

A Different Message to Prince Mohammad bin Salman from Another Young Saudi

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In the year 622, the Prophet Muhammad migrated to the city of Medina, where he established his state and wrote his famous document regarding the protection of civil society and respect for freedom. Faith, morality, and equality were essential values of this small state. Today, the ruling family and the Saudi people see the modern Saudi Arabia as an extension of this state. Despite the length of time that has passed and major changes that have occurred in the world, these values should still be our desired goal, and any progress forward must be directed towards strengthening these noble values.

The hardest question during the Enlightenment in Europe was, “Where should change begin? From the bottom of the pyramid or from the top?” The same question was posed by the Arab Spring, and answered by Mohamed Bouazizi and the youth of the Arab revolution: in the city squares.

The Arab Spring was neither a conspiracy nor the folly of reckless youth, but an uprising against tyranny, despair, and corruption. They were not seeking a new Islamic caliphate or a reactionary ruling regime to take us back to the Middle Ages. Their only demands were “bread, freedom, and social justice.” It would have been possible to avoid the bloodbath if those at the top of the pyramid had moved to respond to these legitimate demands. The unfortunate events after the Arab Spring have now created new challenges in our region, most prominently increased terrorist activity and civil war. Here, Saudi Arabia has an important role to play in contributing to resolving these challenges and restoring stability to our world. And I cannot find a better means of contributing to resolving these challenges than by offering a model for others to follow and serving as a role model to them.

A role model should be strong. Here I am not talking about traditional hard power — although that is necessary to deter external incursions — but rather economic strength; the real measure of the power and influence of any country. We, in Saudi Arabia, have an economic problem. In addition to low wages in the private sector and an increase in the prices of basic services, we are witnessing a decline in oil prices, a high youth unemployment rate, and a situation wherein large family companies still hold a large portion of the country’s wealth without a tax burden to support the state budget. Therefore, political decision makers, wealthy individuals, and ordinary citizens must work together to determine the best means of economic reform. This is where the dialogue should begin.

But dialogue alone is not sufficient. Popular participation with regard to decision-making in the coming stages of

reform will be an essential factor in success; the sensitivity of the issues at hand makes this necessary. The British understood this in the thirteenth century when the Magna Carta was signed, giving the English parliament real power to participate in decision-making. Wars and crises require decisions that impact the lives of the citizen, whose participation in decision-making obliges an acceptance of the resulting circumstances. Real participation raises the level of awareness among citizens and promotes fruitful dialogue, opening horizons to natural pluralism in any civilized society.

Contrary to what some imagine, Saudi society is not extremist, reactionary, nor in need of religious reform. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) did not recruit primarily from the kingdom, and keep in mind that others joined the group from Germany, Britain, and plenty of other non-Wahhabi societies. Young Saudis are constantly interacting with the world, are open to everything new, and want to contribute to the growth and renaissance of their country, region, and world. However, we also wish to adhere to our culture and are proud of our history; we will not accept any moves that will threaten our peace, nor will we abandon our ancient civilization.

Peace does not mean submission and surrender. Therefore, foreign interventions that aim to upset our security and stability must be confronted with all possible force. Our interaction with affairs of the Ummah is a historical responsibility and any display or concealment to the contrary is a betrayal of our collective community. In order for any peace project to succeed and continue, all parties must meet its terms which guarantee justice for all.

Any human action must be subject to assessment and correction in order to give the best image possible, and this is best achieved through listening to different voices. Umar bin Khattab said, "May God have mercy on the man who shows me my faults." The free and independent media is the most important means through which citizens and advisers can offer their views in a peaceful manner. Opening the field to independent journalism and channels representing other views is imperative.

As the political, economic, and cultural crises facing Saudi Arabia intensify at the local and regional levels, the kingdom must be ready to make crucial decisions necessary to protect national security and ensure continued development. But making such fateful decisions by the few will not be feasible in the long term. Therefore, grassroots movements should be given the opportunity to contribute effectively to the decision-making process. This is a great opportunity for those at the top of the pyramid to support those at the bottom. ❖

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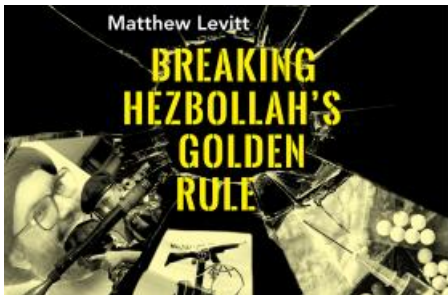
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