Saudi Arabia: A prince’s revolution

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Abstract
Over the past decades, the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have emerged as the leaders of the Middle East and North Africa region. They have also proved to be the safest Arab allies for the EU due to their stability and prosperity, despite being the only regimes in the region whose leaders are not elected by universal direct suffrage. In recent months, Saudi Arabia, in particular, has been anxious to re-establish its leadership in the region through disruptive structural changes. Even though it remains difficult to make sense of these reforms, many analysts have speculated about their purported future relevance. This article argues that the changes undermine the social contract that has prevailed in the kingdom for decades, whereby citizens enjoy material comfort in exchange for their loyalty to the regime. Thus these changes threaten to destabilise the country, with potential lasting effects on the region and collateral consequences for Europe.

Keywords
Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, MBS, Structural reforms, Wahhabism

Introduction
In 2017 the geopolitics of the Gulf Cooperation Council underwent a profound transformation. On 5 June Saudi Arabia, supported by Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, decided to impose an embargo on Qatar for its alleged involvement in the financing of terrorism and its attempts to destabilise the region (Wintour 2017). Days later, on 21 June, King Salman announced that his son, the young Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), then second in the line of succession and minister of defence, was to be the direct heir to the throne. Although this appointment might have been trivial in other kingdoms, it was essentially a palace revolution for the Arabian monarchy, which has always distinguished

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itself on the precedent of agnatic seniority. King Salman’s decision hence puts an end to a decades-long customary law and thereby weakens the already unstable equilibrium of hierarchical and tribal relations that has shaped the modern Saudi state and ensured its stability.

These two events were harbingers of a wave of disruptive reforms. This article aims to evaluate their content, analyse their intricacies and ponder their potential international impact, with an emphasis on Saudi Arabia’s relations with Europe. Because they undermine the main pillars on which the Saudi state was built, these reforms might eventually lead to the destabilisation of the regime and, consequently, of the whole region. In order to make this point, the article will explore the reasons behind the implementation of the reforms, drawing upon the country’s historical background, while investigating how they break with the Saudi social contract through which the regime provides state subsidies in return for the citizens’ loyalty. It will then consider their potential repercussions on Europe.

**The monarchy**

The House of Saud has long praised itself for the absence of apparent discord between its various branches: the horizontal consensus between all members has generally taken precedence over all other forms of hierarchy and ensured the stability of the state (Al-Rasheed 2018; Stenslie 2018). This is explained by the historical situation and the pragmatic strategy applied by the founder of modern Saudi Arabia.

In 1932, six years before oil was first discovered, Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdul Rahman al-Saud, or ‘Ibn Saud’, managed to gather together all the tribal, religious and regional groups of Arabia to form what is now called the third Saudi state. However, to ensure the survival of his political project, Ibn Saud was not content with drawing borders; he wanted to instil a sense of nationalism in his people. He thus implemented a strategy of long-proven efficiency: marriage. The ruler allegedly married no less than 30 women from different parts of Arabia, thereby gaining the support of its most powerful tribes, which saw in these marriages a way to ensure the continuity of their executive power within a centralised state. In that sense, Saudi Arabia is ‘a state imposed on people without a historical memory of unity or national heritage’ (Al-Rasheed 2002, 3). However, these marriages (a strategy further utilised by subsequent kings) produced no fewer than ten thousand potential crown princes. It is therefore no wonder that dissent within the Saud dynasty should exist today (Mabon 2017; Stenslie 2018).

To ensure the survival of his dynasty, Ibn Saud was also eager to emphasise his religious legitimacy by striking an alliance with Wahhabi clerics, taking advantage of the long-standing relationship between the House of Saud and Muhammed Bin Abd al-Wahhab’s heirs.¹ This pragmatic alliance served as a bulwark against any popular opposition: any dissent against the House of Saud was akin to opposition to the state and, by association, to God (Mabon 2017; Stenslie 2018).
By undermining the *entente cordiale* between the different branches of the family, the actions of King Salman and his son weaken not only internal stability but also their relationship to the citizens, since many tribes will feel aggrieved at the outcome. Despite these possibilities, the crown prince seems determined to impose a new form of nationalism on the entire population, based on allegiance to a single authoritarian figure, who is meant to embody progress and development. As such, the reform of the Saudi monarchy appears to be a way for MBS to impose his vision by departing from the potential threats posed by some contenders to the throne.2

**Religion**

In October 2017, at the ‘Riyadh’s Future Investment Initiative’ conference, MBS stated that Saudi Arabia had to go back to a ‘moderate Islam’ (Meredith 2017). This announcement can be analysed through two different lenses. First, the crown prince, who presented the cornerstone of his economic strategy during the forum, urgently needed to reassure international investors put off by the risks of religious and political instability in order to secure foreign direct investment to finance his project. Second, the crown prince was asserting himself, nationally and internationally, as the sole authority behind the reforms and distancing himself from the Wahhabi clerics who had once been part of the decision-making process. Similarly, ‘through the control of the religious discourse, MBS eliminates the existence of an independent Islam that could have been a danger in the future’ (Al Alaoui 2018). Thereby, MBS clearly intends to reshape the alliance once struck with the Wahhabi movement (Al Alaoui 2018). This domestic component also has an international resonance: the eradication of the most radical movements is a way of consolidating Saudi Arabia’s relations with its Western allies and guaranteeing their continuous support. A few days after his announcement, MBS, together with other allied Sunni states, launched a counterterrorism coalition, demonstrating to the world his firm intention to combat all forms of extremism at a time when Saudi Arabia is regarded by many as the state that once served as its main propeller (Mabon 2017; Stenslie 2018).

