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MUHAMMAD BIN SALMAN: COSTS OF BREAKING WITH TRADITION

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[Recent arrests](#) of prominent members of the royal family accused of plotting a coup are intended to demonstrate that dissent of Mohammed Bin Salman's (MBS) authoritarian tendencies will not be tolerated; however, the lesson is really that Saudi rulers break with tradition at their own peril. Among those arrested was King Salman's brother [Prince Ahmed Bin Abdel Aziz](#) and former [Crown Prince Muhammed bin Nayef \(MBN\)](#). The latter was ignominiously dismissed in favour of MBS as prospective successor to the throne in June 2017, a move that alienated the Sudairi Seven, seven powerful sons of Ibn Saud, since MBN is a prominent son of one of their bloc.

MBS has accumulated an unprecedented concentration of power, dominating foreign policy alongside the security and energy sectors. His impetuous leadership has shattered the principles of [consultation and consensus](#) within the Saudi royal family, and undermined the hierarchies that have long shaped the Saudi state. In addition, MBS has [challenged the traditional alliance between the House of Saud and influential Wahhabi clerics](#), all of which points to the potential for instability in the long term.

Riyadh's palace rivalries have traditionally been carefully managed, and rarely resulted in substantive upheaval. The deposition of King Saud in 1964 by King Faisal had the support of a coalition of allied princes. Even then, [Faisal was assassinated](#) by his nephew in 1975, suggesting that familial power plays are not easily forgotten in Saudi Arabia. [MBS's deposition of MBN in June 2017](#), and arrests later that year of a number of senior royals as part of an [alleged 'anti-corruption campaign'](#), allowed MBS to [populate key government posts with likeminded allies](#), thereby isolating him from a more traditional and experienced generation of royals who had [publicly and privately expressed concern](#) about his leadership. The latest arrests of Prince Ahmed and MBN are a clear signal to the royal family to toe the line set by MBS.

[Prince Ahmed is known to be a religious conservative](#), marking another point of tension within the Saudi ruling elite. MBS's calls for 'moderate Islam' have unsettled the historic relationship cultivated between the House of Saud and Wahhabi clerics. MBS used the 2017 confrontation with Qatar as an excuse to [arrest a number of influential clerics](#) who had turned against the royal family. The Kingdom is no stranger to clashes with dissenting Islamists: from Ibn Saud's war against purists within the Wahhabi tradition in the 1920s; to [the establishment of al-Qaeda](#) in the early 1990s by Osama Bin Laden; and most recently, [Saudi recruits flocking to the Islamic State](#).

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Marginalising conservative religious forces within the Kingdom could drive them underground, and in the long term cultivate greater domestic threats from terrorism.

In foreign policy, MBS has continued to court a strong partnership with the U.S., which he has used to promote his antipathy toward Iran. This common enemy has also allowed MBS to cultivate a deeper, though still relatively covert, [alliance with Israel](#) in the quest to diversify the Kingdom's allies. A hawkish posture in Yemen and confrontation with Qatar have defined MBS's foreign policy in recent years. After years with little to show for it but widespread international criticism, [Riyadh's stance shows signs of moderating](#), perhaps in part due to Saudi's role as head of the G20.

OUTLOOK

In the short term, MBS's simultaneously reformist but authoritarian style has created a more business-friendly environment for foreign investors who steer clear of the political arena. However, in the long term, MBS is sowing seeds for internal instability with no meaningful safety valves for dissenting views within the Kingdom's traditional power bases. For the moment, MBS appears to have consolidated his power but royal memory is long and MBS's alienation of a generation of senior royals may create sufficient resentment to make a palace coup increasingly possible.