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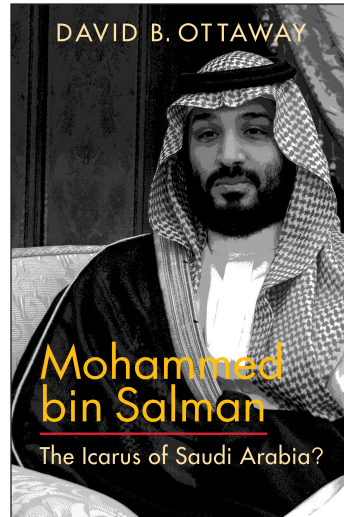
Mohammed bin Salman: The Icarus of Saudi Arabia?

David B. Ottaway

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1800 30th Street, Suite 314

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telephone 303.444.6684

fax 303.444.0824

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1

The Conundrums of Saudi Arabia

I must confess at the start of this endeavor to an insatiable career-long fascination with the “secret kingdom” of Saudi Arabia. I first wrote about it in October 1972, a year after I started working for the *Washington Post*. Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the Saudi oil minister, had come to Washington, DC, to make a surprising offer: his country would assure an unlimited supply of oil to the United States if Richard Nixon’s administration would grant it duty-free access to the US market.¹ The offer came a year after the United States had ceased being self-reliant in the production of oil and begun importing it in ever-larger quantities. My second article about Saudi Arabia appeared the following April, when Yamani in an interview with me and another *Post* colleague warned that his country would use its newfound “oil weapon” against the United States if its leaders didn’t change their negative attitude about the Palestinian quest for a homeland.²

No one in Washington paid any attention either to Yamani’s offer or threat because of the general conviction that Saudi Arabia needed the United States a lot more than vice versa. This blasé attitude changed abruptly, however, after the Saudis indeed wielded their oil weapon to lead an Arab embargo of the United States for supporting Israel after Egypt and Syria attacked that country in October 1973. Ever since, I have found myself repeatedly drawn into writing about the politics and economics of the Saudi kingdom as well as the US-Saudi relationship. The United States has never been able to quite decide if that relationship is characterized more by friendship or enmity. This ambivalence has been particularly pronounced since the hijacking of three civilian US airplanes, destruction of the World Trade Center, and attempt to destroy the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, resulting in nearly 3,000 deaths. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were

Saudi nationals and the mastermind another Saudi, Islamic fanatic Osama bin Laden. Making matters worse, the Bush administration had allowed Saudi nationals present in the United States to fly home at a time when Americans were still grounded. Writing about the bitter-sweet relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia over the lifetimes of five Saudi kings—Faisal, Khalid, Fahd, Abdullah, and Salman—led me repeatedly to these questions: What makes the ruling House of Saud tick, and what are its aspirations, worldview, core pre-occupations, and innermost fears?

My first visit to the “secret kingdom” took place in May 1978, when the Saudi monarchy extended a rare invitation to the *Washington Post* to cover the changes taking place as a result of Saudi Arabia’s oil bonanza. So it was that I broke off from my primary responsibility at that time of reporting on Africa to accompany the foreign news editor, Peter Osnos, on an eye-opening visit to the kingdom. By then, Saudi Arabia had become irritating to the US public and fascinating to the media because of the 1973 Saudi-led Arab oil embargo. One result had been long lines at gasoline stations across the United States. Another was the sudden, shocking realization that denizens of this country had become dependent for their well-being on the diktat of a secretive family of Arabian Bedouin royals bearing the collective name of al-Saud and beholden for its survival and power to another unknown family of Islamic Wahhabi fundamentalists.

My first visit to Saudi Arabia amounted to a double take on a country undergoing a great leap forward in economic development while still bound in a social straitjacket by eighteenth-century Islamic precepts forbidding all forms of entertainment, alcohol, and mixing of genders in public and requiring the interruption of work for prayers five times daily. The oft-used word “opaque” was insufficient to describe the politics of the al-Saud family. The king held court in the desert city of Riyadh, on the Arabian Peninsula, which, though the kingdom’s capital, was still off-limits to Western embassies. Ambassadors were kept 600 miles away in the Red Sea port of Jeddah, and diplomats needed government permission for even brief visits to Riyadh. Interviews with the king or crown prince for Western reporters were unprecedented, and those with government ministers required days of negotiations with questions submitted in advance and finally hours of drinking tiny cups of sweet tea in waiting rooms overcrowded with Saudi petitioners.

