The Saudi Succession and the Sociocultural-Religious Reforms of Mohammed bin Salman

ALI SHIHABI

A proper evaluation of the tenure and achievements of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) requires historical context and a full grasp of the immensity of the changes that have taken place on the ground in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since his appointment in 2017.

A strong case can be made that what has taken place in Saudi Arabia since then is actually two back-to-back *revolutions*, one a bloodless royal generational succession and the other a defanging of the reactionary clerical class, with an impact on the practice of Islam on both a local and even a global scale—a process similar to marginalizing the influence of the Catholic Church that took Europeans hundreds of years and religious wars to achieve.

Let us look at the royal succession first. With the appointment of King Salman as crown prince in 2012, it was clear to all that the era of the throne passing to one of the many sons of the founder, King Abdulaziz, was coming to an end and that power soon would have to jump to the next generation, with hundreds of grandsons of the founder technically eligible and dozens of them seeing themselves as in the running. There was no system in place to make this choice, and the only directive provided by Saudi basic law was that the "older and better" should be awarded the throne. Analysts who, with twenty-twenty hindsight, now belittle the potential for conflict and fratricide in this succession ignore not only the violent history of the Saudi state but also the fact that at least a handful of prominent princes had an expectation to succeed to the throne, based on their seniority, governance track record, and assumed power base, with no way to adjudicate their competition. Civil conflict was certainly not out of the question.

Nabil Mouline of the French institute Sciences Po perceptively analyzed this structural fault line in the family, pointing out that while King Abdulaziz, the founder of the modern Kingdom (the third Saudi state), "was able to restore his family to the throne in 1902, he did nothing to install a system of succession capable of protecting the Kingdom from fratricidal struggles during times of succession. Instead, he was concerned with eliminating other clans from competing with his sons, notably his brothers and cousins."[1]

Over time, this ambiguity elicited growing concern, anxiety, and political intrigue among Saudi elites, culminating with King Abdullah's sons making a badly conceived, poorly executed, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to grab the line of succession in the last years of his life.

Mouline goes on to highlight the succession wars that brought down the second Saudi state (1824–89) and forced the father of King Abdulaziz into exile in Kuwait: "The history of the second Saudi state reflects the troubles to which this adelphic mode of succession and patrimonialization of the state can lead. Assassinations (the murders of Princes Turki and Mishari), fratricidal struggles (wars between Prince Faisal and his relatives, then between his sons after his death), [and] foreign interventions (the Ottomans and the al-Rashid) all characterize this period. Indeed, the succession crisis was the principal cause of the demise of the second Saudi state in 1891."[2]

Given this violent history, a consensual solution among the multitude of entitled royals, who all saw themselves (and were seen by their constituencies) as qualified, was impossible. For the country to be spared internecine conflict, a nonconsensual solution to the succession problem had to be imposed. It was a piece of exceptional luck that King Salman, an adept and clearly successful practitioner of Saudi politics since the 1950s, came to the throne at this critical time of uncertainty. As a participant and close observer of the most intricate details of royal rule in past decades (unlike his predecessor, the late King Abdullah, who had not been brought into the inner sanctum of decision making prior to his being crowned), Salman not only had developed strongly held opinions on issues of internal rule during his decades in power but also had identified his young sixth son, Mohammed, as his likely successor, a revolutionary step breaking decisively with Al Saud tradition. Even Salman's father, King Abdulaziz, had avoided bypassing his eldest son Saud in favor of his far more competent second son, Faisal, in the interest of respecting the seniority of age among his many sons. King Salman bypassed not only his remaining brothers but also the many older nephews and his own older sons in this shocking step by appointing MBS as his successor when MBS was seen by virtually all observers as too young and inexperienced to be worthy.

What observers missed here, though, is that with the spread of modern education, people sometimes wrongly place a premium on university degrees over practical experience, whereas for thousands of years apprenticeship was the primary and most successful mode of education. In the case of a Middle Eastern ruler, a foreign education was of little practical use since it distanced one from one's society, encouraged one's elitism, and involved a focus on theory rather than practice. King Salman realized that for the monarchy to survive and navigate this delicate time in its history, it would need a bold, decisive, and strong leader to impose his will on an arrogant and entitled elite that had been softened by decades of luxury and privilege. In addition, that Saudi elite, the extensive network of royal relatives, was multiplying exponentially and had become, in the final years of King Abdullah's life, virtually unmanageable.

