

Is Saudi Arabia Heading for Disaster?

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Saudi Arabia is a unique nation-state: a kingdom named for its ruling family, the Sauds. The Saud tribe joined forces with the leader of the Wahhabi religious cult in 1744 and gradually conquered all other tribes. Their modern existence as a kingdom began in 1930, when Abdulaziz al Saud became absolute monarch, succeeded one after another by six of his sons from his first wife.

The modern Saudis solidified their hold on rule by marrying into all the other major clans in the country. They already had a deal with one of the most rigid Muslim cults in the world, the Wahhabis. The Wahhabis would be backed up by Saudi police, permitting no competition from other Muslim sects nor outside faiths. In return, the Wahhabis would give legitimacy (Muslim legitimacy) to the Al Saud family. At the time of this deal, the major industry bringing money into this otherwise poor backwater was vested in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, destinations of Muslim pilgrims from the rest of the Muslim world.

But then came a great bonanza: the discovery of a seemingly endless pool of petroleum found just when the world's great powers were needing it to fuel their navies and motor vehicles. The Saudi family became instantly rich. However, they were compelled to be very circumspect in how they enjoyed their wealth lest the religious authorities make a fuss. The clerics fumed over the introduction of automobiles, radio, television, and in each case, were talked out of their protests (the Saudis bought them off). Just one issue remained forever opposed by the clerics: the status of women, barring them from any public visibility (veiling) or other modern rights (such as driving cars).

If wealthy Saudi women were to enjoy any of the benefits of the modern world, they had to travel to Europe or America, and only with the permission of their masters. Today, there is an enormous population of young Saudis who have traveled, have mobile phones, watch world cinemas and TV at home, and know just how deprived they are. They are beginning to simmer.

Because of the odd rules of succession of the first king's sons, the Saudi monarchs are now ageing out. That first generation of princes is dying, and no system to replace them is in place.

The current king has finally broken the pattern, selecting one of his sons, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), only 33, as his crown prince. MBS is a firebrand who has dared the forbidden: locking up all rivals from the many Saudi power centers, including the clerics. This is potentially a destabilizing move, but if Saudi Arabia is ever to become a normal, modern state, this ruthless action was essential.

Two historic models for MBS were Russia's Peter the Great, who crushed the old nobility and the Orthodox clerics, and started the long process of making Russia a European state. The other model was Iran's Reza Shah Pahlavi, who in 1926 took power, reined in the Shiite clerics, and crushed tribes and nobility, other rivals for power. Despite Saudi hatred for the Shiite Iranians, they know that the Pahlavis modernized a country as backward as Saudi Arabia, and despite Iran's current counter-revolution by a religious cult, it is a modern state.

MBS has taken on the role of modernizer. He convinced his father to permit women (at last) to drive. Former Saudi kings have fostered education for women, many of whom have become modern professionals (except that they may only serve other women). There are women's hospitals, business, companies, and some serve in the police and on the news media. This is a good start.

MBS, however, is rash. He started an ugly war in Yemen that is going badly. He has forced Lebanon's Prime Minister to resign because of Iran's Hezbollah terrorists' increasing power in Lebanon. Although locking up his corrupt relatives and clerics in a luxury hotel, he may have to execute a few to show them he is serious. This is a real gamble, one that the Trump administration is encouraging. What happens if it goes sour?

682 words

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