



DISCUSSION PAPER

Saudi Arabia under Muhammed Bin Salman: Crisis, Reform, or Stagnation?

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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

November 2019

PHOTO CREDIT

ANADOLU AGENCY

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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Introduction

Since 2015, the world has witnessed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's (MBS) ascension to power and his ensuing designs to initiate top-down economic and cultural reforms in Saudi Arabia. In these four years, MBS has not only asserted himself both domestically and internationally, but has also established a positive framing of himself through his narrative of reform.

Some of the reforms that he initiated were directly related to the youth, such as organising non-segregated concerts, allowing women to attend sports events in stadiums, giving women the right to drive, and promising new job opportunities to the young generation. With these relatively easy-to-implement moves, MBS managed to use the power of social media to build his image, and attract the attention of the youth (Al Jazeera, 2018a; Lyons, 2017; McKernan, 2017). Media pundits took the bait and promoted the view that Saudi reforms have been successful (Carbone, 2018; Friedman, 2017; Lyons, 2017; McKernan, 2017). For them, Saudi Arabia has "finally" broken the chain and started to modernise.

In other words, MBS is an exception to his predecessors, who only tried to modernise the country superficially.

However, upon closer inspection, it is clear that the modernisation attempts of MBS have several inherent deficiencies, and will most likely fall short just like his predecessors' efforts. On the one hand, the planning process is widely viewed as being inadequate and out of sync with the real economic capabilities of the country. For some of the projects, the budget was insufficient, and the Kingdom could not manage to arrange more funding. On the other hand, MBS' adventurist decisions both in terms of foreign and domestic politics have not only damaged the reputation of the Kingdom at all levels but they have also shaken the investors' trust and confidence in the Saudi markets.

Based on these, this paper aims to discuss the modernisation process in Saudi Arabia historically, and subsequently analyse the limitations of MBS's reforms and the obstacles to their implementation, while also examining the potential trajectories of the Saudi transformation project.



King of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (C), Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud (R) and Crown Prince, First Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior of Saudi Arabia Muhammad bin Nayef (L) pose for a photograph before the announcement of the economic reform plan known as 'Vision 2030' in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on April 25, 2016. (Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)

Modernisation History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Today's Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by Abdul-Aziz ibn Muhammad Al-Saud and has been ruled by the same family ever since (Wurm, 2008). Due to its strategic position, vast oil reserves and custodianship of Islam's two most prominent holy sites (Yamani, 2008), the Saudis have been an influential actor in the region, both politically and economically. In the Saudi system, the ruler has absolute power and has to consider both traditional and religious values while governing the state. It has strict rules for its citizens derived from both religion and cultural traditions, and since the state provides "cradle-to-grave" welfare to its citizens through the distribution of revenues and subsidies on housing, fuel, water, and electricity, a social contract exists between the state and its citizens, which demands that the latter obey these strict rules (Clarke, 2007; Bianco, 2018).

This social contract has made society live with these rules and traditions for a long time. However, upheavals started eventually due to its dependence on oil. Oil is considered as the "main pillar" for the Saudi economy (See Figure 1¹), and therefore, it makes the country's economy vulnerable to the fluctuations in oil prices (Al-Tamimi, 2016). With the increase in population (see Figure 2), fluctuations in oil prices, and mounting pressure from both inside and outside for reforms, Riyadh could no longer preserve the balance and had to take some measures for the establishment of modern institutions which would diversify the economy and create investment opportunities in non-oil sectors for both domestic and foreign investors.

Figure 1: Oil and Non-Oil Revenues in the Saudi Economy (annual %)

