



SAUDI ARABIA

Quick Facts

Population: 34,783,757 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 2,149,690 sq km

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

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

Government Type: Absolute Monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$792.849 billion (2019 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2021)

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia has exported Wahhabism, its puritanical creed of Islam, for decades. Born in the 18th century, Wahhabism was mostly confined to the Arabian Peninsula until the 1960s, when Saudi Arabia politicized the ideology to reject both pan-Arabism and communism in the Middle East. This behavior became more frequent during the oil boom of the 1970s.

However, domestic politics in Saudi Arabia have changed significantly of late, including the official approach to extreme interpretations of Islam. When King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud died in 2015, his younger brother Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud ascended the throne. Controversially, King Salman named his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and his own son, Mohammed bin Salman (commonly known as MbS), as Deputy Crown Prince. However, a subsequent power struggle between bin Nayef and MbS led to Nayef's eventual (forced) abdication.¹ MbS's subsequent anti-corruption and modernization efforts have attracted international attention, but doubts remain regarding their extent and nature, as well as whether the Kingdom has truly ended its long-standing practice of exporting Wahhabism around the world.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The dominant interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia is Wahhabism, a “puritanical form of Sunni Islam” that “seeks to purify Islam of any innovations or practices that deviate” from the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad.² It has roots in the Najd region of Saudi Arabia, and was named for Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth-century scholar of Islam.³ Roughly 85-90% of Saudi citizens are Sunni; the other 10-15% belong to the country's Shi'a minority.⁴ Wahhabism opposes several popular Islamic practices that Abdel Wahhab considered “idolatrous,” including the veneration of saints, most Shi'ite traditions, some

Sufi practices, and the celebration of the Prophet's birthday.⁵

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

The Rejectionists

The “rejectionists” are a pious, lower-class Islamic intellectual movement that emerged in the mid 20th century and categorically rejects the legitimacy of the state and its institutions.⁶ Rejectionists also oppose any role or voice for themselves in national political discourse, choosing to withdraw from society, repudiating all schools of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and relying solely on the unmediated sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, or *hadith*. They live in 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 emerged in the 1970s and was inspired by the Syrian religious scholar Nasr al-Din al-Albani.⁷ In 1979, the JSM, led by Juhayman al-Utaybi, orchestrated an armed takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The Saudi government was initially reluctant to use force in one of Islam's holiest sites but 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. However, Juhayman's ideas remained influential. The JSM's views allegedly influenced three men involved in the 1995 bombing in Riyadh, as well as “senior militants” who were part of al-Qaeda's 2003 campaign against the kingdom.⁸

The Sahwa

Another intellectual tradition that became prominent in the 1950s and 1960s is the *Sahwa* (Awakened), a pragmatic, political, elitist movement. *Sahwa* clerics trace their roots back to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose members were well educated and established in Saudi Arabia's new education and media sectors. As a result, the *Sahwa* clerics synthesized Salafi-Wahhabbi theological teachings with the Brotherhood's political activism.⁹ However, the *Sahwa* is an extremely diverse faction that includes religious scholars, scientists, doctors, and academics.

Sahwa members commonly fall into two main camps: those who follow Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Brotherhood, and those who follow Sayyid Qutb, al-Banna's more extreme ideological successor. Their ability to address issues traditionally outside the purview of the official Saudi religious establishment – like politics – made the *Sahwa* more appealing.¹⁰

For a number of years, the *Sahwa* rarely criticized the Saudi regime.¹¹ That began to change in early 2011, however, when several reform-focused petitions were signed by prominent *Sahwa* clerics.¹² When the *Sahwa* community condemned Saudi government support for the deposition of then-Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, the Saudi government decreed that supporting formally categorized extremist or terrorist organizations is punishable by imprisonment.¹³ Al-Odah and fellow Saudi cleric Aidh al-Qarni were arrested in September 2017 after backing reconciliation between Qatar and the other Gulf states.¹⁴ Another *Sahwa* scholar, Safar al-Hawali, was arrested in 2018 for writing literature that criticized the Saudi royal family for its connections to Israel.¹⁵

The jihadists

A *jihadist* trend embodied by the rise of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network has long existed in Saudi society. However, it has faced considerable challenges in recent years as the Islamic State (IS) became more prominent, both regionally and globally.

