

The unsuccessful whitewashing of MBS's image as peacemaker

Sayid Ahmed al-Khidr

Aljazeera, 16 Dec 2018

Since Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince in 2015, Saudi Arabia has been at the heart of a spate of regional crises.

Mohammed bin Salman launched Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen only two months after his father became King of Saudi Arabia [Reuters]

On January 23, 2015, the world woke up to the news that Salman bin Abdul Aziz had been crowned king of [Saudi Arabia](#), and he was making important decisions, such as the appointment of his 29-year-old son as defence minister.

Prince [Mohammed bin Salman](#) was new to the world of diplomacy. He had a degree in private law and had worked in commercial companies but had only been part of the royal court for a few months.

While analysts scrutinised the young minister of defence, Prince Mohammed made his first decisive move - one still being dissected today.

On March 26, 2015, the crown prince launched Operation Decisive Storm against [Yemen](#)'s Houthi rebels, turning the conflict into a devastating war that has killed tens of thousands of people and destroyed cities built hundreds of years ago.

Prince Mohammed - known by his initials MBS - then brought the war home, arresting powerful princes and businessmen and holding them for months until they agreed to his diktats.

When US President [Donald Trump](#) arrived at the White House in early 2017, the young prince became more assured about his political future.

Burning the Gulf

On June 5, 2017, MBS, 33, set fire to the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC) by [declaring a blockade on Qatar](#) - with the support of Egypt, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

At the same time, Prince Mohammed began an internal battle on the House of Saud. He turned against his cousin - the then-Minister of Interior and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef - who is widely regarded for his knowledge of security affairs.

After seizing the role from bin Nayef, Prince Mohammed launched a crackdown on alleged corruption against prominent Saudis.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was also detained during a visit to Saudi Arabia, plunging the two countries into a deep diplomatic crisis. Hariri was [allegedly forced to resign while being held](#) in the kingdom. The drama only ended when French President [Emmanuel Macron](#) flew to Riyadh and apparently negotiated Hariri's release.

Prince Mohammed has since been preoccupied with internal affairs related to strengthening his own influence in the country. Meanwhile, he has left the task of the war in Yemen to his armed forces and responsibility for securing the kingdom from [Houthi](#) incursions to the Sudanese army.

For more than three years, Saudi Arabia has imposed a deadly siege on Yemen.

More than 20 million people require food aid as hunger has become rampant across the country and a cholera outbreak led to the deaths of nearly 3,000 people, mostly women and children. The [United Nations](#) says Yemen has become the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

When Prince Mohammed's policies began to displease some Saudis, he decided to silence the most prominent intellectuals and activists by imprisoning scores of them.

Israel and cinemas

According to analysts, Prince Mohammed has relied on three pillars to maintain his power: his proximity to [Israel](#), his financial generosity towards Trump and his launching of a series of reforms in the kingdom, such as building cinemas and allowing women to drive.

On several occasions, Riyadh has managed to avoid UN resolutions that condemned its role in Yemen despite the war causing the [deaths of more than 85,000 Yemeni children](#) under the age of five.

During a trip to Washington earlier this year, MBS met leaders of the Jewish lobby and reportedly assured them of his intention to consolidate bilateral relations with Israel.

While in the [United States](#), public relations firms on the payroll were active in whitewashing MBS's image, attempting to distract people from the plight of Yemen's people, while focusing on the prince's openness towards opening cinemas and having concerts in Saudi Arabia.

But MBS did not make good use of this high-priced PR.

On October 2, Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#) entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul for a document to complete his marriage to a Turkish woman who waited for him outside. He would never be seen again.

[Khashoggi was met by a Saudi assassination team](#), including some of Prince Mohammed's top security aides. They killed and dismembered the journalist while listening to music.

After weeks of denials, Saudi Arabia eventually admitted that Khashoggi was killed and dismembered but vehemently denied the involvement of Prince Mohammed.

Instead, Saudi Arabia announced the arrest of several "rogue" actors who had taken matters into their own hands when they killed the Washington Post writer.

Whitewashing

But Riyadh's denials and Trump's defence of Prince Mohammed did not convince the US Congress or Turkey's President [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#).

So Prince Mohammed began looking for a way out of the disastrous war in Yemen.

Last Thursday, the Saudi-Emirati-backed government and Houthi rebels [agreed on a ceasefire in the Red Sea city of Hodeidah](#) after week-long talks in Sweden under the auspices of the UN.

The Saudis immediately tried to turn the agreement into a victory for Prince Mohammed, portraying him as a champion of peace.

Refutation and cynicism

Yemeni Abdul Rahman Abu Talib condemned Saudi Arabia's attempt to transform a defeat into a victory, saying: "They were vowing to expel the Houthis, but they ended up boasting about victory amid the negotiations that are yet to see the Houthis leave the port."

Despite the efforts of Trump adviser Jared Kushner to change the perception of Prince Mohammed, many are not convinced of his portrayal as a man of peace.

On Friday, Erdogan stepped up his rhetoric against Riyadh, saying the Saudis know who ordered Khashoggi's murder yet are refusing to hand them over.

In the US Congress, the Senate adopted two resolutions: one confirming that Prince Mohammed authorised Khashoggi's killing and a second calling for an end to arming and supporting him in Yemen.

Only time will tell whether the fallout from the Prince Mohammed's actions come back to haunt him.