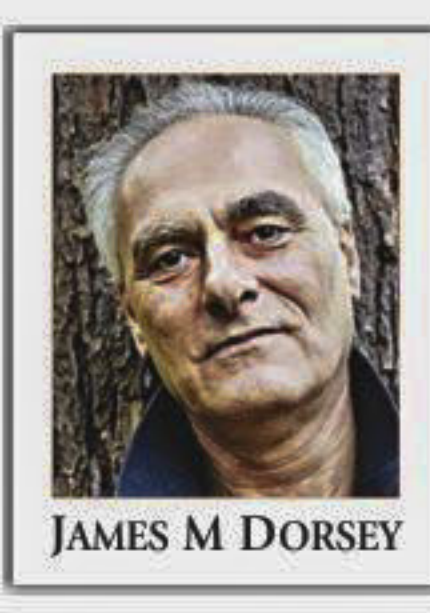


Prince Salman's move towards moderation

Despite the boldness of his moves, Crown Prince bin Salam Mohammed has sent mixed messages about how far he is prepared to go



JAMES M DORSEY

IN his effort to improve Saudi Arabia's badly tarnished image and project the kingdom as embracing an unidentified form of moderate Islam, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has hinted that he envisions a conservative rather than an ultra-conservative society, but not one in which citizens are fully free to make personal, let alone political choices of their own. Prince Mohammed's vision, although not spelled out in great detail, seemed evident in an interview with CBS News' 60 minutes, his first with a Western television program, on the eve of a three-week trip that is taking him across the United States. The trip is designed to cement relations with the Trump administration following the dismissal of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who Prince Mohammed and his United Arab Emirates counterpart, Mohammed bin Zayed, viewed as unenthusiastic about their policies related to the region stretching across the Middle East from the Horn of Africa to South Asia, including the Saudi-UAE-led ten-month old diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar. The visit comes barely a month before Trump has to decide whether to pull the United States out of the 2015 international agreement with Iran designed to curb the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. A withdrawal could lead to the agreement's collapse and spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. "Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible," Prince Mohammed, who is locked into existential battle with Iran, told CBS. It is also intended to project the kingdom as a beacon of moderation rather than a promoter of ultra-conservatism and cutting-edge modernity led by a young reformist king-in-waiting. In a meeting in the White House with Donald J Trump, on the first day of his visit, both Prince Mohammed and the US president touted the economic benefits of the two countries' relationship, with massive US arms sales and other deals, including nuclear sales



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in London.

PHOTO: REUTERS

that would involve reducing US safeguards by giving the kingdom the right to enrich uranium. Both leaders asserted that the deals would significantly boost employment in both Saudi Arabia and the United States. Besides Trump, Prince Mohammed is scheduled to meet members of Congress, think tanks and academics, oil executives, businessmen and representatives of Silicon Valley's high-tech industry and Hollywood. Both Prince Mohammed and Trump need to demonstrate economic progress to boost or cement their popularity at home. The crown prince needs to demonstrate to Saudis that he is feted as a leader despite mounting international criticism of his conduct of the ill-fated, three-year old war in Yemen, his domestic power and anti-corruption campaign, the kingdom's long-standing severe political and social restrictions, and its four-decade long global support for ultra-conservative Sunni Islam. Beyond concern about the high civilian casualty rate in Yemen and the war having sparked one of the world's worst current humanitarian crises, many fear that potentially destabilising anti-Saudi sentiment in the

