

## **Five things to know about 'MBS,' Saudi Arabia's crown prince**

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The Hill, - 10/17/18

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been caught in an international firestorm over his alleged involvement in the disappearance and suspected death of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was last seen entering the Saudi consulate in Istanbul earlier this month.

Khashoggi was a Saudi-born U.S. resident who wrote for The Washington Post and was critical of the Saudi royal court. [The New York Times](#) reported that multiple suspects in Khashoggi's disappearance had close ties to the crown prince.

Khashoggi's suspected death is arguably the biggest international crisis Salman, who is often referred to by the nickname "MBS," has faced during his time in the Saudi royal court. Salman, who is a grandson of Saudi Arabia's founder and first monarch, Ibn Saud, has risen through the ranks of the Saudi government in recent years to become the nation's most prominent figure on the world stage.

He started as head of the Crown Prince's Court in 2013 after his father was appointed the crown prince. When his father became king in 2015, Salman was appointed minister of defense and then deputy crown prince later that year. Salman replaced his cousin Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince, the second in line to the king, in June 2017.

Here are five things to know about the leader known as MBS.

### **He has overseen a crackdown on dissent**

While ostensibly opening up the Saudi economy and society at large, MBS directed a swift crackdown on dissent that reached the highest echelons of power.

Over a dozen senior Saudi officials, including business leaders and even competing members of the royal family, were locked inside the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh in what the royal court claimed was an anti-corruption sweep.

Among those arrested were billionaire businessman Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, the former head of the royal court Khaled Al-Tuwaijri and Saudi media mogul Waleed Al-Ibrahim.

[Amnesty International](#) also reported that in August two women activists were thrown in jail for speaking out against the government.

MBS, 33, is "someone who sees himself as a transformational, historical figure who's going to change Saudi Arabia," according to Shadi Hamid, senior fellow at the

Brookings Institution's Center for Middle East Policy. "Oftentimes when you have these authoritarian modernizers, they have little tolerance for dissent...because they want to make change in their own image. The reformer narrative can coexist with this other side of MBS instead of being seen as opposed or mutually exclusive."

Khashoggi himself was openly supportive of MBS's reforms, but the crackdown on dissent eventually led him to flee the country.

### **He has cultivated an image as a reformer**

MBS launched an ambitious reform initiative called "Vision 2030" in 2016, which involved bringing economic and social change to Saudi Arabia. The plan called for increasing non-oil revenue in the kingdom by over \$260 billion by 2030 and creating "the world's largest sovereign wealth fund."

"We commit ourselves to providing world-class government services which effectively and efficiently meet the needs of our citizens. Together we will continue building a better country, fulfilling our dream of prosperity and unlocking the talent, potential, and dedication of our young men and women," MBS [wrote in launching "Vision 2030."](#)

Subsequent reforms included allowing women to drive cars and enter sports stadiums for the first time in the kingdom's history, as well as opening movie theaters.

The reforms were welcomed in the West. The White House issued a statement praising the decision to lift the driving ban for women, and members of the media heaped praise on the young ruler's apparent desire to liberalize at least some aspects of Saudi Arabia's rigidly conservative society. In March, Salman toured the U.S. and sat down for interviews with multiple news outlets.

But the Khashoggi crisis could impact that image.

"No one can talk about MBS as a positive force for change in Saudi Arabia anymore with a straight face. It's done," Hamid told The Hill.

"He'll survive, but part of his image was building ties beyond governments and building relationships with tech companies and entertainment agencies and really having this charm offensive, so it will change some of that for him for sure," he added.

### **He's a key ally of the Trump administration**

MBS has close ties with members of the Trump administration and is seen by Washington as vital to its efforts to counter Iran and combat terrorism in the Middle East.

The crown prince has held long meetings with [Jared Kushner](#), Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, who reportedly played a significant role in promoting MBS as a potential partner in the region.

The president has also praised MBS, saying, "We've become very good friends over a very short period of time," at an Oval Office meeting with the crown prince in March and touting an arms sale that Trump says will bring billions of dollars into the US.