From 1999 through 2001, conflicts in the Muslim world and a powerful Saudi recruiting network enabled bin Laden to attract people to al-Qaeda's Afghan-based training camps. Al-Qaeda's operations, in turn, were well-funded by Saudi individuals and organizations. The 9/11 Commission reported that bin Laden created a network of charities that allowed Saudi and Gulf financiers to fund al-Qaeda and fighting in Afghanistan.¹⁶

Two independent cells formed after Saudi al-Qaeda members returned to the country in early 2002. These operatives began stockpiling weapons, renting safe houses, setting up training camps, and recruiting other "Afghan Arabs."¹⁷ The cells consisted principally of Saudis as well as a small percentage of foreign nationals. The majority of al-Qaeda members were not from typically impoverished or religiously conservative regions; rather, the overwhelming majority were urbanites from Riyadh with experience in Afghanistan.¹⁸

The Saudi government's aggressive counterterrorism efforts eventually forced al-Qaeda's local branch to relocate to Yemen. In January 2009, the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda merged to become al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). A number of Saudis assumed leadership positions in that franchise.¹⁹ Later that year, the organization nearly assassinated then-Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef at his home in Jeddah.²⁰ Then, only months later, AQAP attempted to blow up a flight traveling from Yemen to Detroit on Christmas day.²¹

In 2014, after AQAP attacked a remote Saudi-Yemeni border checkpoint, the State Department stated that the organization has "continued... to inspire sympathizers to support, finance, or engage in conflicts outside of Saudi Arabia and encouraged individual acts of terrorism within the Kingdom."²² Since then, the Saudi government has increasingly prevented Saudis from traveling abroad to support extremist groups like al-Qaeda and IS. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri condemned the Saudi government in May 2016 after it executed a number of people with suspected ties to al-Qaeda.²³

In August 2018, an Associated 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 with their equipment and assets, and recruiting militants to join the Saudi-led coalition itself.²⁴ In early 2019, a CNN investigation revealed that U.S.-made arms had been transferred to al-Qaeda linked fighters in Yemen, sometimes ending up in the hands of Iran-backed Houthi rebels.²⁵

By his own account, current Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, or MbS, remains deeply concerned with Sunni *jihadists*. During an April 2018 visit to the United States, MbS referred to Turkey, Iran, and radical Islamist groups as the "triangle of evil."²⁶ Subsequently, in March 2019 Saudi Arabia revoked the citizenship of bin Laden's heir and ostensible successor, Hamza.²⁷ (Hamza has since been determined to have been killed in Afghanistan or Pakistan sometime during the first two years of the Trump administration.²⁸)

The Shi'a

Saudi Shi'a have been marginalized and branded as *kuffar* (unbelievers) since the time of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.²⁹ While Shi'a Islamists have never been as organized as the *Sahwa*, or even the *jihadists* in Saudi Arabia, political expressions of Shi'a Islam historically play a significant role in Saudi society. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, *Radio Tehran's* Arabic channel broadcasted anti-Saudi regime propaganda to the Shi'a population, sparking a riot in Qatif in which citizens attacked the town's central market.³⁰ Since that time, the Saudi government has been extremely wary of Iran's influence in Saudi domestic affairs.

