

# Saudi Reforms: Change for Survival or for Progress?

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The modernization of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and detailed in his Vision 2030 plan<sup>1</sup> addresses multiple national and regional challenges. Hampered home by his political communications, the change conceived by MBS is provoking popular enthusiasm, especially among young people, but raises a number of issues regarding his despotic practices. The reformist line of the regent emir illustrates, in fact, an authoritarian liberalization. The motherland's survival justifies his modernizing measures... and paradoxically, his repressive methods against dissenting voices.

## **Building the “New Arabia”: A Matter of National Pride**

The violent austerity that shook the kingdom following the sharp drop in oil prices in 2014 paved the way for the alternative of change embodied by Prince Mohammed with his father's endorsement. Vision 2030, placed under the prince's responsibility, is implemented through the sovereign fund he chairs, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), which aims to exceed \$1,700 billion in assets by 2025. It is the potential

financial backer of mega-projects to redesign the country's societal, urban, territorial and tourist landscape (AIUla, Qiddiya, the Umluj Red Sea Project, etc.) as well as numerous artistic, museum and film productions. The PIF also owns the state defence company Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI).

The promotion of such massive construction projects galvanizes national pride and tends to show the greatness of a Saudi nation that builds and innovates. Interviewed on 3 March 2022 by *The Atlantic*, the prince insisted on the authenticity of their Saudi identity, while underlining their uniqueness on a global scale: “*We are trying to evolve using the potential of the Saudi people, the culture of Saudi Arabia, our history. We want to bring something new to the world. Many of our projects are unique. They are Saudi. For example, Neom, created by our country, this project is developing solutions that no one has provided before.*”<sup>2</sup> A new zero-emission megacity in the Tabuk region on the Red Sea, Neom will be powered entirely by clean energy and run by cutting-edge technologies such as human-machine fusion, artificial intelligence and robotics. This futuristic region will also offer sports, cultural, scientific and tourist attractions. The mega-projects allow the kingdom to “rebrand” itself internationally through the dynamic management of its tourist and cultural sites, contributing to its attractiveness in the eyes of non-Muslim foreign visitors. They are also in line with the government's orientation to Saudiize the sphere of labour. Vision 2030 emphasizes national preference in terms of recruitment in both the private and public sectors.

<sup>1</sup> Unveiled by the Crown Prince in 2016 during an interview with *The Economist*, this plan for the future of Saudi Arabia aims to reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil, diversify the economy and develop public service sectors such as education, infrastructure, leisure and tourism. The American consultancy firm McKinsey drew it up based on 96 strategic objectives structured around 13 programmes.

<sup>2</sup> “Mohammed bin Salman Saudi Arabia Palace Interview: Absolute Power.” *The Atlantic*, 3 March 2022, ([www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/)).

## Winning over Saudi Youth: The Challenge of a Generational and Identity Rupture

After getting rid of his competitors, Mohammed bin Salman invented a new model of “popular” legitimacy by targeting a priority audience, the urbanized Saudi youth who are ultra-connected to the world. Fatiha Dazi-Héni’s study shows that this priority audience is very enthusiastic about aspects of MBS’ change. The researcher observes that the modernization he is carrying out “has the vocation of a generational break that he fosters in order to create an identity for young people formatted to the values of Vision 2030. This is the fundamental marker of his leadership.”<sup>3</sup> MBS’s priorities match their ambitions, going beyond circles of family and tribal affiliation. MBS’s governance of change primarily involves a re-consideration of the social contract. It strives to adapt youth to a new work culture, compensating them with entertainment packages in a liberalized society that is better integrated into globalization. So many remarkable measures of *infitah* (openness) have deeply marked their daily lives and their imagination: reopening of cinemas, authorization to drive for women, sports competitions (Formula One) and musical events. These major events are organized by the General Entertainment Authority chaired by Turki al-Sheikh, one of MBS’ loyalists. The adviser to the Royal *Diwan* boasted on his Facebook account about the huge success of the 2022 Riyadh Season, which attracted 11 million visitors and tens of thousands of foreign tourists from 125 countries. The festival also created more than 150,000 jobs for Saudis. The MDLBeast international music festival, meanwhile, welcomed more than 700,000 people in December 2021. The change has created many opportunities for young people, supported by a powerful communications enterprise that fosters nationalist sentiment among this audience.

