

AFTERWORD

BY THE TIME he reached his 34th birthday, Mohammed bin Salman had done it: After emerging from the shadows only a few years before, he had eliminated his rivals, extended his control over the essential organs of the Saudi state, and solidified his position as the kingdom's undisputed center of power. Some of his rise was due to luck. Had his father, Salman, not outlived his own brothers, he would not have become king. Even after Salman ascended to the throne, he could have delegated power to anyone, but he chose MBS, despite his sixth son's youth, inferior résumé, and troublemaker reputation. An absolute monarchy is essentially a democracy of one, and MBS got his father's vote, the only one that mattered.

Once his father had chosen him, MBS's own attributes propelled his rise. He may never have studied abroad, run a company, or served in the military, but he made it clear that among the contenders for leadership of the kingdom, he was harder-working, more strategic, more willing to shatter traditions, and, at times, more brutal than anyone else—a truly Machiavellian prince. Now, unless some unforeseen and remarkable circumstance intervenes, MBS will become king after his father dies, at an age that could allow him to rule for decades to come.

What should the world expect from a Saudi Arabia ruled by Mohammed bin Salman?

His rise has been dominated by two simultaneous drives that will continue into the future. He has championed a vast social and economic overhaul in tandem with an extreme concentration of authoritarian power. MBS's Saudi Arabia is a place where women can

drive and work and travel, but where campaigning for more rights can mean jail time. It is a place where young people can mingle and ride rollercoasters and launch start-ups, but where questioning the wisdom of government policies is considered treason. It is a place where young women can entertain dreams forbidden to their mothers and grandmothers, but where law-abiding citizens fear that talking to journalists or human rights groups could make them disappear.

MBS's efforts on the social front are groundbreaking, and he deserves credit for reading the kingdom's demographics and taking the risk to break old rules. It is unclear whether his rivals for the throne would have done the same, and the lives of young Saudis will be richer as a result, a gift from their young crown prince.

He should also be acknowledged for providing a wide-ranging diagnosis of the kingdom's economic challenges and putting momentum behind a plan to address them. But good intentions aside, the required changes are momentous. No country so heavily dependent on oil has yet succeeded in transitioning to a truly diversified economy, and there is little reason to expect that MBS will find the magic solution. Doing so would require overhauling the Saudi workforce, creating an unprecedented number of jobs, and building large new sectors in domains the kingdom has little or no experience with—all at a time when low oil prices have constricted state spending.

The initial public offering of stock in Saudi Aramco, the state oil monopoly, illustrated the gap between MBS's vaunted ambitions and real life. After MBS unveiled the idea of the IPO in 2016, he and his advisors pitched it as a watershed moment in global finance, suggesting the company would be valued at \$2 trillion or more and its shares sold on a prominent global exchange, with foreign investors flocking to the deal.

But those goals were scaled back once planning began. The sale was repeatedly delayed before finally going ahead in December 2019 as more of a regional than a global event. Less than two percent of the company's shares were sold, and Aramco was listed only on Saudi Arabia's domestic stock market, because the kingdom had balked at the stringent reporting that a listing in New York or London required and because advisors had told the company that its

pricing was too ambitious. The main buyers were wealthy Saudis, who were given incentives to buy, and who had learned the risks of not supporting MBS's initiatives from the lock-up at the Ritz.

The IPO earned Aramco the title of the world's most valuable company (until Apple surpassed it in July 2020), and its stock price rose, pushing its value above the desired \$2 trillion mark soon after the sale, if only temporarily. The more than \$25 billion the sale raised gave MBS more cash for his diversification plans, but less than the \$100 billion he had hoped it would bring in. And the IPO failed to convince outside investors that the company's decision-making would be guided primarily by business, not politics, as was clear when the kingdom launched an oil price war with Russia in early 2020, crashing global prices as the coronavirus pandemic slashed demand.

The pandemic made the challenges of diversification and economic growth even greater, as the kingdom shut down civilian air traffic and imposed strict lockdowns, taking a toll on the economy. Even the annual Hajj pilgrimage, which had welcomed 2.5 million people the year before, was shrunk nearly beyond recognition. At most, a few thousand pilgrims from inside the kingdom took part, bringing in a tiny fraction of the billions of dollars the event earns the kingdom in normal years.

