

With the world's eyes turning to Saudi Arabia in 2020 as hosts of the prestigious G20 Summit, the international spotlight on the country will become even more intense. Couple that with the delivery of a major Vision 2030 milestone, the reporting of interim KPIs measuring the progress across all aspects of the Saudi economy, domestic focus will also heighten.

2019 has seen major events in the Kingdom, from the continued international fallout from the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, to the attacks on the Aramco facilities, the massive social reforms being undertaken including the relaxing of the guardianship laws, the outspoken position of the Australian Government on the Saudi's human rights record and the swelling of domestic criticism of MBS's rule, to the sale of Aramco. It has been a busy year. 2020 promises to bring more change to the Kingdom's interests; socially, economically, politically and internationally.

Two big developments for the coming year could bring to light indicators of how Saudi Arabia's future may unfold. First, the situation with the dispute with Qatar and secondly, its relationship with the US, and as a result, the role of Russia in the Kingdom.

Since Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and several other MENA countries cut ties with Qatar in June 2017, reportedly over claims that Qatar was supporting terrorism, there has been little progress in restoring relations despite the best efforts of the international community. There are increasing signs that this may change.

Despite Qatar apparently not acting on any of the 19 demands made on it by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for the last few months we have been hearing from sources inside the Kingdom that MBS is looking for ways to resolve this conflict that is casting a shadow over the Kingdom. The announcement that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain will participate in the Gulf Championship soccer tournament in Qatar later this month is a good sign. It is important to note that the tournament is not recognised by FIFA, so participation is being seen as an effort to thaw relations through sports diplomacy. It seems the Gulf Cooperation Committee meeting currently scheduled to be held in the UAE will be moved to Riyadh to accommodate the involvement of Qatar, bringing together all six leaders for the first time in many years. Additionally, there appears to be a PR truce between the parties and, after two and a half years of vitriol, criticisms have quietened significantly across traditional forms and social media.

Efforts to resolve the conflict, reportedly led by MBS, are being resisted by the Emiratis who are more invested in the concerns over the tiny country's links to the Muslim Brotherhood. This could show a very public thawing of ties between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and importantly between MBS and MBZ in particular. It has long been seen that MBZ has acted as a mentor for the young Crown Prince but in recent times they have increasingly been on different paths about major regional issues such as Yemen and Iran.

What any distance between the two will mean for the region will be a key factor in the Gulf, and the Middle East more broadly, in 2020, as the cracks begin to appear in the one of the regions most stabilising relationships.

Another key stabilising force in the region has been the bi-partisan support in the US for a close relationship with Saudi Arabia. This seems to be beginning to change. Only a few years ago, Saudi Arabia enjoyed wide support across the aisle but from initial attacks on the Kingdom and its de-facto ruler over the murder of Khashoggi, Yemen and the Saudi human rights record, to MBS's close alignment to Trump and his family Democrats, and even some

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Republicans, are speaking out publicly about their displeasure with the Kingdom and MBS in particular.

Most recently, in the latest Democratic Primary debate, the candidates shared a unanimous position that if they are elected to the White House, relations with Saudi Arabia will change. Former Vice President Joe Biden, the current front-runner, went so far as to pledged to make Saudi Arabia a “pariah” state. According to Andrew Miller, deputy director for policy at the Project on Middle East Democracy, “I think it is important to understand that the mere fact that this debate is occurring about Saudi Arabia during the Democratic primary and that you have candidates who previously would be much more circumspect in what they said about Saudi Arabia criticizing them so directly is a real sign of the underlying problem for the kingdom and for Mohammed bin Salman.”

While a Democratic victory in November next year is far from certain, this increasing willingness to question the relationship means that it will continue to be a major point of discussion in Washington next year and likely for years to come.

In the aftermath of the Aramco attacks, and America’s resistance to stepping in and defending their ally in any meaningful way, the relationship has already become strained leading the way for Russia to stake its claim as a friend and peacemaker in the region. Putin’s recent courting of the Gulf states, and the Gulf states’ new interested in being courted by Russia, may be disruptive of power influences in the region and in the Middle East more broadly.

What these factors will mean for the Kingdom, the Crown Prince’s ascendancy to the throne and the world are still unknown but they will be key in the future direction of the Kingdom.



## **Jade Evans**

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