



SAUDI ARABIA

Quick Facts

Population: 28,571,770

Area: 2,149,690 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 90%, Afro-Asian 10%

Religions: Muslim (official; citizens are 85-90% Sunni and 10-15% Shia), other (includes Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh) (2012 est.)

Government Type: Absolute Monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$683.8 billion (2017 est.)

Map and Quick Facts derived in part from the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated September 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has experienced significant changes in its domestic politics, as well as an apparent relaxation of its traditionally extreme interpretation of the Muslim faith. Following the January 2015 death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, his younger brother Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud ascended to the throne. Defying Saudi tradition since the 1950s, he removed his youngest (and last surviving brother) as his successor; instead naming his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef as Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and thus his heir apparent, and his own son, Mohammed bin Salman (known as MbS) as Deputy Crown Prince. A subsequent power struggle between bin Nayef and MbS, however, led to Nayef's eventual (and apparently forced) abdication.¹ MbS, meanwhile, has attracted international attention for his apparent anti-corruption and modernization efforts. Nevertheless, doubts remain as to whether or not M.B.S. has truly renounced Saudi Arabia's long-standing practice of exporting extremist Islamist ideology in the form of Wahhabism around the world.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITIES

Islamism in Saudi Arabia is characterized by competing intellectual traditions, which—while all conservative and fundamentalist—hold significantly different, and in some ways evolving, ideas about the relationship between Islam and society.

The Rejectionists

The “rejectionists,” a pietistic, lower-class Islamic intellectual movement that categorically rejects the legitimacy of the state and its institutions, opposes any role or voice for themselves in the life of the state and in the national political discourse, emerged during the 1950's and 1960's. Rejectionists believe in withdrawing from society and focusing solely on faith and ritual practice, repudiating all schools of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), and relying solely on the unmediated sayings of the Prophet Muhammad

(hadith). They confine themselves to isolated, orthodox communities where they educate their children and pursue their distinctive lifestyle. However, they are not monolithic, and some have formed their own socio-political protest movements in spite of the trend's original doctrine.

One of these movements is the al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (JSM), which formed in the 1970s and was inspired by the Syrian religious scholar Nasr al-Din al-Albani.² In 1979, JSM, led by Juhayman al-Utaybi, orchestrated an armed takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Though the Saudis were initially reluctant to use force in one of Islam's holiest sites, they eventually raided the Mosque and ended the siege. After the Grand Mosque incident, the remaining members of JSM fled to Kuwait, Yemen, and the northern Saudi desert, returning to a state of relative isolation. However, Juhayman's ideas have continued to influence others in subsequent years. The JSM's views allegedly influenced three men who were involved in the 1995 bombing in Riyadh, as well as "senior militants" who were part of al-Qaeda's violent campaign in 2003.³

The Sahwa

Another intellectual tradition that developed during the 1950s and 1960s is the Sahwa ("Awakened") movement, which, unlike the rejectionists, is pragmatic, political and elitist. Sahwa clerics trace their roots back to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose members were well educated, and who established themselves in the new education and media sectors of Saudi Arabia. As a natural result of their interaction with Muslim Brotherhood members, the Sahwa clerics' ideology became a synthesis of Salafi-Wahhabi theological teachings and the Brotherhood's political activism.⁴ The spread of Sahwa teachings in Saudi universities would eventually lead to the group's political reform efforts of the 1990s. However, the Sahwa is an extremely diverse faction that includes religious scholars, scientists, doctors, and academics. Its members are commonly divided into at least two main camps: those who follow Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Brotherhood, and those who follow his more extreme ideological successor, Sayyid Qutb. Their ability to address issues—like politics—that were traditionally outside the purview of the official Saudi religious establishment originally garnered broad public appeal.⁵

The Sahwa became widely recognized in 1990 for their virulent opposition to then-Saudi King Fahd's reliance on a non-Muslim military coalition, led by the United States, to defend the Arabian Peninsula after Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army invaded Kuwait. Prominent Sahwa clerics believed that the legitimacy of the Al Saud leadership and the official Saudi religious establishment had been permanently destroyed by this collaboration with the West.⁶ Thereafter, the Sahwa called for greater Islamization of Saudi society and demanded a more prominent role in social and foreign affairs.⁷

