The night of November 4, 2017 will long be remembered as Saudi Arabia’s Night of the Long Knives. While Yemeni Houthi rebels fired a ballistic missile toward Riyadh, and the Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri read his resignation in the same city, 11 of the kingdom’s most powerful princes, around 40 former ministers, and a number of business tycoons and media moguls were arrested and charged with corruption. Among those arrested were prominent figures such as Prince Walid bin Talal, the wealthiest man in the Middle East; Prince Mitab bin Abdallah, the commander of the 100,000-man strong National Guard and son of late King Abdallah; and Khalid Al Tuwaijiri, the former chief of the royal court and the highest ranking non-royal official under Abdallah. The arrest warrants were issued by a newly formed anti-corruption committee—headed by the 32-year-old Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman.1

The detentions culminated a process in which more and more power has been quickly gathered in the hands of Muhammad bin Salman, best known under the acronym ‘MbS’ in the West. Since his father, King Salman, came to power in January 2005, MbS has outmaneuvered every credible rival for the royal succession. The outcome of this Macbethian power struggle is the sidelining of two crown princes, Muqrin and Muhammad bin Nayef, as well as Prince Mitab bin Abdallah, who commanded the only Saudi military force not under MbS’ direct control. MbS has also arrested prominent Islamic clerics, academics, poets, journalists, and other perceived opponents.2

In the history of modern Saudi Arabia, no single prince has ever held such great power. MbS, now the kingdom’s effective ruler, controls the country’s arms, oil,
and its important relationship with the United States. The young prince has an important ally: his father, the king. An expert in royal family politics, King Salman has helped gather all the power in his hands to his favorite son.\(^3\) Salman, who is now 82 years old and in weak health, is painfully aware that this power consolidation must be completed while he is alive. The last act in this royal drama will likely be the king abdicating and formally passing power to his son.\(^4\)

Two competing narratives have emerged around what MbS’ power grab means for the future of Saudi Arabia. The first is that it gives the young crown prince power to reform. Many see MbS as a modernizer, with the vigor needed to change and open up a patriarchal society and an economy overly dependent on oil. Joseph A. Kéchichian, a senior fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, refers to him as an “enlightened prince.”\(^5\) MbS’ flagship reform is Vision 2030.\(^6\) The global management consulting firm McKinsey helped design the crown prince’s sweeping reform agenda aimed at ushering Saudi Arabia into a more open, post-petroleum future.\(^7\) MbS wants to create a vibrant private sector and cut the size of the bureaucracy. Moreover, he has promised to limit the power of the Wahhabi religious establishment, reopen cinemas across the kingdom, allow music concerts, let women drive, and roll out tourist visas. He has even vowed to restore a more “moderate Islam.”\(^8\) Such promises sound like sweet music to Western ears.\(^9\) In a euphoric tribute, New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman calls MbS’ reform initiatives “Saudi Arabia’s Arab Spring, at last.”\(^10\)

The second narrative is that MbS has grabbed power for his own sake. MbS is seen by many observers as an aspiring despot—overtly ambitious, ruthless, and hotheaded. Some suspect that the crown prince is using corruption charges selectively and politically to delegitimize and eliminate those challenging his absolute power, just like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have done. Saudi Arabian governance is built on corruption. A prince arresting another prince for “corruption” is like President Trump dismissing one of his cabinet members “for lying.”\(^11\) It is simply not plausible. MbS’ promises of social reforms are popular among young Saudis. However, democracy is not on the agenda. Populist despots are rarely open to claims for political rights. Moreover, MbS is the region’s number one bully. He is bombing Yemen, blockading Qatar, and calling Iran’s Supreme Leader “the new Hitler of the Middle East.”\(^12\)

Regardless of which of the two narratives is true, MbS’ rise to power has dramatically undermined the stability of Saudi Arabia. An extensive body of research shows that this unique state construction rests on four pillars: The first is the House of
Saudi. Its numerous princes occupy all key positions, a form of government that has given the royals a firm grip on power. Importantly, the royals have historically been able to stand united. The second is Wahhabi Islam. This particular branch of Islam has united the nation, given legitimacy to the Saud government, and provided mechanisms for social and political control. The third is oil revenues that have been used by the royals to buy the support of their subjects. The final pillar is the relationship with the United States. In a turbulent region, the Americans have protected the kingdom from external enemies. While MbS and Trump are on good terms, MbS’ rise to power has undermined the three first pillars.

The established order in Saudi Arabia is hardly sustainable, and the system needs to be reformed. Ian Bremmer, the president and founder of Eurasia Group, has argued that opening up an authoritarian regime is correlated to a period of instability. He argues that if one were to graph a state’s stability as a function of its openness, the result would be a “J curve,” suggesting that as states become more open, they become less stable initially until they eventually surpass their previous levels of stability.

