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HOW LONG CAN THIS LAST?

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THINKING ABOUT A POST-SAUDI "PLAN B"

Douglas A. Ollivant

THE KINGDOM of Saudi Arabia, while not formally an "ally" of the United States, occupies a key place in America's (and therefore the West's) strategy for regional stability in the Middle East. Its centrality goes back decades, but was certainly further cemented by the events of 1979, 1991, and 2003. However, the kingdom is now undergoing radical change while managing numerous foreign engagements. It is long past time to look beyond the history, ask the hard questions about the stability of the Saudi society and regime, and plan around that instability.

For the past months, it has been difficult to pick up a newspaper or tune into a major Western media outlet without seeing some new paean to the newest darling, Mohammad bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, shortened to "MbS" by the initiated. MbS has engaged in what can only be called a charm offensive with both the American presidential administration and the American public.

On the administration side, we know that there were very early conversations between MbS and U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law and Senior Adviser, Jared Kushner. The friendliness of the United Arab Emirates with both Washington and Riyadh has further smoothed the relationship. Trump's first overseas trip included a visit to Saudi Arabia, where both the affection between the two leaders was obvious and the level of cooperation notable.

When MbS made his trip to the United States, the level of public adulation was overwhelming. Normally skeptical journalists seemed to fall over each other to show increasing levels of adoration. This fawning

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Photo: Saudi Press Agency

Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman presiding over Saudi Arabia's powerful Council of Economic and Development Affairs

from senior columnists is perhaps to be expected, but even the notoriously hard-hitting 60 Minutes network television news magazine program decided to participate in this outpouring.

Part of this is indeed deserved. MbS is making notable steps towards liberalization in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The steps are admittedly uneven, as evidenced by the continuing imprisonment of Raif Badawi and the lack of remorse for the execution of Shia Sheikh Nimr Baqr al Nimr. But improving the lot of women and disempowering the religious police can only be seen as positive steps.

Further, the kingdom has made it even more explicitly clear that it desires to be an ally of the United States. Despite its (deeply) checkered past in supporting the rise of Islamic extremism around the world, and a continuing inability to keep its citizens from maintaining this support, contemporary Saudi Arabia has been a partner in fighting Al Qaeda and ISIS. The Saudis are regularly making major purchases of American defense equipment, and generally support American interests in the region.

Finally, Saudi Arabia places a lot of money in the United States. Major American and European firms like

Goldman Sachs, Blackrock, KKR, HSBC, and Citigroup have made arrangements to have access to equity trading and portfolio management in the kingdom.

With all these reinforcing and overlapping points of contact, it is no surprise that Saudi Arabia and the United States find themselves on the same side of many issues. And, of course, the presence of a mutual enemy in Iran does help to cement the relationship.

But, as the saying goes, "nothing lasts forever." Indeed, Saudi watchers could not help but be concerned in recent months, as MbS has sought to steer the kingdom through a time of great change. Saudi Arabia is a conservative country, and conservative societies do not deal well with change and challenge.

Saudi Arabia is transforming not from a position of strength, but from a position of weakness.

And yet the challenges to Saudi Arabia, both foreign and domestic, are huge. Desired or not, largescale change is coming to the Arabian Peninsula. And rational observers must ask what the odds of successful adaptation are, and what the alternative is if adaptation fails.

Foreign Challenges

Any discussion of Saudi Arabia's foreign relations has to begin with Iran. The kingdom has been in what is most aptly described as a "cold war" with Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Grand Mosque seizure in Mecca. The events of recent years—particularly the Syrian civil war and the American withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA)—have further complicated the relationship between these two major Middle Eastern states.

In particular, as the world moves into uncertain territory and whilst the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia interact with Iran in the coming months and years, it is difficult to say just where the critical Riyadh-Tehran relationship will go.

The Saudis have also chosen a fight, in concert with the Emiratis, against Qatar. The boycott, breaking of diplomatic relations, and trade war that began in June 2017 is, of course, related to the relatively warm relationship Doha enjoys with Tehran, as well as its tolerance of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The list of demands presented by the Saudis to end this boycott is long, severe, and would constitute an effective relinquishing of sovereignty. No one has therefore been surprised by the fact that Doha refuses to comply. And Qatar's warm relationship with Turkey—and the latter's dispatch of troops in support of the former—has made military action against Doha virtually impossible. This "warm war" shows no signs of dissipating soon.

