not pleased with the findings of the report.

The drive to seek closer ties with Saudi Arabia became more urgent after the British referendum of 2016, when it became certain that the British economy would face the possibility of shrinking after its exit from the European Union. Prime Minister Theresa May honoured her pledge to continue to be a friend of the Saudis and refrained from taking any measures or making statements that would embarrass them in the international arena. Like other European leaders, she rushed to visit the Saudis as part of a Gulf tour. In April 2017 she arrived in Riyadh (before Trump) and sought to strengthen trade relations with Saudi Arabia.

More recently, May continues to block the publication of an internal Home Office report investigating Saudi sponsorship of radical religious ideology in Britain. The enquiry was commissioned by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government. It is believed that May is still resisting any exposure of Saudi Arabia to more criticism both in Britain and Europe. The release of the report may undermine relations with Riyadh at a critical moment for Britain when it is seeking new trade partners to compensate for its expected losses after Brexit.

Since 2015 when Saudi Arabia began airstrikes on Yemen, Britain came under mounting pressure from parliamentary committees and civil society organisations that oppose arm sales to countries that do not respect human rights and violate international law through illegal military interventions abroad. This became urgent after Muhammad ibn Salman launched his attack, allegedly using British cluster bombs and other banned weapons. Civilian deaths in Yemen, estimated at over 10,000, and the humanitarian crisis pushed British public opinion against arms sale but the logic of the British government remains constant: 'if we don't sell arms to the Saudis, the French will'.

Like Britain, following 9/11, France and Saudi became inter-connected through a series of arm deals that boosted the French economy and offered Saudi Arabia a sense of security, especially after France continued to be a staunch critic of Iran's policy in the region, particularly in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Saudi military aid to Lebanon was conditional on purchasing equipment from France, a deal negotiated by then-President Francois Hollande. Saudi Arabia, however, cancelled this gift to put pressure on Iranian-backed Hezbollah, but pledged to compensate France for its losses.

Saudi Arabia looked to France for support in its bid to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and strengthen the Syrian opposition to his regime. It also expected France not to normalise relations with Iran after the Nuclear Deal and to remain critical of its regional

policy. France honoured the bargain in order to maintain its lucrative military trade with Saudi Arabia and neighbouring Gulf countries. However, more recently, the policy to oust Bashar al-Assad failed to materialise and both Saudi Arabia and France – in fact most European interested parties – are currently facing serious defeat in Syria. As the objective was not to mediate in the Syrian crisis and reach peaceful coexistence between the regime and the many opposition groups, some of which are violent radical Islamists and jihadists, a resolution in Syria was delayed until it became impossible to achieve. In a country where foreign policy has been the sole prerogative of the president since the times of General de Gaulle, newly elected President Emmanuel Macron may continue to seek closer ties with Saudi Arabia. But the Syrian debacle and the failure to resolve the crisis continue to haunt both countries.

Added to that is the new Saudi–Qatari crisis which started in May 2017. Muhammad ibn Salman expects France and other European countries to accept the Saudi narrative about Qatar’s sponsorship of terrorism, including its support for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, both believed to destabilise the region, and the media policies of the pan-Arab *al-Jazeera* channel. President Macron may be put under pressure to endorse the Saudis against Qatar, a move that would undermine France’s greater economic and military interests in this small but rich Gulf state.<sup>14</sup>

With wide-ranging economic and military ties with Saudi Arabia, Germany was less than enthusiastic about the sudden rise of the young Muhammad ibn Salman to power. In 2015, a leaked German intelligence report was damning of the prince,<sup>15</sup> considering his rise cause for concern because of his ‘regional destabilising impact’.<sup>16</sup> While it is very unusual for the German intelligence services to disseminate such reports, the leak was perhaps a deliberate warning signal intended for the international community in general, and Germany’s European partners in particular. Both King Salman and his son did not attend the annual G20 Summit in Hamburg in July 2017, though this may have been due to their preoccupation with the escalating Qatar crisis. Perhaps Saudi Arabia did not want to face additional pressure from the G20 members to resolve the crisis and seek negotiation, rather than the path – which they chose – of confrontation with the small emirate. The King and his son avoided further questioning by sending a technocrat to the G20 meeting. Another reason may be related to the abrupt sacking of Muhammad ibn Nayef

