

Guardian, NYT Paint Power-Grabbing Saudi Dictator as Roguish, Visionary ‘Reformer’

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Two weeks ago, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman carried out a brutal crackdown on his political opponents, arresting dozens of high-ranking relatives, kidnapping the prime minister of Lebanon, and seeing eight of his political rivals die in a convenient [helicopter crash](#). The “consolidation of power” by the de facto Saudi ruler comes as his government [ramps up its siege of Yemen](#) and gets even closer to its US sponsor, thanks to a Trump’s dopey love affair with—and [direct assistance](#) of—the regime.

The cynical plan has been met, in [some media quarters](#), with condemnation, but for many in the Western press, Mohammed’s self-serving power grab is the action of a bold “reformer,” a roguish bad boy doing the messy but essential work of “reforming” the kingdom—the “anti-corruption” pretext of the purge largely repeated without qualification. The most prominent sources for this spin were two major newspapers, the **New York Times** and **Guardian**:

- **Guardian** ([11/5/17](#)): “Royal Purge Sends Shockwaves Through Saudi Arabia’s Elites: Move Consolidates Power of Prince Mohammed Bin Salman as He Attempts to Reform Kingdom’s Economy and Society”
- **Guardian** ([11/5/17](#)): “Saudi Arrests Show Crown Prince Is a Risk-Taker With a Zeal for Reform: Mohammed Bin Salman Is Confronting Some of the Kingdom’s Richest and Most Powerful Men in His Anti-Corruption Drive—but Is He Taking on Too Much Too Fast?”
- **Guardian** ([11/6/17](#)): “Oil Price Rises to Two-Year High After Saudi Arabia Purge: Markets Push Price Up to \$62 a Barrel After Anti-Corruption Purge by Billionaire Crown Prince Who Backs Prolonging Oil Production Curbs”
- **Guardian** ([11/7/17](#)): “‘This Is a Revolution’: Saudis Absorb Crown Prince’s Rush to Reform: Consolidation of Power in Mohammed Bin Salman’s Hands Has Upended All Aspects of Society, Including Previously Untouchable Ultra-Elite”
- **New York Times** ([11/5/17](#)): “Saudi Crown Prince’s Mass Purge Upends a Longstanding System”
- **New York Times** ([11/14/17](#)): “The Upstart Saudi Prince Who’s Throwing Caution to the Wind”

While the text of the **Times** articles was far more skeptical about Mohammed’s motives, the **Guardian**’s ([11/5/17](#)) initial coverage of the bloody purge—not just the headlines—was written in breathless press release tones:

Saudi Arabia’s leadership has pulled off its boldest move yet to consolidate power around its young crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, arresting 11

senior princes, one of the country's richest men and scores of former ministers in what it billed as a corruption purge.

The move sidelined at least 20 senior figures, among them outspoken billionaire, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, sending shockwaves through the ranks of the kingdom's elites, who had long viewed senior royals as immune.

Lot of glowing prose to unpack here. Longtime Mideast correspondent Martin Chulov began by referring to "Saudi Arabia's leadership," which is a nice, sterile way of referencing the country's unelected hereditary king and crown prince. Then he pivoted into marketing pabulum about "bold moves" and "consolidating power," before unironically framing the purge as an "anti-corruption" gesture designed to stick it to the "kingdom's elites." One could come away from reading this lead with the impression that the billionaire aristocrat was a populist folk hero in the vein of Robin Hood or John Dillinger. The thrilling profile continued:

Prince Mohammed will oversee the corruption commission, adding to his already formidable list of responsibilities, including his role as Defense minister and champion of the economic transformation, dubbed Vision 2030, that aims to revolutionize most aspects of Saudi life within 12 years.

Prince Mohammed told the **Guardian** last month that the kingdom had been "not normal" for the past 30 years and pledged to return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam.

While the author had a "[to be sure](#)" paragraph, citing "others" calling it a "naked attempt to weed out dissent," the overall thrust of the article was that a roguish billionaire Boy King was earnestly seeking "reform" and opposing "elites."

A follow-up piece ([11/7/17](#)) took flattering coverage to new extremes. The dispatch, again by Chulov, cited nothing but anonymous Saudi court hanger-ons and a Gulf-funded talking head from the [NATO-aligned](#) Atlantic Council think tank. The article, "'This Is a Revolution': Saudis Absorb Crown Prince's Rush to Reform," was populated with blind quotes from such adversarial voices as a "senior minister," "a senior Saudi official," a "senior figure," a "senior Saudi businessman" and "veteran business leaders." (Evidently no junior officials or rookie business leaders were available for comment.)

The article painted the "consolidation of power" by Mohammed as an inevitability with broad support—using the dubious "reform" narrative without irony. With **Guardian** editors again painting Mohammed as a populist hero by insisting he "upended" "previously untouchable ultra-elite," one is left to wonder why they don't consider the absolute-monarch-in-waiting—who [just bought](#) a \$590 million yacht—part of the "ultra elite." It's a curious framing that reeks more of PR than journalism.



Opinion | EDITORIAL

The Young and Brash Saudi Crown Prince

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD JUNE 23, 2017



The New York Times ([6/23/17](#)) editorialized that Mohammed bin Salman “has cultivated an image as a dynamic leader, keen to take a rigid conservative country into the modern era.”

This was a trope one could see emerging over the past few months. Similar “bold reformer” frames were used in **New York Times** editorials (“The Young and Brash Saudi Crown Prince,” [6/23/17](#)) and straight reporting (“Saudi Arabia’s Grand Plan to Move Beyond Oil: Big Goals, Bigger Hurdles,” [10/24/17](#)). Everything’s new and exciting. The brutal, routine functions of the Saudi state are seen as laws of nature—and those in charge of it are the reformers of the very oppression they initially authored.

A **Guardian** editorial on [November 7](#) was critical of the government, calling it “regressive” and Mohammed “belligerent,” but ultimately rested on “both sides” framing of recent events. The only meaningfully critical coverage of Saudi Arabia coming from the **Guardian** since the purge has been in two articles ([11/12/17](#), [11/16/17](#)), both in the context of Saudi Arabia’s war on Yemen. Neither mentioned bin Salman, and both stressed how the Saudis are responding in earnest to international pleas to stop their mass-

murdering blockade of the Arab world's poorest country.

Per usual, the **Guardian** reserves the label "regime" for Official Enemies like [Syria](#) and [North Korea](#); Saudi Arabia doesn't have a regime, it has "leadership." Unlike adversary governments, often seen in need of "regime change," the Saudi government merely requires "reform"—and a bold new "reformer," of the sort championed by the likes of the **Guardian** and **New York Times**.

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