

Saving MBS from himself is the key to Saudi Arabia's stability

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There are three possible scenarios for the political future of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman speaks during the Future Investment Initiative Forum in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on October 24, 2018. [Reuters]

The murder of journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#) in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul has resulted in the most serious international crisis [Saudi Arabia](#) has faced since the 9/11 attacks. This political assassination has been particularly damaging not only because of the dreadful way in which it was carried out, but also because it happened at a time when the idea of a "[reforming](#)" Saudi Arabia was gaining traction around the world.

Far from being invincible, as he appeared to be in the past three years or so, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman ([MBS](#)) is now facing pressure on several fronts and by some accounts fighting for his [political survival](#).

Internationally, the [reputation](#) of the crown prince has taken a hammering with many questioning whether he is the right person to lead the promised transformation of the country.

The return to Saudi Arabia this week of [Prince Ahmad bin Abdelaziz](#), the last surviving full brother of King Salman, following six year of self-imposed exile, confirms the seriousness of the situation in the kingdom.

As Prince Ahmed never publicly accepted MBS's appointment as crown prince, speculation is rife that he has come to replace or challenge him. However, it is much more likely that his return is part of the House of Saud trying to demonstrate unity in the face of the increasingly difficult predicament it faces.

With the [latest statement](#) from the Turkish prosecutor that Khashoggi was strangled soon after entering the Saudi consulate, the Saudi royal family rightly fear these damaging accusations dragging on for many more weeks and months, particularly as the [US Congress](#) mounts pressure on President [Donald Trump](#) to take action. The Saudis have not helped themselves in this situation by admitting to a murder but not informing the Turkish authorities of the whereabouts of Khashoggi's body. Coming clean on this issue could have brought some closure and ended the swirling speculations.

In the middle of all of this, it is easy to forget the real virtue of King Salman, who himself is a man of renewal and reform. While holding the position of governor of Riyadh (1963-2011), he boosted the business environment of the city, growing and expanding its economy, and undertook massive infrastructural projects. He also

played a key role in keeping the royal court together at very critical junctures in the kingdom's history.

But despite being judicious and reasonable throughout his political career, vesting his ambitious but inexperienced young son with such broad powers was a big mistake which he probably has realised by now.

The combination of overconfidence, overambition and lack of diplomatic experience, which came to characterise MBS and his circle of advisers, is what led to the murder of Khashoggi - whether he was involved in it directly or not.

Assuming King Salman's health does not deteriorate, he is more than capable of salvaging the situation, but to do so, he will have to balance between the national interests of his kingdom and the political survival of his son. There are ultimately three possible approaches the king could take to resolve the situation.

First scenario: The status-quo

King Salman could allow MBS to continue business-as-usual and try to convince the public at home and abroad that the Khashoggi affair was a minor issue which will be resolved with the trial of the 18 suspects.

However, the current situation is not like the [blockade of Qatar](#), which MBS tried to downplay as a "[very, very, very small issue](#)". An attempt to dismiss Khashoggi's assassination would indicate that the crown prince does not grasp the gravity of the situation.

If he insists on such a course, a minority of states like the US and the UK may back him, but the international community would not. Countries like Canada, Germany, and Sweden may even attempt to boycott Saudi Arabia and impose sanctions on Saudi oil, which could deepen rifts and lead to further instability.

Moreover, this scenario would provide further leverage to Turkey's President [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), who has long been locked in a struggle with Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Muslim world. If MBS attempts to act as if nothing has happened, the Turkish president would continue heaping pressure on him through the media.

This scenario would not lead to a long-term solution and instead if pursued, would almost certainly turn out to be a major strategic miscalculation for Riyadh. Saudi Arabia would end up with a crown prince compromised by [Turkey](#), which would expose the House of Saud as fragile and susceptible to pressure.

Second scenario: Demoting MBS

King Salman could order MBS's demotion from the position of crown prince on the basis that even if the murder of Khashoggi was the result of a rogue operation, it

occurred on his watch. The powers MBS had acquired over the past three years would then have to be redistributed within the ruling family.

This could allow for older and wiser heads to prevail at the top of the state apparatus, which would ensure a return to the traditional ways of doing domestic and foreign politics.

But such a move could also be highly destabilising, as it will not be easy to move older, more qualified and experienced cousins of the crown prince into positions of authority and it could plunge the royal court into another power struggle.

King Salman could also appoint his brother Prince Ahmad as crown prince, but this would put power back in the hands of the older generation, ending hopes for the long-awaited transition of power from the sons of King Abdulaziz (1932-1953), to his grandchildren.

Any of these moves could prove incredibly difficult, if MBS decides to resist - and he has the tools to do so. He is popular with a sizeable part of the Saudi population and has managed to build over the past three years his own deep state, which could sabotage efforts for a transfer of power.

Scenario three: Limiting MBS's powers

The most reasonable move for King Salman would be to keep the crown prince in his position, but to curtail his powers. This would teach MBS that there are limits to political ambition within the Saudi court and there is decorum and order that cannot be overlooked.

Even if he is not found responsible for ordering the killing of Khashoggi, MBS should admit some degree of culpability and step aside from the security and defence agencies and focus on domestic social and economic reform. By limiting MBS's political reach and introducing checks and balances on all fronts, the king could signal to the world that he would oversee the transformation of Saudi Arabia personally and rebuild international confidence in his rule.

It would also help immensely if Riyadh demonstrates transparency on the Khashoggi case and hands in the 18 suspects to the Turkish authorities. If that is deemed unacceptable, Turkish investigators should be invited to Saudi Arabia to take part in the prosecution of the suspects.

MBS would also benefit from acting as a peacemaker on the international arena. Nothing could help his case more than him ending the [war in Yemen](#), which has pushed its population to the brink of the "[world's worst famine in 100 years](#)".

Rather than waiting to be [pushed by the US](#) to end the war, he can take the initiative and unilaterally start a peace process. Furthermore, he should immediately resolve

outstanding issues with Qatar and [Canada](#) and accept that other states have a right to an opinion.

Clearly, for this all to happen, the urgency and gravity of the situation have to be appreciated by the king directly. However, from what we hear this is not happening, and even his closest advisers, including his foreign minister, reportedly cannot get to him.

It is not in anyone's interest for Saudi Arabia to suffer instability and be under threat of internal collapse. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that the king and the royal court take urgent action to resolve the situation.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.