

CAPTURED COURTS: MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN'S JUDICIAL TAKEOVER IN SAUDI ARABIA



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Saudi Arabia's judiciary, historically subject to the Royal Court, has lost what limited independence it once maintained since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has consolidated unprecedented control over the courts. While MBS **claims** judges are to blame for the lack of human rights progress in Saudi Arabia, in reality, since 2017 he has methodically transformed the judicial system into a direct instrument of his control by transferring prosecutorial powers to the Royal Court, eliminating potential rivals for judicial influence, and installing loyalists throughout the courts.

MBS CONSOLIDATED HIS TAKEOVER OF THE SAUDI JUDICIAL SYSTEM IN FOUR PHASES:

PHASE ONE THE SHAKE-UP

CONTROLLING THE SECURITY APPARATUS AND THE PROSECUTION

JUNE 17, 2017 – MBS **replaced** the Saudi Bureau of Investigation and Public Prosecution, which was under the control of the Saudi Ministry of Interior, with a newly formed Saudi Public Prosecution Office (PPO) that reported directly to the Royal Court, controlled by MBS.

JUNE 21, 2017 – MBS **deposed** and took over the portfolios of Mohammed bin Nayef, then Crown Prince and Minister of Interior, who was considered the most influential person in Saudi Arabia. Bin Nayef controlled the Saudi security forces and parts of the Saudi judiciary, such as the special counterterrorism court known as the **Specialized Criminal Court (SCC)** whose judges he handpicked.

JULY 20, 2017 – MBS **created** the State Security Presidency (SSP), the political investigative body that handles political cases, detentions, investigations, and intelligence, including all "state security" cases, to replace various Saudi security agencies under the control of the Saudi Ministry of Interior. The SSP reports directly to the Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, currently MBS.

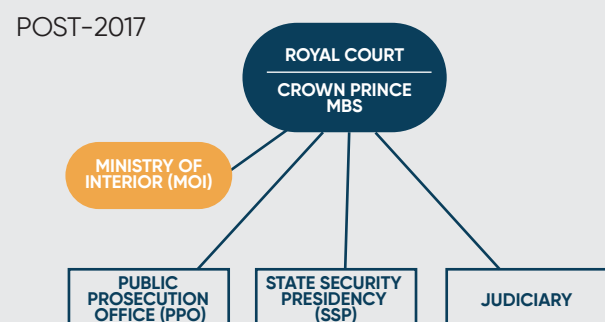
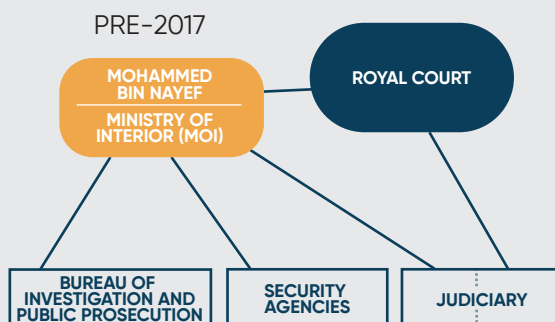
PHASE TWO THE SHAKEDOWN

ELIMINATING RIVALS AND BRINGING THE PROSECUTION TO HEEL

NOVEMBER 2017 – JANUARY 2018 – MBS **ordered** the extrajudicial detention, torture, and shakedown of more than 300 Saudi businessmen and princes in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. Only after the fact did he use the judiciary to rubber-stamp the sentencing and imprisonment of individuals who did not comply with his rule.

OCTOBER 2018 – Saudi Attorney General **Saud al-Mojeb** helped cover up the involvement of MBS and his close aides in the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, Turkey. Al-Mojeb **refused** to share evidence with Turkish authorities, preventing Turkish authorities from interrogating the suspects implicated in the crime. Al-Mojeb did not indict MBS's right-hand man, **Saud al-Qahtani**, despite the fact that the U.N. and the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence identified him as the operation's mastermind. Al-Mojeb and loyal MBS detective, **Awadh al-Ahmari**, also failed to investigate MBS's role in the murder, who U.S. intelligence reports concluded had ordered the murder.