In the long run, MBS's greatest challenge could be the high expectations of his fellow young Saudis. Each year, hundreds of thousands of them enter the job market, and it remains unclear how MBS will create enough jobs not only to employ them, but to maintain the standard of living they grew up with. They may be excited now to go to the movies or dance to the Backstreet Boys, but their perspectives could darken over time as the government's budget tightens and they find themselves unemployed or working harder, and earning less money, than their parents did.

As for NEOM, who knows?

Through his rise, MBS has restructured the nature of power in Saudi Arabia. No longer is the royal family a broad body whose senior princes rule by consensus and maintain relatively independent power centers. Now all significant players, and their capital, answer to MBS. Countering centuries of Saudi history, he has begun un-

linking the clerics from the monarchy. Under MBS, the state's authority comes less from its claim to defending religious orthodoxy than from a new sense of authoritarian nationalism. So far, MBS's efforts to weaken the clerics have sparked no major blowback. But given how long the kingdom has steeped its people in hyper-conservative ideology, it is hard to imagine that the old ways will simply fade away, yet difficult to predict how they might resurface.

Across the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has asserted itself in unprecedented ways, often prioritizing force over diplomacy and risky gambits over thoughtful policies, as the people of Lebanon, Qatar, and Yemen have witnessed. If this continues, the kingdom's neighbors and international partners could be in for a wild ride as MBS seeks new ways to counter the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran.

The kingdom's vulnerabilities were laid bare in September 2019, when surprise attacks with drones and guided cruise missiles put two key Saudi oil facilities out of commission and filled the skies above them with plumes of black smoke. The Houthis in Yemen claimed responsibility for the attacks, but the technology used was far beyond their capabilities. American and Saudi officials accused Iran of orchestrating the assault, either directly or through its Arab proxy militias.

The damage was quickly repaired, but the attacks raised grave questions for the kingdom. The year before, it had been the world's third biggest spender on military equipment, investing an estimated \$67.6 billion. So why had facilities of such import, not just to the kingdom but to the global oil supply, remained so vulnerable to such cheap weapons? And while President Trump vowed that the United States was "locked and loaded," he leveraged no American military might to respond, raising doubts about the United States' decades-old commitment to ensuring the safety of its allies in the Persian Gulf.

Saudi officials avoided voicing those concerns publicly, but there were signs that MBS took them seriously enough to adjust his tactics. Instead of ordering attacks on Iran or its allies, he allowed for indirect diplomacy through officials in Iraq and Pakistan aimed not at reaching a formal *détente* between Iran and the kingdom but at bringing down the temperature to avoid further violence.

In September 2020, the kingdom's closest regional allies, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, announced that they were establishing formal diplomatic relations with Israel, making them only the third and fourth Arab states to do so and the first of the Gulf monarchies. Saudi Arabia did not immediately follow, despite the softer tone MBS has taken toward the Jewish state. How close he will bring Saudi Arabia to Israel will only become clear over time, but there is little reason to expect that sympathy for the Palestinians will guide him as it did his elders. His quiet rapprochement with Israel could accelerate after his father dies.

If MBS deserves credit for the good, he must also accept responsibility for the bad. MBS appears no closer to victory in Yemen than he did years ago. In the meantime, his air force has continued to kill civilians as the country shatters into ever smaller pieces that may never fit back together. MBS did not start the war, and the Houthis are no peacemakers, but the Saudis' callous tactics and inability to change strategy in the face of failure have invited Iran in and fueled great suffering that will not soon be forgotten.

WHEN ASKED ABOUT the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, MBS and other Saudi officials have sought to write it off as an exceptional event, an unauthorized act by a small group of people out of step with the kingdom's policies and character.

I don't buy it.

During his rise, MBS sanctioned a harsh approach to his perceived enemies, allotting state resources to an escalating campaign of electronic attacks, arrests, prosecutions, kidnappings, and torture. Along the way, he and his deputies paid little or no price for any of it, either because their activities remained covert or because the alluring image of the liberalizing young prince overshadowed his harsher side. But by going after Khashoggi, his agents upped the ante and lost the bet, unleashing international condemnation.

Much ink has been spilled on the question of whether MBS ordered the operation, whether there is a "smoking gun" linking him to the killing. We may never know for sure, but that misses the point. Regardless of MBS's role in the murder, he fostered the envi-

ronment in which fifteen government agents and a number of Saudi diplomats believed that butchering a nonviolent writer inside a consulate was the appropriate response to some newspaper columns. Even if he did not directly order the killing, as a crown prince with oversight of those agencies, it is hard to believe that he had no idea what they were planning.

