

# Briefing

## Increasing Saudi Dependence on the UAE

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman has promised to bring about social and economic reform in the kingdom and curb conservative influences that, according to Washington, serve to promote and encourage extremist ideologies adopted by Al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is on this basis that he has managed to secure the support of US policymakers despite a string of controversies as he has side-lined his rivals, including once Washington's favourite Mohamed Bin Nayef. However, with an increasingly uncertain US elections and concerns that a Democrat victory will bring about a major shift in US priorities towards Iran and a potentially hostile US administration, Bin Salman has begun to lean and depend heavily upon the UAE to secure his future. This briefing looks at the dynamics that will govern the Saudi-UAE partnership in the coming months.

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The dynamics that govern the relationship between Washington and Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman are built on the premise that the latter fulfils his promises of enacting unprecedented social and economic reforms that directly address the concerns of US policymakers. Bin Salman has promised to curb conservative influences that Washington believes serve as the catalyst for radicalism and extremism, eliminate some of the traditional monopolies in the economy to allow for greater competition from US companies, and commit to taking greater individual initiative and spend Saudi resources in containing Iran and asserting US interests. In return, Bin Salman expects Washington to facilitate his position within the kingdom as [he bids to become the first of the grandsons of the founding King AbdulAziz to inherit the throne.](#)

However, these promises alone were insufficient to fully allay the fears among US policymakers over a relatively unknown Saudi prince, who had imposed himself on very disgruntled family members. The key influence that managed to sway US policymakers was that exerted by the UAE and its Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Zayed, and UAE ambassador to Washington Yousef al-Otaiba. Bin Zayed was, and remains, a major influence on Bin Salman and continues to advise him not only on foreign policy, but how to navigate the domestic challenges which require an acute understanding of the mood in Washington which continues to insist on the preservation of the likes of Mohamed Bin Nayef and Ahmad Bin AbdulAziz as possible alternatives. When Bin Salman arrested the former Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Nayef, the US reportedly asserted on Bin Salman that Bin Nayef should not be harmed and should be taken care of, resulting in the latter's release and subsequent well-treatment.

The UAE argued, and to great effect, that Bin Salman was the only prince who fully believed in the need to unpin the conservative influences on Saudi society that, according to the UAE, 'promote radicalism', and that the constant domestic instability brought about by the aging second generation princes succeeding the kingship could be resolved by decisively supporting a young third generation prince who would likely rule for decades. Moreover, the UAE argued that unlike former Saudi leaders, Bin Salman was prepared to fully commit to spending Saudi resources on curbing Iranian influence rather than solely rely on US initiatives (as demonstrated in Saudi Arabia's military activities in Yemen, and launching of overtures to Baghdad's political elite).

Bin Salman demonstrated his commitment to these policies by offering billions of dollars in the purchase of arms and other investments in the US, and agreeing with US universities and military organisations to explore the prospect of establishing branches in the kingdom to revamp the education system.

It is in this context that the relationship between Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman and the UAE has developed into a close partnership that for both sides has become indispensable. For Abu Dhabi, they are finally able to exert influence on Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy, propelling them from a minor Gulf state to a regional power that has even asserted itself at the kingdom's expense in Yemen as in the case of their bombing of Saudi-backed government forces that retook Aden temporarily in late 2019. For Bin Salman, the UAE acts as his de facto ambassador to Washington, ensuring that the controversies such

as the Khashoggi affair and the Qatar blockade do not impact American support for his bid to become king.

This relationship is likely to become much closer following Abu Dhabi's normalisation of ties with Israel and the prospect of a return of a Democrat President to the White House who is likely to disregard Riyadh's concerns over Iran and embark on new negotiations that may well come about at the expense of Gulf allies. Should such negotiations commence, it is expected that the US will demand a ceasefire in Yemen and talks with the Houthis, cementing the latter's control of the areas bordering Saudi Arabia and resulting in a permanent entrenchment that will add to the sense of growing Iranian encirclement from Iraq to the North, Iran mainland to the East, and Houthis to the South. Moreover, there is concern in Riyadh that a Democrat-led US would be less inclined to ignore the controversies such as the Khashoggi affair which Congress may well revive to impose sanctions and restrict Bin Salman's ability to exercise his powers as King in a manner he so desires, particularly as the potency of Saudi Arabia's oil power which has acted as the traditional leverage against Washington continues to decline.

Bin Salman will hope that Abu Dhabi can leverage its new ties with Tel Aviv to prevent, or at least temper, any antagonism from a Democrat administration in Washington. Bin Salman will also hope that the UAE can facilitate positive attitudes among US policymakers towards his reforms in Saudi Arabia and continued support especially given that the proposed reforms are likely to result in a gradual decline of Saudi Arabia's traditional influence in the region and the wider Muslim World, and have already alienated Pakistan, Malaysia, Somalia, and exacerbated tensions with the North African states. Moreover, as Saudi Arabia vacates the 'Islamic' space, it leaves behind a vacuum that an ambitious regional rival in Turkey has managed to exploit to great effect while maintaining sufficient leverage with Washington to avoid any reprisals that might normally be associated with its expansion.

Bin Salman's controversies and lack of leverage over Washington mean that his security is now heavily dependent on the UAE's ability to influence the mood in Washington and temper any antagonism. This inevitably requires Saudi Arabia to ensure its policies remain aligned with the UAE and Bin Zayed's ambitions.

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