In other words, MbS’ reforms will likely bring instability before a new, better, and more stable order is eventually established. However, MbS appears to be more of a revolutionary than a reformer. He is arguably fighting too many wars at the same time—against his own family, the religious establishment, and the business families, as well as against Iran, Qatar, and the Houthis. Too many things can go wrong, and it is highly doubtful that the young leader will be able to handle a crisis, or at worst parallel crises. MbS is inexperienced and his power unchecked, a bad combination. Saudi Arabia looks like a train about to derail—or worse. Collapse in the kingdom would spell disaster to a region already rocked by conflict.

**Why Saudi Arabia Has Been Stable**

Despite the enormous socioeconomic and demographic changes the kingdom has gone through since its founding in 1932, not to mention the recent revolution in the use of social media that fueled the so-called Arab Spring, the Saud regime has arguably been among the most stable in the Middle East. Researchers ascribe this remarkable stability to the four pillars that form foundations of the House of Saud.

**The Saud Family**

Saudi Arabia is run as a family business. The country gets its name from the ruling family, al-Saud. Since the middle of the eighteenth century, this family
has reigned over three kingdoms on the Arabian Peninsula. The founder of the present dynasty, Ibn Saud, had many wives, although never more than four at a time, in adherence to Muslim doctrine. Altogether, the wives gave him 36 sons and 27 daughters. So far, six of Ibn Saud’s sons have followed him on the throne. The sons seem to have inherited both their father’s power and virility. Consequently, the royal house, counting men and women of all branches, has grown to many thousand people.

After Ibn Saud’s death in 1953, Saudi Arabia became what Michael Herb, professor of Political Science at Georgia State University and author of All in the Family, calls a “dynastic monarchy.” Oil income began to pour into the treasury in earnest during the reign of King Faysal (1964–74). This wealth gave the Saud family the opportunity to dominate the local economy, distribute welfare, marginalize rival elite groups, and construct a modern state apparatus. While the royal family had previously ruled through alliances with elite groups such as religious leaders, tribal chiefs, and trading families, the family’s newfound wealth allowed them to become the center of gravity in Saudi Arabia’s political structure. The Saud family’s princes occupied all key posts in the state apparatus.

A dynastic monarchy is very capable of resisting revolution, as Herb points out. He claims that the first reason for this is that princes of the royal family hold the most important positions in the state apparatus. It is difficult for potential opponents of the royal house to build a power base within the state apparatus and almost impossible to kill or take all the princes hostage in a first strike. None of the dynastic monarchies in the Gulf have yet been overthrown, whereas for example, the Iranian shah’s autocratic monarchy collapsed as a result of the Islamic revolution of 1978–79. The Shah’s “one-bullet” regime, as Herb termed it, was a manageable match for the revolutionaries. A dynastic monarchy, with power dispersed throughout the royal family, is much more resistant to revolutions than when power is concentrated in a single ruler.

Additionally, the royal family’s efficient mechanisms for regulating internal conflicts promote stability. All families are affected from time to time by internal conflict, and the House of Saud has been no exception. In Saudi Arabia, Faysal, with the support of a coalition of allied princes, deposed his incompetent half-brother, Saud, from the throne in 1964. Nonetheless, conflict-solving mechanisms have prevented such serious strife from undermining the dynasty’s stability. Herb emphasizes the significance of two principles drawn from Arab Muslim tradition that are continued within the family: consultation (shura) and consensus (ijma). Before important decisions are taken, the most influential princes consult and try to reach a consensus. This is especially important when

Two principles help regulate internal conflicts and promote stability.
solving the succession issue, which is historically the most divisive. A prominent Saudi prince, Khalid bin Sultan, in his book *Desert Warrior*, underlines Herb’s argument. He writes that all royals are obliged to follow strict norms of behavior, among those respect for the king, no matter who he is, honoring older family members, solving conflicts within the family framework, putting what is best for the family before individual interests, and sharing leading positions among the most qualified princes. Saudi Arabia’s longstanding tradition of respecting family hierarchy and prioritizing family cohesiveness has helped stabilize the country.

Until now, the Saud family has been remarkably united. Strong informal and formal mechanisms foster elite integration and prevent fragmentation. This has allowed the royals to overcome successions from one king to another, which is the most acute collective action challenge faced by family dynasties. Elite unity is generally considered one of the most important factors in determining the stability of a regime, while deep division within the ruling elite is often a source of political conflict and paralyzes decision making. Elite cohesion is the foundation for stability in Saudi Arabia.

