

Future kings meet in Saudi Arabia but Andrew-Epstein revelations loom over Prince William

“There is an emphasis here on William wielding not just his national popularity, but a global renown and popularity in the singular interest of Britain,” one analyst told NBC News.



Prince William and Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.Chris Jackson / Getty Images

LONDON — One wore a meticulously tailored navy blue suit. The other, a long robe traditional to the men of his desert kingdom. Both are set to rule their respective nations.

As [Britain's Prince William](#) was led by Saudi Arabian [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](#) on a tour around the mud brick At-Turaif District — a

UNESCO World Heritage site and the birthplace of the first Saudi state — they seemed at ease in each other’s company.

But the three-day visit, requested by the British government aiming to strengthen ties with a key Middle Eastern ally and major regional player, was seen by some as a tricky diplomatic mission for the future king as he attempts to build his personal profile at a torrid time for his family as it faces near daily revelations about the [former Prince Andrew’s relationship with Jeffrey Epstein](#).

“This is part of his elevation to heir to the throne,” said Craig Prescott, who teaches law at Royal Holloway, University of London, and specializes in the constitutional and political role of the monarchy. This made it clear, he added, that William was second only to his father, [King Charles III](#).

Ahead of this week’s trip, William will undoubtedly have been briefed about [Saudi Arabia](#), which has been widely criticized for its human rights record, its [suppression of women](#) and where [protest and political dissent are punished](#).



Prince William plants an acacia tree at Saudi Arabia's Sharaan Nature Reserve. Chris Jackson / Getty Images

And he will also have been given guidance on his fellow prince, who unlike William is not part of a constitutional monarchy answerable to lawmakers and open to criticism from an often boisterous free press.

Known by his initials, MBS, Crown Prince Mohammed is Saudi Arabia's de facto leader and a controversial figure with a checkered and bloody history, and the son of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

After the gruesome 2018 killing of [Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#) in his country's consulate in Istanbul, the crown prince became an international pariah.

U.S. [intelligence agencies concluded the crown prince approved the killing](#) — a claim he has denied — although in 2019 he said that he took “full responsibility” for it since it happened on his watch. A Saudi court sentenced five people to death for their involvement in the killing.

Bin Salman was also widely criticized for the war in Yemen where fighting between his Saudi-led coalition and [Houthi rebels](#) led to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. While a truce was declared in April 2022, a comprehensive peace deal is yet to be struck.

“I don't think it's incumbent on members of the British royal family to have to deal with issues like human rights,” Ed Owens, an author and royal historian, said in a telephone interview earlier this week.

Instead, he said, William's visit was “a clever ploy on the part of the British government to dispatch someone who can bring meaning to the relationship, but doesn't have to engage with difficult issues around what happened to Jamal Khashoggi or other human rights abuses.”



William visited a group of young female footballers in Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh. Aaron Chown / Pool - Getty Images

Kensington Palace said in a statement that William would meet young Saudis and hear “about the country’s ambitious plans for the future, including its commitment to sustainability.”

But Owens said that he thought the aim of the British government, which secured nearly \$9 billion in mutual trade and investment deals [last year](#) and “has significant interest in the Middle East and in Saudi, is for the future king to forge a lasting relationship with another future king,”

Together with wife, [Catherine, the Princess of Wales](#), William played a crucial role when [President Donald Trump made a historic second state visit to the United Kingdom](#) in September; Owens said William’s visit is the continuation of that soft power at play.

“There is an emphasis here on William wielding not just his national popularity, but a global renown and popularity in the singular interest of Britain,” he added.

As well as the visit to At-Turaif, William was taken to a soccer training session for girls, a relatively new phenomenon in a country where women have only been given more freedom in recent years, including the right to drive in 2018, although huge limitations remain. He also visited a sustainable farm.

But throughout his visit, remained the specter of his uncle, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, who has been [stripped of his titles](#) and royal mansion because of his relationship with Epstein. British police said Monday that they were assessing whether the former prince [leaked sensitive trade documents](#) to the disgraced financier and convicted sex offender.

Mountbatten-Windsor, who has always denied any wrongdoing in connection with his affiliation with Epstein, reached [a legal settlement with](#) Virginia Roberts Giuffre, one of the most prominent survivors of Epstein's sexual abuse, in 2022. She repeatedly alleged that the financier trafficked her to his powerful friends, including Andrew, before her death in April.

In their first public statement on the scandal Tuesday, a spokesperson said William and Kate were “deeply concerned” by the continuing revelations and “their thoughts remain focused on the victims.”

“In terms of the timing, I think it was to try and get those questions out of the way so the focus can be on the Saudi trip,” Prescott said.

But the scandal followed William to Saudi Arabia anyway.

Twice from the sidelines of a soccer pitch in Riyadh, a reporter asked to what extent the royal family had done enough about the issue. William did not respond, but it was unclear whether he heard.

It is highly unlikely Crown Prince Mohammed would have faced similar questions.



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