In 1994, Salman al-Odah, Safar al-Hawali, and nearly 1,300 Sahwa affiliates were arrested for their vehement opposition to the Saudi regime.⁸ To the leadership's dismay, their five years in prison only cemented the clerics' standing in the eyes of their followers and granted them even greater popular legitimacy than the official ulema. When the men were released in 1999, the Saudi government confronted them with the choice of either withdrawing from the public eye or acquiescing to the authority of the state. They chose the latter, and the Sahwa splintered as a result. Some of its members have since joined other Saudi Islamist movements, including the jihadist trend, while others abandoned Islamism entirely. For a number of years, the Sahwa took a more conciliatory tone with the Saudi Arabian regime, and rarely criticized the government.⁹ But during the Arab Spring, the split amongst the Sahwa, and the challenge they present to the Saudi Arabian regime, became more apparent. In early 2011, several petitions calling for government reform were signed by leading Sahwa clerics, but none of them supported calls for the open demonstrations in Riyadh a few months later.¹⁰

For a few years, some Sahwa and religious scholars remained critical of the regime, but on February 4, 2014, in response to domestic condemnation of the Saudi government's support of the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, the Saudi government issued a decree stating that anyone who provides support (defined loosely and in a variety of ways) to an organization categorized as extremist or

defined as a terrorist group could face a prison sentence of 3 to 20 years.¹¹ In 2017, al-Odah was arrested and remains in Saudi custody.¹² Saudi authorities arrested al-Hawali in 2018.¹³

The jihadists

A jihadist trend exists in Saudi society, embodied by the rise of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, but it has faced considerable challenges since the ascent of the Islamic State to prominence in 2014.

From 1999 through 2001, conflicts in the Muslim world (in places such as Chechnya, Kosovo, and the Palestinian Territories) and a powerful recruiting network in Saudi Arabia enabled bin Laden to attract a wave of Saudis to al-Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's operations have been well-funded by Saudi individuals and organizations. In 2004, the 9/11 Commission reported that bin Laden created an informal financial network of charities, including the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation and other non-governmental organizations, which allowed Saudi and Gulf financiers to send funds to Arabs fighting in Afghanistan and then later to al-Qaeda.¹⁴

In early 2002, between 300 and 1,000 Saudi al-Qaeda members returned to Saudi Arabia after the Taliban's fall compromised the network's base of operations in Afghanistan. Two independent cells subsequently formed, and the organization's operatives began preparing for operations by stockpiling weapons, renting safe houses, setting up training camps, and recruiting other "Afghan Arabs."¹⁵ The cells consisted principally of Saudis, but maintained a small percentage of foreign nationals. The majority of al-Qaeda members were not from regions typically considered to be the most religiously conservative or impoverished rural areas. Instead, the overwhelming majority of the organization was formed by urbanites from Riyadh, most of whom shared previous combat experience in Afghanistan—first against the Soviets and later against the United States.¹⁶

The Saudi government's aggressive counterterrorism efforts eventually forced al-Qaeda's local branch to relocate across the border in Yemen. In January 2009, the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda merged to become al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with a number of Saudis assuming leadership positions in the new franchise.¹⁷ AQAP grew more dangerous in its first year of operations; in August 2009, the organization nearly succeeded in assassinating then Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef during a gathering at his home in Jeddah.¹⁸ Then, only months later, AQAP coordinated the attempted Christmas Day bombing—carried out by a Nigerian man with explosives in his underwear—of a Northwest Airlines flight traveling from Yemen to Detroit.¹⁹

