

“The Complicated U.S.-Saudi Relationship”

By

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Mr. Wood started with the provocative proposition that if what you know about Saudi Arabia is from before 2017, then you don't really know what's going on today. The year 2017 marked Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) being elevated to Crown Prince and thus becoming Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler.

Mr. Wood organized his presentation along three key questions:

- What has Saudi Arabia been like traditionally?
- What is MBS doing today?
- What is MBS like personally?

Lands were consolidated into Saudi Arabia in 1932 due to conquests by its first king, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud. The country was very conservative, almost backward, socially and religiously. It operated on a deal between the King and religious clerics, where the King ruled over the temporal realm, but politicians by and large stayed out of religious affairs. All Saudi Kings since Ibn Saud have been his sons, and for simple demographic reasons, this arrangement was not sustainable.

Despite the oil wealth of the 60s and 70s, Saudi Arabia was not a normal modern country. The ascendancy of MBS appeared as something of a solution to its problems. He was young, not motivated by religious extremism, and *really Saudi* – having gone to school at home rather than abroad. As Crown Prince, he embarked on modernizing steps, as reflected in the government's *Vision 2030* document. Despite appearing to be a social and economic reformer, MBS was ruthless in consolidating political power, and getting rid of rivals including family members.

Mr. Wood has interviewed the Crown Prince and is in a good position to address the question of who MBS is. The Crown Prince has initiated big changes but has not eschewed brutality. He is unapologetic, asserting that what he's doing is what's best for the country. When asked about political repression, MBS deflects, saying that it's a function of the larger *legal system*. When asked about the murder and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, MBS implied that Khashoggi was a small fry below his own level of attention. Wood observed that MBS seemed abnormal discussing Khashoggi, lacking a *normal human reaction*.

At 37, MBS is likely to be around for decades shaping Saudi-US ties. He argues that the U.S. should applaud his moves, as many of them are things that Washington itself has advocated. Besides, he points out, other states (i.e., China) are approving. The Crown Prince says that Washington should hope he succeeds, as an alternative may well look like the Islamic State (ISIS). If he is pushed aside, the result will *not be 2016, but more like 1925*.

Paul F. Herman, Jr.