

An Open Letter from a Young Saudi to Prince Mohammad bin Salman

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Having read [the article in *Foreign Affairs* \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-01-05/can-mohamed-bin-salman-reshape-saudi-arabia\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-01-05/can-mohamed-bin-salman-reshape-saudi-arabia) about Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and in the wake of publicity following [his meeting with President Trump \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-future-meets-the-trump-administration\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-future-meets-the-trump-administration) this week, I would like to offer a candid view that speaks for many Saudis of my generation. Like King Talut of the Holy Quran (corresponding to the biblical King Saul), whom the Quran credits with saving the Jewish people from an enemy bent on their destruction, the young prince bears a similar responsibility -- addressing many challenges in order to achieve the goal of transforming his people to greater strength. Prince Mohammad bin Salman may well be God's chosen to help lead Saudi Arabia through the political, economic, and social challenges it faces. This letter offers suggestions he may consider useful in dealing with them.

A CONSTELLATION OF POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

The events of the Arab Spring created a political vacuum in the Arab world and the region, one that the Iranian regime rushed to fill. Implementing its plan to expand Iran's sphere of influence and hegemonic ambitions, Iran has deployed subversive tactics and brutal force that have led, directly or indirectly, to bloodshed and chaos in three Arab capitals: Damascus, Baghdad, and Sana. Tehran holds Beirut hostage as well, through its Hezbollah proxy. Egypt's internal conflicts have left it listlessly stagnant in dealing with the Iranian threat. The Iranian regime's expansionist policies pose a clear danger to Saudi Arabia and must be confronted with unambiguous resolve.

From an economic standpoint, Prince Mohammad bin Salman faces a major test as a consequence of declining oil prices, Saudi Arabia's chief source of income. A second and related challenge is the proposed transformation of the Saudi economy from revenue-based to one that depends on resources other than oil, the most important being human capital. This would create a national economy based on productivity rather than the consumption-based culture that resulted from inherited mistaken economic policies. Rectifying this situation will require courageous decisions that promise to be unsettling for large portions of the Saudi population, certainly in the short term.

The issues facing Saudi society are no less daunting. The young prince has made his intentions clear that the transition of his country from an isolated kingdom to a nation open to all cultures is of paramount importance. For

the generation of Saudis coming into their own, the initiative he has articulated in Vision 2030 is their gateway to the world.

A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY FOR DIALOGUE

The most important determinant in Saudi society is demographics. Nearly 70 percent of the population is under the age of twenty-five. For most of them, conventional media have long been replaced by highly popular new platforms and social media sites. This reality presents the prince with a golden opportunity: to communicate directly with his young compatriots through social networking sites, Twitter and Snapchat in particular. Fostering such an exchange will nurture a framework of mutual respect between leaders and people that will prove vital with the coming introduction of changes in the system.

To optimize this direct communication, I propose that the prince convene a "Generation 2030 Forum" for young people, meeting every two to three months. This forum can provide a physical and virtual platform, inviting participants to express their opinions regarding their country's future. By giving them a valued voice in the Vision 2030 process, and by staking their interest in their country's direction, this dialogue would become a valuable tool. It would encourage this important cohort and galvanize support for Vision 2030, in advance of the opposition it will certainly encounter from those of the "old guard" who will resist the impending change. Here the medium is indeed the message: in the current Saudi context, these new channels of communication, almost regardless of details, both symbolize and empower the forces of progress and change.

SAUDI ARABIA AS QIBLAT -- REALIZING OUR LEADERSHIP

Religion is and will remain one of the most important components of Saudi society. In his article, Bilal Saab described Prince Mohammed bin Salman as "dumbfounded" by charges equating the predominant Wahhabism to terrorism and by "Americans' profound misunderstanding of this strain of Islam." After all, Wahhabism's founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, lived around 300 years ago, long before the phenomenon of global terrorism. To affect any true change in this mistaken perception, the prince must find a way to meaningfully engage the country's religious establishment. Such an undertaking could lead to two accomplishments of immense potential significance.

Mohammed bin Salman must take up the gauntlet of renewing the call of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab -- reasserting Wahhabism while refuting religious extremism of any kind. I propose forming a "Vision 2030 Religious Incubator" composed of clerics and intellectuals, sociologists, and psychologists. This group can propose the steps necessary for Saudi society's transition, through a process of national unity and participation, to promote equal rights and responsibilities for Saudi women, as well as for all forms of Islam -- Sunni, Shiite, Ismaili, Ibadi, and even a "secular," personal variety. Equally important, a Wahhabi renewal incorporating modernity will fortify the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's position of leadership in the Muslim world. This process will assert Saudi Arabia's moral authority, even without a formal pan-Islamic hierarchy, as Qiblat -- the point of reference for prayer as well as for leadership for all Islamic constituents, whether Shiite, Sunni, Ismaili, Ibadi, or other. As the home of the Two Holy Mosques, Saudi Arabia will thus serve as a bridge to the resolution of sectarian conflicts in the region, gaining political power in the process while helping it maintain peace. Such a renewal will play a pivotal role in Vision 2030's potential success. God may well have chosen Prince Mohammad bin Salman for just such a mission.

A MESSAGE TO THE ISRAELI AND JEWISH PEOPLE -- JOINING FORCES

Having outlined the great potential of Prince Mohammad bin Salman's role and of Saudi leadership in the Islamic world, I raise one more issue of high priority. I would like to address a message to the Israeli people and to Jews around the world. Our Holy Quran confirms that you are an integral part of this region. Your civilization and the

history of your ancestors was and still is part of our region's history. Your State is a product of your civilization as well. You have also left a mark in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as in Najran and Khaibar and Medina, which remains visible to this day.

The policies of the Iranian regime are alarmingly similar to the Nazi policies that aimed to exterminate your people. Thus, the Iranian and Nazi regimes are two faces of the same coin in their enmity and hatred of you and the danger they pose. Nevertheless, please be assured that peace can be achieved, and your historical role in our region secured, within the framework of the Arab Peace Initiative. This process would also promote the achievement of peace with Israel within the framework of the Saudi (Arab) Peace Initiative. If achieved, it will save the region from the flames fueled by the Iranian regime, and also allow Saudi Arabia to openly partner with the many technological advances Israel offers.

Thus, of all the priorities that Prince Mohammed bin Salman must address, the most burning is the need to confront Iran in order to preserve the fate of this region. In today's political reality, you and we are in the same trench in opposing the Iranian menace, with the terrorism and fanaticism Tehran spawns and exports around the world. In fulfilling the destiny of all our ancestors, neither you nor we can afford to be bystanders in confronting this evil. Let us be united and of one voice in order to save our cultures and civilizations from the neo-Nazi threat in its Iranian guise, for the sake of peace. ❖

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