

Cracks in the Saudi system

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The Saudi regime is undergoing its worst crisis since 9/11. The murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi became the catalyst. But the new rifts within the system started with King Salman's accession to the throne in January 2015 and the extraordinary powers he has given to his favourite son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Poor crisis management is the order of the day in Riyadh, while fear and repression silence critics of the regime. President Trump's alignment with Mohammed bin Salman is challenged in the US Congress. The crown prince, considered to be reckless, is already weakened. He is likely to be even more so if Turkey discloses details of the murder.

THE BRUTAL MURDER OF A CRITIC

The dust will not settle easily after the murder of exiled journalist Jamal Khashoggi, killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2. The story has been evolving via harrowing new details, drip-fed by Turkey's President Erdogan and his security apparatus. More than six weeks after Khashoggi's death, his body is still missing. The drama has become Shakespearian.

If Turkey decides to release the tapes that President Erdogan says he has shared with leaders from the United States, Germany, United Kingdom and France, details of the murder may be unveiled.

Even as things are now, the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is weakened. Since the murder, many leaders in the world community find it less palatable to deal with him. If release of Turkey's recordings discloses 'a smoking gun', he will be weakened even further. World leaders, including the US, could use the new evidence to gain more leverage on the crown prince.

The crown prince's assassinated critic, Jamal Khashoggi, was born into wealth and influence as the grandson of the personal doctor of King Abdul Aziz, founder of the nation. At one point, Khashoggi worked as a media advisor to the former head of Saudi intelligence, Prince Turki Al Faisal, son of the former ruler, King Faisal. He was a long-time protégé of reformist-minded Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, previously the richest man in the Middle East, until the crown prince



Jamal Khashoggi. Photo: Per Luthander.

confiscated some of his wealth during at mass detention of personalities from the Saudi elite, at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh, in November 2017.

Jamal Khashoggi did not call himself a dissident. He was not against the monarchy, as such. Nevertheless, he was the most famous critic abroad of Mohammed bin Salman (often called MbS). In exile, once MbS had become heir to the throne, in July 2017, Khashoggi called for freedom of expression, the release of political prisoners, an end to the war in Yemen and acceptance of political Islam, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, in Arab politics.

At a conference in February 2018, in Istanbul, where this author last met Khashoggi, he claimed that giving the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood a legal role in the Arab region would be the most efficient way to push back Iranian influence. He also saw it as a necessary step towards democratization. With his columns in the Washington Post, Khashoggi addressed American decision-makers directly and contradicted the pro-MbS narrative financed by pro-Saudi lobby firms in the US.



CONCENTRATION OF POWER UNDER MBS

In Saudi Arabia, the king is absolute monarch and prime minister. He is to exercise his power in accordance with the Quran and the *sunna* (tradition) of the prophet. However, in practice, King Salman bin Abdel Aziz Al Saud, soon 83, has handed over most of the executive powers to his son. MbS is deputy prime minister and defence minister, in charge of all the security forces, plus the oil wealth from Saudi Aramco and the state budget. His way of using the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund, like a private equity fund, is widely disputed. He is also the gatekeeper to his father's court. His younger full-brother Khaled is Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington.

The fame of Mohammed bin Salman began when he became the world's youngest defence minister, simultaneous with his father's ascension to the throne, in January 2015. Soon thereafter, his uncle, Prince Muqrin, was ousted as crown prince, and replaced by a powerful nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, MbN, who was also the minister of the interior. In July 2017, Mohammed bin Salman removed his elder cousin MbN in a palace coup, and has kept him under house arrest since. The reshuffle shocked US counter-terrorism experts who had been working closely with MbN long before he became minister of the interior in 2012.

The concentration of power in Riyadh was further exacerbated after the mass arrest of princes and oligarchs at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in November 2017. Some, such as Mohammed al-Amoudi, the owner of Preem, the Swedish petroleum corporation, are still in custody. One of the detainees allegedly died under duress.

The most high-profile detainee in the five-star hotel was Prince Mitaeb bin Abdullah, a son of the late King Abdullah, and previously head of the National Guard, which is tasked with protecting the House of Saud from coups d'état. By first removing Mohammed bin Nayef and, later, Prince Mitaeb from the scene, the crown prince now controls all the kingdom's security branches.

In theory, King Salman could cripple his son's power or convene the Allegiance Council, comprised of important princes, to have him replaced. However, the ruler, whose formal and more important title is Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, is ailing. Pundits question whether rumours of an Alzheimer's diagnosis are true or fabricated by Salman's domestic rivals. The House of Saud, with thousands of princes and princesses, has always been full of intrigues.

During the current crisis, experts on the Arabian Peninsula question whether world leaders who talk to

King Salman on the phone can get their message through. They are uncertain whether the king is sharp enough to catch the message. Moreover, interpreters may not dare to translate verbatim any potentially harsh words from the king's interlocutors.

