

Saudi Palace Politics and the U.S. Relationship

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Brief Analysis

Washington should avoid the appearance of taking sides in the rivalry between the Saudi crown prince and his younger cousin, the deputy crown prince.

A profusion of royal decrees on June 17 appears to have further marginalized Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef and confirms the political ascendancy of King Salman's son Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman.

Although apparently esoteric, the most significant of the decrees restructures the kingdom's system of prosecutions. In the new setup, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, known as MbN, who is also interior minister, loses his powers overseeing criminal investigations. The Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution has thus been renamed the Office of Public Prosecution, and a newly appointed public prosecutor now reports directly to the king.

A Saudi lawyer quoted in today's English-language *Saudi Gazette* commented: "What is more important than the change of name is that public prosecution is under the king and not under the Ministry of Interior." The lawyer continued: "This means it is independent."

Other decrees changed key personnel answering to MbN and his principal ally in the royal family, Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, the minister responsible for the Saudi Arabian National Guard and a son of the previous king.

In reality, the decrees shift more control to Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the king's favorite son, who is also the minister of defense and effectively controls policy on the war in Yemen and the confrontation with Qatar. MbS, as he is known, likewise oversees the oil sector and leads Vision 2030, the kingdom's plan to reform its economy. Since the election of President Donald Trump, MbS has sought to drive the bilateral relationship. The king himself, eighty-one this year -- though appearing regularly in public and meeting Saudi notables and foreign leaders

-- is prone to repeating anecdotes and has of late been progressively sidelined from actual decisionmaking, according to foreign officials and diplomats who have met him.

Across Saudi society, there is debate over whether and when the king may replace MbN with MbS. The speculation extends to who in Washington backs which candidate. In February, newly appointed CIA director Mike Pompeo awarded a medal to MbN to honor his counterterrorism work, perceived by some Saudis as backing for the heir apparent. Yet in May, President Trump's senior advisor and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, sat next to MbS at a dinner in Riyadh.

It may well be that the Trump White House regards MbS as the most likely next leader of Saudi Arabia and perhaps, given his role in Vision 2030 and his stated interest in modernizing Saudi society, the most preferable. Such a transition would alter previous traditions of Saudi succession and would likely reinforce Saudi foreign policy efforts on Yemen and Qatar. But the timing and nature of such a transition can only be guessed at, and wider Saudi support for ties with the United States may be undermined by the appearance of U.S. interference in domestic affairs.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute, and coauthor of its 2017 Transition Paper "[Rebuilding Alliances and Countering Threats in the Gulf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebuilding-alliances-and-counteracting-threats-in-the-gulf)."
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