

Some ‘Modernizer’

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Is Saudi Arabia’s crown prince joining a long line of absolutist rulers in the Middle East?

The modernizing rulers of the Arab Middle East date from the early 19th century, with Muhammad Ali of Egypt, who forcibly indentured the peasants of the Nile valley to farm cash crops, and Ahmad Bey of Tunisia, who in 1846 became the first Muslim ruler to abolish slavery. (The bey was the son of a slave, a girl abducted in a Moorish raid on San Pietro.) The allure of such despots has been strong in the West. These pashas were both widely admired in Europe for their efforts to introduce “progress”—more efficient economies, better schools, better armies, elites who spoke European languages—even though their grand ambitions nearly bankrupted their countries. A century later, Baathist, or Renaissance, parties rose and had many Western admirers, too, leading to the surreal situation of a *New York Times* columnist seeing the secular Saddam Hussein, the first Arab *Führer* to use rape as a political tool, as an avatar of social rights for women.

The greatest and most admired of the modernizers is, of course, the real cross-cultural trailblazer, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Ottoman general who saved his brethren from European imperialism and a revanchist Greek army. A hard-drinking, intellectually curious, always natty, womanizing dynamo, Atatürk could be lethal with his opponents. His dream of a Western nation-state, divorced from its imperial Islamic identity and the Perso-Arabic script, which framed the faith and Ottoman glory, had a big dose of fascism—as well as a muted hope that Turkey could eventually evolve, under the watchful eye of the army, into something more liberal and democratic. We do not know yet whether Turkey’s current, Islamist-friendly president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, will overturn Atatürk’s legacy. We do know that decades of forced secularization didn’t immunize the Turkish people from the religious appeal of the past.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, surely sees himself in this long line of absolutist rulers who pushed their countries towards a better, more prosperous tomorrow (in the prince’s case, his “Vision 2030”). The 33-year-old’s fears are justified: Despite its vast wealth, Saudi Arabia is probably headed toward insolvency. Its population is too large, too lazy, too young, and too sexually segregated to become competitive with the West or East Asia. Its public sector is bloated, corrupt, and notoriously difficult to motivate. Saudi Arabia’s oil and gas aren’t going to last forever; though foreign currency accounts are again rising, Riyadh has been steadily drawing down these reserves since 2014 to fund significant deficit spending. Even with a sharp, sustained increase in the price of oil, the kingdom’s long-term financial prospects aren’t good unless it can diversify its economy and produce enough private-sector jobs for its 33 million people. (When Saudi king Faisal and the shah of Iran orchestrated the first significant oil price hike in 1971, Saudi Arabia’s population was around 6 million.)

In an amusing irony, the prince shares the aspirations of an archenemy, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani: Both want a Middle Eastern/Islamic version of the Chinese model. Like the Iranian cleric, who was a key player in building the Islamic Republic’s police state and at the top of the power matrix when Tehran went on an expatriate killing spree in the 1990s, MBS doesn’t want to introduce political freedoms into his realm; he just wants to make his domain more economically vigorous. Some social freedom is

fine if it lubricates society—allows sufficient fun—to encourage competitiveness without igniting the middle class or an aspiring underclass into insurrection. Like his royal predecessors, MbS isn't bashful about his lust for finer things: a \$300 million French chateau, a \$550 million superyacht, and the \$450 million *Salvator Mundi* by Leonardo da Vinci. That he bought the yacht when he was slashing public spending and the painting while he was imprisoning many members of the elite in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton for malversation—and coercing them into forfeiting billions—told us that he is untroubled by inconsistency.

