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After Istanbul: The Forward View



James Watt CVO served extensively in the Middle East, including most recently as British Ambassador to Egypt (2011-14), Jordan (2006-11) and Lebanon (2003-6). His 37-year diplomatic career covered many of the major political and security questions of the day, providing wide experience also of economic, business and development issues.

Vision 2030 was the blueprint for Saudi Arabia's future. Published in April 2016, it highlighted the need for employment creation for the country's large young population. The formula proposed was on expected lines: greatly improved education and skills training, expansion of the private sector, and encouragement of small and medium businesses that in any country are the main creators of jobs. Investment was key. Not only domestic, but from outside. Importing skills and knowledge-economy businesses was rightly seen as an objective. Such goals implied an environment of social and intellectual freedom, and a move away from the conservatism associated with the Kingdom's style of government.

The corresponding narrative was the need to reduce the Kingdom's dependence on oil production and oil-related industries. It foresaw the long-term decline of oil revenues as the world moved towards cleaner, non-hydrocarbon energy. Already the *rentier* form of economy that Saudi Arabia has enjoyed since the 1950s, and despite continuing huge oil revenues, was proving insufficient for the basic needs of the fast expanding population.

The man who tied himself most closely to Vision 2030 and publicly made it his own was Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS). The accumulation of state power in his hands became almost total with his appointment as Crown Prince in 2017. He found himself riding a wave of loyalty among the young population enthused by his announcement of social freedoms, such as women being allowed to drive, and the opening of cinemas. Yet the statement of intent was never going to be easy to put into practice. Change of the kind required implied overcoming obstacles such as the cultural absence of a proper work ethic, of habits of work and organisation, and of management, among the intended national workforce. Such a change would realistically have to be measured in decades, not years.

In his triumphal three-week tour of the United States last spring, MbS was welcomed not only by the heads of large corporations in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, but by many with hopes of engaging Saudi Arabia in confronting Iran and forcing it to change its regional policy. MbS

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had already obliged by declaring his country's hostility to its large neighbour. He also courted part of US opinion by supporting moves to end Palestinian claims to a viable state (a step too far, as it turned out: his father, King Salman, publicly contradicted him). With the earlier successful visit by President Trump to Riyadh and the announcement of large defence contracts, Saudi Arabia's alignment with the US Administration's goals in the region seemed almost complete.

Yet all was not well. Hostility towards Saudi Arabia for its long-established practice of exporting extreme Islamist doctrine, and its association with the 9/11 attacks by virtue of the perpetrators being almost all Saudi nationals, had remained strong in Congress and parts of American opinion. Not many were taken in by talk of women driving as being a genuine sign of change. The wider world had meanwhile been shocked by the war on Yemen launched by MbS in 2015, a war which all agree was from the start unnecessary and unwinnable, and which has led to devastating hardship for a population already facing widespread poverty. It was the surprising move in November 2017, however, orchestrated by MbS against virtually all the wealthiest personalities and businessmen in the Kingdom, - the Ritz Carlton coup - that set the tide flowing against the claims he was making about a brighter new future for his country. While domestic public opinion enthusiastically accepted that the motive was to end cronyism and self-privilege among the royal elite, to more sober minds the coup looked more like a gangsterish shake-down of rivals. The underlying contempt it showed for the rule of law shocked domestic and foreign investors alike. Capital began discreetly to flow out. Investment plans slowed. The scale of the misjudgement became clear. From that moment it was already clear that Vision 2030 was doomed.

Saudi Arabia meanwhile was spending more money than ever on promoting its image and its modernising agenda. The sheer flood of unconvincing propaganda and dishonest lobbying claims caused a reaction in congressional circles in Washington and among the serious media everywhere. It was not simply the half-truths and the lack of trustworthiness they embodied. It was the attitude they implied that the audience would believe anything they were told, or else be too dazzled by promises of lucrative business to want to rock the boat. When reporting came from accurate sources of the widespread arrest of activists, including women campaigning for basic rights, and of the extensive use of the death penalty against dissidents in the Kingdom, the façade began to show serious cracks. A particularly serious atrocity in Yemen, when an air strike on a bus carrying schoolboys killed 40 of them on 9 August, ensured that international condemnation of the Saudi-led war not only continued but became stronger and more urgent.

This was the background to the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Consulate-General of Saudi Arabia in Istanbul on 2 October 2018. While the Saudi authorities are now taking judicial action against 18 of their citizens accused of being the perpetrators, they continue to isolate MbS from any responsibility for it. This has not convinced world public opinion. He is almost universally regarded as having been the instigator of the murder, in conformity with the track record of ruthlessness, rashness, contempt for the rule of law, and ignorance of the real world that he had already established. The myriad scribblers deployed to muddy the waters and deflect attention elsewhere have their job cut out for them. They are of course

only making it worse. For to the crime of murder is added the charge of appalling political judgement, not only in committing it but in the lies and evasions that followed. To deploy such lies shows the contempt with which the perpetrators regard their global audience and their interlocutors. It marks their isolation from the real world. And ignorant self-deceit having relied for so long on paid propaganda and the lure of contracts to have it, as they supposed, all their way. What the murder has done is bring all this into sharper focus. There is no going back. What little trust there was has gone.

Tragically for Saudi Arabia and its young population, it is not just that the promise of Vision 2030 has been pushed back far into the future. It is that the proclaimed new leadership of the country has been shown to be deeply flawed. Its false claims to modernity have revealed the bitter opposite: a savage disregard for traditional consensual government, let alone anything resembling a modern state under the rule of law. The challenge of getting the country's political development onto an inclusive and positive path is greater than it has ever been, and no less urgent. Meanwhile investment will stall and jobs remain scarce. Political discontent will grow. Saudi Arabia's friends must rally round and help it find a new way. The greatest service they can give the Kingdom and its people is to continue to speak honestly about what has gone wrong.

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