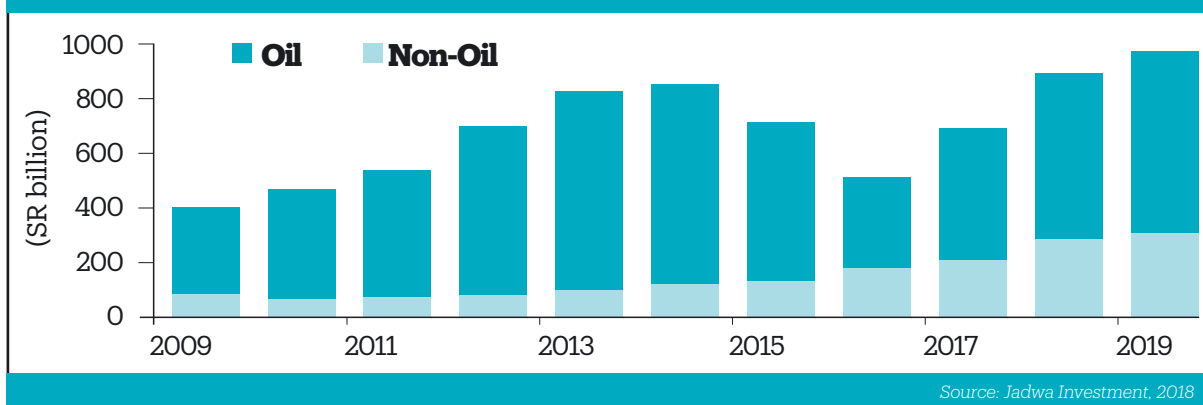
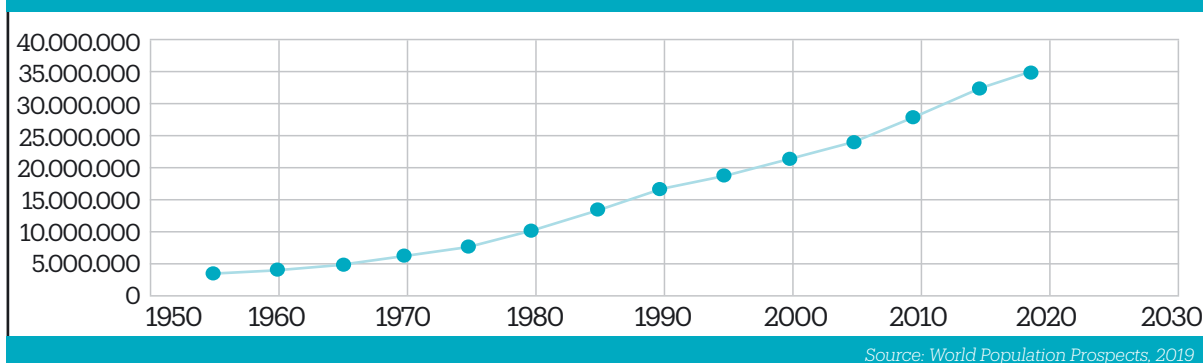


Figure 2: Saudi Arabia Population



¹ Projected values have been provided for 2019.

Mounting Pressure and Early Reactions

As oil prices decreased in the 1980s and people started submitting petitions demanding reforms in the political and judicial system, King Fahd (ruled 1982-2005) initiated several modernisation and development projects with the aim of building infrastructure and increasing privatization and economic diversification in the country (Clarke, 2007; Kapiszewski, 2006). However, he is also the one who increased the power of the *"muttawwī'a"* (religious police) which is responsible for the public enforcement of Saudi's strict moral codes (Wurm, 2008; Bianco, 2018). Under his rule, Riyadh sought to mitigate the situation by taking a few new steps while keeping the traditional governing system intact. King Abdullah, who became the de facto leader in 1995 as Crown Prince following King Fahd's illness (Al-Rasheed, 2016), was no exception to this trend; however, in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, he faced increased pressure.

With the tectonic shift caused by the attacks of September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia had to approach the issue of reform seriously, especially since the world began to scrutinise Saudi Arabia's journey of modernisation more closely (Wurm, 2008). In the meantime, at the end of 2001, a group of Saudi civil society activists formed a coalition and prepared a petition, demanding more political rights including gender equality, government accountability, and an independent judiciary (Yamani, 2008). Furthermore, 2003 was a crucial year for Saudi Arabia due to a sharp increase in terrorist activities, combined with the civil society's increasing demand for civil liberties and political rights (Wurm, 2008). Therefore, the Saudi regime came under intense scrutiny at the beginning of the 2000s. The Saudi monarchy, on the other hand, used terrorist activity as an opportunity to re-impose their tight control over

society. Consequently, they went on a charm offensive in the US in order to burnish their image in Washington D.C. via massively orchestrated PR campaigns as well as providing military support for the US War on Iraq (Wurm, 2008).