**The economy and representation**

With citizens under 30 years old accounting for just over 70% of the population, an excessive reliance on foreign labour and a bloated public sector, MBS quickly realised that the rentier economy was unsustainable in circumstances of a booming demography and low oil revenues. To diversify the state’s sources of income, MBS, in partnership with McKinsey, conceived ‘Vision 2030’, a structural reform of the Saudi economy in the post-oil era. This strategy is largely based on the expected success of NEOM, a zero-carbon megalopolis that is to be erected in the desert and is conceived as the embodiment of all technological innovations. Alongside Vision 2030, the government announced an initial public offering of 5% of state-owned oil company Aramco, the development of the entertainment sector (facilitated by the lifting of the ban on cinemas and concerts) and the unprecedented introduction of many taxes. By investing in the private sector, MBS aims to increase job opportunities for the youth and achieve the ‘Saudisation’ of the work
force, which would reduce the number of Saudis working in public administration (Hubbard 2016; Khashan 2017; Stenslie 2018).

These reforms are undoubtedly necessary. However, MBS’s strategy here again undercuts the social contract implicitly concluded with the citizens and is likely to increase the discontent of citizens used to state allowances. Indeed, the oil industry assured the state tremendous revenues. This money was redistributed to the people in the form of subsidies to ensure the sustainability of the regime, following the strategy of the ‘authoritarian bargain’ through which the citizens’ rights were curbed in exchange for material comfort and the absence of taxes (Stenslie 2018). MBS has broken with this model. Economic openness and popular taxation should hence be accompanied by some sort of political representation. However, even though the crown prince has set modernisation as his main objective, representation does not seem to be part of his agenda. Nonetheless, with the advent of the Internet, many Saudis have begun to express their discontent on the web and are urging others to demand more social freedoms. For the moment, MBS is not really threatened by this movement, whose supporters are too spread out. However, the end of the social contract could lead the Saudi people as a whole to formulate a common demand: increased popular representation in power (Al Alaoui 2018; Stenslie 2018).

Social reforms

Three months after becoming crown prince, MBS announced the lifting of the driving ban imposed on Saudi women, further asserting his intention to reform all aspects of society in accordance with his conception of the economy and the consolidation of his own rule. Even though allowing women to drive might be regarded as some progress on the path to increased social freedoms, it is also another way for MBS to reduce the authority of the Wahhabi clerics and impose his own in the reshaping of social norms: through this decree, MBS has further reduced the decision-making power granted to the religious authorities who had favoured this customary law as a way to meet the demands of the most radical fringes of society. However, lifting the ban does not increase women’s rights but rather shifts the decision-making power from the public to the private sphere: women can no longer be arrested and imprisoned for taking the wheel, but that does not mean that families must allow women to drive, especially when we consider that the guardianship system is still in place (Al Alaoui 2018). Although these changes seem revolutionary and progressive, they are mainly economic in essence: by allowing women to drive, MBS reduces job opportunities for foreign workers and increases women’s mobility, thereby encouraging them to join the labour force. The disruptiveness of the decision and its direct consequence (i.e. the increasing presence of women in the public space) might, however, alienate the most traditional parts of society, which would see in these new norms an ‘innovation’ that contravenes their ways.

Foreign policy

Since his debut on the international scene in 2015 as minister of defence, MBS has demonstrated his intention to change the country’s foreign policy on many regional issues by
pursuing a more aggressive anti-Iranian rhetoric and getting involved in proxy wars against the country’s Shia neighbour. The Saudi rivalry with Iran is nothing new. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Saudi Arabia has zealously competed to establish itself as the symbol of Islamic authenticity, at home and abroad, in order to protect itself against the Shia regime’s growing influence. Iran, which was anxious to export its revolution and restore its fading power in the region through stronger alliances with Shia allies, quickly became a danger to Saudi Arabia, which saw its influence being challenged both domestically (i.e. Saudi Arabia is home to a large Shia minority) and regionally (i.e. in Lebanon and Iraq). And while Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of unlawful involvement in the internal affairs of foreign countries, it has largely implemented similar strategies to maintain its influence in the region if the recent resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri is taken into account. However, through his vehement rhetoric against Iran, MBS is further alienating the Saudi Shias, thereby increasing the pervasive social tensions in some of the country’s regions (Mabon 2017; Al Alaoui 2018).