In 2014, after AQAP attacked a remote Saudi-Yemeni border checkpoint, the State Department determined the organization has "continued its efforts to inspire sympathizers to support, finance, or engage in conflicts outside of Saudi Arabia and encouraged individual acts of terrorism within the Kingdom."²⁰ Since then, the Saudi government has taken increased action to prevent Saudis from traveling abroad to support extremist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. However, after the January 2016 execution of a number of al-Qaeda suspects by the Saudi government, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri condemned the government and called for revenge.²¹ However, in August 2018, an Associate Press investigation revealed that the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen had negotiated a series of agreements with al-Qaeda militants. These deals involved paying some al-Qaeda militants to leave cities quietly, allowing al-Qaeda militants to leave cities early with their equipment and assets, and recruiting militants to join the Saudi-led coalition itself.²²

By his own account, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) remains deeply concerned about the threat of Sunni jihadist groups to the safety of Saudi Arabia. During an April 2018 visit to the United States, MbS referred to a "triangle of evil," consisting of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sunni terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.²³ MbS has also claimed that Iran supports and shelters al-Qaeda operatives, including Osama bin Laden's son.²⁴ The relative decline of the Islamic State in 2017 and into 2018 has not assuaged Saudi concerns about the threat posed by terrorist groups.

The Shia

Another Islamic intellectual trend in Saudi Arabia is rooted in the country's Shia minority, which is primarily located in the Eastern Province, and constitutes 10-15% of the total population.²⁵ Having been branded as unbelievers (*kuffar*) since the time of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Saudi Shia are still severely marginalized in the modern state.²⁶ And while Shia Islamists have never been as organized as the *Sahwa*, or even the jihadists in Saudi Arabia, instances of Shia Islamist activity continue to play a significant role in Saudi society and the government's approach to dissent.

An early and frequently cited incident of Shia opposition took place in 1980, in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Radio Tehran's Arabic channel had been broadcasting propaganda against the Saudi regime to the Shia population. The propaganda sparked a riot in Qatif, during which citizens attacked the town's central market.²⁷ Since that time, the Saudi government has been extremely wary of renewed violence, as well as of Iran's influence in Saudi domestic affairs.

For a brief period, the Arab Spring rekindled opposition from Saudi Arabia's Shia population. Shortly after the outbreak of protests in Tunisia in December 2011, Shia Islamists in Saudi Arabia began to organize themselves through social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, issuing petitions for political and social reforms such as the transition to a constitutional monarchy and an end to sectarian discrimination. Violent protests erupted in July 2012 in the Eastern Province—which includes not only most of the Shia population but also most of the country's oil—after security forces shot and arrested a popular Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr for instigating “sedition.”²⁸ Shia anger continued to bubble in the weeks after Nimr's arrest, with Saudi authorities exacerbating the furor when they fatally shot two men during the demonstrations.²⁹ The protests in the Eastern Province escalated even further in October 2012, when tens of thousands of angry mourners carried the bodies of three young Shia men, slain by Saudi security forces, through the streets of Awwamiya while chanting “Death to al-Saud.”³⁰

Almost ten months after Saudi authorities arrested al-Nimr, in March 2013, he was put on trial for “sowing discord” and “undermining national unity.”³¹ Between the trial and the autumn of 2014, Shia protests dissipated. But on October 24, al-Nimr was sentenced to death, along with his nephew, and protests erupted again.³² A year and four months later, on January 2, 2016, al-Nimr was executed along with 46 other people the Saudi government had labeled “terrorists.” In response to the execution, protests erupted in Qatif in the Eastern Province, in Bahrain, and across the Middle East.³³ Angered by al-Nimr's death, Iranian activists attacked and set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, prompting the severance of diplomatic ties between the two countries.³⁴

Saudi Arabia has often been critiqued for its poor record on human rights, particularly in the matter of executions. In response to rising sectarianism in the region and increasing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia executed 158 people in 2015, up from 90 in 2014.³⁵ In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed at minimum 154 people, according to Amnesty International.³⁶ In 2017, Saudi Arabia executed at least 138 people, according to Human Rights Watch.³⁷ Crimes in Saudi Arabia that warrant death sentences include drug offenses, adultery, and “sorcery.” Confessions to such crimes are often elicited through torture.³⁸ The Saudi regime has at times invoked “national security” as a catch-all defense for its execution policies.³⁹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

