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Issue Brief

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Appointment of New Saudi Crown Prince: Implications for Iran and Pakistan

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So the Kingdom shall have a new crown prince. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the 51 year old nephew of King Salman has been replaced by King's heir, Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Commonly known in the West as MBS or 'Mr. Everything' Prince Mohammed already holds important offices such as defense and oil ministry at the young age of just 31. Apart from putting to rest all doubts about the future vision for the Kingdom, what does his anointment mean for the regional countries like Iran in particular? Well it is quite evident from his strong rhetoric that this development shall not bode well for Saudi-Iran ties. The region will further be drawn into a long-stretching strategic and ideological rivalry, which is reflective of the looming prospects of the much-feared physical confrontation between the two. While MBS's modern outlook is a refreshing change for the Saudi youth at home, his impulsive age is also capable of undertaking risky endeavors such as the campaign to attack Yemen. He spearheaded the attack against the Houthi rebels in Yemen and it has failed to bring about the desired results. All Saudi fingers naturally point at Iran as being the major benefactor of the Houthi rebels, who have successfully propped up a solid defense against the Kingdom's overtures. All these unfortunate developments pave the way for massive deterioration in Saudi-Iran relations.

The US-Arab summit of Riyadh in May 2017 was a major blow for any future chances of rapprochement between the two traditional rivals as Trump voiced his intentions for sidelining Iran from all politics of regional significance. There were reports of a budding rapport between President Trump and Prince Mohammed bin Salman while the latter also dined twice with Ivanka Trump and her husband. This understanding built on mutual hatred and defiance of Iran might not be the most suitable trajectory for the young Prince's future rule and approach towards the region. Furthermore, the exclusion of Iran from the Islamic Military Alliance, writing Qatar off as a rogue state and shaking hands with the unpredictable Trump, all actions reflects the young Prince's inexperience with the matters of international politics. What the Prince seems to have overlooked is the Kingdom's balanced relationship with Russia. Veteran rulers like his father and Prince Nayef have realised the crucial importance of maintaining a strict balance between both Russia and the US. But the recent step taken by the Kingdom towards US and

against Iran is poised to push Russia and Iran into a natural alliance, which will further be strengthened due to their aligned interests in Syria. His bid for Iran's isolation propped up on the wobbly shoulders of Trump's unpredictable foreign policy rhetoric may or may not bear any fruit in the struggle for the leadership of West Asia. Burning all bridges with Iran may well not be the most prudent of ideas.

Prince Salman's appointment met with little resistance at home, which does not classify it as a coup (Iran's state media deems otherwise) which means that the Kingdom will be under his rule for quite some time after King Salman. Sagacity suggests that the young Prince be more level-headed in his approach towards the region in general and Iran in particular. The consequences of accelerating this strife shall be disastrous for the unity of the Muslim world, particularly Pakistan, as the threat for sectarian trouble shall mount exponentially. While Pakistan enjoys brotherly ties with the Kingdom, this appointment is not likely to change much for our bilateral ties. However, in context of Pakistan's relations with Iran, which are already strained at the moment, this new appointment shall undoubtedly increase pressure on Pakistan to take either side. It is high time that Pakistan's external policy decisions be reviewed more objectively towards both Iran and Saudi Arabia. On one hand, there is a neighboring Muslim country with which we share borders as well as a troubled Baluchistan while having a vast majority of *Shia* population who hold great religious attachment with the Islamic scholars in Iran. On the other hand, is the ideological hub of the Muslim Ummah, home to the affluent custodians of *Mecca* and *Madina* and our closest allies, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The question is no longer about which side we should choose but whether or not we should choose at all? The wiser decision will be to keep our feet firmly planted where they are; perched atop a balanced platform built on amicable ties with both countries. But can we continue to do so for long? While it might be easy for Pakistan and Iran to continue in the same vein as before as Rouhani seems to be repeating policy decisions in his second term, the situation with Saudi Arabia might be utterly different. The foundation being laid down in KSA is that of unabashed enmity with countries that have contrasting national and international ideologies. With the new Prince in charge, there may be expectations from Pakistan to declare open rivalry with Iran, which is an unlikely policy decision, judging from the past experience of Pakistan's refusal to send troops to Yemen on Saudi beckoning. But the road ahead is slippery. Prince Salman's ruling trajectory will bring about fresh challenges for Iran, Pakistan and the regional countries such as close defense and strategic cooperation between KSA and the US, alignment of Saudi-US interests in Syria and the Qatar-gulf détente. This not only presents new areas of trouble but also indicates that in case of a unilaterally decided policy, new alliances such as Russia-Iran-China will solidify against the US-Saudi nexus. The

Prince shall have to ensure that he does not fall prey to impulsive politics rather he must take decisions with sagacity and far-sightedness for the peace and stability of the entire region.