During this period, the "King Abdul-Aziz Center for National Dialogue" was established. Among other things, it aimed to promote dialogue between the different segments of Saudi society and Saudi institutions to discuss pressing issues and the possibility of reforms. However, since this initiative was not formally endorsed by the Salafi-Wahhabi oriented religious establishment of the kingdom, little progress was made (Yamani, 2008). Moreover, the Saudi authorities announced that elections for the municipal councils would be held at the end of 2003. However, the candidates were forbidden from campaigning and advertising (Wurm, 2008). The elections were then postponed from September 2004 to 2005, and it was announced later that women would not be allowed to vote (Wurm, 2008).

Similarly, there were attempts to give some concessions in terms of women's rights and address some shortcomings in the educational system in the 2000s. This endeavour resulted in increased participation of women in public life; some women have been appointed to senior management positions, while others have become involved in the decision-making process in both the public and private sectors (Al-Ahmadi, 2011). Nevertheless, these attempts had limited results since, in the following years, women have continued to face challenges including cultural barriers and challenges related to lack of resources such as limited training opportunities (Al-Ahmadi, 2011).

Freedom of Expression and Education

Freedom of expression has had a checkered past in Saudi Arabia. After King Abdullah's accession to the throne in 2005, the country's daily newspapers began discussing social issues, such as unemployment, poverty and even domestic violence (Wurm, 2008). King Abdullah also paid attention to the education system, and as a part of his reform attempts in education, the number of universities in Saudi Arabia increased (Clary & Karlin, 2011). Additionally, the "King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program" was established to encourage Saudis to study abroad with the hope that they would return following their studies and work in government institutions (Clary & Karlin, 2011).

Nevertheless, education remained a challenge for Saudi Arabia since these attempts were not sufficient to catch up with the standards in the developed countries (Alnahdi, 2014). Also, some of the Saudis who benefited from the scholarship program preferred not to return to the Kingdom due to the social, political and economic situation (Hilal, Scott, & Maadad, 2015). Furthermore, freedom of expression remained restricted as demonstrated by the crackdown against demonstrators demanding the right for women to drive (Bulloch, 2015). King Abdullah, just like his predecessor King Fahd, had this dichotomy present in his reform project. Although some consider him as a modest

reformer (Clary & Karlin, 2011; Jain, 2015; Wurm, 2008), he has not granted any substantial civil and political rights to Saudi citizens.

For years, Saudi monarchs have promised modern institutions and reforms in social and political life. However, they present reforms which are relatively easy to initiate but never take actions which would shake their absolute power (Al-Rasheed, 2016). Instead, their reforms were meant to

appease society and respond to international media's criticism. Similarly, for Wurm (2008), the reforms aim only "to meet the minimum demands both from within the country and from the outside," instead of performing democratic structural reforms which may actually lead to a redistribution of power. Hence, the history of the modernisation of the Kingdom has always been full of contradictory steps despite the pressure from both inside and outside.



A Saudi woman drives a car as she passes through the King Fahd Causeway after Saudi Arabia allowed women to have driving licences and lifted the ban for women to drive in Bahrain on June 24, 2018. (Ayman Yaqoob - Anadolu Agency)

King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud

On January 23, 2015, Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud became Saudi Arabia's king following the death of his predecessor King Abdullah (Jain, 2015). Since his early days in power, King Salman added a new factor into the Kingdom's political equation, namely "unpredictability" (Riedel, 2019), especially concerning the line of succession and the cabinet's composition.

Originally, the order of succession to the Saudi Arabian throne followed agnatic seniority. It went from the elder son to the next among the male offspring of Ibn Saud, the founder of the Saudi monarchy. This rule was observed to ensure a smooth transfer of power. However, it was clear that eventually the line would continue through his grandsons since after some time, no son would be there to take the throne.

