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Mohammed bin Salman

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Introduction

Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud—universally known by his initials, MBS—has become a pivotal figure not just in Saudi Arabia but on the global stage, embodying both the transformative potential and the inherent contradictions of contemporary Middle Eastern leadership. Often branded as ambitious and sometimes ruthless, MBS has overseen an era of tremendous change and controversy since his swift emergence as the nation's de facto ruler. His life and rise to power mark a new chapter in the history of the House of Saud, a royal family that has shaped the geopolitics and fortunes of the Gulf for decades.

This biography traces the arc of Mohammed bin Salman's journey from a privileged, relatively private childhood in Riyadh to the pinnacle of power as Crown Prince, Prime Minister, and key architect of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. It explores his formative years, shaped by his close association with his father, King Salman, and contrasts his path with that of Saudi princes educated and acculturated abroad. MBS's choice to study law at King Saud University, and his early ventures in entrepreneurship and charity, set him apart even before his full force was felt in the corridors of power.

The rapid consolidation of authority under MBS, particularly after his father's succession to the throne, upended decades-old traditions of consensus-driven monarchy. As Minister of Defense and later Crown Prince, MBS quickly became synonymous with assertive foreign policy and sweeping domestic reform. The launch of Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen and his deep involvement in diplomatic maneuverings—from the Qatar blockade to back-channel dealings with Israel—signaled a break with past Saudi caution on the world stage. Simultaneously, his stewardship of Vision 2030 heralded a bold attempt to diversify the Saudi economy and loosen the tight grip of social conservatism.

Yet, these extraordinary changes have not come without cost. With every step toward modernization—allowing women to drive, curbing the powers of the religious police, opening cinemas and entertainment venues—there have been mirrored moves to silence dissent and centralize power. The imprisonment of reformers, the anti-corruption campaign that swept up royal cousins and business titans, and the shocking assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi cast long shadows over the prince's reputation and raised international alarms over the kingdom's trajectory.

This book does not seek to secure easy judgments. Instead, it aims to provide a nuanced, comprehensive account of Mohammed bin Salman's character, ambitions, and the far-reaching consequences—political, economic, and cultural—of his policies. Drawing on sources both domestic and foreign, with an eye to context and complexity,

it examines the paradoxes of a leader who stands for both radical change and severe repression, modernization and autocracy, a vigorous nationalism and a calculated engagement with the world.

As Saudi Arabia stands at a crossroads, the story of MBS is not only a personal tale of ambition and transformation but also a mirror held up to a kingdom wrestling with its identity and future. In recounting his trajectory, this book invites readers to ponder how the legacy of Mohammed bin Salman will shape not only the fate of the Saudi state but also the broader narrative of a changing Middle East.

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CHAPTER ONE: Roots of the House of Saud

The story of Mohammed bin Salman is inextricably linked to the long and complex history of the House of Saud, a dynasty that has shaped the destiny of the Arabian Peninsula for nearly three centuries. It is a saga of alliances, conquests, setbacks, and resurgences, rooted in the heart of Najd, the central region of what is now Saudi Arabia. To understand the modern kingdom and its ambitious Crown Prince, one must first delve into the historical currents that forged the family and its unique partnership with a powerful religious movement.

The earliest recorded ancestor of the Al Saud family is Mani' ibn Rabiah Al-Muraydi, who settled in Diriyah in 1446 or 1447. He was invited by a relative who was the ruler of a group of villages that make up modern-day Riyadh. This established the family's presence in the area along Wadi Hanifa, a fertile valley that became an important settlement in Najd.

The lineage leading to the dynasty's formal beginning traces through generations in Diriyah. The name "Al Saud" is derived from Sheikh Saud ibn Muhammad ibn Muqrin, who died in 1725. His son, Muhammad bin Saud, would become the pivotal figure in founding the first iteration of the Saudi state.

In 1727, Muhammad bin Saud assumed leadership in Diriyah. This year is now recognized as the founding year of the First Saudi State. At the time, the Arabian Peninsula was a patchwork of warring tribes and unstable city-states, lacking any central authority across much of its expanse.

