

Saudi Foreign Policy vs. Economic Priorities

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

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The House of Saud is probably not headed for a serious crash, but its growing domestic tensions make a fender-bender increasingly likely.

How steady are the hands on the steering wheel of Saudi Arabia? That question prompts an immediate follow-on: Whose hands are we talking about? There seem to be too many. Notionally, the kingdom is being directed by King Salman, but he is 80 years old and suffering from the physical and mental deficiencies typical of his age. There are also two other people in the front seat: the king's nephew, Interior Minister and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (aka MbN) and his younger cousin, Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (aka MbS). In driving terms, MbN prefers the slow lane, MbS is in a hurry to get to his destination.

In policy terms, this translates as MbN being, to put it generously, the voice of continuity -- which for the Saudi usually means do nothing. MbS is a man of action, with grand ideas for transforming the kingdom, though cynics would say this could be reduced to two words -- power and riches. An anecdote lingers about him once leaving a bullet on the desk of an official who had the temerity to challenge his business ambition. Since King Abdullah died in January 2015, the story of Saudi Arabia has been one of tension and rivalry between these two Muhammads...

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