The king and senior princes dealt with the public at their weekly *majlis*, an open-door meeting in which they listened to complaints and

requests for help from subjects who had come to plead their cases and hand over their scribbled petitions for succor. I recounted in an article three years later my visit to one such majlis held by then governor of Riyadh, Prince Salman, who became king thirty-seven years later, in 2015. “As long as we pray and go out to meet our people, then we will be in good shape,” Salman explained to me through an interpreter. “If you hear we have lost these two things then you know we are in trouble.”³ This quaint practice of “desert democracy” persisted well into the twenty-first century and is only now fading out as e-government takes its place as the primary channel for communication between the Saudi public and the royal family.

Even on my first visit in 1978, I saw that Saudi Arabia was busy building an oil industry of gigantic proportions and well on its way to becoming an indispensable source of this black gold for the entire Western world, particularly the United States. Saudi officials had taken me to see the world’s largest oil field, at Ghawar, stretching for tens of miles across the Eastern Province.⁴ It was pumping 5 million barrels a day, 70 percent of the kingdom’s total production of 7 million at that time. But even then, Saudi Arabia had the ability to pump 11 million, almost as much as it does today (12.5 million). The officials told me then that whether the kingdom would increase its production was purely a political decision depending on the state of the US-Saudi relationship, which at that point was rather tense. Saudi Arabia had already taken a more than 60 percent interest in the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), a consortium of four US oil giants—Standard Oil of California, Exxon, Mobil, and Texaco. Standard Oil had been responsible for the discovery of the first deposits in Saudi Arabia in the 1930s and then for building that oil empire with the other three US stakeholders.

The end of the US domination of that empire came in March 1980, when the Saudis forced Aramco to sell the other 40 percent. The only blessing for the United States was that the Saudis paid for this takeover of the oil consortium rather than nationalizing it outright as the Iranians, Iraqis, and Libyans had done to the British and other foreign companies exploiting their oil wealth. On subsequent visits to Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s, I wrote about the spectacular changes taking place inside the kingdom in other sectors financed by its gushing oil wealth. It was then launching its third five-year plan, having just spent \$142 billion initiating basic road infrastructure, government ministry buildings, hospitals, and schools nationwide. The new five-year plan called for spending far more, \$237 billion (\$805 billion in 2021 dollars.)

Upon rereading my early articles, I am struck by the similarities in Saudi strategic goals at home and abroad then and now. The Saudi kingdom has striven mightily and, so far, unsuccessfully to break its addiction to oil as the elixir for all its economic needs. This has proven a Sisyphean task. In the early 1980s, the monarchy had established a number of basic industries in two new poles of development, one on the eastern coast at Jubail on the Persian Gulf and the other on the western flank at the Red Sea port of Yanbu. These industries consisted mainly of chemical and petrochemical plants. Hisham Nazer, the planning minister in 1981, told me with no shortage of pride and hyperbole that Saudi Arabia was building “the most modern, efficient city in the world” in Jubail. The total of nine petrochemical, fertilizer, and steel plants planned for Jubail and Yanbu, he asserted, would “lay the foundation for an advanced technological economy which the country hopes will eventually replace its total dependence on oil exports.”⁵ Saudi Arabia, he boasted, was already in the twenty-first century when it came to industrial development.⁶ Thirty-six years later, a young upstart prince by the name of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) became the kingdom’s crown prince, proclaiming the very same vision for Saudi Arabia with the very same hyperbole. In 2017 it remained just about as far from fruition as in 1981.

Then and now, the kingdom’s dependence on foreign labor to make any of these dreams come true was a major security and social preoccupation. In 1981, 1.7 million foreigners—43 percent of the entire workforce—lived among a Saudi population of just 5 million. Nazer was well aware of the acute shortage of Saudis educated in the skills needed to run a modern economy, and the kingdom had earmarked nearly 20 percent of its third five-year plan for training them. The shortage of skilled Saudi labor is every bit as problematic today, and foreign workers now number around 10 million out of a total population of 35 million. Saudi Arabia is presently in the third cycle of building brand-new industrial cities and still seeking to break its dependence on oil and foreign workers to make its promised great leap forward into what economists refer to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, underway today in the West and China.