**Wahhabi Islam**

Article 1 of Saudi Arabia’s Basic Law of Government states that the country shall be an Islamic state in which government is based on shari’a. The state ideology builds on a more than 250-year alliance between the Saud family and the Islamic reformist, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. He formulated a political doctrine inspired by Ibn Taimiyya, an Islamic cleric who lived in Baghdad from 1263 to 1326. According to Ibn Tamiyya, an ideal Islamic state should be founded on two equal authorities: the princes and the priests. The first should govern, but the latter should monitor politics. Early in the twentieth century, Ibn Saud reestablished ‘the alliance state,’ an efficient device to establish and later consolidate the monarchy.

For Ibn Saud and his successors, Islam has served a number of aims. First, the royal family has used Wahhabi Islam as an identity marker in the nation building process. The territory Ibn Saud conquered was a patchwork that consisted of a number of religious groups, tribes, and regions—each with its distinctive character and identities. To give the inhabitants a common identity, Ibn Saud introduced the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab as a “state religion.” Saudi Arabia’s king was looked on as the leader of the Wahhabi community and was only subordinate to the law of God, *Sharī’a*. In 1986, King Fahd (1981-2005) took the title Guardian of the Holy Places (Mecca and Medina) to emphasize his leadership over the entire Muslim community.

Second, the Saud family has used Islam to legitimize its rule. The kingdom’s chief religious body, the Council of Senior Scholars, issues *fatwas*, religious
edicts by Islamic scholars based on their interpretation of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s tradition, Sunna, in support of the king’s policies. The House of Saud has the upper hand in the “alliance.” The religious scholars are subservient to the royals, and their independence has gradually eroded as they have become government functionaries. Consequently, the scholars have even been forced to accept—and at times sanction—political decisions they disliked, like the deployment of 500,000 U.S. soldiers, whom they consider infidels, during the Gulf War in 1990.

Finally, the ruling family uses Islam as an instrument of social control. This is achieved through institutions such as the Shari’a Courts, the so-called Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Combating of Evil, as well as the notorious religious police, which all enforce the Wahhabi scholars’ strict interpretation of God’s law. In Saudi Arabia, a political dissident runs the risk of being charged for apostasy, which eventually would lead to flogging and even death.

Oil

In 1938, the American company Chevron found oil beneath the Saudi desert sand, and during the Second World War production blossomed. However, it was not until the price jump following what in the West is known as the 1973–74 Oil Crisis that oil income seriously began to fill the House of Saud’s coffers. Today, Saudi Arabia has almost one-fifth of the world’s proven oil reserves, and is the world’s second largest producer and largest exporter of oil.23 Throughout the history of modern Saudi Arabia, the regime has cultivated a narrative in which the ruler cares for and ensures his subjects’ material needs; thus the welfare arrangements are presented as gifts rather than rights, and in return, subjects are expected to obey their ruler and benefactor.

Hence, Saudi Arabia is the rentier state par excellence. The royal family’s incomes are derived first and foremost from oil sales and from profits from overseas investments made possible by petrodollars. Only a small part of the kingdom’s income is derived from taxes and levies. Putting it somewhat simplistically, the regime of a rentier state is in a position to buy the citizens’ allegiance through an active redistribution policy. A social contract is thus established where the ruling party guarantees the citizens’ material comfort, while in return the citizens accept the ruler’s right to rule.24 This system of loyalty in return for social rights is termed the “authoritarian bargain.”25

In the case of Saudi Arabia, this bargain is almost stated explicitly in the Basic Law, the closest the kingdom comes to a constitution. Article 6 underlines that obedience to the ruler must be maintained at all times. It states: “Citizens shall give the pledge of allegiance to the King, professing allegiance in times of hardship and of ease.”26 In return for their loyalty, the citizens are entitled to welfare services; in other words, social rights. Article 27 states that: “The State shall
guarantee the rights of citizens and their families in cases of emergency, illness, disability, and old age …” The state is also obliged to offer a wide range of different social welfare goods including work for all citizens (article 28), education (article 30), and health services (article 31).

Mamoun Fandy, the author of *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, uses a set of concentric circles to explain how the Saud family distributes oil revenue. The first circle includes the House of Saud. The princes get a yearly stipend, whose size depends on each prince’s position in the state and family hierarchy, on top of which come many other privileges. In addition, many princes are involved in Saudi business. In 2003, *Forbes* crowned Prince Waleed bin Talal, among those arrested in November 2017, the world’s fifth richest man, with a personal fortune estimated at 17.7 billion U.S. dollars. The second circle is composed of aristocratic families that are married into the ruling family. The two most important such families are Al al-Shaykh, descendants of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and Al Sudayri. These families enjoy a number of privileges such as financial support from Al Saud. Blood ties through intermarriage bind together the two innermost circles. The third circle includes Saudi trading and entrepreneurial families with limited tribal connections. The most important among these families are the Juffali, Ali Reza, Rajhi, al-Khashuji, al-Ulian, and Bin Laden. The fourth circle, which is far wider, includes all Saudi citizens. They have limited political rights but enjoy a number of socioeconomic goods as citizens—without paying taxes. Outside the circles are Saudi Arabia’s foreign workers with neither political nor socioeconomic rights. This group numbers almost 10.4 million people, comprising more than two-thirds of the country’s total labor force.

