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# Issue 379

## Of Eagle Eye Intelligence

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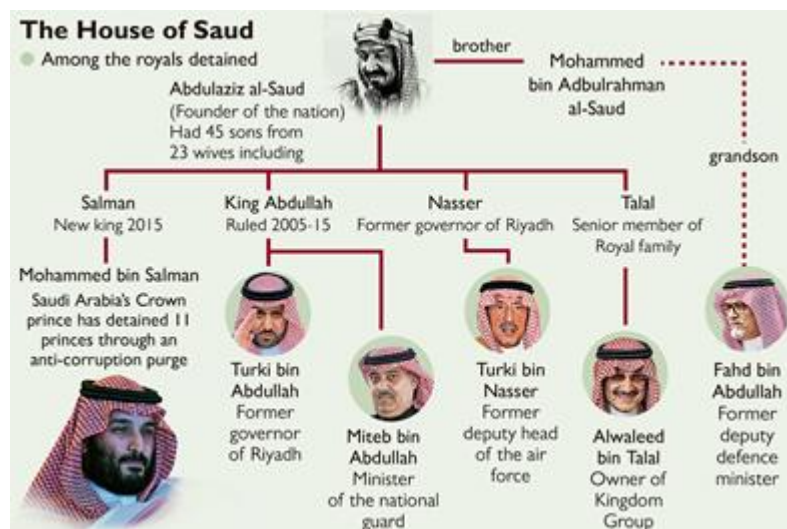
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## SAUDI ARABIA: Riyadh Purge Likely to Solidify Future Latitude for Crown Prince

**Summary:** The latest in a series of anti-corruption purges by Riyadh likely represents an effort by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) to ensure his ability to rule in whatever manner that he sees fit. This includes eliminating those that could challenge his rule, weeding out internal opposition to policies like Vision 2030, and attempting to secure legitimacy for an MBS government.

**Background:** On 14 March, Saudi Arabia's National Anti-Corruption Commission (Nazaha) announced the arrest of 241 people for alleged corruption. Inspection raids throughout February and March resulted in the arrests. Nazaha said the accused included employees from numerous ministries and the charges include bribery, abuse of power, and forgery. "MBS, who also holds the office of Defense Minister, and his brother, Prince Khalid Bin Salman, the Deputy Defense Minister, are using Nazaha to purge the government entity from graft by civil servants as well as military officers, current and former," according to a Riyadh-based journalist, who spoke to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project on condition of anonymity.



**Pattern of Political Purges:** Historical patterns suggest that MBS most likely initiated mass corruption arrests because he detected threats to his position as successor. All previous crackdowns and arrests for corruption targeted those with the power to threaten MBS's rule. The chart above from *The Sunday Times* shows some of the influential royals detained by MBS during the 2017-19 Riyadh Ritz-Carlton arrests, where MBS held royals captive until they paid reparations for alleged corruption and agreed to leave office. MBS detained many prominent princes, government officials, and businessmen and garnered over \$100 billion in reparations. Anti-corruption arrests since then appear to follow the same pattern, including the 6 March 2020 arrests of the King's younger brother Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz and former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. MBS likely saw both men as rivals to the throne since they held powerful positions and commanded great respect among Saudi and international elites. Many of the senior royals arrested over the last few years, including Ahmed and Mohammad, participated in a sort of consensus rule for major decisions in the Kingdom. This system allowed senior royals to vote

amongst themselves on major initiatives that the country would undertake. This could span from domestic to foreign policy. Through these arrests, MBS ensured that no one could challenge his claim to the throne, seemingly securing his rule.

**A Likely Pivot to Consolidating Power:** Even if MBS now feels more secure in his position as successor, he may have acted as a result of worries about an emboldened civil service undermining his future authority as king. In November 2020, Saudi authorities announced they arrested 226 people, including a retired major general, as part of 158 investigations into corruption within the country's Ministry of Defense and other government agencies. "This constitutes a Mini Ritz anti-corruption operation," said a Saudi journalist. "The operation also targeted those military officers the two Bin Salman brothers do not trust or deem loyal inside the Defense Ministry" as they consolidate their power, he said. The people arrested on 16 March worked in ministries directly related to and involved in the Vision 2030 plan, suggesting that MBS may be seeking to eliminate opposition to his agenda. Those arrested could have opposed MBS's Vision 2030 agenda or worked against his interests and reforms, leading to their detention.

