

# Saudi Arabia Hits the Brakes on Reforms

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Articles & Testimony

## Arresting feminists doesn't inspire faith in the crown prince's much-hyped reform agenda.

For months, Saudi Arabia had been enjoying a public-relations windfall. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MbS, the kingdom's charismatic future leader, seduced the world with his vision for a new, modern nation. There have been live concerts, and cinemas are opening, with many more planned. Women can attend soccer games. Last September, MbS announced a bold promise to overturn [\(https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/saudi-arabia-women-driving-reform/541218/\)](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/saudi-arabia-women-driving-reform/541218/) the country's ban on women driving, a change that is set to go into effect on June 24.

Then, late on Friday, it all came crashing down: Reports emerged that the women activists who pressed for the policy change had been arrested and imprisoned. As of this morning, 13 are reported to have been arrested; most are women. Apart from the driving issue, they have campaigned against so-called guardianship rules which require Saudi women to receive permission from a male relative before making many life decisions, like traveling. One of those detained was Loujain al-Hathloul, who was photographed at the 2016 One Young World Summit with none other than Meghan Markle, who married Britain's Prince Harry on Saturday.

What is happening in the kingdom? MbS may want to discourage any popular protests seeking additional social or political changes. (Over the weekend, one American official told me that the arrests reflected the prince's personal style, even if his name was not publicly linked to them.) His reforms were always likely to provoke opposition from within Saudi Arabia's male-dominated, hierarchical society, which follows a strict interpretation of Islam. The apparent need to arrest women activists suggests that MbS is having to rethink his grand plans.

In Saudi Arabia, MbS is sometimes likened to Saddam Hussein, the executed former dictator of Iraq. Most often, they're referring to the "good" Saddam, who, as vice president, was a driving force for modernization in the 1970s.

That Saddam, though ruthless, was respected. Only later, in the 1980s and 1990s, did he come to engender widespread fear. I have spoken to Saudis who [fear \(https://nation.com.pk/08-Nov-2017/muhammad-bin-salman-another-saddam-husseini\)](https://nation.com.pk/08-Nov-2017/muhammad-bin-salman-another-saddam-husseini) MbS will turn out the same way.

One anecdote about MbS that seemingly every ambassador in Riyadh tells is the “bullet story.” When MbS was 22 (roughly 10 years ago), he wanted to build a business career. On one occasion, he needed a Saudi judge to sign off on a deal. But there was a problem with the contract, so the judge declined. MbS, the story goes, pulled a bullet out of his pocket and put it on the man’s desk. “You will sign or this is for you,” he said. The man signed the contract, but complained to then-King Abdullah, who banned MbS from the royal court.

Such stories and fears about MbS suggest a rising royal with a short fuse, bent on reshaping the kingdom in a hurry. Maybe the crown prince now believes that the reform movement he kicked off has spun out of his control. Or maybe he sees that he moved too fast, unsettling the old elites who now need soothing. Or perhaps his father advised him—or was told to advise him—that he needs to slow down.

The possibility that MbS may be facing powerful opposition emerged last month at the Arab summit hosted by King Salman in the Gulf city of Dhahran. The gathering focused on President Donald Trump’s decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem; the meeting’s final communique repeated many of the usual lines about support for the Palestinians. This was hardly surprising, perhaps except for the fact that MbS (who attended the summit, but in a supporting role to his father) had just returned from a three-week tour of the United States, where he had reportedly captivated both the business community as well as leaders of the American Jewish community. MbS reportedly told the latter group that the question of the fate of the Palestinians did not rank among the top 100 issues for ordinary Saudis—a line that reportedly caused some people to literally fall off their chairs.

Those who have met MbS say he is Bill Clinton-like in his knack for engaging with even those whom he disagrees with. Yet he rarely seems to change his mind. That’s a pity, because he’s also gaining a reputation for making bad decisions. Those include the detention of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Saudi Arabia’s ongoing war in Yemen against Iran-supported Houthi tribesmen, the diplomatic rift with Qatar, and the arrest of nearly 400 princes and businessmen accused of corruption. In addition, Vision 2030, the kingdom’s economic transformation plan, is proceeding at a snail’s pace. The centerpiece of the plan is the partial sell-off of the state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco. But this has been delayed. Meanwhile, embarrassing revelations of MbS’s tacky extravagance continue to emerge.

MbS, it seems, isn’t really interested in change. Arresting the activists is the way that Saudi Arabia would and did behave in the past: In 1990, several dozen women were arrested for driving through Riyadh. But today’s Saudi Arabia is meant to be different, and MbS is supposed to be a different kind of royal. The world’s hopes are on him to create a modern Saudi Arabia, able to detach itself from its conservative theocratic underpinnings. After these latest arrests, his ability to satisfy those hopes is in doubt.

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