

## Royal ambitions: The UAE's stake in Saudi crown prince

**Nisha Mathew**

For The Straits Times

Six months after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi sparked a backlash against Saudi Arabia, reports that the Kingdom's leader, King Salman, has moved to curtail the powers of his chosen heir are growing.

While there has been no official confirmation – Riyadh has refused comment when approached – the tea leaves do provide strong hints that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has had his wings clipped.

These include his absence at several high-profile Cabinet and diplomatic meetings, including one with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov a fortnight ago, and the announcement that the King has appointed his trusted loyalist, the Harvard-educated Mubarak bin Abdulaziz Al Aiban, to oversee the kingdom's investment and national security affairs.

In the latest sign that the Crown Prince's influence has been rolled back, King Salman on Sunday categorically rejected United States President Donald Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The King's statement, made at the Arab League summit in Tunis, is a departure from his son's attempts to draw closer to Israel and thus form a united bloc against a common enemy – Iran.

Analysts and policymakers remain undecided over whether these developments amount to anything more than a symbolic gesture meant to calm the rising tide of international opinion against the Kingdom in the wake of the Khashoggi murder, the detention of human rights activists, the protests in Algeria and Sudan and the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

Nevertheless, these actions will be welcomed throughout much of the world, which has viewed the adventurism of the 33-year-old Crown Prince with growing alarm. There is, however, one country which will greet these developments with concern: The United Arab Emirates.

The UAE has a big reason for wanting Crown Prince Mohammed to have an unfettered hold on power. Its de facto leader, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, has been pursuing an economic strategy aimed at securing a key role for the Emirates in the international maritime trade and reducing its dependency on oil for some years now. Reviving Dubai, which was badly hit during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, is central to this goal.

However, Sheikh Mohammed's vision faces stiff competition: Saudi Arabia, its giant neighbour, is also aiming to transform its economy under the Vision 2030 plan, while Qatar was getting ahead in the game with its own efforts to become a modern, plugged-in economy.

To overcome these obstacles, he acted as a mentor and exploited the adventurism of his counterpart in Riyadh in order to distract Saudi Arabia and blunt Qatar's progress.

The Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, was the perfect tool for this. Under it, Iran would have been freed from the crippling shackles of American sanctions, and Sheikh Mohammed successfully convinced the Saudi Crown Prince that this would make Teheran – which has been locked in a struggle with Riyadh for regional hegemony – an even more fearsome bogeyman.

As a result, Riyadh upped its efforts to increase its regional influence, doubling down in

Yemen and bolstering plans to become the leader of the Islamic world. Qatar was a casualty of such efforts, with old family feuds cloaked as an ideological battle against the forces of Islamic terror and Iranian influence.

The UAE has ambitions of its own, as its muscle in the Horn of Africa has shown. However, it is loath to trumpet these efforts, and has thus preferred to operate in the shadows while Saudi Arabia grabs the spotlight.

That the Saudi Crown Prince has grand designs on regional hegemony is fortuitous for the Emirates – as long as their ambitions align, it is content to let the Saudis do the heavy lifting, and Prince Mohammed, who views thwarting Iran as a litmus test of his political leadership and legitimacy as the Kingdom's next ruler, has duly obliged.

Further, his rejection of the Kingdom's foreign policy and defence establishment – many of whom were rounded up and detained at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh in 2017 under the guise of an anti-corruption sweep – has robbed him of counsel and, thus, restraint.

This means that despite ostensibly operating from the same playbook, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are competing against each other.

Cracks are already appearing within the alliance, and the island of Socotra provides a vivid example of the trouble ahead. Abu Dhabi established a significant military presence on the island, and even announced a base there, with the intention of making it a node in its goal of developing a string of ports in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea, one of the most significant maritime corridors in the world.

However, the Saudis, who had similar intentions, pushed back, needling the Yemeni government to criticise the Emirati moves as acts of aggression. Riyadh was then invited to broker peace, and Saudi troops have been deployed to the island, while the UAE has pulled its forces.

But the UAE is not sitting still, and is continuing its push into the maritime corridor.

While the world continues to be distracted by the effects of Saudi adventurism, the Emirates has been quietly bulking up its military and using it to strengthen its grip in areas like Eritrea and Somaliland. Almost without anyone noticing, the UAE's military is now a formidable entity – earning the country the moniker of "Little Sparta" – and more than capable of backing its country's maritime push with force.

Its navy, for instance, has considerable sea-lift capabilities from its base in Assab, in Eritrea. By June this year, when its base in Berbera in Somaliland begins operations, it will add high-end surveillance and combat capability.

Aside from the string of ports it controls along a strategically-important route, the UAE's special operations troops have won praise for their expeditionary capability, and the abilities of its pilots are respected to such a degree that Emirati F16 fighters have been routinely deployed alongside United States Air Force jets on combat support missions.

Now, however, comes a threat that military power alone cannot defeat. If the tea leaf readings are right and King Salman has indeed dialled back his son's powers, Crown Prince Mohammed will have fewer distractions. That might give him a clearer view of what his mentor is up to.

• Nisha Mathew is Joint Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute and Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore.

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