

# Saudi King Comes to Washington, with His Son

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Brief Analysis

## The royals will likely try to smooth relations that have been strained by the Iran nuclear deal and differences over Syria and Yemen.

On September 4, King Salman is scheduled to visit the White House for the first time since succeeding to the throne in January. His inaugural visit to Washington was originally supposed to occur during the May summit of Gulf leaders at Camp David, but he cancelled at the last moment in what was widely perceived as a snub to President Obama's then pending nuclear agreement with Iran. The upcoming visit is expected to focus on repairing the diplomatic damage.

At seventy-nine years old, the king has limited physical and mental capacity for diplomacy. He is flying in from Morocco, where he has spent the past month on vacation after curtailing a planned sojourn in southern France on a whim. His formal discussion with President Obama is expected to be short and tightly scripted -- the more crucial character in the room will probably be his favorite son, the thirtyish Muhammad bin Salman (a.k.a. MbS), who serves as defense minister and deputy crown prince. The king's notional heir apparent -- fifty-six-year-old nephew Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (MbN) -- will remain in the kingdom.

MbS is now the closest aide to his father, who has encouraged the young man's ambition and meteoric rise in the past few months. In addition to being seen as the architect of the war to reinstall Yemeni president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, who was pushed out by pro-Iranian Houthi rebels, MbS has been used as a top diplomatic envoy, visiting Egypt, Russia, and Jordan. Whereas the late King Abdullah was categorical in his loathing of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salman -- or in reality perhaps MbS -- distinguishes between extreme and less extreme parts of the group. This approach is in line with his more general vision of bringing the Arab world closer together, in large part to counter Iran. Hence the wide coalition that Riyadh has put together in Yemen, as well as its efforts in Syria, where the kingdom sees the conflict against the Iranian-supported Assad regime as an extension of the wider Persian/Arab

rivalry.

As for the nuclear agreement, despite a public statement of conditional support for the deal, Riyadh remains very concerned, believing that sanctions relief will be used to finance Iranian troublemaking in the region. The kingdom regards the Obama administration's defense of the deal as naive and therefore views it with extreme skepticism.

King Salman's visit also coincides with a U.S.-Saudi investment conference, so his delegation is expected to include senior financial and economic figures. As president of the newly established Council of Economic and Development Affairs, a crucial decisionmaking body, MbS is a key personality on this side of the visit as well. While the bilateral relationship remains strong at a business level, there is concern about how the kingdom is being affected by the weak price of oil, which is partially a consequence of continuing high Saudi production -- a strategy intended to retain market share and force U.S. shale oil firms to shut down. Already, ambitious construction projects started during the reign of King Abdullah are being delayed and budgets are being cut, including in defense spending. The high production policy has been unsuccessful in raising prices thus far, but there is no indication of it changing -- in fact, the Saudis are apparently willing to let prices weaken further.

Finally, although MbS will be careful not to upstage King Salman, his presence alongside the king will likely further benefit his position, which could mean that he will eventually succeed his father rather than MbN. Therefore, despite the range of disagreements between Washington and Riyadh, the visit is another opportunity for U.S. officials to develop a relationship with MbS, with whom they already interacted at the Camp David summit. And regardless of what happens inside the meeting, any post-visit statement will no doubt try to paper over these differences.

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

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