With the exception of a brief “*Sahwa* Insurrection” in the early 1990s, Islamist opposition or reformist movements in Saudi Arabia have failed to garner enough societal support to mount a sustained or serious challenge to the ruling House of Saud. This is largely due to the Saudi social contract, which consists of the government's use of oil wealth to provide a robust welfare state for its citizens, in return for almost complete control of all of Saudi Arabia by the ruling family.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Saud family has always relied on proselytizing Wahhabism, a deeply radical interpretation of Islam, as part of its basis of power. MbS's determination to modernize the Saudi economy may impact this arrangement, but there were some

tremors in its foundation even before the advent of the current reform effort. Since the rise of the Islamic State, there has been a renewed internal debate over the future of Wahhabism. Cole Bunzel of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has argued that there is a subtly emerging “correctionist” movement regarding Wahhabism within the liberal wing of the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, and that it has been much more tolerated in society of late than in earlier years.⁴¹ Such developments are partially due to the political leadership being preoccupied with consolidating power, but also because of the role that information technologies have played within the Kingdom.

As a social force, the Sahwa clerics rose in influence when they challenged the Islamic credentials of the ruling family and religious establishment between 1990 and 1994. Much to the Kingdom’s dismay, in some cases their subsequent imprisonment only increased their status and notoriety. Increasing modernization of information technologies have changed the way that clerics have engaged with society, and expanded the cleric’s influence beyond the traditional Wahhabist/Salafi international network. Between 2011 and 2014, a number of Sahwa clerics gained increasing prominence through their use of the Internet. In 2011, Forbes Middle East ranked Salman al-Odah fourth on its list of top 100 “Twitterati,” who boasted more than 3.4 million Twitter followers, and by 2014 had garnered nearly 1.5 million more followers on Facebook. Today, al-Odah has 11 million followers on Twitter, and almost 7 million on Facebook.⁴² Fellow Saudi clerics Muhammad al-Arife and Aidh al-Qarni have been even more successful than al-Odah on social media. Al-Arife, who is called the “Brad Pitt” of Muslim clerics, has 16 million Twitter followers—more than the total population of the Kingdom of Jordan.⁴³ Likewise, al-Qarni, a social media star who is known for his self-help book, “Don’t be Sad,” has 14.5 million Twitter followers.⁴⁴ After delivering a lecture in the Philippines in March 2016, al-Qarni was shot and injured in the shoulder, which only increased his notoriety.⁴⁵

These clerics maintain tremendous influence in shaping Saudi public opinion and attitudes toward the West. On the eve of the American siege of Fallujah, twenty-six prominent clerics signed an “Open Sermon to the Militant Iraqi People” that legitimized joining the Iraqi insurgency as part of a “defense jihad” against the “aggressor” coalition.⁴⁶ Shortly thereafter, the number of Saudis who went to Iraq to fight against Western forces peaked.⁴⁷ In June 2012, a number of prominent clerics tried to organize a fundraising campaign for Syrian rebels fighting against President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. However, one of the organizations facilitating the transfer of donations was the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society of Kuwait, a charity previously designated as a terrorist entity by the United States and UN for arming and financing al-Qaeda.⁴⁸ More recently, and despite the government’s 2014 decree forbidding Saudis from fighting against ISIS outside of Saudi Arabia, 53 clerics and academics issued a call in the Fall of 2015 for “all those who are able, and outside of Saudi Arabia, to answer the calls of jihad” and fight against Russian forces and the Syrian government in Syria.⁴⁹

In addition to physical and intellectual resistance, Saudi Islamists have long been implicated in terrorist financing across the globe. Since the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has spent more than 4 percent of its GDP per year on overseas aid, with “two thirds of that amount going to ‘Islamic Activities’” in impoverished countries grappling with extremism, like Yemen, Sudan, Mauritania, Bosnia and Afghanistan.⁵⁰ After the events of September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have been repeatedly criticized for financing terrorism abroad. In 2007, then-Undersecretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Stuart Levey said that, “If I could somehow snap my fingers and cut off funding from one country, it would be Saudi Arabia.”⁵¹ Levey’s comments were a consequence of the fact that Islamic charities are commonly singled out as the primary source of illicit funds in terror financing cases. Implicating wealthy Saudis in terrorist financing cases with exact dollar amounts is extremely difficult, primarily due to the fact that Saudis prefer cash transactions and donate anonymously. Since giving charitably (zakat) is one of the five pillars of Islam, such organizations receive significant donations anonymously and from all sectors of society.