A transformative moment occurred around 1744 when Muhammad bin Saud formed a historic alliance with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was a religious reformer who advocated a return to what he saw as the pure principles of Islam as practiced by its early followers. Expelled from his hometown, he found refuge and protection in Diriyah under the leadership of Muhammad bin Saud.

This alliance was a marriage of political power and religious legitimacy. Muhammad bin Saud provided military and political strength, while Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab offered an ideological impetus and attracted a fervent following to Diriyah. This partnership laid the groundwork for the expansion of Saudi influence. The two leaders pledged cooperation, aiming to return Arabian Peninsula society to the faith of Islam as it was in the beginning.

Using the momentum of this alliance, Muhammad bin Saud and his successors embarked on campaigns to unify the surrounding regions under their rule, guided by

the principles of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's reformist movement. The First Saudi State, with its capital in Diriyah, began to expand its territory across Najd.

The state's rulers, known as Imams, worked to unify territories and establish governance based on Islamic principles. This period saw the implementation of Sharia law and efforts to enhance security and stability along trade and pilgrimage routes.

Under Imam Abdulaziz ibn Muhammad, Muhammad bin Saud's son and successor, the First Saudi State continued to grow. By the early 1800s, Saudi forces had extended their reach significantly, even capturing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, a move that challenged the authority of the Ottoman Empire.

This expansion, however, drew the ire of the Ottomans, who saw the rising Saudi power as a direct threat to their control over the Arabian Peninsula and the holy cities. The Ottoman Sultan instructed his viceroy in Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, to dispatch forces to quell the Saudi state.

Between 1811 and 1818, Egyptian forces, led first by Muhammad Ali's son Tusun Pasha and later by his son Ibrahim Pasha, launched a sustained military campaign against the First Saudi State. Despite fierce resistance, the Egyptian forces advanced into Najd.

The capital, Diriyah, was besieged for several months. In 1818, after a prolonged and difficult siege, Diriyah fell to Ibrahim Pasha's forces. The last ruler of the First Saudi State, Imam Abdullah I ibn Saud, was captured and sent to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), where he was executed. Many members of the House of Saud were also sent to Egypt and the Ottoman capital, marking the formal end of the First Saudi State.

Despite the destruction of Diriyah and the scattering of the Al Saud family, the influence of the First Saudi State and its alliance endured. Less than two years after its collapse, attempts to re-establish Saudi rule began. In 1824, a grandson of Muhammad bin Saud, Turki bin Abdullah bin Muhammad, successfully recaptured Riyadh, which became the new capital.

This marked the beginning of the Second Saudi State, also known as the Emirate of Najd. Imam Turki bin Abdullah, who had evaded capture by the Ottomans, is generally considered the founder of this second iteration and an ancestor of the modern Saudi kings. The Second Saudi State continued to operate on the foundations and principles of the first, emphasizing Islamic law and seeking to maintain security and stability.

The Second Saudi State endured for approximately 69 years, though it faced internal challenges and external pressures. Succession disputes among the sons of Imam Faisal bin Turki, a key ruler of the Second State, contributed to its weakening.

By the late 19th century, the House of Saud faced a new powerful rival in the Arabian Peninsula: the Al Rashid emirs of Ha'il in Jabal Shammar. The Al Rashid, supported by the Ottoman Empire, gradually extended their authority over Najd.

In 1891, the forces loyal to the last Saudi Imam of the Second State, Abdul Rahman bin Faisal, were defeated by the Al Rashid at the Battle of Al-Mulaydah, bringing the Second Saudi State to an end. Abdul Rahman bin Faisal, the father of the future King Abdulaziz, fled into exile with his family, finding refuge in Kuwait.

For a little over a decade, the Al Rashid held sway over central Arabia. However, the ambition and determination of the exiled House of Saud, particularly Abdul Rahman's young son Abdulaziz, remained potent. It was this period of exile that would forge the character and resolve of the man who would eventually unify most of the Arabian Peninsula and establish the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The roots had been tested, but they were far from broken.

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