The United States

The February 14, 1945 meeting between Ibn Saud and President Franklin D. Roosevelt on board the warship USS Quincy on Great Bitter Lake laid the foundation for the informal alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States that has lasted to the present. This partnership has been advantageous for both countries. In the turbulent decades after the Second World War, Al Saud was challenged by militarily stronger neighboring states with expansionist ambitions—Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s Egypt, Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iran, and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. David E. Long, a retired U.S. Foreign Service Officer and specialist on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, claims that because of its historical experiences, the Saudis suffer from an “encirclement syndrome,” which has led them to seek the protection of the United States. In 1975, King Faysal summarized: “U.S. relations are a pillar of Saudi policy.”

On their side, the Americans have cooperated with the Saud family in order to take care of U.S. strategic and economic interests in the Gulf. The Second World War made the importance of oil as a strategic resource clear to Washington.
Without it, the war could never have been won. Following the war, seeking oil dominated the United States’ objectives and strategies in the Middle East. Around 1950, the Truman administration defined American control of Saudi Arabian oilfields, which are mainly to be found in the Eastern Province, of decisive significance in the global struggle against communism. The nightmare was if these fields fell into the hands of the Soviet Union. Therefore as early as the 1950s, the United States drew up plans for the military occupation of the Eastern Province, should it be necessary.

With the exception of the 1973-74 oil boycott, Saudi Arabia has secured stable oil supplies for the world market, thereby contributing to hold prices at an acceptable level for the Americans. The kingdom has for decades been an important supplier of oil to the United States, while Saudi Arabia is also the world’s largest buyer of U.S. weapons. Between 1950 and 2000, Saudi Arabia purchased almost $100 billion of American arms, 25 percent of which was in the wake of the 1990-91 Gulf War.

Lastly, Saudi Arabia has supported U.S. foreign policy. The Saud family supported the Americans’ global struggle against communism during the Cold War by, for example, financing the mujahidun guerrillas that fought against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Not only that, but the Saud family paid more than half of the costs of the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, a sum estimated to be about $60 billion.

**Why Saudi Arabia Is No Longer Stable**

MbS has undermined these pillars essential to maintain the stability of the House of Saud. This is especially true of the first three pillars—Saudi Arabia as a dynastic monarchy, an alliance state, and a rentier state—making Saudi Arabia less stable.

**Elite Conflict**

In Saudi Arabia, the political elite used to be united, but this cohesion is now over. MbS’ power grab has made the regime both vulnerable to external threats and increased the risk of divisive conflicts within the elite. It is far from surprising that the generational shift would weaken cohesion within the House of Saud. Ten years ago, I interviewed an advisor to the royal family who gave the following account: “The generational shift poses a major challenge to the cohesion of the elite. It is an open question whether the third-generation princes share the older generation’s
norms of political behavior, agree on what legitimate processes for making decisions are, and understand the importance of standing together. The primary concern is that Ibn Saud’s many grandsons might prove unable to forge an orderly succession, raising fears that the dynasty will collapse. The erosion of elite integration, however, has been going faster and longer than any observers of Saudi royal family politics probably expected.

The rapid—and somewhat unexpected—rise of MbS triggered discomfort within the House of Saud. September 2015 saw the first signs of a mounting campaign by some of the princes of the royal family to defenestrate the previous ruler. A senior member of the royal family—reportedly a grandson of the kingdom’s founding father, Ibn Saud—circulated a series of open letters that expressed fears that the monarchy would collapse if King Salman, along with his son, was not promptly deposed. “The king is not in a stable condition and in reality the son of the king [Muhammad bin Salman] is ruling the kingdom,” the author argued. Moreover, the author criticized the “ruling clique” for mismanaging the economy in the context of plummeting oil prices, for mishandling the hajj tragedy in 2015 in which more than 2,000 pilgrims were killed during a stampede, and for military adventurism in Syria and in particular Yemen, causing a doubling of state spending. In the letters, the author further advocated that power in the kingdom had to be returned to older princes with more experience: “We have neglected the marginalization of the elderly and those who carry experience and surrendered the leadership to the new generation of foolish dreamers who act behind the scenes to an unfit king.” Consequently, the angry author called on the twelve surviving sons of Ibn Saud (besides King Salman) to unite and remove the leadership in a palace coup, before choosing a new government from within the royal family. “Allow the oldest and most capable to take over the affairs of the state, let the new king and crown prince take allegiance from all, and cancel the strange, new rank of second deputy premier,” the author stated. MbS—privately referred to as “the boy” or “the teenager” in both the letters and by some of his relatives—was at the center of the criticism, accused for being overly ambitious, arrogant, and reckless.

