

Meet the Two Princes Reshaping the Middle East

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The de facto leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE know how to change positions as pressures demand, but getting it wrong in Qatar, Yemen, and other regional hotspots could have dreadful consequences.

The dramatic and sudden effort to isolate Qatar, like the fateful intervention before it in Yemen, sprang from the shared vision of two princes. Depending on your point of view, they may be the harbingers of a new and better Middle East -- or reckless architects of disaster.

Indeed, the region's most important relationship may be the dynamic duo of Muhammad bin Salman, the 31-year-old deputy crown prince of Saudi Arabia, and Muhammad bin Zayed, the 56-year-old crown prince of Abu Dhabi, the lead sheikhdom of the United Arab Emirates. They share not only a desire to wage twin battles against Iran and Islamic radicalism, but also a deep appreciation for their conservative Gulf countries' reliance on the United States. Together, they have shrewdly cultivated President Donald Trump, who is eager to show that he has a new strategy for defeating terrorism and confronting Tehran.

The reasons for the princes' evident mutual regard can only be guessed at -- Gulf monarchies are maddeningly opaque. Known to foreign diplomats and business executives as MBS and MBZ, they appear to have a mentee/mentor relationship, with the older MBZ viewing MBS as the future king of Saudi Arabia, who needs to be tutored by an older brother type figure. MBS, for whom the word hubris is a natural fit, seems to accept MBZ's counselling but probably would be horrified of the perception that he may be the junior partner.

Both men are arguably the powers behind their respective countries' thrones. MBZ has been increasingly running Abu Dhabi, which has most of the UAE's oil reserves, since his appointment as deputy crown prince in 2003 and his elevation to crown prince in 2004, when his father Sheikh Zayed, the founder of the UAE, died. Notionally, his elder

half-brother Khalifa is the ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of the UAE as a whole, but his health has been ravaged by successive strokes and other ailments and he is no longer seen in public. MBS is tracking the same career path as his would-be mentor, having been appointed deputy crown prince three months after his father became king in early 2015. In two short years, he has amassed executive power equivalent to MBZ's -- so the two men can speak as equals in terms of deciding policy and enacting it. King Salman clearly dotes on MBS, and seems to validate almost any policy idea he puts forward.

The main impediment to MBS's advance to the throne, though, is the Saudi crown prince, his 57-year-old cousin Muhammad bin Nayef, whose dour demeanor means he is sometimes described as being comatose, former U.S. officials say. MBN -- whose late father was the powerful hardline interior minister and later crown prince, Nayef bin Abdulaziz, a brother of the current king -- is thought to be contemptuous of MBZ, a consequence of a 2003 WikiLeaks cable in which MBZ is quoted as saying that Nayef had a bumbling manner, 'suggest[ing] that "Darwin was right,"' widely interpreted as implying that he was like a monkey. So MBZ apparently regards the prospect of MBN becoming king as genetically flawed -- and is cultivating his nominal deputy instead.

Until the Qatar crisis broke three weeks ago, the scorecard for the MBS/MBZ partnership was not looking good. The joint Saudi/UAE intervention in Yemen has had only qualified successes. Iranian-backed Houthi rebels control the capital, Sanaa, with forces loyal to the internationally recognized leader, President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, nowhere in sight. The Saudi military's performance has been execrable -- Saudi pilots of Apache attack helicopters don't like to put themselves in line of sight of their targets, considerably reducing their effectiveness, and Saudi F-15 pilots drop their bombs with apparent disregard for the targets, leading to excessive civilian casualties. Meanwhile, the Houthi fighters have held their own despite heavy losses. Widespread famine is an imminent prospect, though Riyadh hopes this will be blamed on the Houthis rather than themselves.

The UAE's performance in southern Yemen has been better, but at a cost. Emirati casualties have become a domestic issue -- MBZ visits grieving families and the injured in the hospital. And, inconveniently, military progress has empowered local al-Qaeda forces. In early May, a correspondent for the London *Times*, ironically on a trip to Aden facilitated by the UAE, reported: "Troops loyal to President Hadi...managed to push the Houthis out of the southern coastal areas around Aden, with the support of Emirati special forces and, controversially, fighters allied to al-Qaeda." The *Economist's* reporter, travelling with him, noted the rivalry between President Hadi and the governor of Aden, who complained that Hadi was recruiting al-Qaeda fighters. Both the Saudis and Emiratis are exasperated with Hadi, who is confined to virtual house arrest in Riyadh.