Trump has evoked that arms sale in public comments since the recent crisis, as he remains hesitant to punish Saudi Arabia for its possible involvement in Khashoggi's disappearance.

Trump told Fox News on Wednesday that "We need Saudi Arabia," arguing that pulling back from the arms sale would hurt American workers.

MBS has also overseen an aggressive foreign policy in the region, including launching a military campaign against Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen while he was defense minister; directing support toward rebel groups in Syria fighting Syrian President Bashar Assad; and organizing a multinational blockade of Qatar over its government's purported ties to terrorist groups.

The Trump administration has been criticized heavily over its supplying of weapons and military training to Saudi Arabia-backed forces in Yemen, which has resulted in massive civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis in the Arab world's poorest nation.

MBS also called on the White House to keep troops in Syria despite Trump's stated desire to withdraw, [telling Time in March](#), "We believe American troops should stay for at least the mid-term, if not the long-term."

The blockade surrounding Qatar has also forced the White House and State Department to walk a delicate tight rope, as it seeks to avoid a confrontation with one of its closest allies in the Middle East while protecting its interests in Qatar, which houses the largest US military base in the region. Qatar has denied any connections to terrorist groups.

Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in the Trump administration's signature Middle East policy: countering Iranian influence in the region. In that effort, MBS has proven to be a staunch ally, citing Iran in his campaigns in Yemen and Syria.

"Trump does see Saudi Arabia as perhaps even central to his broader Middle East strategy, and that includes isolating Iran," Hamid said.

"Human rights abuses don't figure prominently in how he looks at things. He seems to really want to find a way to move. I think it should strain the relationship but I'm not sure it will in any lasting way, at least with Trump himself," he added.

## **He's facing his biggest crisis on the world stage so far**

MBS has faced international scandals during his time on the royal court. It was reported that the crown prince was heavily involved in a plot to possibly kidnap Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri in 2017.

Hariri abruptly announced his resignation in November during a trip to Saudi Arabia, prompting speculation that the Saudis had coaxed him to travel away from Lebanon and then detain him. Parties in each of the countries said the other nation had declared war.

Hariri eventually returned to Lebanon after widespread criticism of Saudi Arabia and suspended, then rescinded, the resignation.

And yet, despite questions surrounding the incident with Hariri, as well as the anti-corruption campaign and the brutality of the war in Yemen, tensions did not boil over between Saudi Arabia and its Western allies until Khashoggi was reported missing.

Politicians on Capitol Hill were quick to condemn Saudi Arabia and MBS over the Khashoggi disappearance, with Trump ally Sen. [Lindsey Graham](#) (R-S.C.) saying the US should “sanction the hell” out of Saudi Arabia and that MBS has “got to go.”

“This story is different because it brings all the other issues to the fore. I’m not seeing it as one isolated incident, I’m seeing it as a culmination and the discontent with MBS has been building in Washington and this is the one thing that has brought it all out,” Hamid told The Hill.

“One thing that’s different about this is that it’s so brazen and it seems disrespectful to the US...It’s one thing to deal with unsavory actors, which the US has done for decades. It’s another thing to have it shoved in your face when one of your allies does something as crazy and reckless as this,” he added.

## **He's likely to survive politically**

The Khashoggi scandal has led observers to question what will become of MBS now that he's no longer seen as the reformer he once was.

“I don’t see how Saudi Arabia completely recovers from this. There might be some reversion to business as usual, but because this case has gotten so much public and international attention...that it could have permanent effects on the image of Saudi Arabia and MBS in particular,” Hamid said.

However, Saudi Arabia, with its massive oil reserves and influence in the Middle East, still holds significant sway among world powers and is unlikely to become a pariah state, as evidenced by Trump’s recent defense of MBS.

As the crown prince, MBS is officially second in power and answerable only to King Salman himself. Hamid predicts that the damage from the Khashoggi scandal will be contained to MBS's image, while his stature within the royal court will not take a hit. He'll remain an international figure because "he's going to be Saudi Arabia's leader, which means he will matter. And there's nothing really anyone can do about that," Hamid said.