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<sup>14</sup> For an assessment of a ‘Macron Doctrine’ in the Arab world, see Joseph Bahout, ‘The Difficult Definition of a “Macron Doctrine” in the Near East and the Maghreb’ [La Difficile Définition d’une “Doctrine Macron” au Proche-Orient et au Maghreb], *Orient*, 10 July 2017. Available at <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/la-difficile-definition-d-une-doctrine-macron-au-proche-orient-et-au-maghreb,1942> (accessed 19 July 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Justin Huggler, ‘Saudi Arabia Destabilising Arab World, German Intelligence Warns’, *The Telegraph*, 2 December 2015. Available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/12029546/Saudi-Arabia-destabilising-Arab-world-German-intelligence-warns.html> (accessed 12 June 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Lizzie Dearden, ‘Saudi Arabia and Gulf States Support Islamic Extremism in Germany: Intelligence Report Finds’, *The Independent*, 14 December 2016. Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/saudi-arabia-gulf-states-fund-islamic-extremism-germany-salafism-wahhabism-qatar-kuwait-islamists-a7473551.html> (accessed 13 June 2017).

and his alleged house arrest, both of which would signal a difficult and uncertain moment for the King, given that he must have alienated a large number of aspiring princes, some of whom are older and more experienced than his young son.

Saudi Arabia, however, cherishes economic relations with Germany in addition to the training opportunities it offers Saudi youth.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, Saudi Arabia invited Germany to be a guest of honour at the annual National Guard al-Janadiriya festival. However, even with over half a billion euros worth of weapons exported to Saudi Arabia, Germany was dismissed as a future military trading partner following their criticism of the Saudi-led war in Yemen. Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed alarm at the high level of civilian casualties and insisted that no military solution could resolve the conflict in Yemen. Saudi Arabia immediately responded by rejecting any future arms deals, which had long been lucrative but controversial in Germany.<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding the existing close ties between Saudi Arabia and the aforementioned European countries, the new Saudi crown prince does not seem to have time for Europe at the moment. For him it remains a source of any weapons that he cannot get from the US and a network of support for his regional policies, especially his rivalry with Iran and his interventionist agenda. This results in European arms manufacturers and governments competing for the attention of the young prince, even if it comes to undermining their own national interest by continuing to uncritically support Saudi Arabia. A more fruitful European policy would push Saudi Arabia towards greater dialogue with Iran and a *modus vivendi* with this formidable regional power, rather than simply and unequivocally taking the Saudi side lest lucrative arm deals get diverted elsewhere.

Furthermore, the national interests of Saudi Arabia's European allies would be better served by encouraging the Saudis to seek mediation and conflict resolution in their regional battles, from Damascus to Sana'a. As with Iranian interventions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, Saudi meddling in internal affairs of Arab countries has had devastating effects, prolonging conflicts, militarising the Arab uprisings, and precipitating sectarian conflicts, humanitarian disasters and an unprecedented influx of refugees to European countries. Saudi Arabia's role in spreading radical religious ideology is still a taboo topic in many European capitals where governments remain silent, preferring not to confront Riyadh with clear evidence of its involvement in radicalising a troubled European Muslim population.

Europe may have lost its favourite Saudi candidate, deposed Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Nayef, who had established a good rapport with Western intelligence services as he was seen as a key player in the fight against terrorism, with counter-terrorism dominating European policy agendas from London and Paris to Bonn and beyond.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Saudi-German Economic Relations', *Saudi Embassy in Berlin*. Available at <http://www.saudibotschaft.de/en/information-for-german-business/> (accessed 29 August 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Jones, 'Saudi Arabia "Wants No More German Weapons": Report', *DW News*, 30 April 2017. Available at <http://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-wants-no-more-german-weapons-report/a-38647662> (accessed 29 August 2017).