The prince's decision to assassinate a frequent critic, the contributing *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi, has highlighted again the choices and contradictions that America has made when it comes to allied authoritarians. MbS is determined to maintain the fiction that he didn't order the killing, that someone else, probably 1 of the 18 who reportedly have been arrested in connection with Khashoggi's killing, was the misguided, zealous mastermind of the mission in Istanbul. The Henry II-Thomas Becket apologia isn't credible, of course, and it will be painful for the White House as it tries to find wiggle room in its commentary on what is likely to be a drawn-out farce. The most important datum about the murder: The crown prince, who is parochial but not stupid, intended to be graphic in his handling of Khashoggi, an occasionally free-spirited opinion journalist who had eclectically mixed support for the Saudi establishment and sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood. Although MbS may have been careless in how he organized the Istanbul rendezvous with the columnist, he knew that this was not going to be a secret operation. The defining moment for the crown prince was his decision a year ago to kidnap the Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri and oblige him to resign. Any Saudi prince could have grown tired of how Saudi money in Lebanon never made a dent in the Shiite Hezbollah's growing control of the country; only an impetuous, delusional Sunni prince would imagine that this humiliation of a Sunni prime minister would not redound to Shiite Iran's advantage inside Lebanon.

In parading the power of sudden death through their omnipresent sword- and scythe-wielding executioners, sultans and caliphs cultivated *hayba*, the awe that comes with unchallengeable control. The crown prince's material acquisitiveness matches his political aspirations: He is a practitioner of *hayba*. Educated only in the kingdom, he has limited knowledge of the United States and Europe. We can be pretty sure that the Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir had no knowledge of the operation against Khashoggi since he is savvy about the American press, about the red lines that still exist in the West's greedy, commercial societies. He would have warned, unceasingly, that so brazenly killing Khashoggi would create a firestorm.

The Middle East has been a particularly ugly place since the post-World War I dynasties started falling to Arab military men, who within a generation or two usually carved up their societies, leaving old-world Muslim civility and, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of people dead. There were moments of serious American protest: John F. Kennedy was unimpressed by the shah of Iran and pressured him to introduce fundamental reforms. But Lyndon Johnson and especially Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger lost interest and increasingly gave the shah whatever he wanted, especially when it came to weaponry, with few concerns about how Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was "modernizing" his country. The bigotry of low expectations—the assumption that Muslim societies just don't have the necessary cultural and religious building blocks to sustain a democracy—undoubtedly conditions the way many Americans, on the left and the right, approach the morally troubling questions about governance in Muslim-majority countries. Americans are reliably inconsistent in how we judge tyranny, but we are usually at our most contradictory in the greater Middle East.

The military juntas in Algeria and Egypt—the former arrived in 1962 with the anti-French *Front de libération nationale* and the latter with the Egyptian revolution of 1952—have murdered vastly more innocent people than any Saudi ruler. Saudi domestic sins, until now, have been, if we exempt actions against the Shia of the Eastern Province, much more typical of hidebound monarchs

than ruthless, secular Arab nationalists. The black-clad *exterminateurs* of the Algerian regime in the 1990s killed with such bloodlust and efficiency that only the Butcher of Baghdad could rival them. Yet Democratic and Republican administrations, like the French left and right, have had little difficulty engaging this blood-soaked dictatorship to further their counterterrorist missions and satisfy Europe's oil and gas needs. If President Donald Trump's commentary about Khashoggi's murder has been offensive, just go back and look at the speeches of Barack Obama administration officials praising the counterterrorist partnership between Washington and the Algerian government, which in its *guerre à outrance* against Islamists regularly slaughtered women and children.

Internationally, the Saudi royal family's proclivities have, of course, been more damaging: As the monarchy became richer, and especially after the 1979 Iranian revolution and the attack the same year on the Great Mosque of Mecca by Sunni millenarians, it devoted much money to spreading its creed. Saudi Islam—Wahhabism, a barebones, hypermasculine version of the faith at war with the color, *joie de vivre*, and mysticism in Islamic civilization—gained ground among Muslims, who were watching the cradle of their civilization, the Middle East, rot under ever more oppressive secular governments. Perpetually insecure and scared to death of the ecumenical appeal of revolutionary Shiism, which tapped the Islamic world's anger at Muslim inferiority vis-à-vis the West, the Saudi royals put their oil and guilty consciences behind proselytism. And success bred commitment. Before the oil embargo of 1973, Saudi Arabia wasn't a significant religious force. By the end of the 1980s, the Saudis were funding mosques worldwide.

