

Masquerading Reforms: The Tricks of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman

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The surgical dismembering of Jamal Khashoggi has sent the military establishments of several countries into a tizz. Arms manufacturers are wondering whether this is an inconvenient blip, a ruffling moral reminder about what they are dealing with. Autocratic regimes indifferent to the lives of journalists are wondering whether the fuss taken about all this is merely the fuss endured, till the next bloody suppression. But importantly, those states notionally constituting the West may have to reconsider the duping strategy that the House of Saud has executed with the deft efficiency of the dedicated axeman.

The ranks are closing in around the Saudi royals, notably the purportedly suspicious son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose status has been given an undue measure of inflation from various powers happy to see reform in the air. The measures taken by MBS have been modest and hardly worth a sigh: the cutting of subsidies, permitting women to drive, and restructuring the economy. But like a fake article of purchase at an inordinately expensive auction, the prince's counterfeit credentials are starting to peer through the canvas.

The Crown Prince has been happy to provide a train of examples to suggest to his Western audience that the roots of a liberal Saudi Arabian past are very much in evidence. To Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, the beguiling royal [explained](#) that,

“Before 1979 there were societal guardianship customs, but no guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia.”

The tactic is clear: speak of a yesteryear that was jolly and a touch tender, and promise that a current era seemingly harder can emulate it. Goldberg was good enough to make the observation that the Crown Prince had gotten one thing right from the perspective of his sponsors in Europe, the Middle East and the United States: “He has made all the right enemies.”

In the aftermath of Khashoggi's disappearance, Mohammed was keen to get a word in to the Trump administration before any firm conclusions could be drawn. His first port of call was President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and national security adviser John Bolton. [According](#) to *The Washington Post*, the call featured one theme of justification: Khashoggi was a dangerous, destabilising Islamist, and any tears shed would be premature.

Publically, the Crown Prince played along with the conceit that the death of Khashoggi had been “very painful for all Saudis”, being unjustifiable. Khalid bin Salman, Riyadh's ambassador in Washington, insisted that the slain journalist had been a friend of the

Kingdom, “dedicating a great portion of his life to serve his country.”

The powers, regional and beyond, have taken to douching the image of the Crown Prince, hoping to minimise prospects for any rash action. Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu might well [concede](#) that what happened in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul last month “was horrendous and should be duly dealt with”, but the broader strategic interests topped anything connected with a mere journalist’s life. When a figure corrupted by power reasons with violently inflicted death, he is bound to embrace that word that forgives and justifies all: stability. “At the same time, it is very important for the stability of the world, for the region and for the world, that Saudi Arabia remain stable.”

Minor appendages of US power such as Australia also find themselves in a tangle about how best to approach the revelations and claimed royal involvement. Shrouded in history, the officials of distant Canberra also remain gulled, confused, and happy to be led. The Australian defence sector has been placed in the dim light of deals with the Kingdom. As legal advocate Kellie Tanter [notes](#), documents obtained via Freedom of Information laws confirm that, between January 1 2016 to December 31, 2017, sixteen military licenses were procured for export of military equipment from Australia to Saudi Arabia. As is traditional with such freedom of information laws, permit holders, permit numbers and approved goods, consignees, end-users and approved destinations were redacted.

Under questioning from Labor Senator Alex Gallacher last month in a Senate estimates hearing, the Australian Department of Defence was not forthcoming about the nature of the exports to Riyadh. Official Tom Hamilton refused to disclose their value, citing weak “commercial-in-confidence” reasons.

The pickle Australian policy makers find themselves in lies in the obligations of the Arms Trade Treaty, which insists on a ban on exports of weapons to countries where evidence can be shown of use against civilians. The Saudi-led campaign in Yemen against the Houthis, featuring a true orgy of civilian-targeted destruction, qualifies. But Yemen hardly qualifies as a humanitarian disaster in Australian political discourse (distant places have a certain ethical irrelevance to the plodders in Canberra). To make sure her bases are covered, Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne, in reference not to the war in Yemen but the killing of Khashoggi, [suggested](#) that, “All options are on the table”. It is already clear what option Canberra prefers: ignore the complicity of the House of Saud, and keep the procession of defence contracts going.

Khashoggi himself [was clear](#) enough about the nature of the Crown Prince: the royal was entirely self-centred, and any reform would take place in a contrived way. Concepts of reform within the Saudi royal court can, at best, only be a limited affair, and have nothing to do with deeper social considerations. Saudi intellectuals, activists and journalists [languished](#) in prison even as MBS was being praised for his openness; such projects as the futuristic city of Neom were doomed examples of extravagance rather than forward thinking.

“He has no interest in political reform,” comes Khashoggi, a voice from the grave. “He thinks he can do it alone, and he doesn’t want really any counter opinion or anyone to share those changes in Saudi Arabia with him.”

Hardly revelatory, and something bound to do little to turn the ladies and men of the

security establishments of the West.

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