Aside from his anti-Iranian strategy, MBS has also changed (though covertly) Saudi Arabia’s position on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The first signs of the detente in the relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel became clear during US President Donald J. Trump’s official visit to the country: upon completion of the visit, Air Force One—the presidential plane—took off from Riyadh destined directly for Israel. Since then, Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and envoy to the Middle East, has paid several unofficial visits to Riyadh during which he allegedly discussed with MBS the terms of the ‘Deal of the Century’, a US-designed strategy to end the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Barnard et al. 2017). While seemingly a positive development, this strategy might however also bring about social discontent within Saudi, since the Palestinian conflict is a cause that Arabs consider their own.

In spite of this, the rapprochement with Israel fits perfectly into MBS’s strategy: Israel is the only military power in the region able to stand up to Iran. It is also the only neighbour that has a complete command of nuclear technology, which is of vital importance to Saudi Arabia since the announcement of its intention to start a nuclear programme that will allow further economic diversification, reduce the kingdom’s dependence on oil, counter Iran’s nuclear capability and ensure the country’s position as the ultimate power in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is now negotiating the terms of a nuclear agreement with the US, which might view the Saudi endeavour as a way to counter the Iranian enemy (Shay 2018).

**Implications for Europe**

Europe has long enjoyed cordial relations with Saudi Arabia. Despite the regime’s authoritarianism, poor human rights record and alleged involvement in the export of radical Islam, diplomatic relations have never been cut off, as Saudi Arabia remains a crucial ally for the West. The reforms implemented could have both a positive and a negative impact for Europe but are unlikely to change the nature of the relationship between Saudis and Europeans.
Economic reforms could prove lucrative for European economies as NEOM is set to serve as a symbol for the world’s technological know-how. Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s announcement of its intention to launch a nuclear programme means that the kingdom will have to rely on foreign technology, with potential economic benefits for a nuclear powerhouse such as France (Shay 2018). However, the nuclearisation of Saudi Arabia, even if allegedly merely for energy purposes, might nonetheless negatively impact EU–Saudi relations as European leaders are currently struggling to stop the nuclear arms race. Furthermore, a nuclear agreement between the US and Saudi Arabia might lead other allies to claim their rights to nuclear capabilities, with dangerous consequences in high-tension regions such as Eastern Europe (Storey 2018). Similarly, should the US give it the green light, the Saudi programme might further undermine the Iranian nuclear deal, especially if the Shia regime considers that Saudi Arabia is being given preferential treatment. Regarding the religious reforms, these might prove beneficial to those European states that are facing radicalisation problems, especially among Sunni Muslims, who tend to regard Saudi Arabia as the spiritual leader of their community.

However, because of their ‘disruptiveness’ and their unbridled speed, the reforms could prove fatal for the kingdom, with catastrophic consequences not only for the region but also for Europe. Due to its still predominantly tribal structure, on top of which sectarian divisions must be added, the country could sink into a chaos similar to that in Libya if MBS were to be toppled. The economies supported by the regime (e.g. Egypt and Jordan) could also be bankrupted, increasing instability at the gates of Israel and in the entire Mediterranean region. Instability in Saudi Arabia would also have an inevitable impact on the oil industry and its prices, creating the possibility of a new international recession (Stenslie 2018). Similarly, the aggressive policy pursued against Iran, which is based solely on attack rather than negotiation, could foreshadow a regional war that would see Saudi Arabia and its allies, possibly including Israel, confront Iran, which would potentially be supported by Russia, China and Turkey. Such a scenario could have dramatic repercussions on the stability of regional states with complex sectarian compositions (i.e. Lebanon and Iraq), and create a new wave of refugees fleeing to Europe.

The end of the Saudi regime, though unlikely, is nonetheless a possibility. The essential pillars of the regime’s stability, with the exception of the long-standing privileged relationship with the US, have been shaken. And if MBS does not manage to bring balance back into his relationship with his people, the whole country may well eventually collapse.

Conclusion

Whichever way you consider the reforms and MBS’s excessive concentration of power, it remains a fact that they are of unavoidable international relevance: for Europe, they could bring about the best in terms of trade and investment, as well as having a positive social impact on Europe’s Muslim communities. However, the way the reforms have been implemented, and the speed with which they have been imposed, might eventually prove counterproductive and alienate the entire population, potentially leading to national instability with international economic and political consequences. Similarly, the Saudi
race for nuclear technology might unnerve European leaders already struggling to save the nuclear deal with Iran. Should the US allow the Saudis to enrich uranium, the possibility of dangerous escalatory cycles and regional war would not remain a far-fetched illusion for long, with potentially dramatic consequences for Europe.

Notes
1. Muhammad Bin Saud, the tribal ruler who started the Saud Dynasty in Nejd (Riyadh region) in 1744, first struck an alliance with Muhammed Bin Abd al-Wahhab to expand his influence throughout the peninsula (Al-Rasheed 2002).
2. Under the cover of cracking down on rampant state corruption, MBS also dismissed and imprisoned many of the princes who could have stood as a potential threat to his rule (Stenslie 2018).
3. However, despite the potential of the strategy, many experts have expressed doubts as to how it can actually improve the economy (Khashan 2017). According to Hertog (2017), the economic reforms are ‘practically unattainable as they implicitly require faster economic and export growth than any mid- or high-income country has ever attained in human history’.
4. Nearly two-thirds of active Saudis work in public administration, which represents another financial burden for the state (Stenslie 2018).

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