Salman also understood that the circle of royal entitlement and privilege had to be dramatically *downsized*. The country could no longer afford tens of senior princes, each with an overhead fit for a monarch, with thousands of second- and third-tier royals still demanding and receiving extensive privileges and entitlements. He also instinctively understood that elites rarely give up their privileges willingly, even though a careful reading of history should tell them that with an orderly reduction of their privileges, many of their entitlements can still be preserved, including their social status, their wealth, and even their lives and their country (rather than exile and humiliation, which a cruel world reserves for ousted elites lucky enough to have survived a revolution). This would be infinitely wiser than stubbornly hanging on to unsustainable entitlements and privileges that might well end up being violently grabbed from them one day by angry, covetous, revolutionary mobs climbing over their palace walls. After all, among ruling elites, wisdom has been a very rare quality throughout history, with the British aristocracy likely being the historical exception having avoided the guillotine and negotiated a soft landing to retain their still exceptionally privileged status today.

The king, seeing the unique qualities of boldness, decisiveness, and steely determination in his teenaged sixth son, began tutoring Mohammed at age fifteen by allowing him to sit in, watch, and absorb while Salman worked. Such an apprenticeship with arguably the premier practitioner of Saudi politics at that time was an opportunity that MBS was astute and ambitious enough to take full advantage of even at a very young age. Hence, by the time King Salman became king, MBS had already benefited from over a decade of unique guided exposure to the highest circles of government and policy, and therefore he assumed power with a substantial body of knowledge and experience in Saudi governance already acquired. This allowed him, under his father's continued guidance, to erupt forcefully onto the local scene and push through massive changes and reforms, a feat the likes of which has rarely been carried out in decades elsewhere, let alone in a few short years.

Today, the royal family has been dramatically downsized in a de facto (although not a de jure) fashion, with privileges and entitlements reduced or cut wholesale, and assets seen as having been acquired from the state (such as land for free beyond the already generous allotment accorded to royals) repossessed by the government. Billions of dollars have already been saved for the state treasury, and royal overstretch into society has been radically cut back in terms of both its extent and its magnitude. Granted, this has all taken place in the shadow of a clearly exhibited willingness by the monarchy to be coercive (with the incarceration of a few recalcitrant senior royals), but it has happened with zero bloodshed—a historical anomaly by Saudi and most dynastic standards, and for which the country can heave a huge sigh of relief.

This transformation alone would have sufficed as a crowning accomplishment of the era of King Salman, yet the monarchy hardly paused and, post-succession, proceeded to confront the second most powerful pillar of the throne, the (often called "Wahhabi") reactionary clerical establishment, a religious revolution in terms of its impact.

This revolutionary restructuring of the mechanisms and machinery of religious influence and control in the country encompassed the following:

First, MBS dismantled the structures and networks of radical Islam within the country by silencing leading militant voices and those preaching intolerance among the Wahhabi religious establishment by incarcerating them. This signaled to any fence-sitting clerics that moderation and nonviolence was now the only acceptable path in Saudi Arabia.

Second, he reworked educational curricula, excising intolerant content and placing emphasis instead on moderation. More than 120,000 individual changes have been made to schoolbooks so far.

Third, he imposed a ban on bigoted and sectarian language from any media within the Kingdom.

Fourth, he focused on creating multiple positive activities for Saudi youth, to give them opportunities and to open horizons beyond religious identity. Although it is easy to forget that music and mixed dancing in public were against the law in the Kingdom only five years ago, today there are street festivals in Riyadh, along with cinemas showing Hollywood films and a vibrant local drama scene. In support of all this, a new foreign scholarship program for both sexes in the arts has been introduced, and multiple local academies have been founded.

Fifth, he opened the public space to free interaction between men and women. Previously, women's freedom was limited in terms of work and travel. Women have also recently been appointed to public posts, from ambassadors to policewomen and members of the royal guard, something unimaginable in the Kingdom only a decade ago. Additionally, sports are now open to women, from the school field to local soccer leagues to the Olympics.

