

# Briefing

## King Salman and MBS: convergence or increasing divergence?

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As a powerful and influential prince, Salman Bin AbdulAziz was heavily involved in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and known throughout political circles as a conservative with unwavering support for the Palestinian cause. While his son Mohamed Bin Salman, now the Crown Prince, has taken over the administration of the kingdom and become the central figure in all decision-making, King Salman has on the rare occasion intervened to overrule his son, as in the case of purported Saudi cooperation with the Deal of the Century where he side-lined the Crown Prince to affirm Saudi commitment to Palestine, the Khashoggi affair which saw him dispatch senior family members to Ankara and Washington, and tempering the ill treatment of some of the more senior family members. However, as the UAE asserts itself and as Washington pressures Bin Salman for greater concessions on the Arab stance towards Israel, King Salman is reportedly furious at the manner in which the kingdom has been led to encourage normalisation and align with the UAE.

This briefing looks at the extent to which King Salman remains in control of policy in the kingdom, to what extent he has leverage over the Crown Prince, and to what extent Saudi Arabia's policies on issues including Iran, Qatar, Palestine, and relations with Washington, are his policies as opposed to those of the Crown Prince.

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Salman Bin AbdulAziz has been a powerful and influential figure in Al Saud since his full brother King Fahd assumed the throne in 1982 and the 'Sudairi seven' were propelled to senior positions. Even when Abdullah Bin AbdulAziz successfully maneuvered his way to become Crown Prince (deploying his leverage as head of the then-newly established National Guard, and arguing effectively that his status as an only son meant he had no factional interests governing his choice of Crown Prince), Salman acted as a key interlocuter on issues such as the Bosnia conflict in the 1990s and the Palestine-Israel issue. Salman would travel often to Washington lobbying on behalf of Izetbegovic and the Palestinians and seeking fend off an assertive White House keen to apply increasing pressure on Riyadh to contain the Arab fighters who had fought in Bosnia and Afghanistan, and the more extreme trends emerging at the time.

Salman Bin AbdulAziz has been an integral part of the Saudi state apparatus, sharing the concerns of the Saudi establishment on a number of issues that align with much of the Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman's own foreign policy.

On the issues of Iran, King Salman is firmly of the belief that the kingdom is being encircled by Tehran and its proxies. In Iraq, Tehran exerts the most influence as its allied militias operate with impunity and have penetrated the state, delivering MPs to parliament and their favoured candidates to important portfolios such as the ministry of interior. In Syria, Iran has been a firm ally of Assad, successfully helping him to resist Saudi-backed Syrian forces in the first years of the Arab Spring movement and bringing Syria out of the Arab orbit. In Yemen to the South, Iran is a firm supporter of the Houthis who overthrew the international-recognised government that emerged from the National Dialogue brokered by the Saudi-led GCC initiative, and almost seized Yemen by force but for the Saudi intervention.

King Salman believes that Washington's policy to contain Iran has failed and is deeply concerned that the Democrats in particular are in favour of recognising Iranian might in the region in exchange for a framework of cooperation limiting the threat to US interests. Such a framework would naturally be at the expense of the Gulf states, and Democrat attitudes towards Iran soured relations with Saudi Arabia under the Obama administration.

Therefore, on the issue of Iran, the need for Saudi involvement in Yemen, and the policy of lobbying for greater pressure on Tehran, King Salman and his Crown Prince are aligned.

On the issue regarding the feud with Qatar, this particular matter precedes King Salman and has been a contentious issue since the early days of King Abdullah's reign as Doha invited the US to establish the largest military base and established diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv with the aim of containing attempts by Riyadh to pressure Al Thani into aligning with its policies. King Abdullah, as well as other senior figures of Al Saud during his reign including the powerful Defence Minister and Crown Prince Sultan Bin AbdulAziz, and the influential Interior Minister and subsequent Crown Prince Nayef Bin AbdulAziz, shared the opinion that Qatar's foreign policy and support for the Muslim Brotherhood were problematic for the kingdom and that Doha's long-term aim was to use external powers to topple Al Saud. However, assured of his own power and influence, King Abdullah sought to preserve ostensible Gulf unity, turning a blind eye to controversies domestically such as Bandar Bin Sultan's attempted coup, and

leaked recordings of conversations between Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani of Doha and Libya's Muammar al-Gaddafi discussing the prospect of a US invasion of Saudi Arabia and its division into five states.

