

MbS: The New Saddam Of Arabia?



As Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) has terrorized his opponents at home and abroad, fear has spread within the Saudi kingdom. Has he become the new Saddam of Arabia? As Iraq's Saddam Hussein did in the 1980s, MbS is cementing his power domestically and regionally through fear and economic largesse under the guise of fighting Iran, Islamic radicalism, and terrorism.

Much like the tyrant of Baghdad did in Iraq, MbS has crushed his domestic and regional opponents. Both of them have enlisted the support of foreign powers, especially the United States and Britain, to buttress their hold on power in their territories and expand their reach internationally. They both spoke the language of "reform," which appeals to Western audiences, and both demonized Iran as a promoter of regional instability and a source of evil internationally.

They both used chemical weapons against their opponents—Saddam against his Kurdish citizens and against Iran during the Iran-Iraq war; MbS against civilians in Yemen. Saddam threatened and later invaded his neighbor Kuwait. MbS has waged a vicious campaign against his neighbor and fellow Gulf Cooperation Council member Qatar and threatened to invade it.

Saddam and MbS also cynically donned the mantle of Sunni Islam in their

hypocritical claims against the so-called Shia Crescent and its main proponent Iran. Saddam's "Republic of Fear" seems to be slowly morphing into a "Kingdom of Fear" under MbS.

In his "city-busting" campaign during the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam committed horrible atrocities against civilians in Iranian cities in the 1980s. Thirty years later, MbS is committing equally horrible crimes against innocent civilians in Yemen. The famine and starvation that MbS's war has wrought on Yemeni children is arguably more calamitous than what Saddam did in Iran. Sadly, both Saddam and MbS have relied on American military, intelligence, and political support in the execution of their bloody wars.

Saddam killed thousands of people and arrested and executed hundreds of his opponents, including journalists, academics, and peaceful dissidents. MbS has used the same playbook. The "premeditated murder" of Jamal Khashoggi—a Saudi citizen, a U.S. permanent resident, and a *Washington Post* journalist—starkly illustrates MbS's campaign against his critics.

Both autocrats used their foreign ministers to weave a pro-regime narrative, mainly for Western audiences, to exonerate their rulers from the war crimes they committed. Tariq Aziz, Saddam's foreign minister, regaled Western media with his outlandish interviews about Saddam and his service to the West in fighting Iran and Islamic radicalism. Adel al-Jubeir, MbS's foreign minister, has given frequent interviews presenting the war in Yemen as a Saudi defensive action against "evil" Iran and minimizing the horrible human tragedy that Saudi airstrikes have caused. Only a few days ago, al-Jubeir described the global reaction to the Saudi murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul as "hysteria."

Several examples highlight Mohammad bin Salman's dystopian decent into bloody autocracy and regional chaos.

The Iran War

Saddam Hussein, the late tyrant of Iraq, went to war against Iran in September 1980 on the claim that he was protecting the Sunni Arab states against Shia Iran. He was supported by the Arab states of the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and its neighboring family-ruled emirates, on the grounds that the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran under the ayatollahs' theocratic rule planned to export its

revolution to the Arab littoral of the Persian Gulf to topple the tribal regimes in the Gulf Arab emirates. Except for Syria, most Sunni Arab states supported Saddam's war against Iran.

Saddam's dream of defeating the "Persian menace" next door faded quickly following the defeat of his forces on al-Fao peninsula on the southern tip of Iraq. The casualties of his poorly trained soldiers began to mount, and the specter of losing the war loomed large. Recognizing this reality, the United States decided to supply Saddam with intelligence and military support. Washington's decision was driven not by love for Saddam but by the painful memory of the hostage crisis and Iran's newly found sense of empowerment in the Gulf region and beyond. American support for the five-year duration of the war after Fao was pivotal in Iran not winning the war and Saddam's not losing it. Over one million Iraqis and Iranians died during that war, which lasted for most of the 1980s.

Aside from his hatred for Shia Iran, Saddam went to war to force the new regime to abrogate the Shatt al-Arab treaty, which he felt he was forced to sign with the shah of Iran in Algiers in 1975. The treaty gave Iran the right to pass through the Shatt al-Arab estuary to reach Abadan, Iran's major oil city. Saddam correctly believed at the time that by signing the treaty, the shah-supported Kurdish rebellion in the north would end. It did. In return, Saddam expelled Ayatollah Khomeini, who led the "cassette" revolution against the shah from southern Iraq, from the country. Khomeini continued his anti-shah movement from France.

