

The Saudi Arabian Makeover

A Reform Movement to Watch

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We may want to keep an eye on the Middle East. Now, that may sound strange, saying that to people who have been watching world events, especially Middle Eastern events, for decades, but it bears repeating because we may tend to focus on the state of Israel and perhaps miss things happening elsewhere in the region. In that vein, we may wish to consider what is happening at the present time in Saudi Arabia.

More specifically, we should add the name of Mohammed bin Salman al Saud to the list of significant people. I know that is a mouthful but just remember Prince Mohammed of Saudi Arabia. He is, since June of last year, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, the obvious heir apparent to the throne. He also fills the positions of Deputy Prime Minister and also Defense Minister, and in that last office he is the youngest to hold that position in the world. He's only 32. We figured out this afternoon he's probably an early Millennial. Prince Mohammed is also Chief of the House of Saud Royal Court, so he's pretty important. He is Chairman of the Council for Economic and Developmental Affairs in Saudi Arabia. He has been described as the power behind the throne of his father, King Salman. Some people—prophecy watchers, specifically—have already tabbed him as the anti-Christ.

Since being named as Crown Prince, Prince Mohammed has engaged in a massive reform program for his kingdom. He is 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. That last one is one of the big ones.

He says that conservative Saudi Arabia has been, in his words, "not normal over the past thirty years," and he blames rigid Islamic doctrines that have governed society there in reaction to the Iranian revolution, which he claims his predecessors "did not know how to deal with"—and he's saying he does. This is interesting in light of the fact that over the past week there have been protests and riots in Iran. Things were heating up over there.

Prince Mohammed has said, "We were simply reverting to what we followed: a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions. Seventy percent of Saudis are younger than thirty. Honestly, we will not waste another thirty years of our life combating extremist thoughts. We will destroy them now and immediately." You can imagine that those are fighting words to Islamic extremists across the Middle East—in his nation

particularly and wherever they happen to be in the world.

So, what has he done so far, this Prince Mohammed? Most importantly, he has succeeded, in part, in breaking the alliance between hardline clerics—these are the old men who have long defined and enforced the national character of Saudi Arabia—he has severed that relationship, that alliance with the house of Saud, which has run affairs of state since 1935. One of the first things he did was that he rounded up two hundred members of the Saudi elite, accused them all of corruption, and locked them up in a luxury hotel in Riyadh, where they are still sitting. His goal, of course, is to separate church and state. He's considered a radical liberal in Saudi Arabia, especially by the conservatives.

He's also more aggressive and interventionist. Shortly after the Prince took charge of the Defense Ministry, Saudi Arabia launched its largest ever military intervention into neighboring Yemen, which is being backed by Iran right now. (At least the separatists there are being backed by Iran.) In June, the Kingdom imposed a blockade on its Persian Gulf neighbor and rival Qatar, because it was dealing diplomatically with Iran and Islamist groups, and Saudi Arabia thought that shouldn't be. So it blockaded their harbors.

His reforms have also tackled head-on societal taboos, such as the recently rescinded ban on women driving and also on women entering sports stadiums. He scaled back guardianship laws that restrict women's roles and he also established an Islamic Center that has been tasked with certifying the sayings of the prophet Mohammed, since there are many apocryphal sayings that ignite extremism. He wants to come up with a book or a list of things that have been certified as having come from the mouth or the pen of Mohammed.

He also is already working on actually bringing entertainment to the Saudi Arabian Kingdom. There is a really interesting reason for this, and it simply is he believes that the millions of Saudi Arabian young people are bored. As I mentioned earlier, 70% of the Saudi Arabians are under 30, 45% of them are under 25. This boredom, this lack of something to do, turns many of them to extremism just for something exciting to do. They need some stimulation in their lives. So public entertainments like concerts are now encouraged. And in December, just just a month ago, the government lifted a decades-long ban on movie theaters.

The economic centerpiece of all this is to turn the Kingdom from a near total dependence on oil into a diverse, open economy. Now, he is going to have to overcome significant obstacles to do this. For one thing, there is an entrenched, poor work ethic.

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The reason for this is essentially socialism—that the government has been giving aid and handouts to its people pervasively, so, "Hey, if we are going to get it from the government, why work?" He also has to overcome a crippling regulatory environment, which is another socialist thing, and a general reluctance to change, because Saudi Arabia is a very conservative state, especially in its leadership. The young people seem to like it, but they are going to have to work for it if they want these changes to go through.

Saudi Arabia will need huge resources if it is to succeed in putting its economy on a new footing, because 90-95% of its money comes from oil or the chemicals that oil produces. Most importantly, though, it needs broad social and religious reforms, or otherwise, it will fail to generate strategic investments because—believe it or not—Saudi Arabia really does not have the money to move away from its petro-dependence. A great deal of Prince Mohammed's reforms, both economic, religious and social, hang on the planned sale of 5% of the Saudi Arabian state oil giant Saudi Aramco. They are predicting that when that 5% stake goes on sale, it will be the biggest initial public offering in history.

Time Magazine speculated in its December 25 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 this may look promising to those of us in the West, we should not forget about the hardline conservatives, both religious and governmental. They're still around. They *will* attempt a counterpunch, which may come in the form of Islamic extremism—in terrorism—within the Kingdom. We do live in exciting times, don't we?