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Saudi crown prince shifts into high gear on multiple fronts

By James M. Dorsey



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is simultaneously speed dating and playing on multiple diplomatic, religious, and economic chessboards. The latest feather in his crown, his [appointment as prime minister](#), aims to ensure that he can continue to do so with as little collateral damage as possible.

The appointment [shields him](#) from legal proceedings in the United States, France, and potentially elsewhere, including the International Criminal Court in the Hague, in

which plaintiffs assert that Mr. Bin Salman was responsible for the 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

As a head of government, Mr. Bin Salman enjoys sovereign immunity, a status he could not claim as heir-apparent. While the legal maneuver is certain to succeed, it is unlikely to significantly improve his image tarnished by the killing and his domestic crackdown on dissent that in recent weeks produced outlandish sentences to decades in prison for little more than a tweet.

Reputation issues have not stopped Mr. Bin Salman from shifting into high gear as he pushes ahead with efforts to diversify Saudi Arabia's oil-dependent economy; replace regional competitors like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar as the center of gravity at the intersection of Asia, Africa, and Europe; demonstrate his diplomatic clout and relevance beyond oil to the international community; and position himself and the kingdom as the beacon of a moderate, albeit an autocratic, form of Islam.

Mr. Bin Salman's multi-pronged dash has produced mixed results.

In his latest foray onto the international stage, Mr. Bin Salman sought to display his diplomatic skills and relevance to the international community by securing the release by Russia of ten foreign nationals captured while fighting for Ukraine. The foreigners' release was part of a Ukrainian-Russian prisoner swap negotiated by Turkey.

Although Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan al Saud rejected as "very cynical" assertions that Mr. Bin Salman was seeking to shore up his image by associating himself with the swap, it seems likely that Russian President Vladimir Putin was happy to give him a helping hand.

In a similar vein, people close to Mr. Bin Salman see mileage in asserting that the crown prince's lifting of a ban on women's driving and enhancement of women's rights and professional opportunities is what inspired women-led protests in Iran that have entered their third week as well as Iran's recent relaxing of its prohibition on women attending men's soccer matches.

Ali Shihabi, an analyst who often echoes official Saudi thinking, claimed in a tweet that "Saudi reforms for women have had a big impact on the world of Islam. As the previous upholder of ultra orthodoxy #MBS's dramatic changes have [sent a powerful signal](#) that has undermined Uber conservatives across the region like the Mullahs in Iran." Mr. Shihabi was referring to Mr. Bin Salman by his initials.

The nationwide protests were sparked by the death of a young woman while in the custody of Iran's morality police. The police had [arrested 22-year-old Mahsa Amini](#) for what authorities described as sporting an "improper" hijab.

By contrast, Mr. Bin Salman's economic diversification efforts appear to be producing more unambiguous results. For example, the Saudi industry and mineral resources ministry issued over 500 industrial licenses in the first six months of this year, primarily in the food, steel, and chemicals sectors.

The ministry reported that the [number of factories](#) that commenced operations doubled, from 303 to 721. Buoyed by massive oil export revenues, Mr. Bin Salman hopes to brand a '[Made in Saudi](#)' label as part of his non-oil export drive.

Even so, foreign investment in manufacturing has been slow to take off, particularly in Mr. Bin Salman's, at times, futuristic mega projects like his [US\\$500 billion city of Neom on the Red Sea](#). New Jersey-based Lucid Group broke the mold when it announced in February that it would build its first overseas [electrical vehicle production facility](#) in the kingdom.

More controversial are plans for a beach in Neom scheduled to open next year that envision [a wine bar, a separate cocktail bar, and a bar for "champagne and desserts"](#) in a country that bans alcohol.

The plans seem out of sync with religious sentiment among a significant segment of Gulf youth if [a recent opinion poll](#) is to be believed,

Forty-one per cent of young Gulf Arabs, including Saudis, said religion was the most important element of their identity, with nationality, family and/or tribe, Arab heritage, and gender lagging far behind.

