

# “Modernizing Saudi Arabia” and the Middle East Geopolitical Chessboard

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Global Research, April 22, 2018

*Saudi Arabia is undergoing a dramatic shift in decades. Saudi Arabia’s crown prince **Mohammad bin Salman** made unexpectedly a gigantic leap into becoming potential successor of **Salman bin Abdulaziz**. This Arab state is the dearest ally of the West in the region which pursues warmongering policies both as a proxy for its distant allies and, now increasingly, for its own interests. The question that flashes to mind in the context of the recent and rapid developments in the structure of Saudi Arabia’s Government is the role and involvement of Israel and the US.*

This question has arisen principally for Mohammad bin Salman’s (widely known as MBS) tough standing against inveterate rivals – Iran and now Qatar – that secure the interests of regional powers. The latest back-to-back events and breakthroughs in Saudi Arabia are not by accident, but by design in chorus with international allies.

In late June 2017, King Salman abruptly replaced prince **Mohammad bin Nayef** with his own son **Mohammad bin Salman** as the crown prince.

In March, the crown prince spilled the beans in his interview with the Washington Post and said that the country’s Western allies urged Saudi Arabia to invest in mosques and madrassas in countries in the Middle East and Central Asia during the Cold War, in an effort to prevent the encroachment in Muslim countries by the Soviet Union.

This shocking revelation should serve as a point of regret for the Jihadists who fought passionately in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere under dictated “sacred” doctrines. It was for Saudi Arabia’s status as a holy site that inspired many leaders of insurgent groups to fight against the Soviet Union and now the Afghan Government and elsewhere.

In 1979, Iran’s **Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini** was pushed into power by his western allies and sponsors to keep the Soviet Union from extending its influence in Iran and again Islamic fundamentalism was used as an effective tool to quell public fury and revolt at the time.

One of MBS’s first acts as defense minister in 2015 was to launch a military campaign in Yemen along with other Arab states after **President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi** was forced into exile by the Houthi rebel movement.

Reports surfaced in 2017 disclosed that MBS had sought **Jared Kushner**’s support in an October meeting in Riyadh in his crackdown on alleged corruption that led to sweeping arrests in the Kingdom.

At the time, MBS launched an anti-corruption drive that many analysts said removed the

final obstacles to his gaining total control of the kingdom. **Eleven princes, four ministers, several military leaders, influential businessmen and religious scholars were among dozens of people detained.**

The prince was also seen as having spearheaded a boycott of Qatar, which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt began in early June 2017 over its alleged support for terrorism and meddling in its neighbor's affairs.

In October 2017, MBS told the Guardian that he will return Saudi Arabia to "moderate Islam". He said that ultra-conservative state has been "not normal" for past 30 years. In the course of the same 30 years or so, millions of civilians have been massacred in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen due to their exported "immoderate Islamic doctrines" plus a spate of hefty funds pumped into rebel regions.

He seeks to transform the hard-line kingdom into an open society for the empowerment of citizens and luring of investors. Saudi Arabia will continue to emerge out of ultra-conservatism and draconian religious laws while Saudi-sponsored religious seminaries and Madrassas that nurture terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan may operate in full swing.

To disarm public anger over widespread arrests and likely opposition, MBS came up with a flurry of modifications in Saudi laws. In September last year, he lifted the ban on women's right to hold driver's license. The same year, it announced opening of a luxury beach resort where nudity would be permitted.

The country's modernists strive to convince the conservative society to embrace the emerging Cultural Revolution.

In January 2018, Saudi Arabia allowed women to watch a football match in the stadium for the first time, and the following month the kingdom opened applications for women to join its military.

In February, women were free to register their own businesses. From mid-April, the first cinemas will open its doors to entire citizens.

Adding to the breakthroughs, Saudi Arabia recently allowed Israel-bound flights to use its airspace, ending a 70 year ban, perhaps, placed over not recognizing Israel. But reversing of the ban and MBS's siding with Israel in its recent clash with peacefully protesting Palestinians on Land Day reveal a diplomatic shift in Saudi Arabia's posture towards this country as both share concerns over Iranian influence in the region.

Mohammad bin Salman went on a multiple-days tour in the US and the UK last month. In his trip, he met with AIPAC and anti-BDS leaders as well as founders and leaders of giant US companies. He was warmly welcomed in Britain despite great protests over his war crimes in Yemen. The UK's foreign secretary Boris Johnson seemed fond of MBS as he was keenly waiting for his arrival.

### **Why Saudi Arabia Waged War on Qatar**

The row sparked when Qatar woke up to the news of hack attributing "false statements" to the emir of Qatar. The news was aired on several UAE and Saudi-owned networks in the Gulf. The point of concern is that it came two days after President Donald Trump met Gulf Arab leaders in Riyadh last year.

Fewer world observers would have believed Saudi Arabia's allegations that Qatar "support terrorism". Absolutely, it does support, but in a minimal amount to Saudi Arabia. This giant Arab country with recent transformations is looking for regional hegemony, especially over other minor and inferior Arab nations, in most part for combating Iran's advancement. And, of course, it carries the blatant support of the West.

In the face of such ambitious bids, Qatar moves on its own way, acting nonchalantly.

In the age of oil and gas, the tiny peninsula of Qatar controls the third-largest gas reserves in the world, which made it into one of the richest nations on Earth per capita. Qatar shares vast natural gas resources with Saudi rival Iran.

The Saudi-Qatar feud can be traced back to several decades. In 1996, Qatar launched the Al-Jazeera satellite news channel and brought a new brand of news coverage to the region. Al-Jazeera disquieted Arab leaders with its reporting, in Arabic, on internal and regional controversies that previously went uncovered.

It shocked some viewers by putting Israeli spokespeople on the air when it covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It still actively serves as one of the international media network to bring to our notice the atrocities in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of Israeli oppression on Palestinians as well as Qatar's support of Muslim Brotherhood including Hamas compelled Israel to put squeeze on Qatar via Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Qatar embraced the Arab Spring uprisings, particularly in Egypt, Libya and Syria that drove the former to join Saudi Arabia's economic blockade on Qatar.

If it was not for the US's neutral stance over its largest regional military base in Qatar that houses 10,000 military personnel from the US, UK and other countries, the tiny Arab state might have taken further plunge into the crisis.

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