

The Next King of Saudi Arabia

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

Jan 8, 2016

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/almlk-alswdy-almqbl\)](/ar/policy-analysis/almlk-alswdy-almqbl)

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

The momentum of Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the king's young son, appears almost unstoppable, but many oppose his ascent.

Speculation is mounting that the next ruler of Saudi Arabia after King Salman will not be his nephew Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef but rather his own thirty-year-old son, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. How this succession process will occur is hard to predict, but the crown prince, previously a U.S. favorite, is being increasingly marginalized both in the kingdom and the wider world. Instead of MbN, as he is known, the dutiful but dour fifty-six-year-old counterterrorism chief, the new face of Saudi Arabia, when King Salman dies or steps aside, is likely to be the bearded, sandal-wearing MbS, who combines the stature and looks of a Hollywood Desert King. But whether MbS is the right leader when the House of Saud is exchanging diplomatic insults with Iran, countering the narrative of the Islamic State, and fighting rebels in neighboring Yemen, while also coping with a historically low oil price, is being actively debated in the major world capitals, as well as apparently in palaces at home.

Vocabulary of the Discussion

Within the kingdom, MbN and MbS are known as "the two Muhammads." Famously, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei last year referred obliquely but obviously to MbS, who combines the role of defense minister with chair of the main Saudi economic and oil decisionmaking body, as an "inexperienced youngster." Other labels, for example "the teenager," are even less charitable.

But an important context involves a word increasingly avoided in the kingdom and the wider world -- dementia -- referring to King Salman's mental health. This condition almost certainly, in addition to the king's fondness for his son, explains why MbS has been able to grab so much power and authority. Lawyers representing the Saudi Royal

Court have acted to quiet rumors about the king's condition such as in a slightly ambiguous "correction" to a January 23, 2015, *Washington Post* online profile of Salman:

"This article has been amended to correct an earlier, unverified characterization of King Salman's mental health. The article's assertion that King Salman was 'widely believed...to suffer from dementia' was too speculative and unsubstantiated to meet *The Post's* standards for publication. The Royal Court of Saudi Arabia, through its lawyers, has asserted to *The Post* that King Salman is 'most certainly not suffering from dementia or any other kind of mental impairment.'"

Other news organizations have escaped such apparent obsequiousness. The online version of the *Economist's* January 10, 2015, report on "Saudi Arabia's Gerontocracy" includes a line about Salman being "no spring chicken," noting he is "said to be suffering from dementia." Yet the magazine was awarded a long meeting, including an on-the-record interview, with MbS for its January 9, 2016, cover story. Significantly perhaps, its latest reporting made no mention of the king's health.

Instead, the reality of the king's mental state is revealed in minor asides, as in a U.S. official's comment last September that an Oval Office meeting between King Salman and President Obama would be "tightly scripted." Journalistically, reporting errs on the side of caution, as in the December 21, 2015, *New Yorker* profile of U.S. secretary of state John Kerry, where it was revealed that King Salman read his talking points off an iPad. Similarly, a November 30, 2015, *Financial Times* article noted the theoretical power structure of king, crown prince, and deputy crown prince as depicted in large street displays but commented: "Ask any Saudi where power is concentrated today, however, and they will point to the younger royal."

Princely Resume

While MbN's educational qualifications are limited to attending but earning no degree from an Oregon liberal arts college, MbS was educated at King Saud University in Riyadh, where he obtained a bachelor's degree in law. Unlike most other leading Saudi princes, though, his English is less than fluent -- with the *Economist*, he spoke via a translator. Post-college, his online profile refers to time in the private sector, which in his circumstances probably means leveraging his royal connections to make a personal fortune. Years of being around his father when Salman was governor of Riyadh Province and the royal family's own conciliator and, when necessary, enforcer gave MbS a firm sense of self-worth, overcoming the possible hindrance of a pronounced facial tic. Being the first-born son of Salman's third and apparently favorite wife, who is said to be very ambitious on MbS's behalf, has also helped.

Rivals within the House of Saud

When his father was defense minister from 2011 to 2015, MbS became notorious for forcing out deputy ministers. Between April 2013 and June 2014, four different princes held the post, which has since remained vacant. This probably explains why, apart from his father and mother, MbS does not seem to have a discernible support base within the royal family, even among his brothers and half-brothers. One of the latter, Abdulaziz bin Salman, has been promoted to deputy oil minister but is twenty-five years older than MbS. After a lifetime of employment in the oil bureaucracy, he probably finds it galling to be working under his kid brother. It is not hard to guess some who oppose MbS. In meetings of the key Council of Political and Security Affairs, presided over by MbN, MbS sits apart, while Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, the minister for the national guard, whose star has waned since the death of his father, King Abdullah, often appears in photographs to be sharing a joke with MbN.

A group of influential but not these days necessarily powerful princes is said to be advocating for the next king to be Salman's brother Ahmed, a onetime interior minister. The family is said to want to revert succession to the traditional brother-to-brother system rather than let it become a father-son routine. Ahmed's support within the family and the desire to keep MbS from the throne may be enough for MbN, who has no sons, to forgo his current

supposed inheritance. An assumption exists that MbS will prompt King Salman to counter this stratagem sooner rather than later, fearing that if MbN becomes king one of his first moves will be to choose a new crown prince in place of MbS. For the king, one possibility is to give up the prime minister role and pass it to MbS, a maneuver that would make him administratively senior to MbN, who is deputy prime minister. Indeed, showing disdain for MbN is becoming a hallmark of MbS's style. As the *Economist* reported, "over five hours [of the meeting] King Salman is mentioned once; his cousin, the crown prince, Muhammad bin Nayef, does not figure at all..." A photograph of the two men at an October meeting chaired by MbN shows MbS reading a magazine. It is hard to believe some attempts to spin the notion that the two men are now working well together.

Crisis Scenarios

Although this week's developing crisis with Iran has dominated foreign coverage of the kingdom, domestically the war in Yemen, closely identified with MbS, is the issue most likely to stop the young prince's career dead.

Apparently still popular with the Saudi public, the fighting is hugely expensive in financial terms and seems destined to continue a long time with no clear outcome. Tight budgets, a consequence of the low oil price, which is also linked to current Saudi oil policy and MbS, could force the issue. MbS is viewed in Washington as out of his depth, his experience and immaturity evident in his comments in his *Economist* interview, in which he seems determined generally to double down rather than shift direction. He certainly doesn't appear to want to admit defeat.

The World Watches

MbS is currently the go-to person in Riyadh for other world leaders as well as visiting journalists. Secretary Kerry called him rather than the king or MbN to try to cool the developing Saudi-Iran crisis. MbS's comments on oil policy are listened to as much as the gnomic remarks of veteran oil minister Ali al-Naimi, although the latter make greater sense. To the *Economist*, MbS spoke of a partial sell-off of the state oil company, Saudi Aramco, including a curious mention of possible corruption in the company, which surprised industry watchers and effectively undermined Naimi. Quoting Winston Churchill, MbS said opportunities come during crises and outlined a wider plan for expanding the kingdom's private sector. At just thirty years old, he already has the power to announce these visions. Whether he will ever have the power to enact them is another question.

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

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022





BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

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

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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