The Arab Spring was seen by Salman and King Abdullah at the time, as an existential threat whereby the momentum of the protests was being channelled by Qatar's media outlets to topple the regimes and deliver its allies to power. Both Salman and King Abdullah were convinced that Doha had become a serious threat, and the indifference of the Obama administration to the fall of long-time ally Mubarak in Egypt and the concerns of Al Saud, suggested to the Saudi leadership that Qatar had successfully begun to temper Saudi ability to leverage Washington.

In other words, anti-Qatari sentiment precedes Mohamed Bin Salman and the imposition of the blockade and imprisonment of sympathisers of the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar are policies that align with King Salman's wider concerns about Qatar's role in the region and the perceived threat it poses to Saudi leadership and internal stability.

On Saudi relationship with Washington, King Salman is acutely aware that the dynamics of the alliance have gradually shifted in favour of the US which has sought to wean its energy dependency on Saudi Arabia so as to remove the powerful leverage that King Faisal wielded to great effect in 1973 with his oil embargo. Salman was an influential operator in the Saudi state when King Abdullah's plan to threaten Washington over Palestine backfired in the early 2000s when the events of 9/11 resulted in such relentless international pressure on the kingdom that King Abdullah presented his own peace plan in a bid to fend off an assertive Bush keen to invade Iraq, and from Riyadh's perspective, mulling the potential of an invasion of Saudi Arabia itself. According to sources close to the key policymakers at the time, King Abdullah was so determined to escape US pressure that when interviewed by a journalist about the details of his proposed peace plan, the King remarked "write whatever you would like to be in it".

King Salman is aware that the kingdom cannot exert the same leverage it once did on Washington, and that part of fending off the pressure means adopting a policy of appeasement in some cases to create room for lobbying on more important matters later. This was no more evident than in King Salman's message to US President Trump early in his presidency when the King remarked that while Saudi would entertain the prospect of an Israeli state, it would not do so at the expense of Palestine.

However, the King and the Crown Prince diverge on the long-term trajectory of the kingdom. While Bin Salman insists the kingdom needs to modernise, the King does not believe this should be at the expense of the kingdom's traditions and identity. While Bin Salman believes an alliance with the UAE is essential to Saudi Arabia's future (albeit for personal reasons as the UAE lobbies Washington to facilitate Bin Salman's rise and future kingship), King Salman has expressed frustration at the UAE's policies in the region. While Bin Salman has imprisoned family members in a bid to assert himself, King Salman has intervened to prevent their maltreatment.

The reality in Saudi Arabia is that while the Crown Prince wields significant power and is the de facto ruler of the kingdom, the King retains the ability to side-line him should he so wish. The reason is simple. Bin Salman is not strong enough to assert himself on the family without the authority of his father who is deeply respected as a result of his long history at the highest levels of state. Without the king, Bin Salman is vulnerable to the family.

However, Bin Salman is also aware that his father does not approve of some of the policies being implemented, that in the Crown Prince's view, are essential. This is why the Crown Prince, who was the head of his father's court before assuming power, has implemented a system whereby he is able to control to a large extent the information that reaches the king. Where Bin Salman differs from his predecessors is that he controls the royal court in a manner previous Crown Princes were unable to. Under King Abdullah, the then-head of the royal court Khaled al-Twijri was able to exert significant pressure on policymaking and was even able to facilitate manoeuvres against the Crown Princes. The position became just as powerful, if not more powerful, than that of the Crown Prince. Bin Salman is arguably the first in the kingdom's history to combine the two positions.

The King had no prior knowledge of UAE normalisation, nor of Bin Salman's approval of it. The King's fury was made evident when senior royal Turki al-Faisal was dispatched to the international media to convey the King's position that there would be no normalisation with Israel without recognition of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. The King disregarded promises the Crown Prince had made to Washington as he raged at the prospect that his legacy would become one of betrayal of the very cause he had championed for decades. The King's move was reminiscent of the dynamics surrounding the Deal of the Century where Bin Salman had reportedly liaised with Kushner to pressure the Palestinian authority to accept the Deal of the Century. When news reached the King, he immediately side-lined the Crown Prince and announced that Saudi Arabia would not accept any deal that did not guarantee the rights of the Palestinians.

King Salman is keen to see his son take power and is willing to attribute mistakes to inexperience. Moreover, King Salman is acutely aware that there is a need to pass on the kingship to the third generation lest the kingdom become mired in consecutive succession struggles that are likely to create instability and chaos. However, it is clear that the King will not accept policies that threaten his legacy.

What is clear however, is that the King moves on controversial issues only when he has news of them. In other words, the ability of the king to assert himself is dependent upon the information he receives, which as Bin Salman strengthens his grip on the kingdom, is becoming increasingly censored.

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