During the war, Saddam persecuted and terrified his Shia population, and right after the war, he gassed Iraqi Kurds in the Iraqi town of Halabja. Also, following the war when oil-rich Gulf Arab states refused to pay Saddam billions of dollars to shore up his depleted budget, he invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Once this happened, Washington put Saddam in the cross hairs.

Upon his appointment by his ailing king as Saudi Arabia's minister of defense, the 31-year-old MbS started his war in Yemen against the Houthis, which has presumably been conducted by a Saudi-led Sunni Arab coalition in which Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates assumed a pivotal role. Like Saddam before him, MbS has used the Iran "menace" to justify a war against a neighbor. In addition to the Sunni Arab states, MbS has received tacit and explicit support from Israel and the United States. Washington has extended a vast array of intelligence and tactical support in its prosecution of the war, including weapons

that have left thousands of Yemenis homeless, hungry, and destitute.

Airstrikes have caused untold misery and death, without much concern in the West other than from human rights organizations. Western leaders, much as they did during the Iran-Iraq war, have paid lip service to the Yemeni human tragedy without holding MbS accountable for this arguably illegal war. A few days ago, the *Independent* reported that the death toll in the Yemen war could be “five times higher than we think.” It’s time for the international community to take responsibility for the human disaster that the Saudi-led war has created in Yemen. Washington should halt its weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and should hold MbS responsible for the war crimes he is committing in Yemen.

In pursuing the war in Yemen, MbS, much like Saddam, also harbors territorial interests. He wanted to control access to the Bab al-Mandab between the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, which also connects with the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea on the other end of the Red Sea. When MbS offered billions of dollars to Egypt’s strongman Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to shore up the Egyptian economy, Sisi gave him Sanafir and Tiran, two strategically located islands in the Red Sea. MbS’s ambition seems to establish Saudi Arabia as the preponderant power in the Arabian Peninsula as a countervailing force to Iran.

Kuwait and Qatar

Two years following his disastrous war with Iran, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, ostensibly to reclaim it as Iraqi territory. Although some Iraqi government officials have at different times referred to Kuwait as the nineteenth province of Iraq, Saddam’s invasion was driven by his anger at the emirate’s refusal to forgive the billions of dollars in debts that Iraq owed Kuwait for the loans it received during the war. Saddam arrogantly believed that his war against Iran helped save Kuwait and other emirates from Iran. Of course, the American-led coalition declared war on Saddam and forced him to leave the “nineteenth province” 100 hours after the start of the war.

MbS’s hostility toward Qatar, which has been driven by the Qatari emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani’s independent streak toward Saudi Arabia and his lukewarm support for MbS’s adventurism in Yemen and bellicose rhetoric toward Iran, led him to declare an illegal siege on Qatar, a fellow member in the GCC. He closed the Qatari-Saudi border and halted all trade with Qatar, which had previously

imported most of its food stuffs over land via Saudi Arabia. MbS intended to starve the Qatari people, forcing them to rise up against their ruler. This deadly, childish game of blockade and severing of diplomatic relations—which Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt supported—has failed to cow Tamim into submission. Tamim has survived MbS’s plotting, developed new trade routes, and remained an independent player in the region.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam dried up the marches in southern Iraq to force the Shia into submission. MbS is now trying to dig a trench between Saudi Arabia and Qatar to alter the emirate’s geography from an island into a peninsula, thereby further isolating it. The marches are back brimming with wild life, and Saddam failed to subdue Iraqi Shia. The wasteful trench project will equally fail to force the Qatari ruler into submission. The animus that Saddam exhibited toward Kuwait on the eve of the invasion in 1990 and the bellicosity MbS displayed toward Qatar differ little in the geopolitics of the Middle East. The difference is that Saddam invaded Kuwait while the United States and others strongly advised MbS against invading Qatar.

Saddam’s arrogance of power and obsession with regional leadership led him to pursue military adventurism in the neighborhood, which brought disaster to him and his country. In pursuing similar policies, will MbS face the same fate?



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