**Attempt to Secure Legitimacy:** The Riyadh Initiative, proposed at last year's G20 summit, and a coalition task force MBS entered with the UN to implement the Riyadh initiative, likely reflect an intention to gain international legitimacy for a bin Salman administration. The Riyadh Initiative calls for establishing a global network aimed at enhancing international anti-corruption law enforcement cooperation. On 3 March, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), in partnership with Nazaha, organized the first meeting of an expert group to implement the initiative. Bin Salman's effort to establish Nazaha as an internationally recognized anti-corruption force could give legitimacy to his anti-corruption agenda and his future administration.

**Outlook and Implications:** Despite feeling more secure, MBS probably acted to strengthen his future latitude, remove possible barriers to Vision 2030, and win international legitimacy for his administration. If successful, this could lead to more anti-corruption purges in the future. Continued purges for political gain could lead Riyadh even further from its traditional consensus-rule model and toward a more authoritarian model of decision-making with MBS at the helm. With crackdowns on dissent and opposition masked as anti-corruption activities, MBS will likely continue to consolidate his power in preparation for his assumption to the throne.

[Meg Pfaff]

## **RUSSIA: Increased Internet Laws Indicates Growing Opposition to Putin**

**Summary:** Increased internet laws recently passed in Moscow give the government more control over citizens' access to digital content and fine uncooperative entities. The passing of these laws likely indicates a perceived threat to political power amid spreading opposition to President Vladimir Putin.

**Background:** On 23 December 2020, Moscow passed several laws expanding its ability to censor digital content. On 27 January 2021, supporters of Alexei Navalny, Putin's leading political opposition, mobilized the biggest protest in years. The demonstrators demanded the release of Navalny from jail. After 3 March, Russian officials moved Navalny from Kolchugino jail to a holding facility to quarantine before transportation to a penal colony. Vadim Kobzev, Navalny's lawyer, detailed the harsh conditions of Navalny's cell in a Twitter post. On 16 March, Moscow stated its intent to ban Twitter, claiming the platform failed to remove posts regarding child pornography and suicide. The previous week, Moscow reportedly slowed access to Twitter to protect Russian citizens.

**Tightening the Digital Reigns:** Russian control over the media, specifically foreign platforms, almost certainly reflects Putin's intention to control the online political narrative. In 2019, Moscow moved from the global internet to a domestic one. It has since sought out ways to increase its control over the internet. The laws passed on 23 December 2020 allow Moscow to block foreign platforms that discriminate against Russian media. Included in this legislation, fines apply to companies that fail to take down banned content, as determined necessary by Moscow. The focus on banning Twitter following the appearance of widespread criticism on the platform surrounding Navalny's holding conditions likely indicates Moscow's intent to suppress political dissent.

**Threats to Political Security:** Recent demonstrations against Putin across Russia likely pose a threat to his political influence over the country. Hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens attended the demonstrations held on 27 January. Large-scale protests likely indicate a growing opposition to Putin's leadership. Anti-corruption protests and protests demanding Navalny's release occurred in more than 80 cities across Russia. Since 2 February, Russian authorities arrested over 1,4000 protesters. Putin likely sees these protests of political opposition gaining traction as a threat to his leadership.



**Outlook and implications:** Sudden increased control over digital content likely indicates Putin’s fear of losing political power and demonstrates a domestic political vulnerability. Government overreach will most likely further frustrations among citizens. This frustration will likely lead to increased protesting and demonstrations across Russia. Growing frustrations and a lack of trust in the government may bolster an eventual attempt for political uprising against Putin as tensions heighten amid increased regulations. Attempts to cut access to external information will likely undermine political support for Putin. Political power grabs likely demonstrate internal vulnerability to the international community.

[Abigail Clark]

## UNITED KINGDOM: Cyber-Attacks on Healthcare Sites Likely to Continue

**Summary:** The trend of automated “bot” cyber-attacks on healthcare sites will likely continue and remain neglected as applying protective countermeasures could prevent legitimate users from gaining access to vaccine appointments and other services.