STRUCTURE OF THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM



PHASE THREE THE PURGE

GETTING RID OF JUDGES NOT SUFFICIENTLY HARSH ON CRITICS

APRIL 11, 2022 – MBS ordered the arrests of at least 10 sitting judges, including 6 judges from the SCC and 4 judges from the High Court. MBS later had them charged with high treason, a crime punishable by death in Saudi Arabia. According to a source with knowledge of the trial, and who reviewed the court documents presented against the defendants, officials from the State Security Circuit of the PPO **charged** the SCC judges after they signed confessions stating they had been too "lenient" in the State Security cases they presided over during their tenures.

PHASE FOUR THE TAKEOVER

COMPLETE ACQUISITION OF THE JUDICIARY

JUNE 9, 2022 – MBS announced the **appointment** of Detective Awadh al-Ahmari and at least ten other detectives and prosecutors to serve as judges in the SCC. Many of the appointees did not possess the minimum qualifications for judges set by the Saudi Judicial Regulation.

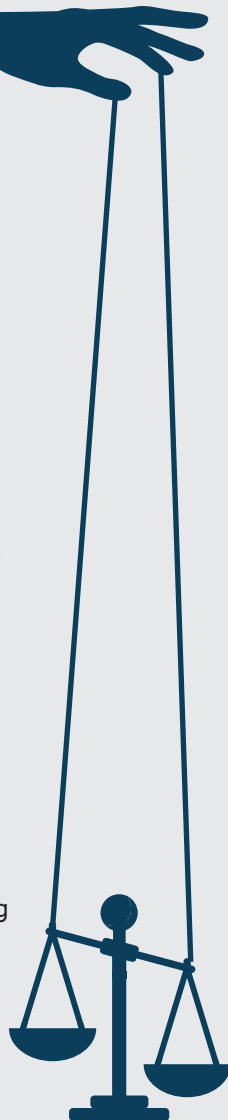
JUNE 20, 2022 – MBS **appointed** more loyalist judges, who reviewed the cases of several political activists and Twitter commentators and dramatically increased their sentences. Such as **Salma al-Shehab**, whose social media-related sentence was increased from 6 to 34 years in prison (she was since **released** in February 2025), and **Nourah al-Qahtani**, whose sentence was increased from 13 to 45 years in prison.

WHY IT MATTERS

Thousands are detained in deplorable conditions without due process. Some, including 55-year old retired teacher **Mohammad bin Nasser al-Ghamdi**, have faced the death penalty over peaceful online expression. This systematic suppression operates through a judicial framework personally crafted and overseen by the Crown Prince.

Claims of judicial independence collapse under the weight of evidence—every major judicial decision, from death sentences to political detentions, bears the fingerprints of royal authority. Under MBS's reforms, any degree of autonomy the courts had has effectively disappeared, creating an unprecedented concentration of legal authority directly under the Crown Prince.

Saudi Arabia's record-breaking **345 executions** in 2024 (on mostly drug-related charges) reveal the direct line of authority in the kingdom's justice system: every death sentence **requires explicit approval** from King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who hold absolute power to grant pardons. This authority reflects MBS's broader consolidation of control over the judiciary, which has become a powerful instrument of state repression.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT



**MOHAMMAD
BIN NASSER
AL-GHAMDI**

Al-Ghamdi was arrested in June 2022 outside his Mecca home and held in solitary confinement for four months without access to family or legal counsel for tweets supporting religious prisoners of conscience—despite having fewer than 10 followers. The SCC initially sentenced him to death in July 2023 on counterterrorism charges. In September 2024, the SCC commuted his sentence to 30 years in prison. Al-Ghamdi's health has deteriorated in detention, with authorities reportedly denying him necessary mental health medication.

