

Saudi Crown Prince Salman Is Not a Reformer, Just Another Despot

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As Mohammed bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, continues what Time Magazine [described](#) earlier this month as his “charm offensive,” Saudi-led airstrikes [killed](#) more than 20 people last week at a wedding party in northern Yemen. Women, including the bride, and children made up the bulk of the casualties.

Should we pay no attention to this and other, similar incidents? After all, Prince Mohammed is, we are told, a reformer and friend of the U.S.

He led the charge to grant Saudi women the [right to drive a car](#), a change expected to take effect later this year. Prince Mohammed, or MBS as he is popularly known, also been credited with bringing the [first movie theater](#) to Saudi Arabia, as well as attracting Western spectacles like [Cirque du Soleil](#) to Riyadh.

In the United States, he has received favorable attention from different quarters. He has been courted by the [Trump administration](#), the [defense industries](#), and [Texas oilmen](#). During a recent tour of the U.S., he had audiences with [Oprah Winfrey](#), [Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson](#), [Bill and Hillary Clinton](#), [Henry Kissinger](#), [John Kerry](#), and [Michael Bloomberg](#). He hobnobbed with Apple CEO [Tim Cook](#), Amazon CEO [Jeff Bezos](#), and met the presidents of [Harvard](#) and [MIT](#). He has been praised by [Fox News](#) and within the op-ed pages of the [New York Times](#).

But, when you strip away the showmanship, the hype, and the fawning adoration of much of the Western media, MBS is a man with blood on his hands.

The incident involving the Yemeni wedding party is merely the latest atrocity committed by the Saudi Arabian government during its military intervention in Yemen, which started in March, 2015.

Since that time, nearly 6,000 Yemeni civilians have been [killed](#), according to the United Nations Human Rights Office. Other outlets have estimated the number could be much higher, in excess of 10,000 fatalities.

Saudi Arabia has utilized [cluster bombs](#), supplied largely by [Brazil](#) and the [United States](#), in many of its airstrikes. Cluster munitions were outlawed by the 103 countries ratifying the [Convention on Cluster Munitions](#). Brazil, the United States, and Saudi Arabia were not among those countries.

Meanwhile, a Saudi-led blockade of the country has left more than [22 million Yemeni](#) —

more than 80 percent of the country's population — without ready access to food, water, or health care.

"The situation in Yemen...looks like the apocalypse," Mark Lowcock, the head of the United Nations office for the coordination of humanitarian affairs, [said](#) in January.

More than 1 million Yemeni have contracted [cholera](#), millions are suffering from acute malnutrition, and last year alone more than 50,000 Yemeni children [died](#) from starvation.

MBS is largely responsible for this disastrous intervention, which he has spearheaded since becoming the Saudi defense minister. According to the [New York Times](#), he "took the lead, launching the war in March, 2015 without full coordination across the security services."

However, Prince Mohammed did recently [donate](#) \$930 million to the United Nations for humanitarian relief, nearly one-third of the total the U.N. is seeking for aid in Yemen this year. This gift is financially significant, but it is impossible not to question the Prince's motives, given that he is the architect of policies that have inflicted such great harm in Yemen.

In MBS' home country, where he is regarded by many as a reformer, he has not done much better. In fact, Saudi Arabia, a nation notorious for its [human rights violations](#), has, by some measures, lost ground in terms of human rights since MBS came to power.

In its report on Saudi Arabia's human rights record in 2017, the [Human Rights Watch](#) wrote:

"Saudi authorities continued their arbitrary arrests, trials, and convictions of peaceful dissidents. Dozens of human rights defenders and activists continued to serve long prison sentences for criticizing authorities or advocating political and rights reforms. Authorities continued to discriminate against women and religious minorities."

In the area of domestic reform, in late 2017 MBS instigated a purge of prominent Saudis, resulting in the arrests of more than 500 people on charges of corruption. While few dispute that there is widespread corruption in Saudi Arabia, the main effects of the arrests may well have been to [consolidate](#) the Prince's economic and political power.

Prince Mohammed has been celebrated here in the United States. He has rubbed elbows with [Hollywood celebrities](#), promised to keep making [arms deals](#) with the U.S. government, and, human rights violations be damned, has continued to promote an image that casts him as a statesman.

At what point does the willingness of leading figures in the U.S. government, technology industries, entertainment, education, and beyond to court and praise Prince Mohammed discredit American values and make a mockery of our often-professed concerns for the sovereign rights of nations and the welfare of their citizens?

At what point does it become clear that Mohammed bin Salman is not a "man of the people," but rather another power-hungry warmonger with little regard for the life he has taken or endangered?

It may be argued that creating an effective foreign policy for the United States in the 21st century depends on a return to many of the values on which the country was founded, including a fundamental opposition to tyranny. Refusing to align our country with despots like Prince Mohammed, with leaders who are willing to inflict the sort of suffering that has been visited on the Yemeni, would be an excellent place to start that process.

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