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The Saudis are also deeply embroiled in a genuine "hot war" on their southern border in Yemen. Pushing back against the Iranian-backed Houthi faction in the Yemeni civil war, the Saudi-led air campaign has drawn international criticism for its lack of discrimination and protection of civilians, accentuating the human crisis that is inevitable in any civil war.

With regard to Yemen, while support from the United States is still solid, there is growing discontent in the U.S. Congress, which has made noises about limiting support to the Saudi air campaign. The Saudi entanglement in Yemen shows no signs of abating, which has prompted multiple media outlets to dub it the "Saudi Vietnam."

Finally, the Saudis are deeply engaged in Lebanon. Earlier this year we were treated to the spectacle of Lebanon's Prime Minster Saad Hariri being detained and forced to resign during a visit to Riyadh.

While the crisis was eventually resolved with the return and reinstatement of the Prime Minister, the heavy-handed intervention in Lebanese politics certainly looked deeply inappropriate, to say the least.

Domestic Challenges

MbS is also moving with great speed domestically. First, he is clearly centralizing political and economic power. This was most graphically demonstrated in the detention of about 400 Saudi royals and businessmen in the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton in November 2017.

While the economic benefits of confiscating assets from senior Saudi subjects may or may not have been the primary motivation, it certainly also had the secondary effect of demonstrating the domestic power of the young crown-prince.

The royal family has always, since the founding of the Saudi state by King Abdulaziz bin Saud in 1932, had an understanding with the ultra-

conservative Saudi religious establishment. The Wahhabi doctrine of duty of obedience to the political leader meshed seamlessly with royal aspirations. Today, the cooperation between the royals and the clerics is most evident in the role of the religious police, with its Orwellian-sounding moniker: the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

At home, Riyadh is attempting, all at once, economic, social, and political reform.

While its role has been curtailed in recent years, and its members no longer carry sticks with which to strike violators, the religious police still maintains an enforcement role in the kingdom. But still, the curtailing of its role, and the mixing of men and women in even limited situations, is very rapid change for the conservative base, particularly the old.

Finally, under MbS the kingdom is engaging in an ambitious economic reform project. Recognizing that the oil economy is both dysfunctional in the short term and unviable in the longer term, an ambitious plan called 'Saudi Vision 2030' seeks to transform the Saudi economy. It envisions the creation of a technologically-advanced economic zone in the (current non-existent) city of Neom in northwest Saudi Arabia near Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula.

Based around the future income from a still-pending partial IPO of national oil company Saudi Aramco, the kingdom is seeking to diversify its economy and shift from a commodity-based system to an information-empowered hub of manufacturing, trade, and investment. Many observers are deeply skeptical that this management consultancy-driven project can succeed in Saudi society, even should the funds from the long-delayed Saudi Aramco IPO eventually materialize.

CHANGE IS NECESSARY

The amount of change that Saudi Arabia is undergoing is quite massive; it will also be difficult to handle. Saudi Arabia is a deeply conservative society that is making these changes not because it wants to, but because it has to.

Its oil-based economy is a case in point. The Saudis have had many very comfortable decades under this model. The kingdom is changing its economic model because the value of oil may well decrease in the coming decades, as renewables reach technological maturity, because the oil will eventually run out, and because the coming youth bulge threatens to outstrip even the profits of a 10+ million barrel per day ARAMCO.

In short, this reform is coming not because of some abstract desire to be better, but because it is demanded by necessity.

Likewise, social and religious reform is happening because MbS assesses that too much internal pressure is building up. MbS took on the family because he thought he had to. And, similarly, he has assessed that he must engage in all these external adventures.

Abroad, Saudi Arabia is simultaneously engaged in a cold war with Iran, a warm war with Qatar, a hot war in Yemen, and adventurism in Lebanon.