The brutal dismissal of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef in June 2017 and the subsequent arrest and public humiliation of Mitab bin Abdallah, along with a number of other senior royals in November the same year, have hardly lessened skepticism of the young prince in the House of Saud. MbS’ cousins will never forget or forgive being attacked. They see the dismissals, arrests, asset freezing, and public humiliation as a blow to their honor, which their closest family members are duty-bound to avenge. Moreover, in the past, if a prince for various reasons could not get a political key position, he could at least become wealthy. Being royal gave privileged access to land and contracts. This type of economic reward was an important mechanism to curb dissatisfaction and maintain peace within the royal family. For the royals, opportunities to engage in
business now seem limited due to economic difficulties and MbS’ efforts to root out corruption.

For the first time in Saudi Arabia’s history, power appears to be transitioning directly from father to son. All kings of Saudi Arabia, with the exception of Khaled (1975-82), have groomed their own sons for prominent positions. King Saud even tried to establish his own dynasty, but the family stopped this from happening. The first ruler who seems to be succeeding is Salman. So far, no brothers or nephews have been able to stop him. Salman has actively positioned his son ever since he inherited power, using all means at his disposal. As mentioned above, it is likely that King Salman’s plan is to step down in favor of his son, and change the succession from horizontal lines (transfer of power between brothers) to a vertical order (wherein the king hands power to his most eligible son). This would secure the line of Salman. MbS has two daughters and two sons, Salman and Mashoor. The power consolidation has been hardhanded, and important clans within the royal tribe are now marginalized in strong opposition to King Salman and his son. If Salman abdicates now, it seems unlikely that the most senior princes would swear allegiance to MbS as new king. However, coercion and bribery may change this.

Because of MbS’ power grab, Saudi Arabia today can hardly be described as a dynastic monarchy anymore. While this type of regime stands strong in the face of external challengers because various princes possess the most important positions, it seems the House of Saud is now moving towards becoming a typical Arab dictatorship. The kingdom is more vulnerable because all power is concentrated in the hands of MbS. The crown prince has few allies within his own family, except for his father and younger brothers. In 2017, one of the brothers, 29-year-old Prince Khaled bin Salman, was appointed ambassador to Washington. The fact that such a young and inexperienced prince was appointed to such an important position clearly indicates how small MbS’ power base is in the royal family. The crown prince relies on a number of non-royal advisors, Saudis and foreigners. Among those is rumored to be Hosni Mubarak’s security chief, the Habib al-Adly, who reportedly was advising MbS on the so-called anti-corruption crackdown. Al-Adly—who earned a reputation in the Mubarak era for brutality and torture—is said to have joined MbS’ security apparatus after fleeing Egypt where he was facing jail.

Consequently, MbS’ Saudi Arabia has also become more like a “one-bullet” regime. If something happens to the crown prince, there might be a power vacuum and a paralysis of decision making, at least until the royal family once again closes the ranks. And it is not unthinkable that something might happen.
to MbS. He has stepped across too many bodies on his way to the top, and marginalized princes might seek revenge. The House of Saud is no stranger to assassinations. In 1975, King Faysal was killed by a nephew. Prince Faysal bin Musa'id, who assassinated the king, was found guilty of regicide and hours later was publicly beheaded in Riyadh. The prince’s motives are still not clear. In the event of a period of absence of efficient leadership, the regime would be vulnerable. Unhappy groups from both inside and outside the elites, or an alliance of these, might take advantage of such a situation to try to take over the power of the kingdom. External powers can also use the opportunity to manipulate internal development in Saudi Arabia, just as Egypt’s President Nasser tried when the Saud family was ravaged by the struggle of power in the 1950s and 1960s. That struggle came close to ending the regime.

MbS has not only come into conflict with his own family, but all the traditional elite structures. He has attacked the clergy, business families, and technocrats. Without support from his own family and the old elites, it will be highly difficult for MbS to rule the kingdom, especially the day after his father is gone. In order to retain power, he must build new alliances, and he will probably reach out to “liberal” technocrats and businessmen—two groups that will be essential in implementing Vision 2030. At the same time, he will probably need to reorganize state institutions in order to prevent potential rivals from using these as alternative power bases. Institutions that previously were commanded by now deposed princes are likely to be dissolved and integrated into other institutions. Since he came to power, it has been rumored that King Salman has planned to subordinate the Saudi Arabian National Guard—the powerful military force tasked with protecting the royal family that for five decades was the power base of the Abdallah branch of the House of Saud—to the defense ministry lead by MbS.41