The final report of the 9/11 Commission determined that there was no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution, or the Saudi leadership as individuals, provided support to al-Qaeda, but the Commission noted that al-Qaeda raised money directly from individuals in Saudi Arabia, and through “charities with significant government sponsorship.”⁵² This pattern of funding allegedly stretches back for the past 30 years. In particular, the 9/11 Commission noted the “Golden Chain,” a network of Saudi and other Gulf financiers used by Osama bin Laden to collect and channel funds for the anti-Soviet jihad during the 1980s in Afghanistan. The financiers used charities and other NGOs as conduits for their donations to the jihad, and this network later became influential in the establishment of al-Qaeda’s base in Afghanistan in the late 1990s.⁵³

In another instance of illicit financing, the Pakistani newspaper Dawn reported on a leaked 2008 cable from the U.S. Consulate in Lahore to the State Department. The cable alleged that financiers in Saudi Arabia and the UAE were sending nearly \$100 million annually to Deobandi and Ahl-i-Hadith clerics in southern Punjab. In turn, those clerics were targeting families with multiple children and severe financial difficulties for recruitment, initially under the pretense of charity. Next, a Deobandi or Ahl-i-Hadith maulana would offer to educate the children in his school and “find them employment in the service of Islam.” During the education phase, the clerics would indoctrinate the children and assess their inclination “to engage in violence and acceptance of jihadi culture.” Parents then received cash payments of \$6,500 for each son chosen for “martyrdom” operations.⁵⁴

Throughout 2016, partially in response to legislation introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2015 as the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) which narrowed the scope of the doctrine of sovereign immunity to enable families of the 9/11 victims to make civil claims against a foreign state in response to an act of terrorism, Saudi Arabia aggressively pursued the issue of illicit financing. In the summer of 2016, Daniel Glaser, a former assistant secretary for terrorist financing at the U.S. Department of Treasury, testified before Congress that Saudi Arabia had emerged as a “regional leader in targeted designations.”⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia’s spokesperson for the Ministry of the Interior claimed that Saudi Arabia had prosecuted more than 240 suspects and froze and investigated more than 117 internal accounts.⁵⁶ These activities by the government were also in response to the growing threat of ISIL throughout the region. According to recent polling data, it is estimated that about 5% of Saudi Arabia’s population—or over half a million people—support the Islamic State.⁵⁷ And in July, 2016, three suicide bombing attacks bearing the hallmarks of the Islamic State were conducted across the country; an act former CIA Director John Brennan described as “unprecedented.”⁵⁸

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In 1979, the Saudi Monarchy witnessed the Grand Mosque takeover within the Kingdom’s own borders, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Shia protests in its own oil-rich Eastern Province, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Shaken by what it perceived as serious threats to its security and power, the Saudi leadership quickly took drastic measures to assert its leadership in the Islamic world and to appease rising domestic extremism. They accomplished both objectives by increasing its existing exportation of a politicized form of Wahhabism, directed as a foreign policy tool against the Soviets and competing strands of Islam alike.⁵⁹

To bolster his legitimacy and to counter the threat of secular governance sweeping the Middle East, in the 1960s King Faysal established a policy of supporting Islamic institutions abroad. In 1962, he created the Muslim World League (MWL) to facilitate the spread of Wahhabi ideology. The Saudis also helped develop other religious organizations, including the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), the Al Haramain Foundation, and the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), among others. From 1973-2002, the Saudi government spent more than \$80 billion on Islamic institutions and other activities in the non-Muslim world alone, contributing to some 1,500 mosques, 150 Islamic centers, 202 Muslim colleges, and 2,000 Islamic schools.⁶⁰