Perhaps the young ruler is not correct in all his assessments: some of the internal reforms may be unnecessary; the same could be said with regard to some of the foreign confrontations. But many of them are imperative.

In short, Saudi Arabia is transforming not from a position of strength, but from a position of weakness. It is transforming because the model it has used during previous decades—sell oil, transfer wealth to citizens, allow religious establishment free reign—is collapsing, or is at least at serious risk of so doing.

Therefore, the coming reforms are driven by the realities of political economy and geopolitics.

WHAT IF?

A brief summary: Saudi Arabia—a key American partner in the Middle East, a leading global oil producer, and a bulwark in the regional (*de facto*) anti-Iranian coalition—is a deeply vulnerable country, both domestically and in the region. To protect this vulnerability, it is engaging in a series of domestic reforms, as well as a number of foreign adventures.

At home, Riyadh is attempting, all at once, economic, social, and political reform. Abroad, Saudi Arabia is simultaneously engaged in a cold war with Iran, a warm war with Qatar, a hot war in Yemen, and adventurism in Lebanon.

From the aforementioned, two obvious yet profound questions present themselves. First, can MbS's Saudi Arabia really manage all these reforms and crises at once? And, second, what happens if a critical number fail?

Managing a series of radical domestic reform measures simultaneously, whilst also engaging in numerous foreign crises, all in a relatively short period of time, would tax the most talented of statesmen—and, in fact, probably exceed the capabilities of most.

The problem here is that MbS, while admittedly promising, is untested, unprepared, and in his early 30s. So, while American policymakers understandably wish him well in his attempts at reform—and Washington should help wherever it can—prudence dictates that we at least need to entertain the possibility that these reforms will fail in whole or in part.

It is long past time for policymakers to start thinking about the possibility of deep instability, if not revolution, in the Saudi kingdom.

So, it is with this in mind that we come to the second question: what happens if the MbS-led reforms fail? I think modesty compels us to admit that we have no idea. Saudi society is deeply mysterious even to the most experienced Arabists, much less laymen. The intricacies that bind the various factions of the al-Sauds, the true opinion of the Saudi public, and the limits of the religious establishment are all known unknowns. The best that can be surmised is that, as these reforms are being undertaken out of necessity, the consequences of botching them could be serious. To put it bluntly: the Saudi regime could be threatened by the failure of these reforms and the inability to achieve defined objectives in the foreign adventures Riyadh has undertaken.

This is not to say that the fall of the Saudi regime is imminent. But it is long past time for policymakers to start thinking about the possibility of deep instability, if not revolution, in the Saudi kingdom.

Predicting how instability and revolution could emerge is virtually impossible. One could draw hypothetical scenarios about a revolt by the Saudi Arabian National Guard, or Al Qaeda infiltration, or a return of ISIS, or a revolt by the clerical class. But I suspect attempts to do so would be futile.

What the United States and its allies should be considering is this: what does the regional security architecture in the Middle East look like if the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is no longer stable? In which neighboring countries could the United States then base its regional strategy?

In some ways, the United States has seen this problem before. It lost a clear ally in the region in 1979, when the Shah of Iran was overthrown. And while the government in Cairo in the wake of the 2014 coup against the Muslim Brotherhood has more or less held the same positions as the old regime, Egypt clearly does not have the same influence it once had, and is less capable in promoting stability in the region.

So, who would step up? Abu Dhabi? Baghdad? Would instability in the kingdom necessitate rapprochement with Turkey? Could Amman do any more than it already does? How much relief would this give Iran?

What does the regional security architecture in the Middle East look like if the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is no longer stable?

The answers to none of these questions are obvious, but intelligence services and strategists should already be thinking about them. A Middle East without a strong Saudi Arabia is nothing that anyone has experienced in living memory. But prudent planning requires a "Plan B" if all MbS's attempts at reform come to naught.

Again, all should wish MbS well in his reforms, as the alternative is—if no longer unthinkable, then—certainly dreadful. Nor does wishing him well require that one assert all his international ventures are prudent, or even just. But a region without a strong and stable Saudi Arabia is difficult to imagine. And yet, we must.