

As Saudi Crisis Grows, Kremlin Is Said to Keep Its Bet on MBS

By [Bloomberg](#)

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Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman / Kremlin.ru

As pressure mounts on Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over the killing of a journalist critic, he's finding strong support in Russia, where the Kremlin is betting the embattled young heir it's invested heavily in courting is likely to emerge from the controversy unscathed and possibly even strengthened.

The 33-year-old prince, in an effort to outmaneuver the growing ranks of his opponents in the elite at home, is likely to push to take over the throne as early as the next few months, while King Salman, his father, is still alive, according to a specialist on the Mideast who's a close policy adviser to top Kremlin officials. He spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss confidential matters. Two other people familiar with Kremlin thinking confirmed that Moscow expects the prince to emerge from the crisis undiminished.

Having cultivated the prince as a key ally in its quest for closer ties with another of the world's

top oil producers, Moscow is hoping to capitalize on that relationship as his power grows. But it's a difficult balancing act, given the deep tensions between Saudi Arabia and two of Russia's other friends in the region — Iran and Turkey. The Kremlin also risks being caught out if the prince loses power at home and if the Saudis patch up ties with their longtime ally, the U.S.

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So far, President Vladimir Putin has publicly steered clear of the controversy over the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul earlier this month, allegedly at the hands of Saudi agents. While Western leaders have questioned the Saudi government's frequently changing accounts of events and threatened to downgrade ties, the Kremlin said Monday that preparations for a visit to Riyadh are continuing.

Awaiting Probe

“We've all heard the official statements from Riyadh on the case denying members of the royal family had any role,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday. “We've taken that into account. The rest is a matter for investigators.”

Putin made the same point last week, saying, “We set our policy toward Saudi Arabia a long time ago, over many years, and the fact that a person has disappeared is of course terrible, but we need to understand what happened.”

Peskov didn't respond to a request for comment on Kremlin views of the crown prince's prospects.

Russia's sovereign-wealth fund, which has been a central player in Kremlin efforts to cultivate the Saudi leadership, has led the way in standing by them amid the crisis. The Russian Direct Investment Fund is leading a big delegation of executives to the prince's investment forum this week, even as western executives and officials are staying away over the Khashoggi case.

Over the weekend, the RDIF welcomed the latest Saudi explanation of events, issuing a statement saying that it “strongly supports” the reforms led by the crown prince, known by his initials, MBS.

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“Within the Saudi establishment there are a lot of people who do not like Russia, who do not want MBS's close relations with Russia. If MBS goes, who will replace him?” said Yuri Barmin, a specialist on the region at the Russian International Affairs Council, a research group set up by the Kremlin. “Putin has a good working relationship with King Salman but he is much closer to MBS.”

But Barmin noted that the Kremlin is being cautious not to alienate Turkey, which has taken the lead in challenging the Saudi account of Khashoggi's death. And overshadowing all

relationships is the role of the U.S., with its much deeper links to both countries.

'Russian Card'

"The Saudis are playing the Russian card to scare the Americans," Barmin said. "Russia needs to stay under the radar here."

Russia will stick with its course to build ties with Riyadh, said Elena Suponina, an expert on the region in Moscow. "The fact is that Saudi Arabia is a leading member of OPEC and the agreements with Russia succeeded in stabilizing prices on the oil market," she said.

The Khashoggi case has also underlined another shared issue for Moscow and Riyadh: Both have been accused of assassinating political opponents abroad. Russia denies Western allegations it tried to poison a former agent in the U.K. in March, but still has been hit by sanctions by the U.S. and other countries over the case.

When asked about the Khashoggi murder last week, Putin at first pretended not to know what the questioner was asking about, then complained about what he called the lack of "a unified approach to these problems."

"There's no proof against Russia but steps are taken" in the U.K. case, he said. "But here, they say the murder took place in Istanbul but no steps were taken."

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