

## An open question

The spate of high-profile arrests in Saudi Arabia on Saturday — including of 11 princes and four ministers — is a radical step in a polity which has historically been slow to change. The country has traditionally been run by a consensus between and among the religious establishment and the royal family, and government positions are distributed among princes of the House of Saud. The House of Saud has also been a supporter of Wahhabism — a rigid, conservative school of Islam, with ties to extremist groups. On the economic front, the country needs to diversify beyond its traditional dependence on oil. The need for a wide range reforms has been recognised by the crown prince, 32-year-old Mohammed bin Salman, the king's top adviser. However, it is an open question whether Prince Salman's actions will lead to a more liberal and stable Saudi Arabia.

The crown prince has recently allowed women to drive in the country and attend open-air events in stadiums. He has formed a committee to look into religious reforms. But, under his watch, Saudi Arabia is also involved in a conflict in Yemen and its relations with Qatar have sunk to a new low. Iran continues to be a rival in the region. With battles on so many fronts, the recent arrests may well destabilise the kingdom. Among those arrested are Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a billionaire tech mogul and a social liberal by his country's standards, and Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, the son of the previous king and head of the Saudi national guard, a locus of tribal power. The crackdown on potential political rivals is ostensibly being undertaken to end corruption but it could also be seen as a way for the young crown prince to consolidate his power.

A stable Saudi Arabia is pivotal to the global political economy. Global oil prices hit their highest point since July 2015 on Monday after news of the arrests. For India, Saudi Arabia's importance is three-fold — as a supplier of oil, a destination for Indian labour and because it controls access to sites of pilgrimage. Recently, especially since Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s visit to West Asia in 2016, Indo-Saudi relations have grown deeper. Whatever the outcome of the current political turmoil, New Delhi must ensure that the gains it has made with Saudi Arabia are not reversed or lost.

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