For a brief period, the Arab Spring rekindled opposition from Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population. Shortly after the outbreak of protests in Tunisia in December 2011, Saudi Shi'a Islamists organized through social media platforms, issuing petitions for political and social reforms. Violent protests erupted in July 2012 in the Eastern Province—home to not only most of the Shi'a population but also much of the country's

oil—after security forces shot and arrested popular Shi’ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr for instigating “sedition.”³¹ Anger within the Shi’a population spread after Nimr’s arrest and was exacerbated when Saudi authorities fatally shot two men during the demonstrations.³² The protests in the Eastern Province escalated in October 2012, when tens of thousands of angry mourners carried the bodies of three young Shi’a men, slain by Saudi security forces, through the streets of Awwamiya while chanting “Death to al-Saud.”³³ (In 2017, Saudi authorities destroyed Awwamiya’s old quarter to quell dissent in the restive region. As of January 2019, the government had spent upwards of \$200 million to rebuild destroyed parts of the town, with plans to broaden investments in the Qatif region as a means to stamp out violence.³⁴)

Al-Nimr was put on trial in March 2013 for “sowing discord” and “undermining national unity.”³⁵ On October 24, when al-Nimr was sentenced to death along with his nephew, protests broke out.³⁶ On January 2, 2016, al-Nimr was executed along with 46 other people that the Saudi government labeled as terrorists.³⁷ Protests erupted in the Eastern Province, in Bahrain, and across the Middle East.³⁸ Iranian activists attacked and set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad, rupturing diplomatic ties between the two countries.³⁹ Saudi Shi’a have since made some gains – anti-Shi’a rhetoric has been excised from school textbooks, for example – and violence in the Eastern Province has died down.⁴⁰ Overall, however, the reason for this relative quiet, in the words of one Saudi watcher, is that “frustration and fatigue” have worn down the region’s Shi’a and led to less unrest.⁴¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Islamist opposition or reformist movements to the House of Saud have generally failed to garner significant support. This is largely due to the government’s use of oil wealth to provide a robust welfare state for its citizens.⁴² Furthermore, the Saud family has promoted Wahhabism as part of the basis of its power. Since the rise of the Islamic State and MbS’s efforts to modernize the Saudi economy, 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” strain that is now more tolerated by the Saudi religious establishment.⁴³

Information technologies, meanwhile, have influenced how *Sahwa* clerics engage with society, expanding their influence beyond the traditional Salafi-Wahhabbi international network. In 2011, *Forbes Middle East* ranked Salman al-Odah fourth on its list of top 100 “Twitterati”; today, al-Odah has 11 million followers on Twitter, and almost 7 million on Facebook.⁴⁴ Fellow Saudi clerics Muhammad al-Arife and Aidh al-Qarni have been even more successful than al-Odah on social media. Al-Arefe has 20 million Twitter followers—three times as many as King Salman’s own Twitter account.⁴⁵ Likewise, al-Qarni has 14.5 million.⁴⁶ After delivering a lecture in the Philippines in March 2016, al-Qarni was shot and injured in the shoulder. His notoriety, however, only increased as a result.⁴⁷

These clerics can significantly influence Saudi public opinion and attitudes toward the West. On the eve of the 2004 American siege of Fallujah, 26 prominent clerics signed an “Open Sermon to the Militant Iraqi People” that legitimized joining the Iraqi insurgency as part of a “defense *jihād*” against the “aggressor” coalition.⁴⁸ Shortly thereafter, the number of Saudis who went to Iraq to fight against Western forces peaked.⁴⁹ In June 2012, a number of prominent clerics organized a fundraising campaign for Syrian rebels fighting against President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. One of the organizations facilitating 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.⁵⁰ In 2015, 53 clerics and academics issued a call for “all those who are able, and outside of Saudi Arabia, to answer the calls of *jihād*” and fight against Russian forces and the Syrian government in Syria.” This was in spite of the government’s decree forbidding Saudis from fighting against ISIS outside Saudi Arabia.⁵¹

Several influential clerics have been arrested or newly restricted as part of MbS' crackdown on dissent. As already referenced, al-Odah and al-Qarni were arrested in 2017. A year later, Saudi Arabia's public prosecutor announced that he is seeking the death penalty for al-Odah.⁵² Authorities arrested Safar al-Hawali in July 2018 after he published a book criticizing the royal family.⁵³ A Saudi Twitter account posted that authorities have stopped Mohammed al-Arefe – best known for his lecture series on how a man should properly beat his wife – from conducting *dawa* (outreach) activities and from preaching in mosques.⁵⁴ However, it is worth noting that al-Arefe remains at large. Thus, despite statements from MbS on returning to moderate Islam, Saudi authorities appear to lack a tangible strategy to achieve this aim.