The Saudi Fear of Abandonment

Abroad, too, the crux of the Saudi foreign policy conundrum has remained the same: assuring as close an alliance as possible with the United States for its security while simultaneously searching for

other allies to offset that troublesome dependence on this country. Threats to the US-Saudi “special relationship” have become common since the Saudi-led 1973 oil embargo, particularly over US arms sales to the kingdom and Saudi export of Islamic extremist ideology and jihadists across the world.

In 1978, I was writing about the crisis over the Saudi request to purchase US-made F15 fighter jets and in 1981 the US Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft. Israel strongly opposed both sales, and its lobby in Washington campaigned feverishly to block them. The Saudis were making clear that their willingness to pump more for the United States would depend on its willingness to sell them F15s and the AWACS. Oil minister Yamani and his aides were talking openly about an oil-for-arms quid pro quo to sustain the US-Saudi relationship when I visited Ghawar in 1978. US arms were then, as they are today, the symbol of the larger US security umbrella over the kingdom. “We may be rich in money,” I quoted one Saudi official as saying, “but we have only 5 million people, no real means to defend ourselves, and little of our own technology to develop. We are really a very small country.”⁷ The Saudis’ underlying sense of insecurity in a region of rivals, competitors, and enemies remains just as strong today as does their military—and, even more, their psychological—dependence on the US security umbrella. “It is perhaps not fully understood in the United States that the Saudis, for all their billions of dollars and barrels of oil, still feel very weak and vulnerable,” I wrote in reflecting on my Ghawar visit.⁸ This is still true today.

The Saudi fear of abandonment by the United States is also just as true today. One article I wrote in February 1981 explained, under the headline “Saudis Cultivate European Link to Offset U.S.,” how the Saudis were developing a European option for buying sophisticated military aircraft if Ronald Reagan’s administration was unable to convince Congress to sell Saudi Arabia the AWACS. I remarked that the Saudi royal family had been signaling “its serious intention to shift away from its primary dependency on the United States for security and arms if the new [Reagan] administration is not forthcoming.”⁹ The Saudis had given credibility to their threat by awarding a \$3.4 billion contract to France for naval ships and by opening negotiations with Germany to purchase tanks. In the end, Congress narrowly approved the sale of the AWACS after a bitter fight won by the White House only after President Reagan staked his prestige on the outcome and personally lobbied a score of senators to vote in

favor of it. In 2019, a frustrated President Donald Trump faced a majority of Republicans and Democrats just as hostile to selling arms to Saudi Arabia, albeit for different reasons.

The Quest for Arab Leadership

Part of the Saudi quest for security options other than the United States involved mobilizing neighboring Arab states on its behalf against its enemies, primarily Shiite and Persian Iran claiming primacy over the Persian Gulf and actively expanding its influence over Saudi Arabia's Arab neighbors. Ever since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, its leaders have periodically voiced their desire to overthrow the six Arab monarchies on the other side of the Persian Gulf. I was present in Riyadh when Saudi Arabia and the five other Gulf Arab monarchs banded together in May 1981 to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) specifically to counter the Iranian threat to their survival.

I have watched other bursts of Saudi diplomatic activism as well, most surprisingly toward Israel even though that country has long been viewed as the *bête noire* of the Arab world because of its refusal to grant Palestinians their own state. In August 1981, Crown Prince Fahd astounded friends and enemies alike by putting forth the first Arab proposal for making peace with Israel. It was adopted over the objections of radical Arab leaders a few months later at the Arab League's summit in Morocco to become thereafter known as the "Fahd Plan." Israel immediately rejected it out of hand, but the main news was that Saudi Arabia had done it at all. I highlighted in my story at the time this "new activist Saudi diplomacy" marking a sharp break from "the long Saudi tradition of backroom maneuvering rather than risky public diplomacy."¹⁰ It was the Saudis' first concerted, multipronged effort to project themselves on the world scene, starting with the Arab and Muslim worlds. That same year, the Saudis also took over leadership of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)—then forty-two nations—and flexed their muscles to force the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to lower oil prices to a level dictated by Riyadh.

The Fahd Plan was dead on arrival in Israel, but the Saudis did not give up. In 2002, they convinced the twenty-two members of the Arab League to endorse unanimously a new Saudi plan for resolving the Palestinian issue and making peace with Israel. As I shall discuss in Chapter 9, the Saudi bid for domination of the Arab world and

recognition as a world power has remained their primary objective in foreign policy since the early 1980s.

