

Opinion **Saudi Arabia**

Prince Mohammed strikes again with a palace coup and oil war

Saudi Arabia's rash but ruthless 34-year-old heir looks out of his depth

DAVID GARDNER



Mohammed bin Salman's oil strategy could sour relations with US president Donald Trump © FT Montage

David Gardner YESTERDAY

Mohammed bin Salman, the mercurial young crown prince and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, is at it again: launching another palace coup at home and an oil price war with global consequences.

Last week he arrested Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, the younger brother of his father King Salman, and Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, his cousin, whom the heir to the Saudi throne [deposed as crown prince in 2017](#).

Saudi sources present this as an attempt to nip a counter-coup in the bud, or a reminder that Prince Mohammed deals ruthlessly with anyone who

doubts his fitness to succeed. Either way it is characteristically heavy-handed.

It is unlikely that the two princes — both carefully monitored — were hatching a plot. It is a matter of opinion whether the arrests communicate control or exude paranoia. Yet if Prince Mohammed measured consequences, he might well conclude there are none.

Despite an outcry in the US Congress over the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul — the CIA has [blamed](#) the crown prince — he is set to host a G20 summit in Riyadh in November.

US president Donald Trump, sold on the prince by Jared Kushner, his callow son-in-law, [stood by his man](#). Mr Trump has also vetoed attempts by Congress to target Saudi Arabia for the ruinous war Prince Mohammed launched in Yemen and the US arms sales that support it.

Initial enthusiasm for the 34-year-old heir, who sought to embody the aspirations of a young population stifled by theocratic tutelage, was widespread. His ambition, to jump-start his kingdom from petro-paternalism into a modern state fired by private investment, has [never been in doubt](#). What has long been in question is his [judgment](#).

Mr Trump has valued him as an ally who has promised vast US arms purchases; to support a one-sided Israel-Palestine settlement designed by Mr Kushner; and to be in the front line of the regional conflict with Iran. Yet the crown prince signs more letters of intent than cheques, and King Salman has [publicly repudiated](#) his son's private assurances to Mr Kushner.

As for Iran, the prince was to make lots of bellicose noise. In practice, he led a blockade of Qatar, his tiny gas-rich neighbour, pushing it into the arms of Tehran. He detained Saad Hariri, then Lebanese premier and

former Saudi client, clearing the way for Iran-backed Hizbollah to consolidate power in Beirut. After the drone and missile attacks on Saudi oil facilities last September — almost certainly by Iran — revealed the kingdom's vulnerability, Prince Mohammed moderated his tone. But seemingly not his impulsive behaviour.

He may get a pass on his Shakespearean ways with his relatives. But he has also just started a disastrous oil price war in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis.

After three years in which Russia co-ordinated with the Saudis and Opec to shore up oil prices, Moscow last week declined to continue, believing this handed market share to the US. Prince Mohammed's instant reprisal was to [slash prices](#). That led to an oil price collapse and the heaviest stock market sell-off since the 2008 financial crisis. Not a whit deterred, Riyadh followed up by announcing [an increase in crude output](#) from 9.7bn barrels a day to 12.3bn bpd. This will flood the market, hurt leveraged US shale oil producers and, if stock market losses continue, the US economy. As Mr Trump seeks re-election, he may well be revising his view of Prince Mohammed who, far from leading a top-down Arab spring, causes serial meltdowns.

In 1973, the late King Faisal used oil as a weapon during the Arab-Israeli war. That at least had a political aim. This sudden engineering of an oil price collapse looks more like collateral damage, by a young despot out of his depth. This year's G20 should be interesting.

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