Although a great deal is often made of the Saudi possession of the two holiest cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina, which gives the regime prestige and an opportunity to press its views among pilgrims, possession of *al-Haramayn* has not made Saudi thought intellectually preeminent. It hasn't gained the Saudi royal family or the Wahhabi religious establishment spiritual deference—except where their money has gained them some institutional leverage. Egypt's renowned but declining religious center, Al-Azhar, which has been poverty-stricken for decades, gave more attention to Saudi legal views (the Hanbali school) as Riyadh started subsidizing the institution and its personnel. With Saudi Arabia's rise, Sunni Islam's other religious schools have coarsened. Poor religious scholars everywhere—like acquisitive American academics, former officials, lawyers, think tankers, and lobbyists—certainly have sought out Saudi favor. Sometimes Saudi-supported mosques have become hotbeds of militancy; sometimes they have become boring imports that relate awkwardly to young, more Westernized locals.

The defining themes of modern Islamic militancy developed beyond the Arabian peninsula: Egypt's Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, the Brotherhood's avatar of holy war and great Koranic commentator, Abul Ala Maududi, the Indian-Pakistani journalist-turned-intellectual who fused Western and Islamic thought into a thoroughly modern militancy, Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iraq's Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, and Lebanon's Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah. Saudi money flowed into an intellectual landscape that was rapidly shifting, often feeding views that were hostile to the House of Saud. MbS isn't alone in the royal family in appreciating this perverse situation; it isn't clear, however, that Saudi Arabia changing its missionary activity would have much effect on Sunni Islamic militancy, which has wildly evolved in the last 20 years. State-supported Saudi clergy and their foreign partners are irrelevant now to the intellectual whirlwind that feeds the Islamic State, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other radical movements. The capacity of state-supported clergy throughout the Sunni world to influence profoundly the faithful has declined for decades for the understandable reason that as Middle Eastern regimes have become more dictatorial and corrupt, as Western ideas about political legitimacy have seeped, sometimes poured, into the region, the reputation of the clergy associated with those regimes has declined. In Egypt and Tunisia, for example, the status of the Muslim Brotherhood—a lay organization that has kept seminary-trained, state-paid clerics at arm's length since its birth—significantly rose as the official

clergy's sank. Parallel, independent religious authorities, who sometimes used the Internet to gain followers, grew in importance. This phenomenon occurred in the Middle East and in Europe, where unofficial mosques sprouted up all over the continent in part because European governments, wanting to believe the immigrants would eventually "go home," refused to authorize the construction of mosques and religious schools. A chaotic democracy of dueling religious authorities and imams developed. Without a legitimate countervailing hierarchy, militants flourished.

It is a biting irony that Saudi Arabia once subvented the Muslim Brotherhood in an effort to counter the rise of communism and monarch-downing pan-Arab nationalism. Until the royal family turned against the organization, Saudi Arabia itself was fertile ground for the movement. It may still be. The Brotherhood has become skeptical of Arab monarchies, seeing them as hopelessly corrupt, religiously hypocritical, and dependent on Western powers. That critique is more right than wrong. The movement's embrace of democratic politics in Egypt and Tunisia as a better, more legitimate vehicle to establish a moral Islamic society also has improved its appeal in the Persian Gulf, where absolute monarchies spend vast sums without any input from the commonweal. Much of Washington wants to believe that the threat from the Brotherhood was curtailed when Egyptian general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi overthrew, with considerable public support, the democratically elected government of Mohamed Morsi in 2013. However, the Brotherhood's message of religious egalitarian populism, intertwined with the idea that leadership in the *umma*, the community of believers, must gain approval at the ballot box, still fits better into modernity than kingship. (It's an excellent bet that the movement's ideas, though battered and hidden, are still fertile in Egypt.) Both contemporary Islamic militancy and fundamentalism—and the two share terrain but are not the same—have a certain discomfort with, if not hostility towards, kingship, *mulk* in Arabic, which is deeply rooted in the side of Muslim history defined by its emphasis on virtue and the equality of believers. Orthodox Sunni Islam has stressed obedience to power, to "those who hold the reins." But within that same memory of the past runs a broad channel of dissent, even rebellion, waged on behalf of those who see leadership tied tightly to orthopraxy.

