

Saudi Arabia's Future Meets the Trump Administration

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Mar 13, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alamyr-aldhy-ymthl-mstqbl-alswdyt-yltqy-adart-tramb\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alamyr-aldhy-ymthl-mstqbl-alswdyt-yltqy-adart-tramb)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

Talks this week with the Saudi deputy crown prince are expected to cover current issues including Iran, "radical Islamic terrorism," Syria, and Yemen, as well as perspectives on the longer-term future of the Middle East.

The visit by thirty-one-year-old Prince Muhammad bin Salman, a son of King Salman, who turns eighty-one this year and is now on the Japan leg of a monthlong foreign tour, has the potential to reconfigure the U.S.-Saudi relationship. MbS, as he is known, is widely perceived to have been given an almost plenipotentiary role by his father. As such, in this visit MbS will be outflanking if not outranking his older cousin, fifty-seven-year-old Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, known as MbN, who remains in Riyadh.

MbS left the kingdom for the United States on March 13, but the official part of his trip will only begin March 16. In terms of protocol, as Saudi defense minister, MbS will probably be the guest of Secretary of Defense James Mattis. He will also likely have meetings with the intelligence community, particularly CIA director Mike Pompeo, even though for many years MbN, as Saudi counterterrorism chief, has been the principal intelligence interlocutor, earning himself the sobriquet "Washington's favorite Saudi." With Secretary of State Rex Tillerson traveling in Asia, the State Department's role in any meetings will be much reduced.

But the most important discussions will be those in the White House, where MbS is expected to meet with chief strategist Stephen K. Bannon and senior advisor (and President Donald Trump's son-in-law) Jared Kushner, who is only a few years older than the prince. A meeting with the president himself is also expected, during which it would be surprising if Trump did not mention his ideas for a grand plan ("a much bigger deal") on Middle East peace including "many, many countries," which he referred to last month at his news conference with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

The most urgent issue would appear to be the continuing failure of a Saudi-led coalition to reestablish the internationally recognized Yemeni government in the capital, Sana, occupied for the last two years by Iran-supported Houthi tribesmen and supporters of ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The stalemate has allowed al-Qaeda to create safe havens in the interstices of the civil war, prompting recent U.S. military action, including a commando raid and airstrikes. Last week, Washington appeared to offer Riyadh an incentive to appear to change tactics, when the State Department announced approval for the resumption of the sales of precision-guided munitions to the kingdom. The decision still needs White House approval, however, which could give the U.S. side important leverage in this week's discussions.

From the U.S. perspective, the meetings present an opportunity to achieve a clearer understanding of Saudi Arabia's current strategy in the war and realistic end-states. Whether or not existing military activities, mainly based on aerial bombing, will alter the situation on the ground, it is certain that the legitimate Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition cannot retake Sana without catastrophic violence, great human suffering, and a legacy of long-term insurgency. The White House could ask pointed questions about how to restart meaningful peace negotiations.

From the Saudi perspective, the talks could be used to seek clarity on the parameters of the Trump administration's new approach to Iranian troublemaking in the Middle East. Tehran's machinations contribute substantially to problems not only in Yemen but also in Syria and Iraq, where U.S. forces are involved in the fighting against the Islamic State. It will be interesting to see whether Washington accepts a standing Saudi offer to send troops to support U.S. Special Forces in Syria, aimed at bolstering the opposition against advances by Assad regime forces and their Iran-backed allies. A disagreeable item from the Saudi perspective likely on the agenda is Trump's continuing use of the term "radical Islamic terrorism," most recently in his February 28 address to Congress. Riyadh prefers to consider extremist violence *un-Islamic*.

Unavoidably, the talks will be overshadowed by concern over the price of oil, which fell below \$50 per barrel last week, putting into doubt a Saudi-led OPEC initiative to cut production with the intention of pushing the price above \$60 or so. But whereas Riyadh can dictate the kingdom's production, neither the White House nor U.S. oil companies can interfere with market mechanisms -- and, arguably, the U.S. economy benefits more from lower oil prices. The lower oil price is painful for Saudi Arabia, to be sure, hampering government revenues and constraining the transition MbS is trying to lead toward a more efficient, less oil-dominated economy, as expressed in the kingdom's Vision 2030 platform. A key component of this change is a planned partial sell-off of the state-owned Saudi Aramco oil company in 2018. The New York Stock Exchange should be ideal as the main venue for the international listing, but a decision has yet to be made.

A further challenge involves finding closure on the 9/11 attacks, in which fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudis. Despite intense lobbying, the kingdom failed to prevent the passage last year of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA), which puts at risk Saudi official assets in the United States if the kingdom can be shown to have been either culpable for the attacks or negligent in stopping them. Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir, who is accompanying MbS to Washington, has spent many months in the United States lobbying to reverse the legislation, so far without effect.

This week's visit is an important "getting to know you" event. But merely setting out differences and explaining positions will not be enough. From a U.S. point of view in particular, the meeting offers an opportunity to address the large number of common U.S.-Saudi concerns as well as bridge differences, especially in circumstances where confusion may prevail regarding the theoretical versus actual power hierarchy in Riyadh.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



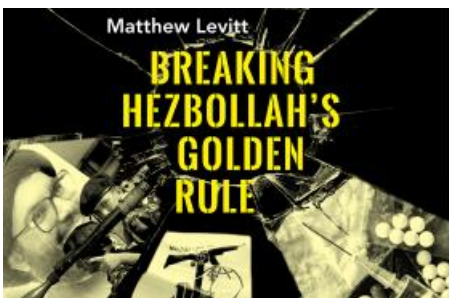
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](/policy-analysis/energy-economics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-states)