

Embrace a New Saudi Arabia

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Jun 29, 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

The United States should work with Muhammad bin Salman, the new crown prince, as he pushes for change.

Saudi Arabia has a new crown prince. Mohammed bin Salman, known as MbS, is clearly now slated to succeed his father, King Salman. At 31, the kingdom has never seen anyone like him. He has been given very wide responsibilities as defense minister and overseer of the Saudi economy and its transformation. As one Saudi minister said to me shortly before I met him, "You are about to meet our force of nature."

There is no question that he is driven. He believes that Saudi Arabia must diversify its economy and modernize the state, its governance and even its sociology. He knows that in an age of rapid technological change, Saudi Arabia must create a knowledge-based economy. Visit the college of entrepreneurship in King Abdullah City and it feels like being on the Google campus. But it is not just the layout, it is the coed students, who exude an energy and sense that they can reshape the country. And there is little doubt that MbS is their inspiration.

Whether they and the new crown prince can succeed remains to be seen.

Saudi Arabia is a deeply conservative country where social change in general, and particularly for women, will not come easily. The religious establishment will resist change and a diminution of its role. It has taught -- and exported -- an austere, deeply intolerant strain of Islam. It has controlled education and social mores, and done so as part of a deal with the royal family. Significant parts of the royal family may also resist as the crown prince cuts off the moneys that have always been available to them.

In an era of reduced oil prices, the crown prince's task becomes more difficult still. Already some of the salary cuts he imposed to reduce the budget deficit have been rolled back given the opposition they engendered. Still, he is pushing forward, promising to diversify the sources of revenue, working to change the culture -- bringing concerts and dance troupes to the kingdom, even as he seeks to transform the Saudi educational system. His minister of education wants, for example, to do away with the old textbooks, replacing both their content and changing the rote

style of instruction by introducing interactive digital tablets in place of books.

The challenges are not only internal. External threats start with Iran. The crown prince sees Iran as an existential threat and is determined to counter it. Saudi Arabia drew a line in Yemen when it saw the Iranian hand in the Houthis overthrow of the Yemeni government (and was convinced the Obama administration would never act against Iranian aggression). Its intervention has proved costly for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates -- not to mention the price it is imposing on an already impoverished Yemen.

In addition, the kingdom, along with the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, is now embroiled in an effort to force Qatar to change its policy of double-dealing -- being a putative partner to these states and the U.S. while it also provides material support and a platform for the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Taliban and al-Qaida affiliates. Like the Saudis, we have endured this double game for far too long. And while President Donald Trump initially applauded the Saudi pressure campaign against Qatar, his administration now seems to have altered its course. In an unprecedented way to speak about a friendly country, the State Department spokesman said the administration was "mystified" by what the Saudis were doing toward Qatar, saying that it had not provided clear conditions that the Qataris had to meet and seemed to be trying not to change Qatar's behavior but its regime.

Well, the Saudis have now conveyed 13 conditions through Kuwait, which is acting as a mediator with Qatar. There are surely some, like seeking "reparations and compensation" for damages caused by Qatar's policies, that go too far, but there are others that do not. For example, expelling Iranian Revolutionary Guard members from Qatar, severing ties to terrorist groups, and stopping the funding of organizations and individuals that have been designated as terrorists by Saudi Arabia as well as the United States and other countries are appropriate and necessary. Maybe it is too much to ask the Qataris to shut down Al Jazeera, but isn't it time to stop its subsidizing the network when it gives a platform to those like Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi who legitimize terrorism?

It is easy to understand why the Trump administration wants the imbroglio between the Saudis and Qataris to stop. But it should be supporting the effort to get Qatar to change its ways. Berating the Saudis is not the way to produce that. We have a stake in the successful transformation of Saudi Arabia, and finding the right way to work with the crown prince is the place to start.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former special assistant to President Obama. ❖

U.S. News & World Report

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)