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The risks of Saudi war on too many fronts

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“Only the churlish would deny the necessary logic of the prince’s grand plan for Saudi Arabia: A future that looks beyond oil. A better-adjusted society.”

Until the sudden purge in Saudi Arabia, there was little doubt that the kingdom’s young crown prince had the world’s admiring attention for his prospectus for change. He promised women a share of the public place and the chance to legally get behind the wheel of a car (almost 130 years after Bertha Benz, wife of Karl, who patented the first “horseless carriage,” but change proceeds at its own pace).

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz offered young Saudis legitimate outlets such as cinemas for the fun-loving instinct shared by humans and many mammals (dolphins, for instance, are famously playful). Most important of all, Crown Prince Mohammed vowed his country would “return” to a more “moderate, balanced” Islam.

So far, so admirable. Only the churlish would deny the necessary logic of the prince’s grand plan for Saudi Arabia: A future that looks beyond oil. A better-adjusted society. A more holistic appeal to and for the world.

Then, there was the November 4 purge. There was the resignation of the Lebanese prime minister, announced by him on a Saudi television station and from within Saudi Arabia. There have been repeated muscular verbal threats against Iran. Separately, but in sync, there has been US President Donald Trump’s tweeted support for Riyadh’s bold moves against sections of its royal family, leading businessmen and



New trend. An employee of Careem, a chauffeur-driven car booking service, talks during a training session for new female drivers in Khobar City in Saudi Arabia, on October 10. (AFP)

executives.

The developments came within a week of a quite different slew of head-turning announcements from Riyadh. The Future Investment Initiative was launched, along with plans for a fully automated city for “dreamers” on the Red Sea. The kingdom’s robust open-for-business message only added to the rising excitement in London (and New York, via Trump) over the proposed initial public offering of oil giant Saudi Aramco.

However, the purge and Saudi tough talk in the neighbourhood may have raised the political risk the country faces. No one can

presume to know for sure but those who have long studied the kingdom from afar say Aramco’s valuation may be dented and some foreign investors may be leery.

But, of what? The purge is a sign that Crown Prince Mohammed is consolidating power for the long and difficult road of radical reform. That is an internal matter and frankly – despite the explosion of commentary – impenetrable to the outside world. That said, there is another visible fault line between intention and initiative.

Many are wondering whether Crown Prince Mohammed and

Saudi Arabia will be able to hold up and hold on as they fight on multiple fronts. Domestically, there is the battle against current and future opponents of reform. Abroad there is the nearly 3-year-old war in Yemen, the seven-month impasse with Qatar and a new martial mood towards Tehran. All of this while Crown Prince Mohammed pursues the most far-reaching social, cultural, political and security changes in the 85 years Saudi Arabia has existed in its current form as an independent country.

The worry is that in its attempt to confront Iran – whose relentless regional meddling undoubtedly does need to be checked – Crown Prince Mohammed will begin yet another war abroad even as he soldiers on through a domestic fight. One is difficult enough; both at the same time are immeasurably hard.

More than 200 years ago, the great Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz noted that war cannot be seen in terms of military victory. The defeated enemy may not accept the result and will simply wait for a better time to fight again, he said, so the maximum use of military force is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for final victory.

Diplomacy and political wisdom are the “missing ingredients,” Clausewitz counselled, if the results achieved in battle are to be consolidated. It is wiser, then, to rely on a combination of adequate strength and diplomacy.

The subtext is clear: Choose which fights to pick and when.

Balancing power and religion in Saudi Arabia

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“By breaking up with the history of the “Renaissance,” the kingdom returns to its true history and culture as a defender of moderate Islam.”

Respective of the motivation behind the arrests of princes and ex-ministers in Saudi Arabia, the event represents a revolutionary change to a governing style that has been in place since the beginning of the Saudi state in the 1930s.

Deliberations and decisions on matters of authority in the kingdom used to take place behind leak-proof closed doors. Today, such debates are publicly propped up by official decrees, decisions and measures that have spared no one. The message is clear: The authority that holds princes and top officials accountable for their actions has the legitimacy to hold all Saudis accountable.

The anti-corruption campaign is concomitant with one against religious extremism. Religious moderation declined in Saudi Arabia right after the armed rebellion of Juhayman al-Otaybi at the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979. Since then, a strong religious revivalist movement, unfairly dubbed as the “Renaissance,” has swept the Saudi kingdom and given birth to ultra-conservative concepts and behaviour. Thanks to the extraordinary means of the kingdom, it has been possible for this conservative ideology to reach the farthest corners of the world.

It might be argued that the return to ultra-conservatism was a political response to the latent cleavage in Saudi society uncovered by events at the Great Mosque. It was also a response to the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran the same year and to claims by the latter to be the legitimate representative of Islam and Muslims.

The fact is, however, that this so-called “Renaissance” was not the result of natural evolution in Saudi society but of a conscious political choice by Saudi authorities to end certain social choices and replace them with others. It was politics, not religion, that was behind the disappearance of religious moderation in Saudi Arabia and the beginning of an exceptionally ultra-conservative era.

It is customary to present the Saudi kingdom’s birth as a partnership between Mohammed Abdel Wahab’s school of religious thought and Al Saud’s school of political authority. While that bit of history is factually true, it is not the complete truth. This partnership was, first and foremost, in service to the state and its permanence. Stability was never subjugated to a religious ideology.

The religious side of the partnership hoped to move towards the

establishment of a vast, borderless Islamic state while the political side hoped to use the partnership to lay the foundations of a Saudi state. When the Saudi tribes of the Muslim Brothers (or more precisely the “Brotherhood of those who obey Allah”) during the 1920s wanted to continue their invasion towards Iraq and Kuwait, they were stopped by King Abdulaziz Al Saud’s government, which believed it was important to preserve the kingdom’s borders for it to be accepted internationally as a sovereign country and regime.

In Saudi Arabia, the religious establishment cannot be allowed to stand in the way of choices decided by the regime. When Saudi authorities wanted to introduce television and mass media technology to the kingdom, they were met with heavy resistance but they prevailed.

Those familiar with the evolution of the Saudi state appreciate authorities’ considerable patience and wisdom in dealing with religious and social conservatism in the kingdom and those familiar with the corridors of power know that in the end it is political power that has the last word. The religious establishment in Saudi Arabia has always been subservient to the choices of the political

establishment.

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz have decided to halt the downward spiral that turned the Saudi kingdom into an aberrant case in modern times. It was time to end its structural contradiction in which a kingdom intent on sending its finest scholars to the biggest universities in the world also exports its religious extremists across the globe. It is essential for Saudi Arabia to do away with a dubious religious discourse that proved to be lenient, if not permissive, to extremism.

By breaking up with the history of the “Renaissance,” the kingdom returns to its true history and culture as a defender of moderate Islam, to use the words of the crown prince.

The debate raging among Saudis about their own reality is understandable, as is their anxiety about sudden change. This is normal as the political authorities’ current awakening is doing away with the so-called renaissance of the past, which delayed the country’s social progress. By all measures, however, the event is another illustration of the primacy of the political establishment over the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia.

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