Over the years of writing about Saudi Arabia, I have repeatedly asked myself why that country has had such a difficult time projecting its power and leadership in the Arab world, even over its closest Arab allies, the five other Gulf monarchies. The Saudi kingdom has tried and repeatedly failed to establish its primacy even though Cairo, Egypt; Damascus, Syria; and Baghdad, Iraq—the Arab world’s three historic power centers—have ceased to be contenders. Saudi Arabia leads the Arab world in gross domestic product (GDP), foreign reserves, and financial heft, and it is the birthplace of Islam and custodian of the religion’s two holiest mosques, in Mecca and Medina. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has never succeeded in putting together these unmatched assets to exercise a commanding influence.

I will argue later in this book that the answer to this conundrum lies partly in the Saudi inability to project military power without US backing. The kingdom’s reliance on the United States to achieve that goal is only slightly less today than it was during the 1990–1991 Gulf War, which required the dispatch of 500,000 US soldiers to defend it and liberate Kuwait. In retrospect, that war marked the apogee of US-Saudi cooperation over the seventy-five years of the two countries’ “special relationship.” Since then, the ties have steadily frayed, first because of neglect during the eight years of the Clinton administration (1993–2001) and then because of the shock of Saudi involvement in the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001. This led to countless conferences in Washington under the title “Saudi Arabia: Friend or Foe?” devoted to analyzing whether the US-Saudi relationship was “too important to let fail.” The debate over this issue continues to this day.

The Saudis, too, saw reason to ask the same question, particularly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 opened the door for the vast expansion of Iranian political and military presence on the Saudi kingdom’s northern border. For the Saudis, that event transformed the United States from its historic role as guarantor of the kingdom’s security into a major cause of its insecurity. This was only made worse by the monarchy’s own decision in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq to demand that the US military stop using Saudi bases and move all its planes, soldiers, and operations to neighboring Qatar, which it did in April 2003. The strain in US-Saudi relations only worsened during the Obama administration (2009–2017) as it negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran and called upon the Saudis to

“share the neighborhood” with their Iranian enemies. Added to this was Saudi Arabia’s own invasion of neighboring Yemen in 2015. This resulted in the US Congress demanding an end to US support of that operation along with its arms sales to the kingdom as the invasion turned into a terrible humanitarian disaster.

The arrival of Trump at the White House in 2017 led to a revival of Saudi hopes that the United States would return to its traditional role of security blanket for the kingdom because of Trump’s fierce rhetoric against Iran and promise to curb its expansionism in the Arab world. The Saudis, who had kicked the US military out of the kingdom in 2003, welcomed it back wholeheartedly in 2019. This was particularly true after that September, when Iran attacked with impunity the monarchy’s strategic oil facilities, exposing Saudi inability to protect the crown jewels of the kingdom. But then came Trump’s defeat in November 2020 to Obama’s former vice president, Joe Biden, who had called MBS a “pariah” for his role in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 and promised a reassessment of the whole US-Saudi relationship.

The emergence of MBS as heir apparent in June 2017 provoked the greatest challenge yet to the rationale for that relationship, which dates back to the end of World War II and is the oldest US relationship with a Middle Eastern country. MBS quickly showed himself to be impulsive and reckless in his foreign policy, acting against US interests time and again. He also proved ruthless against his critics, activists, and even reformers at home. He almost immediately raised serious doubts in the US Congress, the media, and human rights groups about his fitness to rule. Yet, because of his young age—only thirty-one when he became crown prince—it became clear he might very well rule Saudi Arabia for the next half century.

The Icarus Analogy

MBS brings to mind the tragic Greek mythological figure Icarus, who suffered from an excess of youthful recklessness and hubris and wanted to escape the island of Crete. His father, Daedalus, had made his flight possible by designing his wings of feathers held together by wax, which melted when Icarus flew too close to the sun. Icarus’s high-flying audacity ended in his drowning in the sea. Like Daedalus, King Salman has enabled his son to escape the political confines of the House of Saud, traditionally requiring years of government experience and proven ability to qualify for leadership. The king figuratively, and

almost literally, catapulted his son over far-more-qualified rivals to reach the pinnacle of royal power. Like Icarus, MBS has shown unbridled ambition to become the founder of a new futuristic Saudi kingdom and a renowned world leader. But already MBS has taken an epic fall because of his unbounded ambition, hubris, and recklessness. The Greek myth has given rise to what is known as an “Icarus complex,” which one medical dictionary describes as the gap between “a person’s desire for success, achievement, or material goods and the ability to achieve those goals.”¹¹ Saudi Arabia’s forthcoming king might well be suffering already from such a complex, and this would help to explain his often erratic and self-defeating behavior.