MBS acknowledged some personal culpability for creating this atmosphere one month after Khashoggi's death.

"I may bear some guilt," he told a group of Americans. "But not because I authorized the heinous act, because I did not, but because I may have caused some of our people to love our kingdom too much and delegated authority in a way that made it too easy for them to think they would be pleasing us by taking matters into their own hands."

Was that really the problem? Or was it his failure to understand that citizens might question their leaders not because they hate their country, but because they love it?

Khashoggi's killing came to symbolize the harshest aspects of MBS's rule, leaving an ugly stain. It will fade over time, but it raises questions about how the United States and other Western nations will deal with Saudi Arabia going forward. Will future American presidents be as happy as Donald Trump to welcome MBS into the Oval Office? Anger has grown in other parts of the government, particularly in Congress. Senators emerged from a briefing on the killing by Director Gina Haspel of the Central Intelligence Agency in a rage. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who had been so impressed with MBS a few years before, called him "a wrecking ball."

"There is not a smoking gun, there's a smoking saw," Graham said. "You have to be willfully blind" to miss it.

The Senate passed a unanimous but symbolic resolution holding MBS "personally responsible" for Khashoggi's death, and legislators continued to wage battles with the administration over support for the war in Yemen.

The immediate, concrete effects on U.S.-Saudi relations were minimal, but the chill was significant. Arms and oil companies continued to do business, while many of MBS's heroes in Silicon Valley

and Hollywood kept their distance. MBS may have to accept that doors across the United States will no longer swing open when he comes to town—and that protesters might show up outside, wielding saws.

But such reactions may be short-lived. The United States has a long and bipartisan history of working with authoritarians, and MBS is still young. If he succeeds his father and lives to be as old, he will lead an important American partner in a turbulent region into the 2060s.

As policy makers in Washington and other world capitals ponder that possibility, many wonder whether MBS is learning from his mistakes. Are his dangerous acts the youthful faults of an inexperienced ruler? Or do they spring from deep in his character and serve as harbingers of things to come? Will MBS mature into a wiser monarch, or will unpleasant surprises continue to punctuate his reign?

People who have met with him over the years say he now listens a bit more and talks a bit less. His spoken English has gone from nearly nonexistent to good enough to conduct meetings in, indicating that he is a quick study. He seems to enjoy having his ideas challenged, at least by foreigners. And he has finally stopped insisting that victory in Yemen is only three months away.

As the outrage spread over Khashoggi's death, foreign friends told MBS that to move on, he must accept responsibility and ensure justice. He promised to do so. But when the trial of the suspects in the killing opened in Riyadh, it was shrouded in secrecy and Saud al-Qahtani, MBS's "Lord of the Flies," was not among the accused. The trial wound its way through a series of closed sessions that resulted in five unnamed defendants being sentenced to death and three others to prison terms. But before the sentences were carried out, Khashoggi's son Salah announced that the family had pardoned the killers, taking the possibility of execution off the table. (Salah and his siblings received tens of thousands of dollars, as well as real estate worth millions, from the Saudi government after their father's murder in what was widely seen as compensation.) In September 2020, the court gave those eight men prison terms ranging from seven to twenty years, punishment the king-

dom hoped would put the Khashoggi issue to rest. But human rights groups dismissed the trial as a farce for not holding accountable or even examining the possible culpability of senior officials, including MBS.

“The Saudi authorities are closing the case without the world knowing the truth of who is responsible for Jamal’s murder,” Hatice Cengiz, Khashoggi’s fiancée, wrote. “Who planned it, who ordered it, where is his body?”

Only time will tell how long the stain of Khashoggi’s killing will cling to MBS, and how the scandal might affect his decision-making in the future.

Perhaps it is lonely at the top. Perhaps as he moves through his days in his palaces, in the Royal Court, and on his yacht in the Red Sea overlooking the barren sands where he hopes NEOM will rise, he meets few people with the courage to blunt his more destructive impulses or an incentive to tell him that a beach with glow-in-the-dark sand is less crucial to Saudi Arabia’s future than investments in peace, education, and the rule of law.

IN THE SUMMER of 2019, Saudi Arabia announced that women could obtain passports and travel without the permission of a male relative. The new regulations were significant blows to the kingdom’s “guardianship” system, and marked another step forward for Saudi women.