More than half of those surveyed, 56 per cent, said their country's legal system should be based on the Shariah or Islamic law. Seventy per cent expressed concern about the loss of traditional values and culture.

In contrast to economics, the going in turning the kingdom into a sports and esports hub has been rougher.

In his latest move, Mr. Bin Salman launched a US\$38 billion "National Gaming and Esports Strategy" to make Saudi Arabia an esports leader by 2030. The budget includes

[US\\$13 billion](#) for the acquisition of “a leading game publisher.” The kingdom has already invested in Capcom, Nexon, Nintendo, ESL Gaming, SNK, and Embracer Group.

In addition, Saudi music entertainment company MDLBEAST saw a business opportunity in the 2022 Qatar World Cup that would also help project the once secretive kingdom as a forward-looking modern state. MDLBEAST has invited 56 top international and regional performers to entertain soccer fans on a custom-built stage in [Doha](#) during the 28 days of the tournament.

On an even grander scale, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two of the world’s more notorious human rights violators, together with Greece, are considering [bidding to host the 2030 World Cup](#) –a move that sounds like an invitation to a perfect public relations fiasco, if Qatar’s experience is an indicator.

The potential bid did not stop soccer icon [Cristiano Ronaldo](#) from dashing initial Saudi hopes to attract a superstar to the kingdom’s top football league when he turned down a US\$258 million offer to play for Al Hilal, one of Saudi Arabia’s top clubs.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s endeavor to [bankroll Liv Golf, a challenger to PGA Tour](#), the organizer of North America’s main professional men’s golf tournaments, has turned into a public relations fiasco amid allegations that the kingdom was seeking to launder its reputation.

A refusal by major broadcasters to secure the rights to air the League’s tours exemplifies its problems.

Religion has proven to be the arena in which Saudi Arabia may have scored its most prominent public relations fete.

The Muslim World League, Mr. bin Salman’s primary vehicle to garner religious soft power and propagate an autocratic version of Islam that is socially liberal but demands absolute obedience to the ruler, achieved a public relations coup when it forged an unlikely alliance with Nahdlatul Ulama.

Nahdlatul Ulama is arguably the world’s only mass movement propagating a genuinely moderate and pluralistic form of Islam.

Moreover, as the world’s largest Muslim civil society movement in the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country and democracy, Nahdlatul Ulama’s [words and actions have an impact](#).

As a result, the League counted its blessings when Nahdlatul Ulama' recognized it as a [non-governmental organization](#) rather than a de facto extension of Mr. Bin Salman's rule.

The recognition opens doors for the League, which has so far traded on Saudi Arabia's custodianship of Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest cities; lofty statements and conferences that produced little, if any, real change; and funding of emergency and development aid in various parts of the world.

It allowed Nahdlatul Ulama to invite the League, a major promoter of Saudi ultra-conservatism before Mr. Bin Salman's rise, to co-organize the newly established Religion 20 (R20), a summit of religious leaders under the auspices of the Group of 20 that brings together the world's largest economies.

The first R20 summit, scheduled for early November in Bali, is part of the run-up to the [meeting of G20 leaders](#) later that month hosted by Indonesia, the group's chairman for the year. The R20, the G20's latest official engagement group, aims to "position religion as a source of solutions rather than problems across the globe."

The limits of Saudi tolerance were evident last month when authorities arrested a pilgrim to Mecca for dedicating his pilgrimage [to Britain's Queen Elizabeth](#), a non-Muslim who had just died.

Nahdlatul Ulama's outreach to the [Muslim World] League is part of a bold and risky strategy. However, Nahdlatul Ulama believes that engagement creates an opportunity to persuade the League to embrace a more genuine and holistic vision of moderate Islam rather than one that is self-serving.

That may be a long shot, but it also may be a way of launching Saudi Arabia on a path that would help it repair its badly tarnished image. That is if Mr. Bin Salman pairs genuine religious moderation and pluralism with a rollback of domestic repression and greater political pluralism. So far, that appears to be one thing the crown prince is unwilling to consider.

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