With their unprecedented outreach campaign, the Saudis provide extremely generous support to American universities and elite institutions, which can preempt criticism from that realm.⁶¹ However, since 9/11, Islamic institutions in the U.S. have faced increasing scrutiny. Nearly 50 organizations and institutions that have been raided, shut down, or had their assets frozen because of suspected links to terrorism. Among those institutions connected to Saudi Arabia were the Muslim World League, World Assembly of Muslim Youth, the Al Haramain Foundation, the SAAR Foundation, the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and the School of Islamic and Social Sciences.⁶² There are some indications that MbS's policies may be changing the outlook of some of these groups. For example, Sheikh Mohammad al-Issa, the leader of MWL, has publicly been very supportive of MbS and his attempts at reform.⁶³

After the Arab Spring

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010, when massive protests overthrew longtime Saudi allies in Egypt and Tunisia and heralded the rise of Islamists to power in those places, the Saudi government has worked to preempt similar demands for national reforms. As the protest movements rolled through Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, King Abdullah rushed to avert a crisis of power by issuing subsidy packages worth an estimated \$130 billion, creating a Facebook page for the population to tell him their grievances, and increasing the salaries of government workers. The king's measures included 60,000 jobs at the Ministry of the Interior, 500,000 new houses, and a minimum wage for the public sector of 3,000 Saudi Riyals (\$800) per month—in contrast, the average private sector wage is only 1,000 SR per month.⁶⁴ The government also infused \$10.7 billion into its development fund, which offers Saudis interest-free loans to build homes, marry, and start small businesses. An additional \$4 billion was designated for the healthcare sector.⁶⁵

To maintain order, the Saudi government also relied on help from the state's clergy, sanctioned and unsanctioned alike, who criticized activists online on Facebook and Twitter, and who issued fatwas in support of the regime. On March 6, 2011, the country's highest religious body, the Council of Senior Ulema, called on "everybody to exert every effort to increase solidarity, promote unity and warn against all causes giving rise to the opposite," and further warned Saudis about "deviant intellectual and partisan [Shia] tendencies" that could threaten Saudi stability.⁶⁶ Other clerics threatened potential protesters with violence. Saad al-Buraik, a member of the government's Counseling Program for re-educating extremists, called for "smashing the skulls of those who organize demonstrations or take part in them."⁶⁷

The state's mix of subsidies and clerical advocacy, as well as its robust security deployments, successfully eliminated the threat of a popular uprising, but threats to the Kingdom remain. With the rise of the Islamic State, the increasing strength of Iran, the unruly nature of the Internet and online activism, and a significant power transition, Saudi Arabia continues to wrestle with how to maintain control and legitimacy in a rapidly changing geopolitical and security landscape. Unsanctioned clerics have carved out a substantial platform on social media that may prove difficult for the government to control. Because those clerics have generally played within the state's red lines, they have been largely unhindered in the messaging.⁶⁸

Current and Future Issues

Following the death of King Abdullah on January 25, 2015, his half-brother, King Salman bin Abdulaziz, came to power and immediately began to assert his authority through various strategic policies. He released thousands of prisoners (except those deemed a threat to security), increased the salaries of public sector employees, curtailed the power of the religious police, dismissed two influential officials who had opposed Wahabi clerics, and, in a nod to ultraconservative clerics, fired the Kingdom's only female Cabinet member. He also upset the traditional succession order, forcing his brother, the Crown Prince, into retirement, and then filling the position with his nephew in 2015, and his son MbS in 2017.⁶⁹ Also in 2017, the King lifted a national ban that prevented women from driving, which came into effect

in the summer of 2018.⁷⁰

King Salman's approach to geopolitical changes has been both ideological and practical, similar to his predecessors. As King Salman has leaned more heavily on the traditional cleric establishment to maintain legitimacy, he and MbS have also moved to restructure the economy in the face of a shifting global energy landscape driven in large part by the United States' new oil independence.⁷¹