Extremist Backlash

To the House of Saud, the alliance with the Wahhabi establishment has been instrumental in unifying the nation, legitimizing political decisions, and controlling the population. Nevertheless, it has long been an asymmetric alliance, in favor of the royals. While MbS has effectively outmaneuvered all potential rivals within its own family, he has taken drastic initiatives to further limit the clergy’s influence. This is part of his efforts to take all the traditional levers of Saudi power under his control. It is an open question how the clergy will respond to being marginalized. Most likely, many will adapt to the new reality, although it cannot be ruled out that elements of the Wahhabi establishment will oppose the young crown prince.
Anxiety permeates the Saudi conservative wing under attack by MbS. The crown prince has stripped the religious police of its arrest powers. He has also expanded the space for women in public life by naming women to high-profile jobs and announcing that women would be allowed to enter soccer stadiums and even drive. In addition to paving the way for the acceptance of gender mixing, MbS has allowed music at public events. Speaking at Riyadh’s Future Investment Initiative conference in October, he stated that the kingdom needed to return to a “moderate balanced Islam that is open to the world and to all religions and all traditions and people.”

During the fall of 2017, dozens of hardline religious scholars were arrested, and members of the religious police were allegedly warned not to speak publicly about the loss of their powers. In September, around 15 clerics were arrested, among these four of the kingdom’s best-known religious scholars: Salman al-Oudah, Oudh al-Qarni, Rarm al-Bishi, and Ali Omari. Those arrested had a number of commonalities: they failed to support the royal house in the ongoing conflict with neighboring Qatar, and have numerous social media followers. Moreover, several of the arrested clergy were part of the Sahwa, or “Islamic Awakening,” which was a social-political movement that from the late 1980s turned against the House of Saud. While some members of the movement explored the prospects for an Islamic constitutional monarchy through peaceful activism, others supported Osama bin Laden’s violent jihadi campaign. The Sahwa is now illegal, and its former members have significantly moderated their views.

Saudi Arabia is still a deeply conservative society, and many carry the idea that the kingdom is the land of unsullied Islam. The majority of the Wahhabi establishment is probably unhappy with the direction the country has taken under MbS, and many fear that the kingdom is forsaking its principles and giving up its identity. Still, preserving the alliance is of primary importance for many. The clerics have arguably too much to lose by opposing the ruler, and most will probably rather adapt to the new situation. Throughout Saudi history, the Wahhabi establishment has adapted to changes that it initially condemned, such as the introduction of TV. (Today, the religious scholars have their own satellite channels, and are prolific social media users.) Moreover, Wahhabi teaching emphasizes absolute obedience to the ruler whose policies are not inconsistent with Islam. It is even better to support an unjust ruler than to rebel, as the latter may lead to chaos. To some clerics, the wisdom of this teaching has been borne out by the mayhem in Libya and Syria. Many Saudi clerics are also quietist, devoted to scripture and prayer rather than politics, let alone political violence. As evidence of
the Wahhabi establishments subservience to MbS, the Council of Senior Scholars endorsed the arrests, stating that Sharia “instructs us to fight corruption and our national interest requires it.”

Despite Wahhabi teaching and the quietist tradition however, it cannot be ruled out that some clerics may oppose MbS. By pushing the conservatives too far, the government could trigger a backlash. It could drive extreme clerics underground, where some could be drawn to violence. This has happened before. In the 1920s, Ibn Saud had to fight a war with extremists who felt that the purity of Wahhabi practices was challenged by innovations advocated by the king. In 1979, Wahhabi militants that accused the royal family for not being Islamic enough seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the most sacred place in the Muslim world. Later, in the early 1990s, Osama bin Laden established al-Qaeda after breaking with King Fahd over his decision to allow Western troops on Saudi “holy” soil in the Gulf War. More recently, thousands of Saudis have joined the so-called Islamic State. Whether the Wahhabi clerics would be able to mobilize the masses against the House of Saud is an open question. What we know is that religious scholars have many followers on social media. Some of the most radical clerics have millions of followers on Twitter, by far more than any “liberal” Saudi tweeter.

For example, Salman al-Oudha, one of those arrested in September 2017, has as many as 14 million followers on Twitter. He is especially appealing to the younger generation of Saudis. In 2012, al-Oudah published the book Questions of Revolution, in which he argues for a more positive view of revolutions, which according to traditional Wahhabi teachings are synonymous with chaos and danger. Thus, he challenges the principle of allegiance to the ruler and claims that there is a middle way between allegiance and violent insurgency: peaceful revolution. Not surprisingly, the book was banned, but al-Oudha used social media to share his message.