Some weeks after the murder of the Saudi journalist, King Salman convened the Allegiance Council. The meeting had but one result: the crown prince was given even more executive power and is now responsible for an overview of Saudi Arabia's security.

The adventurous 33-year-old prince, often portrayed as a reformer by Western media, has since his father became king shown his ruthlessness in many cases. In March 2015, as the new defence minister, he started the war in Yemen. In the summer of 2017, he joined forces with Abu Dhabi's crown prince to enact a blockade of Qatar, which has proven fruitless and ironically made Doha more dependent on imports from Iran. In November 2017, he was behind the humiliating kidnapping of Lebanon's prime minister, Saad al-Hariri. He has incarcerated critics from various segments of the society in waves of arrest, often aimed at peaceful reformists with leadership skills.

Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince in breach of Saudi traditions. Since the passing of Abdel Aziz, founder of the kingdom in 1953, the succession has always gone from one half-brother to another. Direct, vertical transition from father to son has not been accepted for the last 65 years – and, within the tacit opposition to the crown prince, remains so.

This is why a dissident prince in exile in Germany raised his voice in favour of a younger full-brother of King Salman, Prince Ahmed Abdel Aziz, who used to live in exile in London. Prince Ahmed recently took centre stage during a demonstration in London, when he stressed that the House of Saud has nothing to do with the war in Yemen, and that the king and the crown prince are the only ones to be held responsible. He surprisingly returned to the kingdom at the end of October 2018, supposedly after having been granted security guarantees by Washington.

AN INVESTIGATION HELD IN DARKNESS

The immediate reaction of MbS after the disappearance of Khashoggi was to say that he had left the consulate as a free man. This version was soon quashed by revelations from Turkish CCTV cameras. By releasing information from surveillance cameras apparently within the consulate to Western leaders, Ankara could stifle attempts to make the story fade away.



The ongoing drama has also touched the nerve of the free press and dragged the United States, Turkey and Saudi Arabia into a triangular affair, which may end in political trade-offs and a continued cover-up.

The assessment of the crown prince has changed dramatically after the murder in the consulate. The influential New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman previously hailed MbS as a progressive reformer. After the disappearance of Khashoggi, Friedman wanted to disassociate himself from MbS and described him as 'radioactive'.

Senator Lindsey Graham, influential Republican in the Armed Services Committee, claims he has always defended Saudi Arabia as an ally. Nevertheless, he calls MbS 'toxic' and is demanding a royal power shuffle.

After repeatedly changing its official version, Riyadh finally admitted that Khashoggi was killed in a premediated murder and started its own investigation. The top brass in Riyadh is striving to save Mohammed bin Salman from all blame. The assumption that he masterminded the murder of Khashoggi is vehemently denied in Riyadh, where 11 individuals have been indicted for the killing. The prosecutor is seeking death penalty for five of them. The Trump administration has imposed sanctions on 17 Saudis, among them Saud al-Qahtani, a former top advisor to the crown prince. But these measures do not go far enough for critics in the US Congress. Suspicions against MbS remain.

Even though it is expected that the Saudi investigation will lead to a cover-up, no foreign government has heeded calls by human rights organisations for a UN-led independent investigation. Western capitals are fearful of being singled out by Riyadh, the way Sweden was punished in 2015 after its foreign minister, Margot Wallström, criticized the flogging of blogger Raif Badawi, and the way Canada was bullied after criticizing the arrest of Raif's sister, Samar Badawi, and other women's rights activists, in 2018.

A KINGDOM OF FEAR

Not even mild critics of the crown prince dare to speak their minds. Anti-terrorism laws are used against peaceful reformers, who are sentenced to long prison terms. Saudi citizens, who used to be active in social media, have in many cases closed down their accounts. The well-known economist Essam al-Zamil, who disputed the assets of Saudi Aramco, is imprisoned on charges of terrorism and of meeting with foreign diplomats without permission from the authorities. 'Spreading false rumours', a crime

which is up to the prosecutor to define, may also lead to long sentences.

Others who risk heavy sentences are well-known women activists, many of whom Western visitors used to meet in Saudi Arabia. They have been branded on the front pages of Saudi newspapers as 'traitors', allegedly after instructions from the palace.

MbS conducts everyday business in such a way that no shadow may fall on him, while even peaceful critics are punished as terrorists. In many ways, his rule resembles that of the young Saddam Hussein in the 1970s and '80s. Just like Saddam, MbS is virulently anti-Iranian and anti-Persian. Saddam started a war against Iran in 1980 whereas MbS started a proxy war against Iran in Yemen in 2015. Echoing the late Iraqi leader, MbS also wants to use the oil wealth to make his country the leading nation in the Arab world.