Cracking down on terror finance remains a lingering problem for the Saudi state. 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. However, the Commission noted that al-Qaeda raised money directly from individuals and through “charities with significant government sponsorship” in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶ Implicating wealthy Saudis in terrorist financing cases with exact dollar amounts has been difficult largely because of cash transactions and anonymous donations.

A leaked 2008 cable from the U.S. State Department Consulate in Lahore showcases how financiers are able to conduct their operations. 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 under the initial 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.⁵⁷

Partially in response to the *Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act* (JASTA) – U.S. legislation that narrows the abilities of 9/11 victims' families to make civil claims against a foreign state – Saudi Arabia aggressively pursued the issue of illicit financing throughout 2016. That summer, the former assistant secretary for terrorist financing at the U.S. Department of Treasury, Daniel Glaser, testified before Congress that Saudi Arabia had emerged as a “regional leader in targeted [terrorism sanctions] designations.”⁵⁸ A spokesperson for Saudi Arabia's Ministry of the Interior claimed that the country had prosecuted more than 240 suspects and froze or investigated over 117 internal accounts.⁵⁹

These Saudi government actions were also taken in response to the growing regional threat posed by IS. According to polling data taken in 2015, about 5% of Saudi Arabia's population—or over half a million people—support the Islamic State.⁶⁰ A cache of IS documents dated 2013-2014, which were leaked in 2016, revealed that 759 Saudis had joined the terror group as foreign fighters.⁶¹ In July 2016, three suicide bombing attacks bearing the Islamic State hallmarks were conducted across Saudi Arabia; former CIA Director John Brennan described the event as “unprecedented.”⁶²

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Islamism has always been a core tenet of the Saudi state. The Saudi king is customarily also known as the “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” a title introduced by King Faisal that denotes the monarchy's oversight of Mecca and Medina.⁶³ While an absolute monarchy, the government derives its legitimacy from *sharia* and from the 1992 Basic Law, which “sets out the system of governance, rights of citizens, and powers and duties of the government.”⁶⁴ The Basic Law also states that the “Qur'an and the Traditions (Sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad serve as the country's constitution.”

Saudi Arabia has long supported Islamic activities abroad, beginning under King Faisal's reign. To bolster his legitimacy and to counter the threat of secular governance sweeping the Middle East, Faisal established a policy of supporting Islamic institutions abroad in the 1960s. In 1962, he created the Muslim World League (MWL) to spread Wahhabbi ideology abroad. 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.

In the face of dramatic political events in 1979 – including the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia by Islamic radicals, the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution, the targeting of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province by Shi'a protestors, and the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union – the House of Saud took drastic measures to assert its leadership in the Islamic world and to appease extremists at home. It did so by further weaponizing Wahhabism and ramping up its exportation as a foreign policy tool.⁶⁵ The policy included a distinct internal component; exporting Wahhabism abroad placated the Kingdom's domestic extremists, thereby neutralizing the threat they posed to the regime.⁶⁶

From 1973-2002, the Saudi government donated more than \$80 billion to 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.⁶⁷ The Saudis donate generous sums to American universities and elite institutions, preempting criticism from academia and hindering research on the consequences of the exportation of Wahhabism.⁶⁸ However, since 9/11, Islamic institutions in the U.S. have faced increasing scrutiny, and several organizations and institutions (including the MWL, WAMY, the Al Haramain Foundation, the SAAR Foundation, the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and the School of Islamic and Social Sciences) have been raided, shut down, or had their assets frozen because of suspected links to terrorism in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.⁶⁹