When King Salman ascended to the throne, Muqrin bin Abdul-Aziz, son of King Saud bin Abdul-Aziz, held the office of the Crown Prince according to the traditional line of succession (Blair, 2015). However, King Salman altered the line of succession for the first time and appointed Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, his nephew, as Crown Prince (Gause III, 2015). This decision not only seemingly prevented the uncertainty over the throne that would have emerged sooner or later and a possible fight between the grandsons, but it also marked the end of an era since this decision showed that, from now on, the king would assign his successor directly (Blair, 2015).

King Salman subsequently assigned MBS as Minister of Defence, Chief of the Royal Court and head of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (Gause III, 2015). King Salman also made significant changes to the cabinet. Prince Mitab, the eldest son of King Abdullah, who was the guard commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, was removed. In November 2017, Prince Mitab was detained on corruption charges and replaced by Prince Abdullah bin

Bandar bin Abdul-Aziz even though he had no military experience (Riedel, 2019). These decisions have affected internal political stability in the country.

On the international level, the Kingdom's political reputation was notably shaken as well. In his first year as king, Saudi Arabia became engaged in wars in Yemen and Syria (via support for non-state armed groups). Simultaneously, mass executions and arrests, and bombings in mosques were the major issues within the country (Gardner, 2016). According to Reprieve's briefing (2017), between 2014 and June 2017, 438 executions were carried out in Saudi Arabia (see Table 1). Furthermore, several religious scholars and Saudi princes were arrested in 2017 (Al Jazeera, 2018a; Bianco, 2018). Amidst this tumultuous environment, King Salman changed the line of succession once again. In 2017, he dismissed Prince Nayef and put him under house arrest, while assigning MBS as the crown prince (Riedel, 2019).

Table 1: Executions in Saudi Arabia by Offence (2014-2017)

Smuggling narcotics	145
Murder	230
Murder/Rape or Sexual assault	2
Kidnap/Rape	11
Kidnap/Attempted rape	1
Adultery	1
Sorcery	1
Terrorism	47
Total	438

Source: Reprieve, 2017



Saudi Crown Prince and Defense Minister of Saudi Arabia Mohammad bin Salman al-Saud (L) and Saudi Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz (R) wait to welcome King of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (not seen) at King Salman Air Base Airport in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on November 11, 2017. (Bandar Algaloud / Saudi Royal Council / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman

The impact of MBS on Saudi politics has been felt since the beginning of his father's accession to the throne. Even when he was the Deputy Crown Prince, there were rumours regarding his intentions and the possibility of him abusing his rapidly increasing authority. At the end of 2015, Germany's foreign intelligence agency issued a statement claiming that Saudi Arabia could become unpredictable and 'impulsive' as MBS acquires more power (Reuters, 2015). Unsurprisingly, after MBS became crown prince, his influence has increased, and he has wasted no time in consolidating more power in his hands (Al Jazeera, 2018a). Today, some consider him as "de facto ruler" of the Kingdom (Al Jazeera, 2018b; BBC, 2018; Magri, 2018). With his father's support, he has developed a new approach to governance for Saudi Arabia based on "rapid and forceful decision-making" instead of performing "collective consultation and deliberation" (Bianco, 2018). He preferred to appoint the young princes as governors or deputy governors instead of old and experienced ones

as it is easier to control the young ones (Gause III, 2018). In this way, he has effectively guaranteed that no one can oppose him in any meaningful way.

MBS, like many of his predecessors, has also been labelled as a 'reformer', due in large part to his planned modernisation project which has promised reforms relating to issues ranging from women's rights and empowerment to economic diversification and social liberalisation (Bianco, 2018). While opposition members viewed these endeavours sceptically, others welcomed these reforms. Some pundits exaggerated the official Saudi claims. Media articles frequently published larger-than-life titles about the reforms. Examples include "A Saudi Arabia awakening" (Lyons, 2017) and "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last" (Friedman, 2017). However, the stories behind these reforms, and MBS's aggressive policies as a defence minister and later crown prince have increased uncertainty about Saudi affairs rather than reduce it.