Finally, he cut off funding to any organization anywhere in the world that espouses reactionary interpretations of Islam. Salafi madrassas no longer receive any official or private Saudi funding, and any remaining support to mosques or other Muslim organizations abroad now has to have the official sanction of each host country's respective national security authorities. Additionally, Islamic international organizations such as the Muslim World League have been reoriented toward actively promoting tolerance and understanding between Islam and other faiths.

At the same time, the official clerical establishment (the Higher Council of Ulema, the Mufti, etc.) has been allowed to maintain its privileges, jobs, and status, even as its influence has diminished tremendously.

Importantly, these reforms also signaled to the Muslim world that the Kingdom has adopted moderation and openness as its public policy. This will inevitably set an example that will

be emulated by other Muslims, especially those who consider the Saudi interpretation of Islam to be the correct form and practice.

Today, reactionaries across the Muslim world are outraged at these Saudi cultural and religious reforms because they clearly understand how all this will undermine their xenophobic and intolerant message with their own publics.[3]

Nevertheless, MBS ensured that the Kingdom will no longer be a breeding ground for reactionary and intolerant thinking. And resources that once fed this effort have dried up. This massive change, implemented with virtually zero public pushback and with its major moderating implications for the future course of Islamic practice, has not been given the attention or credit it merits by analysts.

Critics tend to belittle this "revolution" and minimize its import and magnitude by often describing it only as "eliminating the religious police," when in effect it was a wholesale restructuring of the role of the clerical class in society, from virtually comanager of society to marginal player. In fact, the West was able to impose change of this magnitude only after hundreds of years of turmoil and violence, concluding as recently as the mid-twentieth century with the Spanish Civil War. The scope of anticlerical brutality carried out by both sides in that civil war can be seen in this example. According to one account, "Accepted figures for the numbers of priests and clerics killed in the [fascist] zone during the Spanish Civil War would hardly be believable, were they not the result of painstaking research conducted by Antonio Montero [Moreno] in the late 1950s. According to this research, 6,832 members of the Catholic clergy were massacred, including 13 bishops, 4,172 diocesan priests and seminarists, 2,364 monks and friars, and 283 nuns."[4] These figures are over and above the concurrent wholesale massacre of clerics in the Republican (communist) zone of Spain. In Europe, secularizing society involved extensive use of violence. Saudi Arabia took another path.

The Kingdom was a country where a reactionary clerical establishment had been empowered to dominate culture, education, and the legal establishment, and to heavily influence the media and public discourse. They saw this as their right in accordance with an understanding reached hundreds of years ago between the founder of the Saudi dynasty and Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi school of Islam. This was a reactionary, fundamentalist, and intolerant interpretation of the religion that served the dynasty very well throughout the centuries by giving it legitimacy and religious sanction and by organizing and discipling its people and indoctrinating them to submit to royal rule. After the founder of the modern Saudi Kingdom reestablished the dynasty in the first decades of the twentieth century, this establishment played an absolutely crucial role not only in officially sanctioning King Abdulaziz as legitimate ruler but also in going out among the tribes and villages of central Arabia to lobby for him, to attach the critical label of "holy jihad" to his war of unification of Arabia, and to indoctrinate the Bedouin

to fight against his enemies by denouncing the latter as unbelievers, thereby legitimizing "holy war" against them. The Saudi state would not have come about without this clerical support, which at the end even extended to sanctioning the destruction of those tribal fighting elements who had become so intoxicated with their "jihad" that they refused to stop when King Abdulaziz wisely decided to reach an accord with the British Empire and respect its borders with the Kingdom on the Persian/Arabian Gulf.

Subsequently, the religious establishment played a strong supporting role in fighting the antimonarchical ideologies that swept through the region—from communism to Arab nationalism and then to Arab military republicanism—and was also critical in sanctioning the use of US troops and having them come to Saudi Arabia to liberate Kuwait. This decision was so controversial among fundamentalist elements that it spawned al-Qaeda and incited Osama bin Laden, who saw the US military's arrival in the Kingdom as defiling the Holy Land.

