King’s forces arrest prominent Saudis in warning to critics

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When news broke of a possible breakthrough in an impasse that has pitted Qatar against its Arab neighbors for the past three months, one of Saudi Arabia’s most well-known clerics expressed his support for reconciliation in a tweet to his more than 14 million followers.

“May God bring their hearts together for the good of their people,” Salman al-Ouda wrote, garnering 15,000 likes, 13,000 retweets and nearly 2,000 responses.

Within hours of his post Saturday, the cleric was detained, sparking the start of a crackdown in which at least 30 people have been rounded up in recent days as apparent Islamist sympathizers and critics of the crown prince, according to Saudi rights activists.

Among those reportedly detained was Awad al-Qarni, another popular cleric who was banned from writing on Twitter in March on charges he spread content on social media that could jeopardize public order and provoke public opinion.

The arrests have thrown an already anxious kingdom into deeper unease, raising questions about the country’s steadiness amid mounting speculation that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, also known as MBS, could soon replace his father as king.

Saudi rights activists say the arrests are being carried out by agents of the State Security Presidency, a new body whose forces report directly to the king. Previously, they were under the scope of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef — the former crown prince who was plucked out of the line of succession in June to make way for MBS. The former crown prince was also removed from his post as the country’s longtime security czar.

Within days of the contentious ouster, which did not have the full backing of senior royals, King Salman stripped the Interior Ministry of its broad powers, relegating its work to traffic fines, drug enforcement and passport control. The Interior Ministry was essentially stripped of its teeth as the most feared security apparatus in the country.

Political risk consultancy Eurasia Group estimates that “in the near future” King Salman could relinquish power to MBS, giving the aging monarch an opportunity to oversee a potentially fraught transition while he’s still alive.

The spate of arrests this week could be seen as an attempt by MBS to show strength ahead of such a move. It also helps appease ultraconservative Salafi Saudi clerics, known as Wahhabis, who disagree with Islamist calls for Western-style ballot box democracy. They have also been rankled by aspects of the 32-year-old crown prince’s reform agenda, known as Vision 2030.

Saudi Arabia’s council of state-backed Wahhabi clerics said on Twitter after the arrests that the country was founded on the Quran and the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad “so there is no place for political parties or ideologies.”

To generate more income and appeal to an antsy population of mostly young people, MBS is encouraging Saudis to spend more of their money locally on entertainment, like once-banned musical concerts. He is also behind plans for the development of a semi-autonomous Red Sea resort destination, where the kingdom’s strict dress codes and gender segregation rules would not be enforced.

The crackdown is the clearest sign yet that the 32-year-old crown prince is taking policy cues from the more experienced Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, said Lori Boghardt, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The United Arab Emirates — home to liberal and tourist friendly destinations in Abu Dhabi and Dubai — is often held up as a model for Gulf countries looking to modernize. It has also cracked down the hardest on Islamists in the Gulf.

“The big takeaway from the arrests is that MBS is following the path of MBZ as many suspected,” said Boghardt, referring to Mohammed bin Zayed by his nickname in policy circles. “The UAE’s stability model is useful for us to keep in mind when we’re trying to make sense of what’s happening in Saudi,” she added.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE brand the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization. They view the group’s political aspirations, its calls for elections and its members’ pledges of allegiance as a threat to their dynastic rule.

Qatar’s embrace of the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots has made it an outlier among U.S.-allied Gulf countries.

Together, the two crown princes are leading the diplomatic assault on Qatar that began in early June. With backing from Egypt and Bahrain, the quartet has unleashed an unprecedented attack on Qatar’s leadership, accusing it of supporting terrorism, backing extremists in the region and plotting unrest throughout the Middle East. Qatar denies the allegations and says the moves are politically motivated.

Al-Ouda, the detained cleric, has in the past described the Saudi-backed ouster of Egypt’s Islamist government as “a coup” — putting him at odds with his own government. As Arab Spring uprisings sprouted across the region in 2011, his opinions about democracy made him an anomaly in a country where hard-line Wahhabi clerics are pillars of support for the kingdom’s absolute monarchy. His Snapchat following, YouTube views and overall social media profile mushroomed.

Al-Ouda is no stranger to the dangers of being associated with politically disruptive Islamist ideals. In the 90s, he spent five years in prison for his alliance with Saudi Arabia’s Islamist Sahwa movement.

Others arrested in this week’s crackdown include writers, a poet, intellectuals and two women, according to lists being circulated on social media by Saudi activists. The Associated Press could not independently verify the arrests and the government has yet to confirm the names of detainees.

The arrests, however, appear to have been confirmed in a vague statement published by the state-run news agency Tuesday. The statement said arrests were made after the State Security Presidency monitored the activities of a group of people acting “for the benefit of foreign parties against the security of the kingdom and its interests.”

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The National newspaper, based in Abu Dhabi, ran an opinion piece by writer Hassan Hassan saying the arrests signal that anything short of unequivocal support for Saudi Arabia’s position toward Qatar would not be tolerated.

“As pro-government Saudis see it, those figures have learned how to tiptoe over red lines to express adversarial religious and political positions without the risk of punishment,” he wrote. “Authorities want to put an end to the situation.”