

Muhammad bin Salman Deserves Support — “Whether He is Right or Wrong”

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Brief Analysis

Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) might benefit from a reassessment of some of his bold policies, notably in external affairs: whether in Yemen, where a preemptive action has stalled into a war of attrition to the detriment of the Yemeni population; or in Qatar, where a boycott intended to force a course correction in Qatari politics is generating counterproductive results. But while a wide contingent of supporters and admirers have been engaging in inflated hagiography, much of the criticism directed at this young leader is also exaggerated, in bad faith, or in disregard of the crucial importance of this moment in Saudi and regional history.

Critics of the welcome reception that some of the media has accorded the Saudi Crown Prince have expressed outrage at the human rights record of Saudi Arabia. Some have even summoned back the false accusation of Saudi involvement on September 11, 2001, attacks, as well as the more credible accusation of support by the Saudi religious establishment to the spread of radical readings of the Islamic faith worldwide. But such criticism ignores, deliberately or not, the fast-paced and courageous actions of MbS to contain and disempower the radical religious establishment, and seem to suggest that he is to be rebuked for being incapable of resolving all the ills of the Saudi state, culture, and society at once.

What is undeniable is that the Crown Prince, whose immodest assertion is that “his ambition will overwhelm all issues” is trying hard. In many respects, he is succeeding; in others, he is not.

Some of the reform initiatives that the young prince has undertaken seemed inconceivable prior to their announcement. MbS directed the sudden lifting of the grip of the dreaded religious police — the major agency for the enforcement of a kind of totalitarianism in Saudi society — dramatically altering the social and cultural landscape in the kingdom. Reform-oriented Kings in prior years, such as King Fahd in the 1980s and more recently King Abdullah, had refrained from any fundamental challenge to the religious establishment, recognizing its deep influence over the conservative Saudi society. The need of the monarchy to secure the support of prominent clerics was heightened by growing radical religious challenges to its legitimacy.

But MbS has opted for a daring, albeit risky, alternative approach: an all-out confrontation with radicalism in its militant as well as in its social and institutional forms. Most assessments before his action would have deemed his approach unrealistic and slated for failure. Yet, MbS prevailed, even succeeding in unleashing a wave of popular

support that questions underlying assumptions about the nature of conservatism in Saudi Arabia. A hardline backlash cannot be ruled out. Still, the momentum is currently towards amplifying and cementing the considerable gains in social and cultural reform, potentially leading to a tipping point of irreversible change.

The reading provided by MbS as to the place of religion in Saudi society — his view that 1979 represents the initial advent of ultra-conservatism, his characterization of the religious milieu in the ancestral time of early Islam as fundamentally tolerant — may be dismissed by Islamic (and much of Western) scholarship as reductionist, even naive. Yet, MbS's stance is far more in line with much of the self-perception of a majority of Muslims. And if Islam is what faithful Muslims believe it is, the lived Islam of MbS, other Saudis, and other Muslims, is indeed the antidote to radicalism — not some laboratory-manufactured “moderate” version of the faith.

Another key legacy of MbS, were he to succeed, would be to alter the political leadership system of Saudi Arabia from the untenable horizontal succession (brother-to-brother among the sons of the founding monarch) to the less precarious vertical one. While both persuasion and coercion applied, the ability of the young prince to navigate, manage, and ultimately control the sprawling ruling family was his first test of national leadership.

MbS seem also intent on ushering the kingdom away from the model of the total welfare state. He is reducing subsidies, introducing taxation, and expecting actual productivity from a population more accustomed to entitlements. But its management and recognition of the reverse side of this reform -- the demands for genuine representation, accountability, and a say in national affairs on the part of a tax-paying population -- will be a further test for him to face.

In foreign affairs, MbS has already changed the style of Saudi Arabia. A reliable U.S. ally, Riyadh had consistently engaged in mitigating politics — following and anticipating U.S. actions and crafting strategies to ensure political and economic soft landings. With the rise of MbS, however, a new Saudi Arabia has manifested itself in Yemen and Qatar, as well as in the ham-handed approach to the Lebanese prime minister. The new approach is a work-in-progress, as MbS seems to oscillate on the fine line between boldness and recklessness.

Washington was not ready for this pro-active approach and is yet to adjust its expectations and reactions. Still, his displayed courage that may lead MbS to assume a historic role. He is even positioned for a contribution to the resolution of the Palestinian plight and the achievement of peace with Israel. Where he to achieve consistency in his approach, he may be a better Sadat for the region, as well as the Meiji equivalent in the history of his country. Yet courage ought to be balanced by a yet-to-be-hinted-at modesty.

MbS, together with the leaders of the UAE and Israel, assess a hegemonic Iran as the main threat to addressing these local and regional challenges. However, clarity of vision has not yet translated into a coherent policy. While both Tehran and Moscow are engaged in a patient, incremental pursuit of power in the region, MbS seems to compensate for the lack of a counter -strategy, whether in Riyadh or in Washington, simply by asserting superlative self-confidence. A better course will need to be charted.

A tradition attributes to the Prophet of Islam the command to “support your brother, whether he is right or in error.” His companions allegedly inquired: Supporting him when he is right is clear, but how to support him when he is in error?”; The Prophet is reported to have replied: “by guiding him away from it.”

Muhammad bin Salman is far from being the paragon of measured reason and wisdom. No politician is. Still, short of the fantastic democratic transformation that his ill-informed or ill-intentioned critics demand, MbS presents a credible path towards salvaging his country, and perhaps his entire region, from a fate of festering decay. ❖

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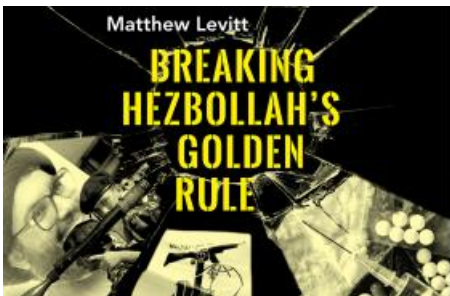
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