The two princes also diverge somewhat when it comes to Qatar. MBZ seems fixated on Doha's sympathy toward elements of the Muslim Brotherhood -- particularly the support given to the short-lived Morsi administration in Egypt. Abu Dhabi sees local elements of the Brotherhood as being treasonous. There have been arrests, trials and heavy sentences. MBS's focus is said to be more on Iran, which he regards as a destabilizing, malevolent force in the region. Both men are exasperated by Qatar's cautious approach to Iran, explicable by the two countries sharing the world's largest offshore natural gas field, and infuriated by the hostile reporting of Qatari media, particularly the Al-Jazeera satellite television station. Abu Dhabi views Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani as a mere proxy for his father, Hamad, who abdicated in his son's favor in 2013 and is now titled "Father-Emir." Hamad, who seized power from his own father in 1995, to the consternation of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, has traditionally taken a mischievous delight in almost promiscuous diplomatic flirting -- Israel and Hamas, the U.S. and the Taliban, Russia and anti-Russian Islamists.

Qatar's penchant for such games is hard to explain, but I am reminded of the occasion of a visit to Doha in April 2011 when I called on a friend who was a senior Al Thani. He laughed as he asked me whether I had seen that day's cartoon in the London *Independent* newspaper. No, I said. He tapped a few times on his iPad and showed me the

cartoonist's view of the events in Libya, where a loose international coalition was trying to overthrow Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi. The drawing was of a fighter-jet with side-by-side seating. British Prime Minister David Cameron was fighting over the controls with President Nicolas Sarkozy of France. In the back seat, with his legs up, was President Obama, asleep. A figure, clearly identifiable as then Qatari Emir Hamad, was gripping the nosecone, his finger in the air to see which way the wind was blowing. There was no caption to the cartoon but rather a label giving the type of plane depicted. The British media tends to be less straitlaced than its American counterparts: The aircraft was an "FU-2 Infighter Jet." My Qatari friend said to me: "That's rude, isn't it?"

Trying to work out the twists and turns of the Qatar crisis is challenging. The Saudi/UAE-led bid to isolate Qatar seems to have been pre-cooked, whether or not Emir Tamim really made his reported sympathetic comments about Iran, which Qatar denies. Breaking off diplomatic relations and closing land borders and airspace prompt the question of what Team MBS/MBZ is hoping to achieve. Washington's position was itself muddled last week when President Trump blasted Qatar's alleged ties to terrorist funding a mere 90 minutes after Secretary of State Rex Tillerson asked the Saudis and Emiratis to calm down. What is the U.S. endgame? Many Gulf analysts worry that Qatar won't capitulate, and Iran will reap the diplomatic rewards.

Apart from MBS and MBZ, there are probably two other key players: UAE Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef al-Otaiba (some of whose emails were leaked last week in what may be a sub-plot of the crisis) and presidential senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner. Otaiba (with whom I have exchanged emails!) is very much MBZ's man and is credited with suggesting the lunch between President Trump and MBS in March. Otaiba has also been one of the more successful ambassadors in developing contacts with Kushner; he orchestrated MBZ's semi-secret trip to Trump Tower to meet President-elect Trump and Kushner during the transition, which has also led to a Jared/MBS bonding. (The key elements of the Riyadh summits during President Trump's visit to the Middle East were apparently agreed by WhatsApp messages between the two men.)

But diplomatic excitement does not necessarily produce successful outcomes. MBS shrugged off the title of being the architect of the Yemen military adventure when it became clear that victory was not going to come easily. Low oil prices are hampering his Vision 2030 plan for economic transformation in the kingdom. Subsidy cuts, which were causing economic pain for ordinary Saudis, may well have been reversed recently against MBS's wishes. The wider House of Saud may have appreciated the deleterious impact rather better than MBS, whose recent purchase of a \$500 million superyacht may yet prove a political embarrassment.

So is the MBS/MBZ campaign against Qatar going to be a quick success or require an embarrassing climbdown? Emir Tamim and his wily father know how to change positions as pressures demand. As this crisis continues, the future potential roles of MBS and MBZ, either individually or together, in the Middle East will become clearer. Success could mean blunted ambitions for Iran and a defeated Islamic State, but overconfidence is not a prescription for victory. Cooler heads, in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Washington should be listened to. Getting it wrong could have dreadful consequences for the region, as well as the wider world.

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