

Saudi Arabia gets its first real government

By David Goldman, Spengler, 9 November 2017

A couple of years ago I attended seminars with Chinese and Israeli counterterrorism experts in Beijing, in my capacity as a board member of a foundation that promotes Sino-Israel relations. A senior Chinese official complained that the Saudi royal family funds every radical madrassa in Xinjiang province, where Muslim Uyghurs of Turkish ethnicity form the majority. With a long and porous border stretching through sparsely-populated lands, Chinese security couldn't prevent the funds from pouring in.

I asked our Chinese hosts why they didn't remonstrate with the Saudi government. The Chinese official said, "We talk to the Saudis all the time, and they say they will have nothing to do with it. But this is not a government. It is a family! Some crazy cousin is always sending money to terrorists through informal finance channels."

Now it appears that Saudi Arabia has a government, thanks to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's weekend purge of the royal family. It is probably the only political event in recent memory that has the support of Washington, Moscow and Beijing, not to mention Berlin, London, Paris and Tokyo — as well as Jerusalem.

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China Daily hailed the Crown Prince's action as a modernizing anti-corruption campaign. "The wave of arrests, the first of its kind, paves the way for a new Saudi Arabia with an intolerant approach against corruption. It also gets ready for the country [to move] towards a post-oil era with the focus on economic reforms and diversity, and major business projects," the Chinese government newspaper wrote on November 5.

Russia's [Novosti News Service](#) characterized Mohammed bin Salman's purge in nearly identical language: "As for the detention of a number of ministers and large businessmen in Saudi Arabia, then, according to the expert, on the contrary, one should expect an improvement in the economic situation in the kingdom and a reduction in the budget deficit. 'The return of the huge capitals exported by these people abroad may help reduce the budget deficit and

enable the implementation of new projects proposed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman,' [Lebanese expert Marwan] Iskander said in an interview with RIA Novosti.”

President Trump, for that matter, tweeted, “I have great confidence in King Salman and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, they know exactly what they are doing.”

Indeed they do. The foundations for the creation of a functioning Saudi state were laid well before President Trump visited Riyadh last March. The Washington Post reported at the time: “Behind the scenes, the Trump administration and Saudi Arabia have been conducting extensive negotiations, led by White House senior adviser Jared Kushner and Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The discussions began shortly after the presidential election, when Mohammed, known in Washington as ‘MBS,’ sent a delegation to meet with Kushner and other Trump officials at Trump Tower. After years of disillusionment with the Obama administration, the Saudi leadership was eager to do business. ‘They were willing to make a bet on Trump and on America,’ a senior White House official said.”

Last month’s Moscow visit by King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman provided cover for the crackdown. As Leonid Issaev wrote in al-Jazeera Oct. 4, “Both Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Russian leadership have personal interests in developing the relations between the two countries. First of all, the Saudi crown prince needs to strengthen his political position at home and he views Russia as an actor that can help him achieve this goal.”

As I wrote in Asia Times Oct 16, Russia’s sale of its advanced S-400 air defense system to the Saudi Kingdom makes clear that Moscow wants to keep a balance of power in the Middle East. It is perceived as an ally of Iran, but also fears that Iran’s attempts to establish a permanent presence in Lebanon could provoke war with Israel – which Russia does not want. Russia allied with Iran to clean up Sunni jihadists in Syria, not least because large numbers of Russian Muslims came to Syria to fight against the Assad government and returned home as prospective terrorists. But the alliance only goes so far. From the Saudi point of view, hedging the kingdom’s bets against the United States is a rational response to the American drift towards Iran under the Obama Administration, according to a senior adviser to the Defense Department.

Moscow’s interest in Saudi Arabia goes well beyond the market for sophisticated arms, to be sure. Russian-Saudi cooperation to stabilize oil prices is in the interest of both parties. And Moscow will applaud the Crown Prince’s effort to suppress freelance financing for Sunni jihadists by members of the royal family.

Israel has quietly developed contacts with the Saudi government, which has far more to fear from Iran than from the Jewish state. Israel will continue to keep a low profile in the Arab world, but the Crown Prince's purge has some direct implications for Israeli security. Among the victims of the Saudi crackdown was Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who announced his resignation while in Saudi Arabia on Nov 4, citing an Iranian plot to kill him. Hariri almost certainly was ordered to resign by his Saudi hosts. His father, Raafik Hariri, was killed in a 2005 bombing attributed to Iran and its Lebanese militia Hezbollah.

Now, as [Anna Ahronheim](#) wrote in the Jerusalem Post on Nov 6, "It seems that Hariri has given Israel more legitimacy for a full-scale and uncompromising campaign against Iran and Lebanon, not only Hezbollah, should a war in the north break out." Hariri gave credence to Israel's position that Hezbollah, which threatens Israel with a stockpile of more than 100,000 missiles, is a cat's paw for Iran. Israel's Defense Minister Avidgor Lieberman tweeted on Nov 5, "Lebanon=Hezbollah. Hezbollah=Iran. Lebanon=Iran. Iran is dangerous to the world. Saad Hariri has proved that today. Period."

Yoav Gallant, a member of Israel's security cabinet, commented, "Iran controls actually Lebanon, Iraq and is working very hard to take over Syria. This is a great danger to the stability of the region and the peace of the world. Hariri understands very well that after the massacre that is taking place in Syria, he might be next in line, as it happened to his father Rafik al-Hariri, and he is saying it in his own words."

Should war break out, the Jerusalem Post quoted Gallant as saying Israel "will bring Lebanon back to the stone age."

From the viewpoint of Washington, Beijing, Moscow, and Jerusalem, this is win-win-win-win. The odd man out is Iran, whose attempts to project power from Tehran to the Mediterranean have become an annoyance even for its allies. The shape of the deal emerging in the Middle East was visible last summer. As I wrote on [July 17](#), the US and Russia both need to leash their dogs – the former to crack down on Saudi financing of Sunni jihadists and the latter to puncture Iran's dream of a Shi'a empire.

The missing ingredient in the mix was a Saudi leader with the courage to face down his own family as well as the country's religious establishment. It is not clear yet that Prince Mohammed bin Salman will succeed, but if he does, he will be the most popular world leader of 2017.