Saudi Arabia's 'Inexperienced Youngster'

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Brief Analysis

As Prince Muhammad bin Salman's proactive approach to regional affairs becomes clearer, the novice defense minister could lead the kingdom to overreach in Yemen.

Earlier today, Saudi Arabia announced that it has ended its airstrikes in Yemen because the heavy weapons and ballistic missiles threatening the kingdom have been destroyed. The fighting had appeared to be stalemated for at least the past two weeks. Although the announced outcome is being depicted as a military success, it is unclear how it fits into a Saudi strategy to reinstate the government of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, currently in exile in Riyadh, though the statement spoke of a political solution.

A key Saudi decisionmaker on the matter is one of King Salman's younger sons, Prince Muhammad, who was appointed defense minister in January. The outcome of the crisis, which saw the deployment of Saudi naval and army units, could make or break his career and perhaps even define his father's legacy.

When Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called Saudi Arabia's new leaders "inexperienced youngsters" in an April 9 speech, there was little doubt he was referring at least in part to Muhammad. The prince has shot to prominence since his father succeeded the late King Abdullah in January. Previously the head of his father's court when Salman was crown prince, MbS (as he is widely known) now runs the Defense Ministry, the royal court, and the newly formed Economic and Development Affairs Council, in addition to being a member of the Political and Security Affairs Council, another key decisionmaking body.

In many respects MbS is the face of Saudi Arabia's month-long operation in Yemen, even outshining his elder cousin, Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (a.k.a. MbN), the interior minister and chair of the Political and Security Affairs Council. Over the past week alone, he has visited Bahrain to invite King Hamad to Riyadh, and Cairo

for talks with President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Meanwhile, Saudi media has shown photographs of him in separate meetings with CENTCOM commander Gen. Lloyd Austin III, U.S. ambassador Joseph Westphal, and former British prime minister Tony Blair.

Although MbS is clearly acquiring a great deal of on-the-job experience, much speculation continues about his age. King Salman, seventy-nine this year, has fathered at least twelve sons by three wives. MbS is the oldest son from the third wife. Reports of his birthdate vary from 1980 to 1985, with an outlier of 1988, making him possibly as young as twenty-seven. A more definitive number is elusive: the website of the Saudi embassy in Washington gives no birth year for him in its listing of the Saudi Council of Ministers.

Whatever his age, MbS has already developed a reputation as a ruthless political operator. When his father became defense minister in late 2011, MbS used his position as head of Salman's court to undermine a series of deputy defense ministers. The post was held by four different princes between April 2013 and June 2014, since when it has been vacant. Similarly, as chair of the Economic and Development Affairs Council, he is seen as being responsible for the firing of the housing and health ministers in the past two months, apparently for administrative incompetence.

The prince's meteoric rise is attributed to his close relationship with his father, who appears to dote on him. The king seems to have devised a special career path for Muhammad. Although some of Salman's older sons went to universities in the United States or Britain, Muhammad went to King Saud University in Riyadh, where he studied law. His older half-brothers include Sultan (age 58), the former astronaut who is in charge of tourism, and Abdulaziz (55), who has spent his career at the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and was promoted to deputy minister in January. Both now find themselves subordinate to their younger brother by virtue of his council chairmanship. Staying close to his father has allowed Muhammad to become a key aide over the years, particularly as Salman's health has deteriorated -- today, the king uses a walking stick and can look puzzled during his often hectic schedule of meetings with visiting dignitaries.

Ayatollah Khamenei's barbed comments earlier this month included a tweet asserting that Saudi foreign policy has changed from "composure" to "barbarism," an apparent reference to the kingdom's more proactive approach under Salman compared to the caution seen under previous kings. However it is characterized, the shift would appear to reflect MbS's regional view. Last month he told a visiting U.S. congressional delegation that "Iran can't be trusted," and he asked why Washington was negotiating with the Iranians on the nuclear issue when they are responsible for growing tensions in the Middle East. And earlier this month, he met with Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken during the latter's visit to Riyadh -- a trip that also included meetings with Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, who has held the post for forty years, and MbN, who has been the point man for bilateral counterterrorism discussions for at least ten years. When the author asked Blinken at an April 15 forum what he made of MbS in view of Khamenei's insults, he described the prince as "extremely knowledgeable, focused, and engaged," saying "we had a very good exchange." None of these comments suggest, in the cautious vocabulary of diplomacy, that there was much agreement with the young defense minister's positions.

Despite almost daily Saudi communiques depicting successes in the Yemen conflict and widespread public support, the reality suggests little movement on the ground: the Iran-linked Houthis are unable to gain full control of the southern port city of Aden, and supporters of President Hadi are too weak to overcome Houthi domination of the capital and other major towns. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has freedom of operation in a sizable swath of the country to the east of the Sana-to-Aden axis. Washington and the international community are trying to reestablish a diplomatic process, but the task may have been set back last week when the UN mediator resigned. U.S. operational support is so far limited to intelligence transfers, targeting information, inflight refueling, and a naval presence that is about to be boosted by the arrival of a carrier task force.

It is unclear whether MbS views the situation as ripe for a diplomatic outcome now that airstrikes have been halted. Instead, he may hope that he can double down and use army and perhaps naval units to defeat the Houthis militarily. Despite another new announcement regarding further National Guard involvement, a full-scale land invasion has seemed increasingly unlikely, especially given Pakistan's decision not to commit military forces to the operation and Egypt's evident reluctance to transform its diplomatic support into overt military assistance. His youth aside, MbS may have a crucial voice in determining Riyadh's next steps because of his status as defense minister and de facto commander of the army, navy, and air force. MbN may have less influence on the matter; although his Interior Ministry forces are numerous, they are lightly armed, and he is not a son of the king. Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, son to the late king, heads the Saudi Arabian National Guard; perhaps significantly, he sat next to MbN at today's meeting of the Political and Security Affairs Council.

Many observers were surprised when MbS rocketed to prominence in January rather than his half-brother Prince Faisal bin Salman (44), who instead was appointed governor of Medina province. Faisal's 2003 book, based on his Oxford doctoral dissertation about Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf, was an obvious credential for taking on a foreign policy role in his father's court. Instead, while the Yemen intervention remains popular at home, the outside world watches as a young novice struggles to win respect in a conflict whose previous episodes have seldom produced a clear result, and which is increasingly seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The U.S. interest is for Riyadh to avoid the embarrassment of overreaching itself. Discreet diplomacy, combined with the pressure of less-than-timely replacement of expended munitions or spare parts, may have prompted the decision to halt airstrikes, which were causing mounting civilian casualties. There remains the risk of direct confrontation with Iran, at least at sea. In most other countries, a military leader or defense minister who does not achieve a clear outcome would be a political casualty. If that does not happen in Saudi Arabia, then King Salman may find himself under pressure from senior princes seeking more fundamental change.

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

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