**Mobilization for Rights**

The system of loyalty in return for welfare, the so-called authoritarian bargain, has added to the stability of House of Saud. MbS made an unprecedented step by admitting in public that this contract is increasingly unsustainable, as oil prices remain low, the population booms, and the government’s resources are running out. As a response to the Arab Spring in 2011, King Abdallah launched a plan to raise public sector salaries, build subsidized housing, and provide benefits to the unemployed. The result was huge state budget deficits. To address this problem, MbS has launched Vision 2030—the ambitious plan to diversify Saudi Arabia’s economy and reduce its dependence on oil. It emphasizes making the private sector the engine of growth and jobs.
To balance the budget according to Vision 2030, the Saudi government has announced measures to cut government spending and increase its revenues. Measures to increase revenue include increasing foreign investment and selling a stake in the giant national oil company, Saudi Aramco. The government has indicated that shares of the company will be offered in 2018, in what is expected to be the world’s largest ever listing.\textsuperscript{54} Saudi officials have said they expect Aramco to be valued at around $2 trillion. If the market agrees, selling just 5 percent would raise $100 billion.\textsuperscript{55} Besides opening up for business, new taxes were announced in December 2015.\textsuperscript{56} Starting January 1, 2018, Saudis have to pay a value added tax (VAT) for the first time.\textsuperscript{57} Additionally, the government has introduced a 100 percent excise tax on tobacco products and energy drinks.\textsuperscript{58} Citizens’ income and Saudi companies’ profits will remain untaxed, for now.

In order to reduce spending, the government introduced cuts to the subsidization of basic goods such as petrol, water, electricity, and food in December 2015.\textsuperscript{59} As a result, there has been a marked rise in consumer prices. This rise has caused unease among less wealthy Saudis, who are used to cheap basic goods. In October 2017, the government decided to cut subsidies more gradually and take longer to balance the budget.\textsuperscript{60} In 2016, besides subsidy cuts, the government decided to reduce allowances and benefits for public sector employees.\textsuperscript{61} As many as two-thirds of all Saudi workers are public servants, and paying them is a major burden on the state. The decision about cuts in payments came suddenly without prior communication and consultation, and created dissatisfaction among state employees.

In June 2017, while MbS was promoted to crown prince, King Salman declared that the decision to reduce payments would be reversed.\textsuperscript{62} The government’s decision to soften subsidy cuts and revert cuts in payments to public servants came in part because oil prices rose. There were also concern that the rapid cuts in fiscal spending would undermine consumer spending and economic growth. Finally yet importantly, the authorities were probably worried that the cuts would trigger protests, and the last thing King Salman wanted was political unrest in a critical time where he consolidated the power of his own son.

Besides boosting the Saudi economy, Vision 2030 promises increased social freedoms, but does not include steps toward democracy. MbS’ top-down moves can be seen as undermining the social contract, which eventually could lead to intensified demands for political rights. Although the Arab Spring of 2011 apparently never came to Saudi Arabia, political awareness is on the rise among broader segments of the Saudi population. The regional uprising arguably inspired several groups to articulate demands for civil and political rights. This tendency is particularly apparent online, where Salafis, Shia-activists, women, and liberals all voice their demands for rights.\textsuperscript{63} So far, the opposition has been split and has primarily occurred online. In addition, the regional security situation following the Arab
Spring has probably made some groups refrain from pushing political rights too far. However, it will be a serious problem for the House of Saud if various unhappy groups unite and move to the streets.

MbS can become the one the opposition unites against. For the time being, MbS’ anti-corruption campaign is probably popular among the Saudis, especially the middle and lower middle class fed up with elites abusing their power and enriching themselves. MbS has used the anti-corruption campaign to present himself as a kind of Arabic Robin Hood, taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Several of the arrested princes, former ministers and businessmen have paid large sums to the state treasury in exchange for freedom. Prince Miteb bin Abdullah was reportedly released after agreeing to pay as much as $1 billion. According to Saudi officials, it is conceivable that between $50 billion and $100 billion in assets can be recovered in this manner. This would be much needed money for the Saudi state. In the past, Saudis often criticized individual princes who abused their position of power, but they were not necessarily critical of the king or the royal family as such. Because of the power grab, MbS is now synonymous with the House of Saud. The public opinion could turn quickly against the crown prince, which makes the monarchical system more vulnerable than before.

To MbS, anti-corruption might be a double-edged sword. In 2016, he bought the world’s biggest yacht, Serena, from the Russian vodka baron Yuri Shefler for $550 million. In December 2017, a few weeks after initiating the austerity drive at home, the crown prince was revealed as the buyer of a $300 million French chateau described as the world’s most expensive home, and reportedly paid a record $450 million for a Leonardo da Vinci portrait of Jesus Christ, “Salvator Mundi.” It seems highly untimely for MbS to spend so much money on luxury items while he cracks down on corruption among elites and takes the initiative to tighten government expenditure. Sooner or later, the Saudis will ask where the 32-year-old crown prince got the money to make these big investments. In social media, rumors may begin to circulate that MbS is not clean, which will undermine his credibility as the supposed reformer of Saudi Arabia. Public opinion could quickly turn against MbS—and the House of Saud.