**Development:** On 22 March, cyber bots attacked a COVID-19 vaccine booking site in London, preventing legitimate users from booking vaccine appointments. The website received over 30,000 hits within the first hour. The massive number of requests slowed down the system’s performance making it harder for the legitimate users to access the site’s services. This attack constitutes the most recent development in the growing trend of bots disrupting traffic on healthcare websites, according to Imperva Research Labs. The hardship of blocking bad bot traffic faces the dilemma of still enabling legitimate traffic. Distinguishing between the two different forms of traffic proves difficult as bot technology continues to evolve. Bots no longer triangulate back to a single user, complexifying the search for a solution.

**Analysis:** The bot attacks will almost certainly continue to target healthcare websites as only limited protection measures will assure that legitimate users will not get rejected from accessing the needed services. Even if protection measures manage to get implemented correctly, hackers will most likely continue their attacks on other vulnerable healthcare websites. The ongoing advancement in bot technology also indicates that the attacks will continue to increase in complexity, making them harder to detect and deter.

[Amalie Hansen]

## RUSSIA-CHINA: Partnership Likely to Strengthen against Western Opposition

**Summary:** Moscow and Beijing requested a summit with the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to discuss sanctions amid political opposition from the West.

**Development:** On 22 March, a joint statement from Moscow and Beijing requested a summit of members from the UNSC. The request followed a meeting between Beijing and Moscow's Foreign Ministers in Guilin, China, after which Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi reported both countries' dissatisfaction with Western sanctions and political hostility. Both men called on other countries to refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of both nations.

**Analysis:** A UNSC summit may establish an official alliance between Moscow and Beijing to deal with growing Western pressure. Continued pressure from the West may strengthen the relationship between Moscow and Beijing. Both countries likely understand that the political and economic benefits of a partnership regarding a shared interest in combating Western imposed sanctions. The increase in calls for reducing dependency on Western nations almost certainly indicates intention to cut ties with the West.

[Austin Perez]



## AFGHANISTAN: Islamic State Violence Increase May Indicate Resurgence

**Summary:** The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for over 30 deaths in Afghanistan, possibly indicating a resurgence of the terrorist group.

**Development:** On 22 March, ISIL claimed responsibility for the deaths of over 30 military men and civilians. Kabul initially blamed the attacks on the Taliban despite ISIL's claim. The Taliban often provides ISIL with support. While Kabul announced the defeat of ISIL in 2019, the group continues to carry out and claim responsibility for attacks.

**Analysis:** The increase in ISIL claims likely indicates a resurgence of the group. The number of attacks that ISIL took credit for may also show that ISIL increased its resources and possibly its size. This increase in power and resources could mean that more ISIL attacks will likely occur. ISIL activities executed with the support of the Taliban could also increase as the groups continue to push back against Kabul.

[Taylor Begley]

## About GSIS

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's (ERAU) Bachelor of Science in Global Security & Intelligence Studies (GSIS) degree program at our Prescott Campus blends both academic and professional studies to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become future leaders in intelligence, security, and law enforcement. The program provides students with a sound foundation in the liberal arts, including international relations, foreign languages and cultures, international law, foreign policy, political and military history, and other essential topics.

## About EE

Eagle Eye Intelligence (EE) is an intelligence and research organization led by the students of the GSIS program at ERAU in Prescott, Arizona.

Dr. Philip E. Jones founded EE and Embry-Riddle's GSIS program in 2002, following a career with the Central Intelligence Agency and consulting work in international development and global security. Currently, Professor Dale R. Avery, a former career intelligence analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency and Office of the Director of National Intelligence, serves as EE's faculty advisor.

EE strives to provide actionable intelligence and analysis to its customers during the academic year. We are driven by a number of goals – continuous development, nonpartisanship, interdisciplinary studies, global awareness, and professionalism.

EE does not cite sources in the final publication; however, we log every source we use in our research and are happy to share them upon request. The official EE Source Database is available on our website's resources page for a general overview of our sourcing methods.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not represent the position Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University or the College of Security and Intelligence.

Alli McIntyre, a junior in the GSIS program, currently serves as EE's Editor in Chief. For questions or comments, contact the team at [editorsee@gmail.com](mailto:editorsee@gmail.com) or Professor Avery at 928.777.4708.

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