Since late 2010, the Saudi government has sought to preempt demands for national reforms. King Abdullah rushed to avert a crisis of power by issuing a \$130 billion aid package, creating a Facebook page for the population to air their grievances, and increasing the salaries of government workers. This aid package funded 60,000 jobs at the Ministry of the Interior, 500,000 new houses, and a public sector minimum wage higher than the minimum wage in the private sector, amongst other projects.⁷⁰ The government also injected \$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 earmarked for the healthcare sector.⁷¹

The Saudi government also sought help from pro-state clergy. 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."⁷² It further warned Saudis about "deviant intellectual and partisan [Shi'a] tendencies" that could threaten Saudi stability.⁷³ 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."⁷⁴

When King Salman bin Abdulaziz rose to power in early 2015, he immediately asserted his authority. He released thousands of prisoners, increased public sector salaries, dismissed two influential officials who had opposed Wahhabbi clerics, and, in a nod to ultraconservative clerics, fired the Kingdom's only female Cabinet member. He also stripped the religious police of their ability to arrest. King Salman upset the traditional succession order, divesting his brother Muqrin bin Salman from the post of crown prince and filling that position with his nephew in 2015 and MbS (his son) in 2017.⁷⁵ Also in 2017, the king lifted a national ban that prevented women from driving, which came into effect in the summer of 2018.⁷⁶

King Salman's approach to geopolitical changes has been both ideological and practical. Even

as he has relied on the traditional cleric establishment to maintain legitimacy, he and MbS have also moved to restructure the Saudi economy to meet the shifting global energy landscape driven by U.S. oil independence.⁷⁷ The Saudi government has recently pursued a more aggressive foreign policy defined by its opposition to the pro-Iranian Assad regime in Syria and to Brotherhood-aligned governments in Turkey and Qatar, as well as its military campaign in Yemen.⁷⁸

During his visit to the United States in April 2018, MbS professed previously unheard-of reformist opinions. In a landmark interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic*, MbS stated that “the Palestinians and the Israelis have the right to have their own land.”⁷⁹ MbS’ statement was unprecedented for a Saudi official, given that the kingdom does not recognize Israel. MbS likewise expressed a desire to modernize the Saudi economy while preserving its culture and remaining anxious about 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. When asked by Goldberg about the pernicious influence of Wahhabi ideology, MbS rejected the premise entirely, saying that he wasn’t familiar with the concept at all. “No one can define Wahhabism,” he said. “There is no Wahhabism. We don’t believe we have Wahhabism. We believe we have, in Saudi Arabia, Sunni and Shiite...”⁸⁰

Other public statements from MbS suggest that he hopes to return Saudi Arabia to a “moderate Islam.” According to the Crown Prince, “what happened in the last 30 years is not Saudi Arabia... Now is the time to get rid of it.”⁸¹

Other Saudi officials have noted the young royal’s change in tone and supported it with their own. Sheikh Mohammad al-Issa, the leader of MWL, has publicly supported MbS.⁸² Twice now, al-Issa has issued public letters on Holocaust Remembrance Day expressing his “great sympathy with the victims of the Holocaust” and noting that “Muslims around the world have a responsibility to learn” the Holocaust’s lessons.⁸³ Al Issa’s remarks are a historical milestone given the history of anti-Semitism from kingdom officials; King Faisal once lauded the cruel hoax known as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion as a fact.⁸⁴

This change in direction has extended to the Kingdom’s economic strategy as well. In April 2016, MbS announced “Vision 2030,” an energy independence plan that seeks to boost women’s participation in the workforce, trim the unemployment rate, privatize some state-owned assets, and diversify state assets. However, according to *The Economist*, the modest workforce participation goals – increasing the number of women with jobs from 22% to 30 % over 15 years – suggests resistance from the Wahhabbi clerical establishment.⁸⁵