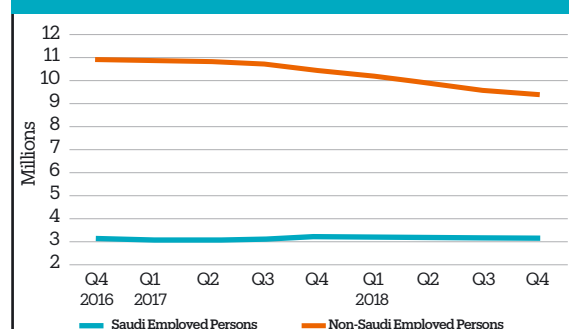
Modernisation Project: Objectives and Failures

In early 2016, MBS announced *Vision 2030*², prepared by the business consulting firm McKinsey (Teller, 2018). It aims to not only move the Kingdom beyond the oil through diversification in the economy, and "the reservation of certain jobs and sectors for Saudi nationals" but also bring social liberalisation to Saudi society (Hubbard & Kelly, 2017; Kinnimont, 2017; Young, 2018). In that regard, Vision 2030 puts forward three themes –a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation- and eight programs to achieve abovementioned aims, but it is stated that more programs will be announced as needed. While Vision 2030 has been lauded by many in the international community, there is a dark reality behind these mostly superficial reforms that have become more apparent in the last year, including executions of political dissidents and the detention of women's rights activists.

Despite giving place to social issues in Vision 2030, MBS's primary target is the economy. If successful, Vision 2030 would open new sectors and bring "Saudisation" into the Kingdom's employment sector. As it currently stands, Saudi Arabia remains vulnerable to oil price volatility and has suffered economically as a result. Furthermore, investment opportunities outside of the energy sector

remain limited and high-paying jobs are, more often than not, taken by foreigners who have skill-sets not abundantly present among the Saudi population. In the last couple of years, expats have started to leave the country (see Figure 3), and, so far, the Saudis have not managed to replace them (Martin, 2019). Therefore, both opening new sectors in the Saudi economy and bringing Saudisation into the employment sector are actually to the point, and they have been hot topics for a long time in the Kingdom.

Figure 3: Saudi and Non-Saudi employed persons in Saudi Arabia



Source: The General Authority for Statistics of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2018

² Projected values have been provided for 2019.

After Vision 2030 was published, some degree of economic diversification was undertaken. With programs such as the National Transformation Program 2020, the Fiscal Balance Program 2020 and the Removing Obstacles to the Private Sector Program, Saudi Arabia tried to standardise this diversification process (Ghafar, 2018). These programs have monitored both the public and the private sector. Also, new industrial cities have been established in Jubail and Yanbu and more Saudi nationals, including women, began to work in the private sector (Kinninmont, 2017). Young Saudis are being encouraged to become entrepreneurs and replace foreigners in private-sector jobs (Hubbard & Kelly, 2017).

Moreover, as a part of Vision 2030, the NEOM project was announced in 2017 by MBS. Accordingly, to benefit efficiently from the strategic position of Saudi Arabia and creating a hub for tourism, trade, and investment, a city called NEOM will be built between Saudi Arabia's northwestern borders with Jordan and Egypt (Ghafar, 2018). Accordingly, NEOM will be operated with artificial

intelligence and robots and powered by the sun (Ghafar, 2018). It was clear that NEOM would bring liveliness to the region and create investment opportunities.

However, NEOM, as well as other projects, continue to face setbacks. For instance, the construction of NEOM has fallen behind schedule (Mogielnicki, 2018) and there are many barriers to allocating funding. MBS stated that the investors of these programs would vary from the Kingdom itself to regional and international investors (Mogielnicki, 2018). Accordingly, through forming "the Public Investment Fund" or selling 5 per cent of state-owned ARAMCO (officially the Saudi Arabian Oil Company) to the public, the Kingdom was hoping to secure funding for NEOM. Although ARAMCO's initial public offering was proposed in 2016, until this year, Saudi Arabia could not give a start to it (Martin, 2019). Finally, it is announced this year that investors would bid for shares between November 17 and 28 and ARAMCO would publish the final price on December 5 (Martin, 2019).

