

# The Power Struggle for the Throne and the Saudi 'Reset' With Trump

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Articles & Testimony

## Palace intrigue and regional war could complicate the budding romance between Riyadh and the Trump administration.

American media were rather muted about last week's visit to Washington by Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. They were unswayed by the juicy tidbit in the [official statement \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-15/saudi-prince-sees-trump-as-true-friend-to-muslims-full-text\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-15/saudi-prince-sees-trump-as-true-friend-to-muslims-full-text) reporting that the man known as MbS told President Donald Trump that Saudi intelligence "confirms...the existence of a plot against the United States of America that had been planned" in the six countries whose citizens had just been banned from entering the country. Nor were they moved by the effusiveness of an anonymous Saudi "senior advisor" who lauded the Oval Office meeting and luncheon with Trump as a "huge success," "a historic turning point," and "a significant shift in relations." The statement went on to describe "President Trump's great understanding of the importance of relations" and "his clear sight of problems in the region."

But it's no accident that much of the Arab media's coverage echoed this over-the-top line. The Saudi side was intent on using the visit to "reset" relations with Washington after the Obama years, as well as to introduce the new administration to the young man who seems destined to be the next king of Saudi Arabia.

The reset mission arguably succeeded. But judgment on the personal coming-out of MbS should be postponed. Inconveniently for the 31-year-old MbS, his older cousin Muhammad bin Nayef (MbN) is crown prince and appears reluctant to let MbS leapfrog over him. The Trump administration must deal with two alternative future Saudi leaders and may -- and perhaps should -- regard it as premature to decide whom it prefers.

Rivalry between the two men is not a figment of the imagination of foreigners. Last week, the anonymous but

seemingly well-informed Saudi blogger who uses the Twitter handle @Mujtahidd re-emerged after several months. He reported that the two Muhammads were trying to avoid any public differences, but each was keen to win the approval not only of the wider House of Saud but also the United States.

On a point-scoring level, MbN probably had the last laugh on MbS's trip. Despite the photo opportunities and honor guards, MbS's departure from the United States was very low-key. No waves to crowds of fawning admirers, but rather a 2:30 a.m. flight to Riyadh a day after meeting with Defense Secretary James Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, instead of heading to New York for business meetings as had been expected. What happened? King Salman, MbS's father, was returning to the kingdom after cutting short a month-long Asian trip, and the prince needed to be there to welcome him.

But the royal court's **claim (<http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/saudi-king-postpones-visit-maldives-swine-flu-46195818>)** that the monarch's vacation in the idyllic Maldives had been canceled because of an outbreak of swine flu seemed too diplomatically convenient to be entirely believable. The *Financial Times* **reported (<https://www.ft.com/content/46d9b1a4-0578-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9>)** that local opposition politicians there were making a stink because of a putative arrangement for a group of islands to be ceded to MbS in perpetuity. The members of the king's entourage who had been hoping to take over two resort complexes and dip their toes in the Indian Ocean found themselves back in Riyadh early -- which meant that MbS, whatever his self-appointed mission in Washington, was obliged to be back early, too. That may have been for the best. Despite the notional reset, the photos and video clips in Washington suggested coolness by Trump toward MbS. Perhaps the U.S. president was irritated that the young Saudi showed no apparent deference.

Ultimately, of course, policy differences, not personal ones, will matter most. Everyone in the Saudi leadership shares with the Trump administration a common view on the dangers posed by Iran. But there's a gap in their respective positions on the war in Yemen and how the kingdom can best be extricated from it. The Saudis have made scant progress there in fighting the Iranian-backed Houthis, and bureaucratic Washington is probably regretting its initial profuse support for the war -- a political concession to Riyadh to placate Saudi concerns about the nuclear agreement with Iran. The Saudi military persists in demonstrating that it is, in the words of a Pentagon official during the Obama administration, a "paper tiger."