Vision 2030’s successes so far have been mixed. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia has begun partially privatizing some state assets, deepened its capital markets, enacted pro-business reforms including passing a landmark bankruptcy law, and allowed some foreign ownership in certain sectors. As a result of its reforms, the Saudi stock exchange has been upgraded to emerging-markets status by both the MSCI and FTSE Russell indices, a move which could net the kingdom \$10 billion of inflows.⁸⁶ In addition, societal reforms are implicit in Vision 2030. In addition to granting women the right to drive, Saudi Arabia passed a sexual harassment law in 2018, and in February 2019 announced it would review its controversial guardianship system.⁸⁷

But these positive moves have been marred by a series of unforced errors under MbS’ watch, culminating in the horrific murder of opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018. Even before that, however, in 2017, Saudi Arabia had begun a far-reaching crackdown on clerics, powerful businessmen, royals, and rights activists, which still continues today. In November 2017, the kingdom launched a widespread purge on the grounds of countering corruption. Saudi police arrested over 200 people, many of them wealthy and influential, and placed them in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. Some reports suggest that the subsequent interrogations of the detainees included significant physical abuse.⁸⁸ Detainees had to pay a large sum of money and sign a non-disclosure agreement in order to leave.⁸⁹ The

Saudi government claimed to have regained over \$100 billion in the operation.⁹⁰ While MbS may have claimed anti-corruption as the motivation for the roundup, it was likely intended to remove potential political rivals. Among those arrested was Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, the head of the national guard. This left MbS in command of all three of branches of the Saudi military.⁹¹ As of March 2019, 64 people (including an American citizen) were still detained.⁹²

Shortly before removing the ban on women driving, the kingdom began detaining several rights activists. The Saudi public prosecutor had announced that investigations into the detained activists—whom Saudi media frequently portrayed as foreign agents, and many of whom had been tortured in Saudi prisons—had concluded, and that nine activists, unnamed, would stand trial.⁹³

Saudi Arabia has often been critiqued for its human rights record and its state executions. Saudi Arabia executed at least 540 people between 2014 and 2017, according to human rights organizations (figures are difficult to verify due to the closed nature of the Saudi judicial system).⁹⁴ Crimes in Saudi Arabia that warrant death sentences include drug offenses, adultery, and “sorcery.” Confessions to such crimes are repeatedly elicited through torture.⁹⁵ The Saudi regime has, at times, invoked “national security” as a catch-all defense for its execution policies.⁹⁶

Moving forward, the scope and authenticity of current reforms will undoubtedly become clearer, as will the commitment of the country’s leadership to those goals. Cautious steps in this direction continue to be taken by the House of Saud. In October of 2020, Saudi officials announced reforms to the *kafala* system, which ties the legal status of millions of migrant workers to individual sponsors, and which has in the past allowed for the abuse and exploitation of these individuals.⁹⁷ Subsequently, in February 2021, plans were announced to introduce significant changes to Saudi Arabia’s judicial system.⁹⁸ And in June 2021, the Kingdom loosened its historically-draconian regulations on women, for the first time permitting single, divorced or widowed females to live independently without male supervision.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the Saudi government has plans to pursue this “moderate Islam” in earnest; further, there are few indications that Riyadh is stopping the flow of Saudi money, preachers, and educational materials to mosques and madrassas abroad.¹⁰⁰

Of note as well has been a significant reorientation of Saudi foreign policy. The advent of the Biden administration has brought with it a sterner approach to Saudi Arabia. This has included: the release of an intelligence community report implicating the Saudi government and MbS in particular for the 2018 death of Jamal Khashoggi¹⁰¹; the leveling of sanctions against a number of Saudi officials (although not against MbS himself)¹⁰²; and the removal of Yemen’s Houthi rebels from the U.S. Foreign Terrorist Organization list.¹⁰³ Simultaneously, the Biden administration has reengaged with Saudi Arabia’s regional rival, Iran, in an effort to get the latter to return to the confines of the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, from which President Trump withdrew in 2018. In response to these changes in U.S. policy, Riyadh has scaled back its involvement in Yemen’s civil war, and even launched a quiet diplomatic dialogue with Tehran in an attempt to establish a more durable regional *modus vivendi*.¹⁰⁴

ENDNOTES

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