Understandably, the clerical establishment in turn looked to receive its share of the cake for such loyalty and service, and successive Saudi rulers obliged by allowing the clerics virtually free sway over critical sectors of the Saudi state.

MBS, however, saw something in society that few had understood at the time, namely that exposure to foreign media, starting with satellite television in the late 1990s followed by the internet, and experience with regional liberalization in neighboring Gulf states such as the UAE and Bahrain, had a profoundly liberalizing impact on Saudi youth (his generation), who constitute the majority of the country's population. The time had come, he concluded, to decouple society from its reactionary clerical inheritance.

Here, MBS took the calculated risk that majority public opinion would support his bold reforms, although conventional wisdom held that such changes were decades away from being accepted in a society that was still seen by virtually everybody as overwhelmingly ultraconservative.

While these reforms clearly were accompanied by a certain amount of state coercion and led to the arrest of hundreds of potentially rebellious and politically ambitious clerics, none were killed, and the application of state violence in support of this has not been necessary. While the incarceration of these clerics, some with millions of followers on social media, certainly further restricted political liberties in the country, such coercion arguably prevented conservative clerics from inciting their followers to any armed rebellion, although subsequent youth support for social and cultural liberalization would argue that even had they tried to inflame public opinion, they likely would have gotten little traction. Even more extraordinary is that such reforms as women's driving and public entertainment provoked not a single incident of violence of note (one failed knife attack by a Yemeni resident and one burning of an empty car belonging to a woman seem to be the only

isolated incidents). This success took place moreover in a country that just a few years ago was fighting an open war against jihadi terrorism in its towns and cities.

This war that killed thousands of Saudis and foreign citizens across the country, including US military personnel and citizens, commenced in the year 2000 and died down only in 2016, after it was crushed by Saudi security forces. The terror came from al-Qaeda first and then ISIS. It is very notable that these organizations and other jihadi groups have not been able to recruit or rebuild since MBS's provocative (to them) liberalization of society, which one would have expected would reignite them into action. Clearly their support in society has dried up, as the youth have realized that they want to have fun, go to concerts, meet members of the opposite sex, and not drown in fundamentalist anger and bitterness while awaiting the afterlife.

These coercive actions taken by the government have brought upon the Kingdom extensive criticism from human rights organizations in the West. Human rights are of course absolute and should not in principle be open to any compromise. However, rulers have to balance multiple goals, including maintaining public order and preventing insurrections (in arguably the most volatile region on earth today), and these goals may conflict with human rights norms. How much immense suffering has Iraq had to go through in its still unfinished experiment with "democracy"? Saudi Arabia has avoided any kind of domestic political violence. The Saudi leadership feels it has no choice but to use coercion to maintain social tranquility. Could it have tempered it with a softer touch? Maybe in hindsight, but in a country with extreme poles of opinion ranging from Western liberalism to Wahhabi extremism, it was not surprising that MBS used a heavier hand than might have been necessary. The Middle East is full of conflagrations and emergencies, and he is fighting to keep his nation afloat and in one piece. Choreographing this disruptive transition—limiting the power of the princes and the clerics—with less coercion may have been beyond anybody's magical ability to achieve.

The Kingdom is a notoriously difficult place in which to gauge public opinion, given the absence of elections and the fact that polling is still in its nascency. People also still have concerns that their answers to polling questions will be shared with authorities, so one has to look more for anecdotal evidence to get an idea of popular opinion. Massive youth participation in public entertainment, in a country where youth constitute the majority, is an important indicator. The Saudi program of reform has not been some elite exercise held in gated communities for an exclusive audience but a process very open to the masses, with hundreds of thousands of young people of both sexes out in the streets. Saudis have actually been voting with their feet in support of MBS's reforms.

Another evidentiary point of importance is the lack of any public disturbances. Critics attribute this to Saudi Arabia's being a "police state." In certain ways it is a police state, but a mild one. People forget that the most brutal police states, such as Bashar al-Assad's Syria

or the ayatollahs' Iran, were not able to prevent the people coming out into the street when their anger exploded. So, the fact that public protests have been virtually nonexistent in Saudi Arabia is an indicator of note, allowing us to safely conclude that the absence of protests against the reforms probably indicates that they have widespread support.