Increasingly concerned with the threat of Iran and its proxies in Yemen, in recent years the Saudi government has also pursued a more aggressive foreign policy defined by its call for the resignation of President Bashar al Assad of Syria, and its military efforts in Yemen beginning in 2015. Three months after coming to power, following the ouster of the Yemeni transitional government in 2015 at the hands of the Houthi rebels and backers of the former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, King Salman initiated military strikes in coordination with nine other Middle Eastern countries.⁷² Since then, despite a significant number of civilian casualties, Saudi losses, and increased tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the United States supported the Kingdom in its efforts to reinstate exiled President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi in the ongoing conflict. Hadi is currently in Saudi Arabia. However, the relationship between Hadi and the Saudis has recently soured, as evidenced by significant restrictions on the president's movements. Saudi authorities have prevented Hadi, his sons, and his ministers from returning to southern Yemen, which is ostensibly under Hadi's control. Saudi officials indicated tensions between Hadi and the UAE led to the blockade.

In April 2016, MbS announced a long-term oil independence strategy for the country. Included among the initiatives in his "Vision 2030" was a commitment to a minor increase in the women's participation rate in the workforce—which will be raised from 22% to 30 % over 15 years. This modest proposal, according to the *Economist*, suggests resistance from the Wahhabi clerical establishment. For a country with a population that has been conditioned to expect oil wealth in exchange for loyalty, and a clerical establishment that is resistant to modernization, a National Transformation Program will be difficult to implement, and would rely largely on MbS to succeed.⁷³ However, MbS has proved his determination to do so.

MbS's first maneuver was a widespread purge, allegedly on anti-corruption grounds. Saudi police arrested over 200 people, many of them wealthy and influential, and placed them in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh under a kind of house arrest. Some reports suggest that the subsequent interrogations of the detainees included significant physical abuse.⁷⁴ In order to escape confinement, detainees had to pay a large sum of money and sign a non-disclosure agreement.⁷⁵ The Saudi government claimed to have regained over \$100bn in this anti-corruption operation.⁷⁶ Some analysts have contended that, while MbS may have claimed anti-corruption as the motivation for this roundup, it was also intended to remove potential threats to his rule. Most prominently, the arrest of the head of the national guard, Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, left MbS in command of all three of branches of the Saudi military: the national guard, the interior ministry, and the Army.⁷⁷

MbS attracted further international attention during his April 2018 visit to the United States. During that period, he professed reformist opinions previously unheard of among Arab leadership, including that "the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land."⁷⁸ In that same interview with journalist Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, he expressed a desire to modernize Saudi Arabia's economy while preserving its culture and extreme anxiety about what he called the "triangle of evil" (Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sunni terrorist groups). However, some of his reformist zeal – at least as regards a change in Saudi Arabia's traditionally intolerant interpretation of Islam – was called into question during a particular line of questioning:

Goldberg: Isn't it true, though, that after 1979, but before 1979 as well, the more conservative factions in Saudi Arabia were taking oil money and using it to export a more

intolerant, extremist version of Islam, Wahhabist ideology, which could be understood as a kind of companion ideology to Muslim Brotherhood thinking?

MbS: First of all, this Wahhabism—please define it for us. We’re not familiar with it. We don’t know about it.

Goldberg: What do you mean you don’t know about it?

MbS: What is Wahhabism?

Goldberg: You’re the crown prince of Saudi Arabia. You know what Wahhabism is.

MbS: No one can define this Wahhabism.

Goldberg: It’s a movement founded by Ibn abd al-Wahhab in the 1700s, very fundamentalist in nature, an austere Salafist-style interpretation—

MbS: No one can define Wahhabism. There is no Wahhabism. We don’t believe we have Wahhabism. We believe we have, in Saudi Arabia, Sunni and Shiite...⁷⁹

Moving forward, the scope and authenticity of the reforms now underway in Saudi Arabia will undoubtedly become clearer, as will the commitment of the country’s leadership to those goals. For the moment, observers of the changes underway within the Kingdom – including, most prominently, the U.S. government – remain cautiously optimistic about the potential moderating effect of the initiatives that have been undertaken to date by Saudi authorities under the stewardship of MbS.

ENDNOTES

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