Regional Instability and the Saudi Economy

Regional instability remains a matter of concern in the Middle East. For almost a decade, uprisings and wars, most notably in Yemen and Syria, have kept the region in a fragile state. Saudi Arabia has had its parts in these crises. In 2015, MBS launched Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen backing Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government against the Houthi rebels. After the intervention started, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as well as France, the United Kingdom and the United States (US) showed their support (Darwich, 2018). Despite this mobilisation, the following years have been a struggle for Saudi Arabia to protect its stance against Iran and the Houthis. No substantial victory has been achieved under Saudi Arabia's three-year air, naval and sea blockade of Yemen, coupled with airstrikes, and the situation has become insurmountable (Darwich, 2018).

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (UNOCHA) report, as of 2018, in Yemen, there are as many as 24 million people requiring humanitarian assistance, approximately 57,000 people have died and around 3.9 million people have been displaced since the crisis started in 2015 (UNOCHA, 2019). Apart from its brutal consequences in Yemen, this intervention has been an unfavourable start for MBS since it put his economic credentials in question. The intervention has cost Saudi Arabia significantly since the

Saudis have had to mobilise significant military resources in their ongoing effort to defeat the Houthi rebels (Riedel, 2019). Although the UN initiated the Stockholm Agreement between the Houthis and Hadi government in December 2018 under the leadership of Martin Griffiths, UN Special Envoy for Yemen, the conflict continues because of the violations of the terms of the agreement by both sides (Salisbury, 2019). Today, it is widely accepted that Saudi Arabia's actions in Yemen have led to the escalation of the humanitarian crisis (Nebehay, 2018; Riedel, 2019; Salisbury, 2019).

2017 also brought other Saudi-led political crises to the region, further impacting regional stability. The first was the blockade against Qatar, initiated by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt in June 2017. Accordingly, these countries accused Doha of having relations with terrorist organisations and cut their diplomatic relations with Qatar (Harb, 2018). However, recently it has also been argued that the primary intention behind the blockade against Qatar was taking control of Qatari gas fields to make Saudi Arabia one of the prominent natural gas exporters of the world overnight (McFarlane, Said, & Amon, 2019).

Eventually, this crisis not only impacted the power and influence of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) but also created a negative impact on the investment climate in the region (Ghafar, 2018). As a result of the blockade, Qatar

was no longer bound by the decision-making process of the GCC. Although Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani attended the 2017 GCC Summit in Kuwait after the blockade started, he did not attend the 2018 GCC Summit held in Saudi Arabia on December 9, 2018, despite the invitation of the Saudi King (Al Jazeera, 2018c). In this meeting, no step was taken to put an end to the blockade (Al Jazeera, 2018c). For many experts, the blockade has failed since Qatar managed to handle the conditions with careful steps and even strengthened its ties with other countries such as Turkey and Iran (Gause III, 2018). So, just like the Yemen intervention, the results of the blockade against Qatar has made Saudi Arabia's foreign policy controversial.

Furthermore, in 2017, the resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri triggered another diplomatic crisis

in the region. On November 4, 2017, Hariri announced his resignation in Riyadh and his decision led to many debates regarding Saudi Arabia's intervention in Lebanese internal affairs (TRT World, 2018). One of the views claimed that MBS effectively held the Lebanese PM hostage (TRT World, 2018), and sought to replace him with his brother Bahaa (Nakhoul, Bassam, & Perry, 2017). Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated that this situation is unacceptable for the US, and French President Emmanuel Macron demanded the release of Hariri (Ulrichsen, 2018). Similarly, former Foreign Minister of Germany, Sigmar Gabriel criticised Saudi Arabia of intervening in Lebanon's internal politics (Al Jazeera, 2018b). Following a personal intervention by French President Emmanuel Macron in late November 2017, Hariri withdrew his decision to resign (TRT World, 2018).

Social Dilemmas

Vision 2030 also touches upon cultural and social issues. MBS claimed that he wishes to "return Saudi Arabia to normality" (Cohen, 2018). He highlighted the prominence of social liberties during his visits to the US and Europe. In January 2018, women in Saudi Arabia were allowed to attend sports stadiums for the first time, and then a royal decree was signed to let them drive and put an end to the male guardianship system (Al Jazeera, 2018a). Societal reforms such as opening the first movie theatres in the Kingdom or allowing music concerts which are open to both men and women have been introduced (Al Jazeera, 2018b). At the same time, however, arrests of dissidents and executions have increased, throwing MBS' reformist credentials into question.