EMBOLDENED BY TRUMP

Since the onset of Trump's term in January 2017, MbS has become one of the pillars of the new US president's anti-Iran policy, which is also built as an alliance with Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and UAE's de facto leader, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, MbZ.

After the murder of Khashoggi, MbZ and Netanyahu want the US to stand for business as usual vis-à-vis the Saudi crown prince. Many observers, however, argue that the anti-Iran alliance is weakened precisely because of Mohammed bin Salman. Dan Shapiro, former US ambassador to Israel under Obama, claims that the brutality of Khashoggi's murder raises fundamental questions "for the United States and Israel about their whole strategic concept in the Middle East" and about their plan to build an Israel-Sunni Arab coalition against Iran, with MbS as a pillar.

POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS

While there is no room for dissent in the kingdom, the Khashoggi case remains an open wound and has many repercussions. Among them we may notice:

- The crown prince will face new difficulties in getting his Vision 2030 on track. Dropouts from *Davos in the Desert*, designed to attract foreign investment to MbS' grand plan of reshaping the Saudi economy, exposed his difficulties in attracting foreign capital.
- Ankara is more self-assertive. President Erdogan wants political concessions from Riyadh and Washington. His

tactic is to wait for offers, rather than to outline what he wants.

- Trump's plan to forge an 'Arab NATO' against Iran, called Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), is facing new complications. A summit in Washington, attended by Mohammed bin Salman, would stir protests.
- Trump's use of MbS as a pillar for his Middle East policies is questioned within Congress, his own intelligence community and among experts in the State Department. Many within these institutions do not want US Middle East policies to be a family affair. They see new reasons to withhold a security clearance for Jared Kushner, the president's special advisor and son-in-law, who has personal connections to MbS. If Turkey comes up with a 'smoking gun' connected to MbS, his critics in Washington will have more clout in countering both the crown prince and Kushner.
- Trump has finally made his choice for the next ambassador in to Riyadh. In order to have more leverage on MbS, he has nominated a retired general, John Abizaid, who is also fluent in Arabic.
- The debate in both the US Congress and parliaments in the EU is likely to focus more on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and how these weapons are used against civilians in Yemen. A bipartisan group of US senators is seeking a congressional oversight and suspension of arms sales to the kingdom. Germany has frozen its arms exports to Saudi Arabia. However, EU member states are not likely to take a common stand. France's president, Emmanuel Macron, has described an arms embargo linked to the murder of Khashoggi as 'pure demagoguery'.
- Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is using the Khashoggi crisis to push Saudi Arabia and other parties to the war in Yemen into negotiations, with the need to enforce a cease-fire.
- Moscow will not let go of its new ties to Riyadh. King Salman has made the first-ever visit by a Saudi monarch to Moscow and has shown an interest in buying the S-400 air defence system from Russia – as a gesture indicating that the kingdom does not want to be overly dependent on the US.

The ultimate question is whether Trump will withdraw his support from MbS and pave the way for a reshuffle. True to his instincts, he is not expected to act in the national interest of the United States, but rather in his own political interest to be reelected.

FIVE FUTURE SCENARIOS

The debate inside the palaces of Riyadh is another decisive element. One line of thought goes: Which move will lead to the least exposure of Saudi weaknesses: keeping, or removing, Mohammed bin Salman as heir to the throne? We can thus foresee five possible scenarios:

1. The return of Prince Ahmed Abdel Aziz from London and the nomination of John Abizaid as US ambassador increase the chances of clipping the wings of MbS or having him removed, as a restoration of the old order.
2. King Salman abdicates and hands over power to his son to safeguard a transition. This was expected after the palace coup in 2017. The fact that this has not yet happened is seen as a sign that the king knows that it would cause internal turmoil and protests within the palaces.
3. Mohammed bin Salman removes his father in a soft palace coup and becomes the non-disputed ruler with the help of the armed forces and his control of the oil wealth. However, challenges remain: the Saudi economy requires tough changes that may prove impossible for him to enforce.
4. King Salman passes, MbS becomes the king, with the prospect of running the kingdom for decades ahead, using repressive methods. This may trigger opposition. It is yet to be seen whether tribal leaders and important princes would be loyal to the ousted Mohammed bin Nayef and Prince Miteab bin Abdullah, should they call for a rebellion against MbS.
5. MbS becomes the target of an internal attack. According to well-informed sources on the Arabian Peninsula, a gunfire incident around the royal palaces in April 2018 was an attempt on MbS' life. According to the official version, the shooting was simply caused by a toy drone. It was widely noticed, however, that MbS was absent on the public stage for some weeks after the incident. Those who know the prince describe him as obsessed with his personal security. MbS undoubtedly has many reasons to fear enemies from within.

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