

The Saudi Arabian Makeover

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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Students of Bible prophecy tend to keep an eye on the Middle East. That broad stretch of land squeezed by the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe is the setting for most of what takes place in the Bible, and this is also true for its prophecies. While focusing specifically on the state of Israel and Jerusalem, some may miss events happening elsewhere in the region. In that vein, we may wish to consider what is happening in Saudi Arabia.

More specifically, Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, 32, is quickly becoming a significant player in the turbulent region. Since June 2017, he is the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the heir-apparent to the throne. He also fills the posts of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, the youngest in the world to hold the latter position. In addition, Prince Mohammad is chief of the House of Saud royal court and chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs. He has been described as the power behind the throne of his aging father, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, 82. And, typically, some prophecy buffs have already tabbed the prince as the Antichrist!

Since being named Crown Prince, Prince Mohammad has engaged in a massive reform program for his kingdom, vowing to return the country to “moderate Islam” and asking for global support to transform the hardline kingdom into an open society that empowers citizens and lures investors. Contending that ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia has been “not normal” for the past thirty years, he blames rigid doctrines that have governed society in reaction to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which he claims his predecessors “didn’t know how to deal with.”

On this point, Prince Mohammed said in a recent interview:

We are simply reverting to what we followed—a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions. 70% of the Saudis are younger than 30. Honestly, we won’t waste [another] 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts. We will destroy them now and immediately.

With such fighting words, he has thrown down the gauntlet at the feet of Islamic extremists across the Middle East and around the world.

What has he accomplished so far? Most importantly, he has succeeded—in part—in breaking an alliance between hardline clerics, who have long defined the national character, and the House of Saud, which has run affairs of state. He rounded up more than 200 members of the Saudi elite, accused them all of corruption, and locked them up in a luxury hotel in Riyadh. His goal, of course, is to separate mosque and state.

Shortly after the prince took charge of defense, Saudi Arabia launched its largest-ever military intervention, entering into neighboring Yemen, which is backed by Iran. In June, the kingdom imposed a blockade on its Persian Gulf rival, Qatar, for dealing diplomatically with Iran and Islamist groups.

His reforms have also tackled head-on certain societal taboos such as the recently rescinded ban on women driving and entering sports stadiums. He has scaled back guardianship laws that restrict women's roles. Also, he has established an Islamic center tasked with certifying the sayings of the prophet Muhammed, since some apocryphal sayings ignite extremism.

He has also been working on bringing new forms of entertainment into the kingdom because he believes the millions of young Saudis are bored—45% of the population is age 25 or younger—which causes many of them to turn to extremism just for something exciting to do. Public entertainment—like jazz concerts, Comic-Con, and video gaming events—is now supported. The government recently lifted a decades-old ban on movie theaters and has made a point of encouraging the fledgling Saudi filmmaking industry to expand. Six Flags Entertainment Corporation announced in June that it would build a theme park in the kingdom.

The true centerpiece of his efforts, though, is economic. He wants to turn the kingdom away from a near-total dependence on oil and into a diverse, open economy. He will have to overcome significant obstacles: an entrenched poor work ethic due to pervasive government handouts, a crippling regulatory environment, and a general reluctance to change. Saudi Arabia will need massive resources if it is to succeed in putting its economy on a new footing.

Everything hangs, however, on securing broad social and religious reforms, or otherwise, the kingdom will fail to generate strategic investments from wealthy Western nations. Contrary to popular belief, Saudi Arabia does not have the money to move away from its petro-dependence on its own. A great deal depends on the planned sale of five percent of state oil giant, Saudi Aramco, which could be the biggest initial public offering in history.

As *Time* magazine speculated in its December 25, 2017, issue:

But 2018 is likely to be just the start. After he takes the reins from his elderly father, Mohammed bin Salman could rule the kingdom for a generation. Top officials in the royal court say no plan is in the works for the ailing King to abdicate, a step unprecedented in Saudi history. Besides, he may prefer to rule alongside his father for some time, with the King providing a degree of political cover as he continues to transform the kingdom completely.

While a stable, moderate Saudi Arabia appears promising, we should not forget about the kingdom's hardline conservatives. They *will* attempt a counter-punch, which may come in the form of Islamic terrorism against the Saudi state. And then things will really become exciting in the Middle East.