Amnesty International, for instance, has highlighted the increase in the executions in the last few years and condemned Saudi Arabia for using the death penalty, particularly as it has been used against the Shia minority of the country (Al Jazeera, 2018b). Furthermore, there has been a clear uptick in arrests of those deemed to be critics. The arrests started with clerics and religious scholars in September 2017 (Bianco, 2018). Then in November 2017, Saudi Arabia was shaken with an "anti-corruption purge." At the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh, hundreds of Saudi Arabian princes, high-level ministers and business people gathered for the announcement of NEOM, however, instead, these people were arrested with the charge of corruption (Al Jazeera, 2018a). Some of them were released after paying huge amounts through secret negotiations

whereas some others have remained under arrest without a trial for 15 months (Al Jazeera, 2018a). At the end of January 2019, Saudi authorities announced that the commission ended its mission and they recovered around \$107 billion from the people who included the detainees (Sabah & Algethami, 2019). Although some Saudi officials think that this operation was necessary and will bring more investments to the country in the long-run (Sabah & Algethami, 2019), some regional experts prefer to consider it as a "purge" due to the allegations of torture during the operation and lack of transparency (Al Jazeera, 2018b). From the latter's perspective, the purge was intended to remove any potential political threat to the crown prince and seize money instead of combatting corruption (Al Jazeera, 2018b).

Saudi Arabia has also arrested several women rights' activists. This decision has had repercussions, especially in Canada. While the Canadian foreign ministry criticised the human rights' violations in Saudi Arabia in its tweets (Gause III, 2018), Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called for the release of these activists (Al Jazeera, 2018b). In response, the Kingdom immediately withdrew its ambassador from Canada, called Saudi students who study in Canada back and froze trade with the Northern American country (Al Jazeera, 2018b). Recently, it was also revealed that three prominent Saudi Sunni scholars, Salman al-Odah, Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omari who were held on terrorism-related charges and sentenced to death may be executed (Hearst, 2019).

Current Situation

Considering these failures in social and economic reforms, it seems MBS has taken his father's unpredictability even further with his actions in both the domestic and international realm and failed to achieve the aims of Vision 2030 so far. Neither the opening of new sectors in the Saudi economy nor bringing 'Saudisation' into the employment sector has been accomplished. The Kingdom has continued conducting human rights violations, executions, and detentions against its citizens while deepening the crisis within the region. In that regard, it is pertinent to indicate that MBS has not been an exception to Saudi Arabia's history of modernisation attempts, which is full of reforms aiming to appease Saudi citizens and international media instead of changing the traditional mechanism of governance. MBS initially enjoyed even more support from large sections of the international community, which portrayed his actions in glowing terms.

The Trump administration provided MBS with a *carte blanche*. First, President Donald Trump labelled MBS as "the right person at the right time" (Friedman, 2017). Later, in March 2018, MBS visited President Trump to discuss his modernisation efforts in which President Trump clarified the US's main expectation from MBS. President Trump expressed the view that "[Saudi Arabia is] going to give the United States some of that wealth hopefully, in the form of jobs, in the form of the purchase of the finest military equipment anywhere in the world" and offering his country's support in return for this wealth transfer (Landler, 2018).

Similarly, in April 2018, MBS paid an official visit to France for a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron (The New Arab, 2018). In that meeting, President Macron



US President Donald Trump (2nd L) and Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad Bin Salman (R) pose for the family photo on the first day of the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan on June 28, 2019. (Metin Aktas - Anadolu Agency)

expressed his country's support for MBS by highlighting that a chance should be given to MBS (The New Arab, 2018). With the backing of these world leaders, MBS has managed to shape public opinion in his favour. However, the assassination of Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi tarnished his image to a large extent.

