Royal ambitions: The UAE's stake in Saudi crown prince

Nisha Mathew
For The Straits Times

Six months after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi sparked a backlash against Saudi Arabia, reports that the country’s de facto leader, Mohammed bin Salman, has expanded the powers of his crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, have surfaced.

While there has been no official confirmation, reports that the crown prince has taken on a more prominent role in Saudi policy have been circulating for months. The kingdom has seen a series of high-profile Cabinet and diplomatic appointments, including the installation of Prince Saud bin Abdullah as the new foreign minister.

The moves come as the kingdom steps up its efforts to assert itself on the global stage. Riyadh has been seeking to expand its influence in the region, particularly in the wake of the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

The move is also seen as a way to bolster the kingdom’s standing in the wake of the controversy over the killing of Khashoggi, a dissident journalist who had lived in the United States and was critical of the Saudi government.

The appointment of Prince Saud bin Abdullah as foreign minister is seen as a way to strengthen Riyadh’s position in the region. The veteran diplomat has a long history of service in the Saudi Foreign Ministry, and is known for his diplomatic skills and ability to navigate complex international relations.

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That the Saudi Crown Prince has grand designs on regional hegemony is fortuitous for the Emirates – as long as their ambitions align, it is content to let Riyadh do the heavy lifting, and Prince Mohammed, who views thawing Iran as a litmus test of his political leadership and legitimacy as the Kingdom’s next ruler, has duly obliged.