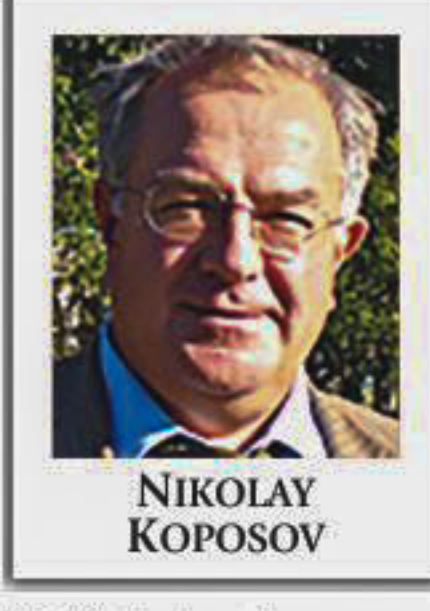
ravaged country will persist long after the guns fall silent. Those fears are reinforced by contradictory Saudi measures. While on the one hand pledging billions of dollars in aid and allowing at least some relief to get into the country, Saudi Arabia has aggravated the crisis in the country by expelling tens of thousands of Yemeni workers in recent months. Prince Mohammed also needs to demonstrate that he can attract foreign investment despite the arbitrary nature of the arrest in November of hundreds of senior members of the ruling Al Saud family, prominent businessmen, and high-ranking officials, and reports that at least some of them were abused and tortured during their detention. Most of the detainees were released after surrendering control of assets and/or paying substantial amounts of money. The government said it expects to raise USD 100 billion from the campaign. Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, one of the most prominent detainees and the kingdom's most-high-profile businessman, who seemed to put up a fight during his detention, has

since his release in January said that he would be investing in some of Prince Mohammed's pet projects. Prince Mohammed bolstered his image by vowing to return Saudi Arabia to an unidentified form of moderate Islam; forcing the country's ultra-conservative religious establishment to endorse his reforms; suggesting that the kingdom may halt its massive global funding of Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism to counter Iran's revolutionary zeal; surrendering control of the Saudi-managed Great Mosque in Brussels; granting women the right to drive, join the military, and attend male sporting events; and creating a modern entertainment sector. Despite the boldness of his moves, Prince Mohammed has sent mixed messages about how far he is prepared to go. Women and men mix at concerts and theatre plays but are segregated in the three sport stadiums that have been declared open to women. While the crown prince has been decisive in his recent moves, he has yet to say a clear word about lifting Saudi Arabia's system of male guardianship that gives male relatives control of their lives. Similarly, there is no indication

that gender segregation in restaurants and other public places will be lifted. Asked about the guardianship, Prince Mohammed evaded specifics. "Today, Saudi women still have not received their full rights. There are rights stipulated in Islam that they still don't have. We have come a very long way and have a short way to go," he said. Middle East Scholar As'ad Abu Khalil, whose blog is named *The Angry Arab News Service*, posted a picture of Prince Salman's meeting with Trump, noting that there was not one woman on either side of the conference table. Speaking Arabic despite having learnt to speak English by watching movies, Prince Mohammed appeared in his CBS interview to defend allowing a mingling of the sexes in the work place while shying away from ultra-conservatives ban on a man meeting a woman unaccompanied by a male relative in non-professional or non-public settings. "We have extremists who forbid mixing between the two sexes and are unable to differentiate between a man and a woman alone together and their being together in a workplace," Prince Mohammed said. The crown prince conceded that women had the right to determine what to wear if their clothes were "decent, respectful clothing, like men." He did not define what would constitute decent but insisted that it did not have to be a "black abaya or a black head cover." No doubt, Prince Mohammed's social reforms and promised economic change provide him significant arrows in his multimillion dollar public relations blitz. That is getting him the support of the White House. "Getting a strong presidential endorsement of the crown prince's trip to the US to encourage investment in Saudi Arabia, that, I think, could be something that could be done," said Anthony H Cordesman, the Arleigh A Burke chair in strategy at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. Translating that into real policy and dollars and cent could, however, prove to be a harder sell. Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the *New Books in Middle Eastern Studies* podcast. He is the author of *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* blog, and a book with the same title, among others.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Memory laws and nationalist lies



NIKOLAY KOPOSOV

"Polish death camps." But the law is intended to be much more than a means to get people to mind their language. The law states that one could face a fine or up to three years imprisonment for "publicly and contrary to the facts" ascribing to the Polish people or government "responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes" or "other offenses" that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, or war crimes. True, "Nazi crimes" were committed by the Nazis, and Poles should not be blamed for them. Likewise, while Nazi extermination camps were located in Poland, they were by no means Polish. But it is the mention of "other offenses" that should concern us. The truth is that, in many places in Eastern Europe, the arrival of German troops during World War II prompted an immediate outbreak of homicidal anti-Semitism. Many Jews were murdered by their neighbours or the local police force, only sometimes pursuant to German orders. While Nazism was the catalyst for such murders—which include pogroms all across German-

controlled Europe, particularly in the east—should Nazis alone be blamed for them? Poland's PiS government is far from the first to introduce "memory laws" aimed at reshaping historical narratives by criminalising certain statements about the past. Such laws exist in some 30 European countries, as well as in Israel, Russia, Rwanda, and Turkey. Laws criminalising the denial of the Holocaust or other crimes against humanity—the most common type of memory law—were first introduced in the 1980s and 1990s in West European