Young people now associate the prince’s leadership with the mission of safeguarding the interests of the homeland. MBS’s communication strategy is largely handled by the Misk Foundation, which promotes the Vision 2030 programme and the propagation of the values of the “new Arabia.” This is coupled with an innovative approach to textbooks in order to joint-

ly shape the “ideal citizen” of the Fourth Saudi State. Tools of influence and guidance are massively mobilized for this purpose, including social networks and communication and research centres, such as the Etidal – Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology and the King Abdel Aziz Center for World Culture, also known as Ithra.

## The mega-projects allow the kingdom to “rebrand” itself internationally through the dynamic management of its tourist and cultural sites

Two areas of reform can be discussed to better define the identity markers of post-Wahhabi Arabia: education and political control of the religious domain.

### Pedagogy through the Prism of *Infitah*

The modernization of school curricula is helping to forge the “new Arabia” and shape a citizen who is committed to the values of Vision 2030. Thus, freeing school from the Wahhabi grip has been one of the main axes of the kingdom’s transformation. The decision by liberal Education Minister Ahmad al-Isa in July 2018 to abolish the *Tawu’iya al-islamiya* (Islamic Awareness) programmes was a turning point in the history of the Saudi education system. Pointed out as having fuelled fanaticism among youth, they have been replaced by the *Wa’yî al-fikrî* (Intellectual Sensitivity) programme, which praises citizenship and makes young people aware of the importance of being open to foreign cultures. The de-Wahhabization of education has continued from another angle. On 5 December 2018, the government decided to teach critical thinking skills and philosophy in high schools. These two reform measures illustrate a political determination to promote cultural *infitah* and to combat religious fundamentalism in society.

<sup>3</sup> DAZI-HENI, Fatiha. “Arabie saoudite – Le pari sur la jeunesse de Mohammed Bin Salman.” *Étude 80*. Paris: IRSEM, May 2021.

## Reform Means Breaking with the Ideological Matrix of the Saudi-Wahhabi State

The assertion of MBS's political power has been accompanied by an accentuated regulation of the clerical domain. This reflects the kingdom's entry into the post-Wahhabi era, as evidenced by the decline of the religious police (Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice). The government decision of 14 April 2016 tangibly reduced the powers of its zealous agents.

The heightened control of religious discourse corresponds to two priorities: advocating the kingdom's return to an Islam "open to all religions and to the whole world" and sanctioning all forms of extremism. This repressive political line is stigmatized by Islamist opponents as justifying the systematic murder of dissidents. The 2017-2018 arrest campaign targeted *ul-ema* from the former *Sahwa* protest movement. On 11 September 2017, ten prominent Islamist preachers and scholars were arrested. Ahmad al-Amari, the former dean of the Faculty of Quranic Sciences at Medina University, died in prison in January 2019.

## The survival of the homeland depends on the ongoing *infitah*, which consequently requires the neutralization of those who contest the prince's choices

The government severely punishes any criticism targeting the reforms. Thus, the Saudi preacher Issam al-Uwayid, detained since 2017, was sentenced to four years in prison by the terrorism court for having criticized the president of the General Entertainment Authority. On the other hand, the prince enjoys the unflinching support of a brigade of quietist preachers wholly aligned with his reformist line, such as Aed al-Qarni, a former *Sahwî* militant who has assured that he recognizes himself in the Islam "of the middle way" that MBS preaches, and Salih al-Mughamsi, who glorifies the person and the actions of the emir and denigrates his opponents.

Finally, Saudi Arabia has abandoned its diplomacy of globalized Islamic preaching, as stated by the Sec-

retary General of the Islamic World League (an NGO founded in Mecca in 1962 and affiliated with the regime). Interviewed on 19 January 2020 by the Swiss daily *Le Matin*, Mohammed bin Abdel Karim al-Issa, former Saudi Minister of Justice, announced that his country would stop managing and funding places of worship outside its borders.