It's possible that MbS's intense animus against Khashoggi was in part fueled by the columnist's Brotherhood sympathies and real fear of the movement's continuing appeal. Conversely, it may now be the strongest argument for MbS within the Saudi royal family, many members of which no doubt would like to superannuate the young prince: If Khashoggi becomes a martyr among Saudis, or Arabs in general, that could lend strength to those who no longer see kingship as *halal*.

Many Western officials, columnists, and intellectuals exuberantly praised General Sisi's speeches against political Islam and the Brotherhood as a necessary step in contemporary Islam's reformation. The Saudi crown prince's Western supporters have seen his speeches against the militancy of post-1979 Saudi Islam similarly. (Historically, the crown prince is on weak ground: The fusion of the Saud family and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's creed in the 18th century never allowed an even slightly loose, cosmopolitan Muslim society to develop in Arabia.) But the official hierarchies in these countries, assuming they implement the will of their overlords energetically, simply can no longer command religious change. Their actions are more likely to prove counterproductive.

Nearly forgotten, the modern Middle East had a pretty profound reformation-cum-renaissance in the late-19th to mid-20th centuries. Among elites and even the common man, religious identities became less acute, national identities rose in importance and affection, parliamentary politics started. Serious Muslim scholars and liberal intellectuals advanced ideas for fusing Western and Islamic values, providing a means for proud Muslims to borrow from the West without shame. Traditional religious scholars and the ardently faithful went on the defensive for decades.

But as postcolonial Muslim states faltered, as they became meaner, as they attempted to ram through projects aiming to transform their societies, dissent grew. Political and cultural dissent in Muslim societies always expresses itself religiously. The harshness of secular dictatorial Arab states naturally produced a harshness in opposition. It's not surprising that the Islamist/jihadist opposition in Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Libya has been so brutal given how the secular Arab nationalist dictators in these lands savaged their own people.

Unintentionally, the Saudi crown prince's dictatorial ambitions could well spoil a felicitous evolution in Saudi society. We know from Western history and what has transpired in the Islamic Republic since 1979 that oppressive religious rule secularizes society. As the conservative Iranian ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi Kani worried over 20 years ago, if everything is about God, then soon nothing is about God. Saudi society, which is harder to penetrate than Iranian society because it is less sophisticated and literate, historically less open to the foreigner, may be much more secular than most people realize precisely because Saudi religious rule is overbearing. Iranian society took a cultural nosedive with the Islamic revolution, but there is a collective memory in Iran of a more curious, open, and secular society. Saudi Arabia doesn't have those memories to draw on. But globalization matters. The crown prince's popularity with the young has been undoubtedly a reflection of the Westernization of much of the country's youth. (That same process of Westernization, conversely, can fortify the appeal of contemporary Islamists, like the Muslim Brothers.) The crown prince could blow this transformative moment by intensifying his police state. Talk to young Saudis and they will quickly tell you how social media have become almost entirely a vehicle of MbS sycophants. What is now a widely held sentiment among the young for more openness, certainly for more fun, could turn into a protest movement against a dictatorship that allows only approved thought.

It is always good to recall the Iranian pre-revolutionary experience: The protest movement in the beginning was not explicitly religious. The secularization of Iranian society—especially the middle and upper classes—was profound. And yet the religious critiques gained ground as they tapped into deep historical roots and modern anxieties. The charismatic force of Khomeini and his clerical allies finally united the disparate strands of protest into an explicitly Islamic revolution. There is not, and probably cannot be, any equivalent to Khomeini in Saudi Arabia. But the opening for serious protest against an increasingly ruthless prince, who tramples simultaneously Westernized youth, Westernized and religious intellectuals, the religious establishment, and his own family, shouldn't be discounted. It's an excellent bet that if MbS cannot check himself—and odds are if he survives the current turmoil, his embrace of *hayba* will tighten—the positions he advocates will sour with the public and the royal family. In other words, his pro-American, pro-Israel, philo-Semitic bent, and the hugely expensive Vision 2030 plan, could all become toxic. The crown prince's anti-Iranian determination might remain since those sentiments appear immovable within the society and the royal family (the Shia of the Eastern Province live on top of most of the oil; the clerical regime really would like to wipe the royals out; Wahhabis see the Shia as one small step above infidels), but elsewhere MbS could easily produce the opposite of what he intends.

