



PERSPECTIVES

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US Senate Resolution on Saudi Arabia Could Change Middle East Dynamics

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A [draft US Senate resolution](#) portraying Saudi policy as detrimental to US interests and values and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman as “complicit” in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi could, if adopted and implemented, change the dynamics of the region's politics and create an exit from almost a decade of mayhem, conflict, and bloodshed. It could accomplish this by causing the prince’s close UAE ally, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed, to reconsider the wisdom of his being so closely associated with Muhammad bin Salman.

A six-page draft US Senate resolution does more than portray Saudi policy as detrimental to US interests, which is striking in and of itself. It also identifies Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman as “complicit” in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, holds him accountable for the devastating war in Yemen that has sparked one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, and blames him for the failure to end the 17-month-old Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar as well as the jailing and torture of Saudi dissidents and activists.

The resolution confronts not only Prince Muhammad's policies but also, by implication, those of his closest ally, UAE Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed. The UAE was [the first country that Saudi leader visited](#) after the Khashoggi killing.

By in effect challenging the position of king-in-waiting Prince Muhammad, the resolution raises the question whether some of his closest allies, including the UAE crown prince, will in future want to be identified that closely with him.

Moreover, by demanding the release of activist Raif bin Muhammad Badawi (better known as Raif Badawi) and women's rights activists, the resolution further the challenges fundamentals of Prince Muhammad's iron-fisted repression of his critics, the extent of his proposed social reforms as part of his drive to diversify and streamline the Saudi economy, and the kingdom's human rights record.

Badawi, a 34-year-old blogger whose website is entitled Free Saudi Liberals, was barred from travel and had his assets frozen in 2009, was arrested in 2012, and was [sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for insulting Islam](#). His sister, Samar Badawi, a women's rights activist, was detained earlier this year. His wife and children have been granted asylum and citizenship in Canada.

[A diplomatic row that stunned many erupted](#) in August when Saudi Arabia expelled the Canadian ambassador after the foreign ministry in Ottawa tweeted a demand that Ms. Badawi and other activists be released.

Prince Muhammad and Saudi Arabia, even prior to introduction of the Senate resolution, are discovering that the Khashoggi killing weakened the kingdom internationally and made it more vulnerable to pressure.

[Talks in Sweden between the Saudi-backed Yemeni government and Houthi rebels](#) to end the war are the most immediate consequence of the kingdom's changing position.

Another is the Senate resolution, which is unprecedented in the scope and harshness of its criticism of a long-standing ally.

While the resolution is likely to spark initial anger among some of Prince's Muhammad's allies, it could, if adopted and/or implemented, persuade some – like UAE Crown Prince Muhammad – to rethink their fundamental strategies.

The relationship between the two Muhammads constituted a cornerstone of the UAE leader's strategy to achieve his political, foreign policy, and defense goals. These include projecting the Emirates as a guiding light of cutting-edge Arab and Muslim modernity; ensuring that the Middle East fits the crown prince's autocratic, anti-Islamist mold; and enabling the UAE, [described by US defense secretary Jim Mattis as “Little Sparta,”](#) to punch above its weight politically, diplomatically, and militarily.

To compensate for the Emirates' small size, Prince Muhammad opted to [pursue his goals in part by working through the Saudi royal court](#). In leaked emails, UAE ambassador to Washington Yousef al-Otaiba, a close associate of Prince Muhammad, said of the Saudi crown prince that “I don't think we'll ever see a more pragmatic leader in that country.”

Al-Otaiba went on to say: "I think in the long term we might be a good influence on KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), at least with certain people there. Our relationship with them is based on strategic depth, shared interests, and most importantly the hope that we could influence them. Not the other way around."

The impact of the Senate resolution and what it means for US policy will depend to a large extent on the politics of the differences between Congress and President Trump, who has sought so far to shield the Saudi crown prince.

To continue to do so, Trump, with or without the resolution, would likely have to pressure Saudi Arabia to give him something tangible to work with. That could mean, for example, an immediate release of imprisoned activists followed by a resolution of the Qatar crisis, as well as some indication that Yemen peace negotiations are progressing.

Regardless, the fallout of the Khashoggi killing, culminating in unprecedented Congressional anger towards Prince Muhammad and the kingdom, is likely to have significant consequences not only for the Saudi crown prince but potentially also for the strategy of his UAE counterpart.

That could, in turn, create light at the end of the Middle East's tunnel of almost a decade of volatility and violent and bloody conflict. That conflict has been driven by Saudi and UAE assertiveness in countering dissent at home and abroad in the wake of the 2011 popular Arab revolts, as well as by Iran, which has done its part to fuel destruction and bloodshed in Syria and Yemen.

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