## Losing the Regional Struggle: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and the Elephant in the Room

Muhammad ibn Salman is currently struggling to establish Saudi Arabia as a serious regional power on a par with Turkey, Iran and Israel. Each are currently flexing their muscles in a bid to emerge as the dominant force dictating the outcome of several conflicts in the Arab world. In this heated regional struggle, new alliances are formed and old ones are reversed.

The young Saudi prince has continued the anti-Iranian rhetoric that dates back to the reign of King Abdullah (2005–2015). Unexpectedly, he recently announced that he is determined to bring the fight to the Iranian heartland, a statement tantamount to a declaration of war. Saudi prince and ex-director of the Intelligence Services, Turki al-Faisal, attended two conferences held by the Iranian opposition abroad; notable amongst them were the Mujahideen-e Khalq, an opposition movement ostensibly combining Islam with Marxism.<sup>19</sup> Under King Salman, the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran has continued without resolution in sight. The latest battleground is Yemen, where Saudi Arabia accuses the Iranians of backing the Houthi rebellion.

Saudi's relations with Iran deteriorated after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003. At the time the Saudis accused the US of removing Saddam Hussein from power only to hand the country to the Iranians. The occupation led to the further expansion of Iranian influence in the Arab world, a threat the Saudis had warned of. Today it is in Iraq where the King and his son are desperately trying to reach out to Iran, the backer of both the Baghdad government and the various militias – most prominently the Popular Mobilisation Forces, or al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which it has armed and supported since 2014 to fight IS. Recently, for purely internal reasons, the Iraqi government of Haider al-Abadi has proven more responsive to the Saudi advances than former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Three Saudi state visits to Iraq promised to herald a new era of Saudi–Iraqi relations. Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir visited Baghdad on 25 February 2017, followed by Prime Minister al-Abadi arriving in Riyadh in June to meet the King. A meeting with the Iraqi oil minister followed.

However, Saudi Arabia went further by inviting the controversial Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to Riyadh. The Iraqi government welcomed Saudi advances to gain Arab support and undermine any accusations of being motivated by Shi'a sectarian politics. This was especially urgent after the liberation of Mosul, where a Sunni population has since been struggling to find political space in Iraq in a post-IS era. In the battle of Mosul, word of atrocities committed by official and para-military Shi'a Iraqi troops and militias spread across the Arab world. Al-Abadi has tried to recast himself as a leader for all Iraqis rather than just the Shi'a, and good relations with the Saudis could go some way towards improving his image.

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<sup>19</sup> 'Saudi Prince in Push for Iran Regime Change at Paris Opposition Conference', *Gulf News*, 9 July 2016. Available at <http://gulfnews.com/news/mena/iran/saudi-prince-in-push-for-iran-regime-change-at-paris-opposition-conference-1.1859664> (accessed 20 July 2017).

On the Saudi side, there is a belated understanding that their previous policy of ostracising Iraq in the post-2003 era has merely intensified the country's estrangement from its Arab neighbours, precipitating its steady drift toward the Iranian orbit. But without Iran's approval, Saudi Arabia will find it difficult to 'reconcile' with Iraq, especially after several decades of media wars, terrorism blamed on Saudi Arabia, sectarianisation (the politicisation of sectarian identity)<sup>20</sup> and general hostility. Iran's militias operating on Iraqi soil and the pro-Iranian position of its leading political party, namely Hizb al-Da'wa, threaten any genuine future reconciliation between the two countries. Moreover, Riyadh's erratic foreign policy under Muhammad ibn Salman is a further obstacle to any regional détente between the two estranged neighbours. It is unlikely that Saudi–Iraqi relations will return to any kind of normality before the forthcoming Iraqi elections in 2018. Even if Riyadh seeks genuine cooperation with Baghdad, Iran's approval will remain crucial for further normalisation, let alone cooperation.