As if to underline the problem, as MbS flew back home, news emerged that a helicopter probably belonging to the Saudi-led coalition **opened fire (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/17/apache-helicopter-guns-down-boat-full-of-somali-refugees-fleeing-yemen/>)** on a refugee boat carrying Somalis escaping the Yemen civil war. The death toll was given as 42, but, from Washington's point of view, the worst part was the report that a U.S.-made Apache helicopter was involved. That means it could have been either Saudi or Emirati, but the United Arab Emirates has issued an official denial. (Doubts about a Saudi role are based on the judgment that its pilots were too incompetent to have carried out the attack, at night and at sea.) The United States was already in a quandary about resuming supplies of bombs to the Saudi Air Force following last year's suspension after concerns about Yemeni civilians being hit. Pictures of the dead and rescued refugees will further complicate this policy shift.

If Yemen remains a thorn in the side of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, the two countries seemed to find common ground over economic ties. The Saudi statement said Trump's changes to U.S. policy coincide "with the undergoing change in Saudi Arabia through 'Vision 2030,'" MbS's blueprint for the kingdom's economic transformation. The official White House **readout (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/15/readout-presidents-meeting-mohammed-bin-salman-abdulaziz-al-saud-deputy>)** spoke of "expanded economic cooperation [that] could create as many as one million direct American jobs within the next four years, millions of indirect American jobs, as well as jobs in Saudi Arabia." It also mentioned deals "worth potentially more than \$200 billion in direct and indirect investments within the next four years."

This may be on the conservative side. Gossip in the financial markets suggests that the kingdom was dangling the notion of \$1 trillion in investments in the United States over the next decade.

Such a deal may be tantalizing for Trump. But, as always, it comes at a price. As Saudi Oil Minister Khalid al-Falih **told (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudis-expect-u-s-to-reverse-terror-law-1489772538>)** the *Wall Street Journal*, the 2016 Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act "stoked tension in U.S.-Saudi relations and threatens to chill Saudi investment in the U.S." Falih also said the law was a consideration in whether the kingdom would choose to list shares of the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil company, the 2018 initial public offering of which is expected to be the largest in history, in the United States.

The law, known as Jasta, came as a consequence of the large number of Saudis who were involved in the 9/11 attacks. It allows U.S. terror victims to file civil suits in federal court against the kingdom, which had been protected by sovereign immunity. Trump was a strong supporter of the measure. The Saudis want to at least neuter the measure but have worked on the issue to no avail, despite a multimillion-dollar lobbying effort.

This twist makes the calculus of what each side got from the Washington meetings more challenging. There is clearly agreement to work together, but Yemen is an immediate problem, skewing the discussion about how to tackle the broader threat posed by Iran as well as the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and other terror groups. Meanwhile, a public reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel over their fear of Iran remains elusive. The Saudi statement blamed Iran for obstructing a deal "to settle the Palestinian issue" but managed to avoid any mention of Israel.

It may fall to Trump's coterie of close advisors to grapple with these difficulties. His chief strategist, Stephen Bannon, and senior advisor (and son-in-law) Jared Kushner were at the Oval Office and Pentagon meetings as well as the White House luncheon. Meanwhile, Trump's lawyer and Israel advisor Jason Greenblatt was in Jerusalem and Ramallah talking to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas.

Occasionally, world events have a curious and perhaps prophetic irony. King Salman's trip to Asia concluded last week with a high-profile visit to China, where he and his delegation of Saudi business leaders were received by the top leadership and reportedly agreed to deals worth \$65 billion. On March 19, the next foreign leader arrived in Beijing for similar discussions -- Netanyahu. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang honored him by **saying (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-israel-idUSKBN16R0XX>)**, "The Chinese people and the Jewish people are both great peoples of the world."

The trend lines are obvious. Business can be the key to deeper political alliances, and Saudi Arabia and Israel have more in common than the House of Saud wants to admit. Does a bigger deal await?

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