Every life lost and every incarceration for expressing one's opinion or engaging in nonviolent political protest is deplorable in this day and age. When that takes place in Saudi Arabia—or anywhere else—it deserves criticism. However, the many Western critics of Saudi Arabia should also recognize that no war of succession took place in Saudi Arabia, that the clerics were defanged without violence, and that there were no terrorist attacks committed by jihadists, despite major strides forward in the liberalization of society. This saved perhaps thousands of lives, casualties, and property. An honest student of history would have to realize how lucky and effective the Saudi leadership has been in managing all these risky transitions with virtually no violence and limited coercion, and that such coercion (principally, incarceration) may likely have prevented the eruption of civil war(s). American critics of Riyadh should remember how even President Abraham Lincoln suspended the right to habeas corpus in the face of the insurrection of the Southern states.

This is hardly to say we should ignore the shortcomings or failures that any such process inevitably suffers from. The degree of coercion used was mild by historical standards, although it is legitimate to claim that things could have been carried out with an even softer touch in many instances, given the wide public support that MBS seems to have among Saudi youth. Actions such as the blundering by organs of the state into the gruesome murder of Jamal Khashoggi and the arrest and apparent mistreatment of women activists are inexcusable by any standard, but given the magnitude of change and disruption that Saudi society has successfully navigated, the frequency of such heinous actions has been relatively limited in scope by any reasonable historical or even contemporary standard, and such missteps are highly unlikely to be repeated by a now chastened state.

Going forward, challenges remain for the Saudi state, but these are more on the economic side, because with the succession sorted out and well on its way to becoming a vertical (father to son) rather than a horizontal process and society officially opened up to the world, women allowed to fully integrate into the workforce, and the oppressive weight of reactionary Islam well on its way out, the tasks left are to uphold all this change, allow it to sink deep roots into society, and prepare the country for a future with an uncertain outlook for oil.

These objectives are less dangerous in terms of immediate risk than the two key historical developments mentioned earlier, but they will still require a steady and consistent hand over the coming decades. They will also eventually require some form of political reform, which has clearly been off the agenda so far, if only to put in place some checks and balances on absolute power. Now, without absolute power none of the historic structural

reforms discussed above would have been possible, and a strong leader, an executive who can drive policies and maintain stability in the dangerous neighborhood that is the Middle East, will be required for the foreseeable future. However, given the well-known dangers of unchecked absolute power over time, some form of checks and balances to temper the monarch and to replace the legitimacy previously provided by the clerical class would serve as an ideal solution to gradually work toward in coming decades.

NOTES

1 Nabil Mouline, "From Generation to Generation: The Succession Problem in Saudi Arabia," Middle East Institute, October 1, 2009, https://www.mei.edu/publications/generation-generation-succession-problem-saudi-arabia.

2 Mouline, "From Generation to Generation."

3 Editorial Board, "Why Young Saudis May Reshape the World," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 3, 2021, https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2021/1203/Why-young-Saudis-may-reshape-the-Muslim-world.

4 Julio de la Cueva, "Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition, and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 3 (1998): 355–69, https://www.jstor.org/stable/261121.

hoover.org

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

About the Author

ALI SHIHABI

Ali Shihabi is a commentator on Middle Eastern politics and economics with a focus on Saudi Arabia and the author of *The Saudi Kingdom: Between the Jihadi Hammer and the Iranian Anvil* and the fiction work *Arabian War Games*. He is also widely published in publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *Foreign Policy*.

About The Caravan Notebook

The Caravan Notebook is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are too local or too specific from the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*.

We draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman chairs the project from which this effort originates.

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World studies a range of political, social, and cultural problems in the region with the goal of informing American foreign policy choices and the wider public discussion. The working group draws on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad to foster the pursuit of modernity, to combat Islamist radicalism, to promote human flourishing, and to spread the rule of law, human rights, and democratic governance in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellow Russell Berman.

For more information about this Hoover Institution Working Group, visit us online at www.hoover.org/research-teams/middle-east-and-islamic-world-working-group.

Hoover Institution, Stanford University
434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

HOOVER INSTITUTION