MBS has set as his goal becoming the greatest Saudi king since the founding father of the Third Saudi Kingdom in 1932, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud (king until his death in 1953). It sometimes seems MBS is bent on carrying out as radical a secular transformation of Saudi society as Atatürk did of Turkey’s. MBS has already set in motion a social revolution, curbed the Wahhabi establishment’s powers and radically changed the way Saudi Arabia is ruled. He has set his sights on making his kingdom a world economic powerhouse at the leading edge of technological innovation. He exhibits all the high-flying ambition of Icarus and has already taken an epic fall in his standing on the international scene, if not at home, because of his early misdeeds and missteps. If he has not drowned like Icarus, he is flailing in a roiled sea at the start of a long quest. Whether one admires or excoriates him, the central question remains whether MBS will prove the necessary agent of change to transform his tethered kingdom into a truly dynamic global power.

Structure of the Book

In this book I intend to use MBS’s rise to power to tell a larger story of the kingdom’s decades-long quest for domestic reform and global leadership. I am a journalist, albeit one who holds a PhD from Columbia University in comparative politics (with the Middle East as one focus of my studies), so the reader will find the style distinctively journalistic. My hope is that the book will appeal to generalists as well as to a scholarly audience and specialists in Saudi Arabia, whom I sometimes refer to as “Saudiologists” (akin to the term “Kremlinologists”). The text is interspersed with my own personal recollections of many visits to the kingdom that together with my academic background have provided the basis for my assessments.

I have divided the book into three parts, plus two initial chapters aimed at introducing the reader first to the mysteries of Saudi Arabia, with its numerous conundrums outlined above, and then to MBS, explaining how he was able to accomplish his extraordinary rise to power so quickly and so totally unexpectedly. Part 1 (Chapters 3–5) deals with the crumbling of the old Saudi order and describes the surprising number of reforms already underway before the iconoclastic arrival of MBS onto the Saudi political landscape. Part 2 (Chapters 6–10) covers the making of a new, modernized Saudi Arabia as imagined by MBS. I detail in Chapter 6 the radical changes he has already introduced in the governance of the kingdom and in society. Then in Chapter 7, I outline his dreams for a new Saudi Arabia embracing the digitalized economy and social life associated with what has come to be called the Fourth Industrial Revolution. I follow this in Chapter 8 with the account of MBS’s dramatic fall from international grace, his “Icarian moment,” as I have called it, as a result of his engineering the assassination of his chief critic, Saudi journalist Khashoggi. I weigh the consequences for him both at home and abroad, which I argue are quite different. Then I turn in Chapters 9 and 10 to MBS’s foreign policy, covering first his quest for global power, and how it has been severely set back by the dramatic deterioration in Saudi Arabia’s relations with the United States and even its neighboring Arab allies.

In Chapter 9, I also seek to answer perhaps the central conundrum of Saudi Arabia: why, despite its enormous oil wealth and religious authority, it has had such a difficult time projecting military power as reflected in its dismal performance in the Yemeni civil war. Saudi Arabia has even been unable to exercise much political influence over its closest and far smaller allies, the other Gulf Arab monarchies. I argue that these striking shortcomings in power projection have only become more acute and obvious since MBS came to power. In Chapter 10, I examine whether Saudi Arabia and the United States will be able to rescue their seventy-five-year relationship, or if they have finally reached a parting of the ways or at least come to the point where a fundamental reassessment of its basis and purpose has become imperative for both.

In Part 3, my conclusion, I seek to place MBS in the wider context of past notable Middle East reform leaders, from Atatürk in Turkey and Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia to Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt and the shah in Iran. I look at the similarities and dissimilarities in their tactics, particularly repressive ones, for bringing about

reform. Finally, I offer the pros and cons of MBS's chances for success of one day joining the ranks of these major historical figures in the modern-day history of the Middle East.

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