The assassination of Jamal Khashoggi has cast a long shadow over MBS's international perception and his 'reform' agenda. While he was initially an insider, he grew increasingly disillusioned with the rule of MBS. Subsequently, Jamal Khashoggi was banned by the royal family from writing, and appearing and attending in conferences after he criticised Donald Trump regarding his opinions towards the Middle East in late 2016



People gather in front of Saudi Consulate in New York to protest against Saudi Arabia's decision to execute three leading Saudi Arabian scholars including Salman al-Awdah after Ramadan, in New York, United States on June 1, 2019. Citing two government sources and one of the men's relatives, "Middle East Eye" reported the three individuals, Salman al-Awdah, Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omari, will be convicted and executed after the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. (Atılğan Özgül - Anadolu Agency)

(Haltiwanger, 2018a). Eventually, he left Saudi Arabia in June 2017 to become a US resident (Haltiwanger, 2018b). Until his death, Khashoggi persisted in his critique. In one of his opinion pieces, Khashoggi invited MBS to "restore dignity to his country – by ending Yemen's cruel war," (Khashoggi, 2018b) and in another one, he stated that MBS "needs to do much more" since lifting the driving ban for women can only be a start for Saudi Arabia (Khashoggi, 2018a).

On 2 October 2018, Khashoggi entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to get some documents for his planned marriage with Hatice Cengiz, his Turkish fiancée, but he did not re-emerge from the building (Haltiwanger, 2018a). His disappearance sparked debates across the world, turning it into an international crisis. Whereas Saudi Arabia claimed he left the consulate alive and rejected the accusations without providing any evidence, the Turkish government provided the audio and video recordings which show how a group of Saudis "interrogated, tortured and then murdered" him (Haltiwanger, 2018a).

In addition, the US intelligence agencies revealed MBS's conversation with Turki Al-Dakhil, Saudi envoy to the UAE, which took place in September 2017 (TRT World,

2019). Accordingly, in this conversation, MBS stated that if Khashoggi does not return to Saudi Arabia by choice, he should be brought back by force. Today, the investigation is still going on, and it has been speculated that King Salman and MBS have recently been at odds, due to MBS's stance in Yemen war and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi (Kirchgaessner & Hopkins, 2019).

The assassination of Khashoggi, together with the failures in social and economic reforms, and human rights violations, executions and detentions in Saudi Arabia have reversed public opinion about the crown prince. However, President Trump continues to express his support for MBS. Despite the US House of Representative's efforts to impose sanctions on Saudi officials and block arms sales (Roberts, 2019), in the G20 leaders' summit in Osaka, Japan, President Trump referred to MBS as a "friend of mine" and stated that Saudi Arabia had been "a big purchaser of American products" (CBS NEWS, 2019). Similarly, the world also witnessed in the same meeting that the crown prince managed to be at the centre, standing in the front between President Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, raising the question of whether MBS has been welcomed back by these leaders (Taylor, 2019).

Conclusion

The issue of reform has been a huge challenge for the Saudi monarchs for years. Over the last 20 years, many reform projects have been initiated in Saudi Arabia, but they have been unable to go beyond being token gestures. When MBS declared his rather vague reform agenda, aiming to diversify the Saudi economy and bring a measure of social liberalisation to the conservative Kingdom, some thought that he would be an exception to history and take the right steps in modernising his country.

However, in this four-year period, MBS' promises have not materialised and many see his undertakings as mere PR. Despite the pledge to bring social liberalisation to Saudi society, he has been behind crackdowns against activists and potential rivals within and outside the royal family. Many people have been taken into custody, some have been executed, and others have been released in exchange for large cash payments made in the name of an anti-corruption drive.

Moreover, he has been a chief actor in a number of regional crises such as in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen and

blockade in Qatar, and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. All of these tarnished the image of Saudi Arabia and the Crown Prince, which culminated in the fallout amongst international investors and important political allies, most notably in the US Congress. As a result, many projects have fallen behind schedule and the aim of diversifying the Saudi economy has been impeded.

Although there are some authors and world leaders who continue to strive to highlight the positive aspects of MBS, under this socially, politically and economically ambiguous environment, the Kingdom remains far from what his project supposedly aims to achieve. Also, considering Saudi Arabia's history of modernisation, it becomes clear that MBS, despite his more youthful exuberance, is not ultimately an exception to his antecedents who were also considered 'reformers'. Instead of enacting substantial changes to deep-rooted traditions and rules, MBS has followed a path similar to the previous rulers of the Kingdom, using the language of reform mainly as a means of maintaining power in his hands.

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