Memory laws emerged in Western Europe's old democracies as a means of promoting truth, peace, and reconciliation. But, in attempting to avoid future tragedies, these countries may have set a dangerous precedent.

democracies that had been implicated in those crimes, including Austria, France, and Germany. Whether or not it is advisable to use criminal law in such a way, there is no doubt about the intentions of the people behind such efforts: to protect the memory of the victims, while acknowledging shared responsibility and regret for the misdeeds of the past. Some Eastern European countries have likewise prohibited Holocaust denial. But they have also introduced memory laws with essentially the opposite aim: to whitewash national narratives by shifting the responsibility for historical atrocities entirely onto others, whether Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union. Poland introduced such a law in 1998. Similar norms exist in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania. By obscuring the role that local populations played in both Nazi and communist crimes, such laws help to advance nationalist narratives, which can prove very handy for politicians looking to win popular support. The PiS, for one, has accrued substantial electoral support, thanks in part to its exploitation of past tragedies for political ends. There are more extreme cases than that of Poland. In Russia, a 2014 law prohibits any criticism of Stalin's policy during WWII. In Turkey, a 2005 law forbids calling the extermination of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire genocide. These laws differ



Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw, in front of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

victims, of state-sponsored crimes. Of course, Turkey, and especially Russia, can hardly be called a democracy, and neither is a member of the European Union. But Poland is—and its government, too, is now actively protecting the memory of the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, though they were individual citizens, not state officials acting in their government's name. This is not even the first time the PiS has attempted to introduce such a law. In 2008, it proposed a law that penalised "slander against the Polish nation," including accusations concerning Poles' involvement in Nazi and communist crimes. The country's Constitutional Tribunal invalidated that law on procedural grounds. Memory laws emerged in Western Europe's old democracies as a means of promoting truth, peace, and reconciliation. But, in attempting to avoid future tragedies, these countries may have set a dangerous precedent. Now, memory laws have become one of the preferred instruments of nationalist populists attempting to consolidate their own power—and to incite the very xenophobic nationalism that once provided fertile soil for the Holocaust. Nikolay Koposov, Visiting Professor of Russian and Eastern European Studies at Emory University, is the author of *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2018. www.project-syndicate.org Exclusive to The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

ROMILA THAPAR (b. NOVEMBER 1931) HISTORIAN OF ANCIENT INDIA

Democracy ceases to be so if it is governed by permanent majoritarian identities of any kind.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Allude (to)

6 Vatican-based

11 Banish

12 Scarlett's last name

13 Clear quaff

15 Huck's friend

16 Pull along

17 Feeling down

18 Croc's cousin

20 Terrible

23 Weakly unsteady

27 Harbor structure

28 Goopy cheese

29 Finish

31 Microwave sounds

32 Long stories

34 Much of N. Amer.

37 Combat

38 Phone bill

addition

41 Vaulting aid

44 National symbol

45 Mountain group

46 Purloined

47 Fiery crime

DOWN

1 Take a breather

2 Trade show

3 Unyielding

4 Quarterback

5 Tourist's car

6 Conference

7 "So that's it!"

8 Touches lightly

9 Open space

10 Cooking fat

14 Procured

18 Wise ones

19 Judicial garb

20 Galoot

21 Victory

22 Nourished

24 Lode material

25 Energy

26 "Certainly!"

30 "Parks and Recreation" town

31 Superstar

33 Cormic bit

34 Purposes

35 Petty argument

36 Jason's ship

38 Stadium group

39 Therefore

40 Genesis setting

42 Under the weather

43 Crew tool

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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ACRES HAIFA

HEARTS SIS

OLDS HUGEST

EYE PUNISH

ELFIN

BEREFT DES

ORDEAL SAGE

HIS EUCHRE

IDEST SALEM

OGLER ELITE

ESPY SEAS

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