Curious how these changes affected women I had met, I got back in touch with Rahaf Alzahrani, the architecture student whose inaugural drive I had witnessed at the women’s university in Jeddah the year before. She was elated. Now 23, she had landed a scarce spot in a women’s driving school and gotten her license. When I called, she had just taken a seven-hour road trip with her mom to the family’s hometown. Along the way, other drivers had honked to show their support, and soldiers at checkpoints had smiled and waved her along. Driving through one village, she said, a young girl had spotted her in the driver’s seat and flashed a thumbs-up.

“I was like, whoa, even young girls know about these things,” Alzahrani said.

So much had changed in the lives of young Saudi women in such a short time that they were still making sense of it. Guardianship had never been a big barrier for her, but its erosion still empowered her. Her father had recently injured his hand, so she volunteered as his personal chauffeur. Her driving so impressed him that he gave her his Range Rover. The entertainment push had taken off in Jeddah, where she lived, and her friends had recently attended a show by the American DJ Marshmello.

“I never thought in a million years he would come to Jeddah,” she said.

Thanks to MBS, when her generation had their own children, they would probably consider such events normal and find it funny that Saudi Arabia had once barred women from driving.

But Alzahrani was not thinking that far ahead yet. She would finish her degree in a year and a half and wanted to teach other aspiring architects to use design software. Later, she would practice architecture herself. She had always been fascinated by mosques and wanted one day to design her own.

“I am going to build a mosque,” she told me. “I don’t know when, but I’m going to do it.”

ONE OF MY best friends in Saudi Arabia was a guy who worked in a bank. He was not political, but was thoughtful and curious about the world. Like many of the young Saudis I got to know, he was excited about MBS. Finally, he told me, the kingdom had a leader who understood young people and would not be cowed by the clerics.

But as MBS gained more power, my ability to speak with people like him, and the ability of people like him to speak their minds, waned. Waves of arrests spread fear among Saudis I knew. One fled the kingdom after the government put him on trial for some tweets. He is still abroad, struggling. Others sought out foreign jobs or study programs, planning to stay away until the situation calmed down. Some of those who had been jailed during MBS’s rise were released, but shed their public profiles lest they get arrested again. Trials for some began, and well-known activists such as Loujain Al-Hathloul faced charges that included speaking to diplomats and

journalists, making it clear that such activities were suspect, even criminal. The authorities later told Al-Hathloul that to get out of jail, she had to make a video denying she had been tortured. She refused, and remained in prison.

Even Saudis who avoided activism worried about the government eavesdropping on them or hacking their phones. Over time, people I enjoyed chatting with on the phone suggested we move to encrypted messaging apps. Later, some cut me off or blocked me, just to be safe. Others got in touch only while abroad. The braver ones switched to apps they thought were more secure, setting their messages to disappear in twelve hours, then six hours, then thirty minutes, then five minutes. After Jamal Khashoggi was killed, a friend I had known for years set his messages to disappear in thirty seconds. As I raced to read them, I realized that something fundamental had changed in Saudi Arabia.

Something fundamental had changed for me, too. Over my years of reporting on the kingdom, I had spent significant time there, made friends, and generally wished the place well. But my reporting on MBS and his activities got me cast as a hostile party. The visas grew scarce and then stopped altogether; my work was attacked on social media; and it appeared that the Saudis had tried at least once to hack my cellphone. When Jamal Khashoggi was killed, it became clear the old rules no longer applied. I was not a Saudi and so had no reason to think that MBS and his people felt the same sense of betrayal toward me that they did toward him, but here I was writing a book about the prince himself. I did wonder, while walking home late at night or drifting off to sleep, whether they might come after me as well.

Not long after Khashoggi's death, I messaged my friend who worked in the bank.

"It's you, Ben!!!" he responded. "Hiii!!!"

He was glad I had gotten in touch, he wrote. There was something he needed to tell me. The situation in Saudi Arabia had changed since we met and he was now afraid of communicating with a journalist. If the messages were intercepted, he would be at the state's mercy, with little chance to defend himself.

He was breaking up with me.

He said not to take it personally and that having me as a friend had been "a real honor." I told him I understood and asked that he save my number so he could call me from abroad someday to say hi.

"I promise to do so," he wrote.

I haven't heard from him since.

Beirut

September 2020