The crown prince has brought forward the ugly authoritarianism among our Muslim allies that American officials usually prefer to stay behind closed doors or, ideally, between Arab security services and their counterparts in the Central Intelligence Agency. One can feel some sympathy for those in the State Department whose purpose is to highlight the tyranny of the Islamic Republic but not concurrently highlight the despotism of the clerical regime's primary Arab foe. Tehran is a vastly deadlier player in the Middle East. It is fueled by a still-potent blend of Shiite Islamic militancy and national arrogance (only the Turks are competitive when it comes to national pride among a Muslim people). Iran's mullahs and Revolutionary Guards have actually deployed a multinational Shiite legion that fights in Syria; Saudi Arabia has begged and coerced and it still can't get Egypt and

Pakistan, two Sunni states deeply in debt to the Al-Saud, to send troops to Yemen. Yet when it comes to human rights for its own citizens, or the press, or the arts, it might be the Islamic Republic that's less oppressive in a competition of awfuls. The Iranian political and cultural elite don't produce great books, but they do occasionally write things that rip the flesh off each other; there are now and then, under the censor's eye, fairly serious meditations on man, God, and absolutism. And the Iranians certainly have the Saudis beat when it comes to hidden, joyful, profoundly creative, hip hypocrisy.

MbS should have known what Iranian revolutionaries have always known: Don't kill your opponents on your own diplomatic grounds. Tehran has frequently sent forth its murderous missionaries to kill in Turkey, but the dirty deeds have been done mostly in private. The Iranians have been outrageous elsewhere, most recently in an attempt to bomb an oppositionist rally in Paris where Rudy Giuliani and other Americans were speaking. But the clerical regime knows that the Western penchant with them is to forget if not forgive. Tehran benefits enormously from how Iran's internal politics—the factions within the ruling elite—always get interpreted to cast blame on the “hardliners,” whoever they may be at any given time.

The crown prince won't be so lucky. Killing a *Washington Post* columnist plugged into the matrix of Western elites was rash as well as immoral. The American left and much of the right is in high dudgeon. The president's transactional approach to foreign affairs looks particularly unpleasant. And MbS will have an impossible time using the Thomas Becket defense given that he had already purged the police state's upper echelons. And if the young prince dares to kill any of those reportedly arrested for Khashoggi's murder, he could actually create a disloyal cadre within his own circle. Henry II didn't touch the four knights who dispatched Becket, allowing the men, after the pope excommunicated them, to sail off to the Holy Land to pray and fight.

MbS has to be hoping that Erdogan doesn't really have audiotapes from Turkish intelligence bugs inside the Saudi consulate or chooses, for whatever political or financial calculations, not to release them to the public. If they exist and he releases them, if they leak from a Western intelligence service (it's unclear whether the CIA has a copy of a recording), and we can hear MbS's minions chopping up Khashoggi's body, if we can hear them cutting off body parts when the columnist is still alive, then the Western penchant of forgetting the heinous crimes of consequential heads of state may falter. This time round greed, fear, and allegiance to a grander cause—the usual reasons for realpoliticians to look beyond gut-churning messes—may not be sufficient. Washington's increasingly vicious political divisions are aligning along the crown prince's mistake. “He is a bastard, but he is our bastard” is an argument best made within the confines of Washington's Metropolitan Club without an accompanying soundtrack of bones being sawed.

If MbS survives, which is still likely, the United States will confront the distressing fact that the Saudi ruler is “modernizing” his country in ways that could well prove tumultuous. There is little to love in the Saudi royal family. There is nothing to like about what has happened since the Saudi-Wahhabi fusion in 1744. But there is something to be said for consensus within a deeply conservative society trying to change. The Muslim Middle East is littered with the wreckage of strong, oh-so-modern men exercising their wills. Saudi Arabia is a potentially explosive laboratory where cautious men need to prevail.

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