**House of Trump, House of Salman**

The only pillar that MbS apparently has not undermined is the partnership with the United States. While there was some friction between the two countries under the Obama administration and the late King Abdallah, the relationship has
become closer than it had for a long time under the House of Salman and the House of Trump, respectively.

In May 2017, President Donald Trump began his first foreign trip in Riyadh, signaling the importance of the kingdom to the United States. Since then, Jared Kushner has been the point man on Saudi Arabia and has held regular discussions with MbS. The two men are rumored to be naturally drawn to each other. Both are born into ultra-rich families, and both have colossal power despite their young age and limited experience. Moreover, observers have pointed at a number of striking similarities between the Saud royals and the Trump administration: they operate in the same way, both have family members as their most trusted advisers, they mix public and private interests, and human rights are not among their favorite conversation topics.69

The Trump administration has repeatedly given unreserved political support to Saudi Arabia. Antipathy toward Iran is the matter that first and foremost unites Washington and Riyadh. While the Saudis have teamed up with an alliance of Sunni states as well as Israel to counter what they interpret as growing Iranian power, Trump aims at scrapping the nuclear deal with Iran. On January 12, 2016, he tweeted: “The Iran deal is terrible. Why didn’t we get the uranium stockpile – It was sent to Russia.”70 Such tweets are music in the ears of the Saudis fearing that Iran is searching for nuclear weapons to alter the power balance in the Middle East.

U.S. backing has arguably encouraged Saudi diplomatic and military adventurism in the Middle East. Trump has declared support to Saudi Arabia in the ongoing conflict with Qatar, even though the latter is hosting the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East. With Trump’s blessing, Saudi Arabia has intensified its war in Yemen, causing what Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, refers to as “the world’s biggest humanitarian crisis.”71 Save the Children estimates that 130 children are dying each day—or one child every 10 minutes—as the country grapples with famine and the largest cholera outbreak in modern history.72

Trump even tweeted in support of Saudi Arabia’s king and crown prince following the move to purge the elite. In a tweet posted November 7, 2017, the day after the arrests that shocked the kingdom, he wrote: “I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing…”73 MbS has spent millions of dollars buying support among politicians in Washington by hiring a fleet of lobbying and public affairs firms.74 In addition, his
bestowal of the U.S. ambassador position to his younger brother further cemented the relationship between the House of Salman and the House of Trump.

This partnership has arguably benefitted the U.S. economy. During the visit to Riyadh in May 2017, Trump signed a U.S. $350 billion arms deal with the kingdom, the largest arms deal in American history. Nor can it be ruled out that Saudi Aramco eventually will be listed on a U.S. stock exchange, which Trump has encouraged. Last but not least, it is vital for the U.S. economy that Saudi Arabia continues to price and sell oil in U.S. dollars. This is important as oil trading in other currencies, such as Chinese yuan or Russian rubles, would destroy the U.S. dollar as the world’s reserve currency.

**Cause for Concern**

All but one of the pillars underpinning the House of Saud have been undermined by the rise of Crown Prince MbS. If MbS is a genuine modernizer and succeeds with his ambitious reform plan—unlike all other previous authoritarian and ruthless “modernizers” that brought destruction to the Middle East over the past decades—he might in the long term add “the people” as a new pillar of the regime. However, too much can go wrong along the way.

Consequently, we should spend time thinking carefully through scenarios for a potential future regime collapse in Saudi Arabia, which would have grim consequences locally, regionally, and globally. First, if the House of Saud collapses, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia would survive. The country has few well-functioning governing institutions besides the royal family, and if the regime falls, the country will most likely collapse in the same way as post-Qadhafi Libya. The population would be split on the basis of geographic belonging, as well as tribal-based and sectarian divides. Different groups would fight among themselves for power and resources, particularly over the country’s vast oil reserves. Notorious groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaida would probably fight for control of Mecca and Medina, Islam’s geo-religious center. Anarchy and civil war would prevail.

Second, collapse in Saudi Arabia would have consequences for the rest of the Middle East. There is a danger that other monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula—such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—would be dragged into the undertow. In addition, the pressure would increase on regimes that rely on financial support from Saudi Arabia, including those in Egypt and Jordan. Saudi Arabia’s huge stores of modern weapons systems could come into the hands of terrorists—a threat to the entire region.

Finally, the House of Saud’s fall would have considerable international repercussions, with exploding oil prices as the foremost among them. This could
ultimately trigger a new global economic recession. International military interventions to secure the oil fields, and perhaps also the holy cities, cannot be excluded.

I do not predict a collapse of the House of Saud anytime soon, but with MbS’ rise to power, the kingdom has become far more unstable and unpredictable. This should be a cause of concern for those who portray the young crown prince as a true reformer.

Notes

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