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## Saudi Arabia | The Gulf's resurgent power on the verge of a new era

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*Saudi Arabia is undergoing significant political change as it moves from family rule to a one-man state. Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman is undertaking a series of reforms with implications both to Saudi society and economy and to the regional strategy of the country. His aspirations to restructure the economy and provide some freedoms to segments of society are combined with an aggressive foreign policy resulting in the war in Yemen and tensions with other neighbors such as Qatar. However, these initiatives might be an indication of the efforts for a greater concentration of power on the hands of the Crown Prince and have led to what has been described as a "palace coup".<sup>1</sup>*

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Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman came to the forefront of Saudi politics in March 2015, when he was appointed to the position of Minister of Defense and has since then led change in the Gulf state through a plan for a series of reforms for the next decade. Bin Salman marked his rise to power with the creation of Vision 2030, which contains the ambitions and the strategic plan for elevating Saudi Arabia within the regional sub-system and for transforming the country into to the leader of the Arab world. Despite the fact that the Crown Prince refers to the importance of religion, he clarifies the need for the creation of an active society, a statement which hints at a potential decrease in the influence of the clerics in the country. Regarding the economy, he aims for a diversification of the country's source of income with the creation of industrial zones, the opening of more job opportunities in the field of arms manufacturing and the partial privatization of national companies such as Aramco, 5% of which will be sold this year. Vision 2030 concludes with the importance of transparency and effective governance, which are the main pillars that lead the domestic policies which the Crown Prince has been trying to implement ever since.<sup>2</sup>

This vision was followed with a general shift in Saudi politics and the start of a new era, one that is marked by the gradual transition from oligarchy to monarchy and from the old to a younger generation. This shift is constituted by the rise to power of the youngest Crown Prince that the country has ever had, the grant of more freedoms to certain social groups and an ongoing struggle against the elite in the Kingdom with the arrest of several Princes and businessmen controlling an important amount of wealth and power in the country. Although these attempts are said to be a struggle against corruption by the Crown Prince, they can also be perceived as a way for Bin Salman to gain control of more wealth by attacking his opponents using the state mechanisms.<sup>3</sup> While King Salman bin Abdulaziz still holds the throne in the Kingdom, it is in fact Mohammad Bin Salman who is pulling the strings in the state as he is considered to be the operator of the long-standing war with Yemen as well as the architect of the new vision for the country. However, his rise to power is also characterized by efforts to maintain his legitimacy in contempt of growing challenges, stemming from rising unemployment and a decrease in oil prices that have led to a restructuring of the economy and could result in the change of the subsidiary system in the country.<sup>4</sup> Bin Salman ensured his position when Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef was dethroned from his position "in the higher interests of the State".<sup>5</sup> Since then, the newly appointed Crown Prince undertook a series of actions that aimed to weaken opposition and to increase his level of legitimacy. The initiatives were undertaken on two fronts. On the one hand, the Crown Prince started a struggle to rebuild the political system in the country in order to weaken political elites which held significant power mainly due to their financial perks. This has led to the arrest of more than 200 princes and businessmen regarding cases of corruption<sup>6</sup> with the most recent one the arrest of 11 princes who were taken into custody after a sit-in demonstration in a palace due to a cut in their perks.<sup>7</sup> These moves indicate that the Crown Prince is trying to consolidate power and to eliminate opposition originating from other governmental officials as a sign of reckoning with possible domestic enemies that could threaten his leadership. Thus, it can be translated into a strategy stemming from a position of fear rather than a sense of power, as the individuals arrested held a significant amount of wealth and media power<sup>8</sup> and as an effort to smooth his own way over to the rank of the King. On the other hand, in an effort to tackle internal opposition from religious leaders and to present himself as a guarantee for providing more rights to women and in a more positive light to his allies and possible future opponents who would be in support of this venture, the Crown Prince has granted freedoms to certain social groups as a sign of progress. In this context, Saudi women were granted the right to drive for the first time starting from June 2018, while they were also able to attend the celebration of Saudi Arabia's Independence Day in a stadium. These progressive steps aimed to decrease the role of clerics in the conservative country since people would perceive their government as one advancing human rights and gradually moving away from the guardianship system.<sup>9</sup> These developments are strong indicators that the Crown Prince is trying to eliminate both the powers of the state elites and of the religious authorities in an attempt to strengthen his rule. His initiatives have overshadowed the current King and leader of the country and can be

perceived as a “palace coup” in the sense that Mohammad Bin Salman is monopolizing all important aspects of politics in the country.

The shift in Saudi politics is also affecting the foreign policy of the country. The ambition of Bin Salman to transform the country into the leader of the Arab world has led to the escalation of the regional antagonism with Iran. The two countries, which have been involved in several proxy wars in the region are currently supporting opposing sides in the wars in Yemen and Syria, while their antagonism has also spread to Lebanon, where Saudi Arabia forced Prime Minister Hariri to resign from his position in the face of the growing influence of Hezbollah in the country.<sup>11</sup> The war in Yemen has also led the country to reach out to African states for manpower. In 2015, Saudis provided economic assistance to the US long embargoed Sudan in order to help them fight the Houthi rebels.<sup>12</sup> These regional aspirations have also led to a closer and more open relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US. The Gulf Kingdom is looking for greater support from US President D. Trump, who is in favor of Bin Salman, while in May 2017 the two countries also signed an arms deal that was aiming at countering the rising influence of Iran.<sup>13</sup> In 2017, Saudi Arabia had to face another crisis while its rivalry with neighboring Qatar reached its peak. The country, along with UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic ties and imposed a blockade on Qatar with the accusation that it was supporting terrorist organizations such as Hamas, and Islamist militants.<sup>14</sup> The embargo served as another demonstration of power as Saudi Arabia tried to counter the increasing role of Iran in the country.

The rise of Prince Mohammad Bin Salman to power marked the beginning of a new era for the Saudi politics. His aspirations for the country expressed in Vision 2030 were affected by the fear of a lack of internal legitimacy, as is demonstrated by his attempts to silence domestic opposition, and at the same time, by his initiatives to provide more freedoms in order to achieve a greater degree of public support. Although the implications of these policies remain to be seen, it is pertinent that Saudi Arabia is heading towards a more concentrated system of governance, one that is dominated by the Crown Prince.

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