

# Saudi crown prince charges Iran with “act of war”

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Hot on the heels of purging his main rivals for the Saudi throne, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has dramatically ratcheted up tensions in the Middle East, accusing Iran of an “act of war.” This makes clear that the consolidation of power in the hands of the most hardline, anti-Iranian faction of the Saudi royal family threatens to trigger a catastrophic regional conflict across the war-ravaged Middle East.

Bin Salman’s allegation was made in the wake of the firing of a missile from Yemen into Saudi Arabia, which was intercepted and destroyed by the Saudi Air Force. Riyadh has been waging a bloody war since 2015 against the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Bin Salman seized on the incident to provocatively threaten a military conflict with Tehran. “The involvement of Iran in supplying missiles to the Houthis is a direct military aggression by the Iranian regime,” he said Tuesday, “and may be considered an act of war against the Kingdom.”

Fanning the flames of conflict between the two regional competitors and strengthening bin Salman’s hand in his anti-Iran policy, US President Donald Trump denounced Iran Monday, blaming it, without any evidence, for being behind the missile launch. The head of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards responded to Trump’s incendiary allegation by denying Iranian responsibility.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif responded angrily via Twitter, criticising Riyadh for carrying out “wars of aggression, regional bullying, destabilising behaviour and risky provocations.” Yet, he added, Saudi Arabia “blames Iran for the consequences.”

Bin Salman’s war threats followed the dramatic arrest of 11 princes and 38 government ministers and former ministers last weekend. The crackdown, carried out by bin Salman in conjunction with his father, the aging and ailing King Salman, exposed the deepening crisis confronting the regime in Riyadh and the extremely

unstable situation throughout the Middle East.

The 32-year-old bin Salman was named as crown prince in June by his father after the arrest of former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Naif. Bin Salman was appointed Saturday by King Salman to head up an anti-corruption body, and a few hours later he launched the latest wave of detentions under the self-serving pretext of clamping down on corruption.

The transparent aim was to strengthen Salman’s branch of the royal family and ensure a smooth succession to bin Salman when the 81-year-old king abdicates or dies. Among the most high profile figures arrested were Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, the son of the former King Abdullah and head of the National Guard, and Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a billionaire with substantial investments in numerous European and US companies.

The crown prince’s declared determination to confront growing Iranian influence throughout the region is exacerbating the already tense conflicts that have been enflamed over the course of more than a quarter century of uninterrupted wars waged by US imperialism. The first Gulf War of 1991, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the bombardment of Libya in 2011 and the ongoing war in Syria and Iraq have claimed the lives of millions, forced millions more from their homes and upended the regional balance of forces.

Everything suggests that Saudi Arabia and its US backer are taking coordinated steps to challenge Iran more forcefully. The entire US ruling elite is deeply troubled by Iran’s growing influence in the Middle East and the fact that, notwithstanding the expenditure of vast amounts of blood and treasure, Washington has proven incapable of bringing the world’s most important oil-exporting region under its control. Instead, the US is losing ground to Russia and increasingly China, which is emerging as an economic player.

The same day as bin Salman ordered the arrest of his

rivals, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his surprise resignation while in the Saudi capital. Hariri, a Sunni leader who ruled in cooperation with the Shiite and Iranian-aligned Hezbollah, appears to have been forced out by Riyadh to create the conditions for a more direct confrontation with Hezbollah. In neighbouring Israel, which is preparing for war with Hezbollah, the government of Binyamin Netanyahu has encouraged the Saudis in their hardline approach to Iran. Tel Aviv has also stepped up its air strikes in the Syrian conflict, aiming to contain Iranian influence and stop weapons shipments to Hezbollah.

Prince Salman's purge was explicitly endorsed by Trump, who stated during his ongoing Asia trip that it was a good thing for the crown prince to take action against corruption and that he has "great confidence" in him.

Trump laid the groundwork for the development of an anti-Iranian Sunni alliance in the Middle East during a trip to Riyadh in May. In the course of a provocative speech, he lambasted Tehran as the region's main sponsor of terrorism. Last month, Trump refused to certify Iran's compliance with the 2015 nuclear accord negotiated under the Obama administration, setting the stage for a further ratcheting up of tensions with Tehran and a direct military conflict involving the United States.

Predictably, the US media has generally responded positively to bin Salman's crackdown on his domestic opponents. The only expressions of concern came from those worried that bin Salman's aggressive clampdown could discredit and weaken the Saudi monarchy. Bruce Riedel, a 30-year CIA veteran and director of the Brookings Intelligence Project, told al-Jazeera, "There will be much discontent behind the scenes in the family, and the Kingdom is headed for instability."

Riyadh, which has served as a key prop of Washington in the Middle East since 1945, is growing increasingly concerned about the undermining of its geopolitical position. Washington's failure to launch a direct intervention to topple the Assad regime, its decision to conclude the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and its refusal to grant its unreserved support to Riyadh's economic and diplomatic blockade of Qatar earlier this year have intensified the Saudi ruling establishment's crisis.

The Saudi ruling elite is responding to the thwarting of its ambitions to become the regional hegemon by lashing out ever more recklessly and aggressively. The bloody war in Yemen conducted by Riyadh since 2015 against the Houthi rebels, has killed tens of thousands of civilians and produced a devastating humanitarian disaster. The

Saudis have failed to achieve their strategic ambitions and have instead been increasingly isolated, with only limited support coming from the Gulf states for the conflict.

The blockade against Qatar, which was motivated by the Saudis' frustration at Doha's burgeoning ties with Tehran, especially in the energy sector, has also failed to produce the desired outcome, with only the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt joining the Saudi offensive. Kuwait and Oman have remained neutral, effectively crippling the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council.

The strengthening of Assad in Damascus, with the aid of Russia and Iran, has enabled Tehran to plan the establishment of a land corridor running through Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean coast, which would substantially enhance Iranian influence across the entire region at the expense of Riyadh, Tel Aviv and Washington.

Saudi Arabia's domestic economic and social crisis is yet another factor contributing to the explosive situation. The royal family sits atop a social powder keg, with its vast wealth and that of the business elite offering a glaring contrast to the poverty experienced by wide sections of the kingdom's population. These social tensions have worsened due to the sharp decline in oil prices since 2014, which has roiled the Saudi economy, compelled the adoption of austerity measures and increased dissatisfaction with the fabulous levels of wealth enjoyed by the country's rulers. Added to this is Saudi Arabia's overwhelmingly young population, two-thirds of which is under the age of 30.

It is clear to see why the House of Saud is deeply concerned about maintaining its brutal dictatorial rule. Ever since the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions of 2011, the greatest fear in Saudi ruling circles has been the emergence of a popular movement in opposition to the existing set-up, something which it has sought to prevent by means of ruthless repression.

The rampant levels of social inequality and increased discrediting of the ruling elite will only encourage the Saudi rulers to act with even greater aggression throughout the region. Riyadh's twin aims are to divert social tensions outwards against external enemies, and to strengthen the unstable monarchical regime.



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