Turkey, considered a close Saudi partner during the Syrian civil war, sided with Qatar in the latest Saudi–Qatari crisis of May 2017 when the small Gulf emirate was put under sanctions by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt. Turkey is now in the process of strengthening its military presence in Qatar, stationing several thousand soldiers there in preparation for any threat to the small emirate. In an unprecedented move, Saudi Arabia exacerbated the conflict with Qatar when it tried to promote a member of Qatar's Al-Thani royal family as an alternative emir, thus deepening an already near-intractable rift. This recent episode in inter-Gulf relations has proven to seriously undermine cooperation and unity. More importantly, as with other regional conflicts in the Arab world, regional powers Turkey, Iran and Israel have taken the opportunity to become involved. Israel backed Saudi Arabia and its allies when it announced that it would close *al-Jazeera's* Jerusalem bureau in July 2017.

Muhammad ibn Salman may have scored success with the elephant in the room, Israel – now jokingly dubbed the newest Sunni state – in his bid to form a pan-Islamic and international alliance against both Iran and Qatar. He has continued to clandestinely cooperate with Israel on security and economic matters.<sup>21</sup> In July 2016, a Saudi delegation of academics and businessmen visited Israel with a view to establishing discreet relations, the purpose of which was to strengthen Saudi Arabia's military capabilities and enlist Israel in any armed confrontation with Iran. Saudi Arabia also has a new geographical and strategic link to Israel after Egypt offered to cede the two Red Sea islands of Sanafir and Tiran to Saudi Arabia. Both islands sit on the Straits of Tiran, Israel's only access to the Red Sea, and they may in the future serve as launching pads from which to enhance military and security cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi public is being prepared for greater cooperation with Israel, especially through Saudi-sponsored

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the concept as it relates to the Middle East, see Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds), *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Israel and the Arab Gulf States: Drivers and Directions of Change', *Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University*, September 2016. Available at [https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/research\\_document/13eaaa71/CME-pub-GCCIsrael-090716.pdf](https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/research_document/13eaaa71/CME-pub-GCCIsrael-090716.pdf) (accessed 20 July 2017).

media, now much more willing to permit articles that do not overtly criticise the Israeli occupation and its treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Saudi Arabia has also criticised Qatar for supporting the Palestinian group Hamas, now designated as a terrorist organisation. Muhammad ibn Salman has certainly pleased the Israelis by doing so and assured them of his willingness to foster greater cooperation. However we shouldn't expect the Israeli flag to be raised in Riyadh soon. This will take some preparation and coordination and the stakes in such a controversial move are high for the young aspiring prince.

## Conclusion

Salman's kingdom is being shaped amid real domestic, regional, and international challenges. The newly appointed Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Salman is not a capable firefighter or a tactical statesman. He is confident that, equipped with only money and unconditional US support, he can surmount any obstacles to him becoming king as soon as possible. So far, he has succeeded in marginalising his rival cousin Muhammad ibn Nayef and enlisting Donald Trump as an ally, albeit momentarily. He is unlikely to turn his attention to Europe as he considers the US the only superpower that can guarantee his survival, despite the recent broadening of the search for international partners.

However, even Muhammad ibn Salman's command of a rich economy – despite falling oil prices – and recent loud US support have not enabled him to claim victories in the many wars and conflicts he has embarked upon. The most obvious setback is in Yemen where over two years of Saudi airstrikes have failed to end the local power struggle between multiple factions. His relations with Qatar are bound to deteriorate as the conflict has already reached a stalemate. By July 2017, the Saudis had already tempered their list of demands imposed on Qatar a month earlier as pre-conditions for lifting the boycott and sanctions. His rivalry with Iran is currently fought through several proxy wars. As long as he continues to secure Mr Trump's approval and support, Muhammad ibn Salman is more likely to light further regional fires than extinguish existing ones.

King Salman and his son have decisively shifted Saudi foreign policy from cautious diplomacy and behind-the-scenes manoeuvring to a more interventionist doctrine. Under the future kingship of the young prince, Saudi Arabia will continue to attempt to become an undisputed Arab regional power even if this requires greater shifting alliances, for example closer cooperation and partnership with Israel. The domestic consequences of such a provocative policy may backfire and lead to future internal upheaval. Saudi Arabia has been set on an unknown future path and its aggressive foreign policy is above all a reflection of domestic political and economic uncertainty that has prevailed since Salman became king.

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