## Modernize and... Repress: Emir Mohammed's Authoritarian Liberalization

Change in Saudi Arabia is being accompanied by the closure of channels of expression. Saudi political discourse consistently nurtures an exalted patriotism based on the primacy of the Saudi identity and the preservation of the national interest. Thus, the survival of the homeland depends on the ongoing *infitah*, which consequently requires the neutralization of those who contest the prince's choices.

Issam al-Zamil, a brilliant young economist and businessman, was sentenced in October 2020 to 15 years in prison after criticizing the privatization of 5% of the Saudi oil giant Aramco (a measure included in Vision 2030). The authorities wrongly accused him of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood and of inciting the population to revolt. The arrest of feminist activists in May 2018 has greatly affected the record of progress for women. Loujain al-Hathloul, Eman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yusuf and Aisha al-Mana were planning to found an association for battered women and victims of domestic violence. They were immediately accused by the security authorities of threatening the country's stability and undermining national cohesion. The detainees also faced unprecedented attacks on social networks and by the media machine of the ruling elite. The hashtag "*umalâ' al-sifârât*" (agents of foreign embassies) and the particularly violent comments of the daily *Al-Jazirah* stating that "the fatherland rejects the renegades" are evidence of this.

But it was obviously the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi on 2 October 2018 by a security commando close to MBS in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul that shook the international image of the reformist prince. The journalist had long been part of the Saudi media and diplomatic establishment before fleeing to the United States a few days after being banned on 16 September 2017 from writing for

the *Al-Hayat* daily by order of its owner, Prince Khaled bin Sultan. The *Washington Post* columnist committed the unforgivable by countering the policy directions of the rulers on local and regional issues, such as political Islam, the arrest of the Sahwa ulama, the Arab Spring or Saudi-Israeli rapprochement. Khashoggi challenged the mode of government dominated by the Salman clan. According to him, the prince had led the kingdom into one-man rule by creating a climate of intimidation and fear. He too faced a wave of defamatory accusations and was called “a naturalized intruder who has marred the image of Arabia, serving the agendas of foreign intelligence, because his loyalty is not to the fatherland.”<sup>4</sup> Abdel Rahman al-Rached, a well-known journalist with the daily *Asharq Al-Awsat*, called him “an *ikhwanî* [Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer] who chose to join his brotherhood.”<sup>5</sup>

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The governance practices of the prince regent are consistent with the functioning of personalized despotic regimes. This is illustrated by the composition of the PIF, which has developed into a system of cli-

entelist patronage. The emir favours his followers, who are appointed to key positions because of their total loyalty to him. They thus feel in a position of strength due to this royal privilege, which explains their use of violence to defend their leader and protector against his detractors. On 18 December 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on the alleged responsibility of MBS’s communications adviser, Saud al-Qahtani, in the abuses inflicted on the detained female activists.

### Conclusion

Uncertainties loom over the Kingdom’s future. In addition to the exorbitant cost of MBS’s reforms, the global economic and health crises caused by the spread of Covid-19 have hampered his ambitions. Other major challenges also weigh on his agenda. The sharp fall in oil prices on 9 March 2020 has led to a significant increase in the budget deficit. The Riyadh government is still mired in the Yemeni conflict – since 2015 – and the crisis persists in its relations with this US ally. The change the prince represents raises questions about the effectiveness of his absolutist governance. Omnipresent in the complex work of reform, the harried emir seems to be setting the bar too high for his promises to the Saudis. Introducing a new social contract may not please everyone. Will the young Mohammed manage on his own to make his power survive despite the vagaries of the future?

<sup>4</sup> The tweet alluded to Khashoggi’s distant Turkish heritage. Cited by *Al-Jazeera*, 20 September 2017, ([www.aljazeera.net/news/reports-and-interviews/2017/9/20/لصاوتى-موجدل-ةىدوعسلل-ءءاقتنل-ءعب](http://www.aljazeera.net/news/reports-and-interviews/2017/9/20/لصاوتى-موجدل-ةىدوعسلل-ءءاقتنل-ءعب)).

<sup>5</sup> Tweet from 19 September 2017, (<https://twitter.com/aalrashed/status/910144530791374848>).