

SWP Research Paper

Guido Steinberg

A Fourth Saudi State

The Crown Prince's Reforms in
Politics, Society and the Economy



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
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- The political, social and economic reforms spearheaded by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman serve the goal of consolidating his rule in the long term.
- Bin Salman has centralised decision-making in his own hands and is in full control of the country's politics.
- Authoritarianism under the crown prince is far more radical and uncompromising than was the case in Saudi Arabia until 2015.
- From the outset, Bin Salman promoted a pronounced Saudi nationalism, which many observers describe as a "Saudi-first" policy.
- From the crown prince's point of view, social and cultural liberalisation is a prerequisite for the success of his economic reforms and thus for the long-term survival of the kingdom and the ruling family.
- The reforms have had only limited success because Saudi Arabia remains highly dependent on oil revenues, despite a recent economic upturn.

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Issues and Conclusions

A Fourth Saudi State: The Crown Prince's Reforms in Politics, Society and the Economy

Since his father, Saudi King Salman, ascended the throne in 2015, Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman has initiated extensive reforms in politics, society and the economy. The reforms are so radical that observers are already talking about a fourth Saudi state. That is because during the almost decade of the de facto rule of the crown prince, Saudi Arabia has become so fundamentally different from the three states that existed before (1744/45 – 1818, 1824 – 1891, 1901 – 2015/17). In fact, the crown prince's reform programme is the most ambitious and radical of an Islamic country since the era of Kemal Atatürk in Turkey after World War I.

Today, Saudi Arabia is *the* leading power in the Arab world. As an oil superpower and home to the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, the country exerts considerable political, economic and social influence not only in the Middle East but also far beyond. And it is Saudi Arabia's steadily growing importance in international politics in recent years that has made the question of the status of, and prospects for, its reforms so pressing for the Middle East and countries in other regions of the world. For this reason, the present study examines what results the Saudi reform programme has achieved so far and what its further prospects for success are.

Although an analytical distinction must be made between the political, social and economic reforms, they all serve the overarching goal of consolidating the rule of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman over the long term. This applies first and foremost (not to mention most obviously) to the reforms in the political sphere: King Salman's main rivals for the succession have been eliminated, all power has been centralised in the crown prince's hands, and a comprehensive and sweeping form of authoritarianism has been practised, with drastic measures having been taken to quell political opposition and even mere dissent. As of late 2025, whatever opposition still exists in Saudi Arabia is incapable of threatening Bin Salman's rule.

The social reforms, which are similarly aimed at destroying the old power base and building a new

one, have changed Saudi Arabia even more profoundly. The most significant measure is the downgrading of the old alliance between the ruling family and the religious establishment. From 1744/45 onwards, the Saud family derived its religious legitimacy from an alliance with Wahhabi religious scholars; since 2017, however, the influence of the clergy over society has been significantly curbed while Bin Salman has promoted Saudi nationalism, emphasising the role of the ruling family. This shift has paved the way for far-reaching social liberalisation, which the conservative scholars previously prevented. Liberalisation is particularly evident in freedoms for women that were unthinkable just a few years ago; but it can also be seen in the growing entertainment sector. As a result, the crown prince enjoys enthusiastic support from among the younger and more liberal sections of the population.

As for the economic reforms, they, too, have the core purpose of authoritarian consolidation. Back in 2016, they were given the label "Vision 2030", which, according to the then new leadership, aimed at alleviating the Saudi economy's heavy dependence on oil. The most important instrument of economic policy is the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), which has been significantly strengthened since 2016 and claims to hold deposits worth more than US\$900 billion. This sovereign wealth fund is intended to create alternatives to oil and stimulate the private sector by investing in urban megaprojects, tourism and transport infrastructure and establishing new industries such as sports and entertainment. That the PIF is also an instrument of power is evident from the fact that the crown prince and a few close associates have exclusive control over the fund, which will soon boast deposits exceeding US\$1 trillion.

Any attempt to take stock of the reform process must also distinguish between the crown prince's authoritarian approach and the content of the reforms. Bin Salman has been enormously successful in consolidating his rule. Not only has he no political rivals or opposition to fear; he has also largely disempowered the religious elites and found new supporters among young people and women. Through the sovereign wealth fund, he has a lot of money at his disposal to secure his rule, even in the event of an internal crisis. However, a closer examination of the reforms themselves – in political, social and economic terms – paints an ambivalent picture.

To wit, the concentration of power in one person's hands and the new, sweeping authoritarianism have

laid the foundation for the kingdom to become a much more dynamic player in both foreign and domestic politics than it was in previous decades. Accordingly, the crown prince has been able to do away with the old basis of legitimacy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by promoting a new nationalism, curbing the influence of the religious elites and drawing on support from young Saudis instead. But whether the latter will continue to support him depends primarily on whether he can make the Saudi economy viable for the post-oil era. Although significant economic momentum has been generated by the sovereign wealth fund playing a central role in the reform process as well as by the launch of a large number of megaprojects, the economy remains dependent on oil revenues; and there are few signs that any real change will be forthcoming in the foreseeable future. Thus, with its growing population, persistently high youth unemployment and lack of jobs, Saudi Arabia could soon be headed for new domestic crises.

Reforms I: Politics

Muhammad Bin Salman launched his political reforms by eliminating the most ambitious rivals to his father's succession and then went on to centralise all power in his own hands and gather around himself a new political elite that depends entirely on his favour. This has enabled him to prop up his rule through a comprehensive and sweeping authoritarianism that takes on any political opposition. The rigorous crackdown on dissenting opinions has paved the way for social and economic reforms, which, though controversial, have not sparked any public debates because Saudis no longer dare criticise government policy.

The rise of Muhammad Bin Salman

Before Muhammad Bin Salman's rise to power in 2015, there had been a prolonged serious crisis in Saudi Arabia's political system. The country was ruled by a clique of competing elderly princes, many of whom had serious health problems and were therefore able to perform their government duties only sporadically. Because important decisions usually had to be made by consensus of the leading princes, policymaking was laborious and time-consuming. To many of its partners, Riyadh seemed incapable of practising decisive politics.

The main reason for this state of affairs was a succession process that had been in place in Saudi Arabia since the death of the country's founder, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, in 1953. Under this process, Ibn Saud's eldest living son was to succeed his brother or half-brother upon the latter's death provided that he was considered neither incompetent nor unacceptable for any other reason by the leading family members. By the early 1940s, Ibn Saud had fathered more than 40 sons, so there was no shortage of qualified pretenders to the throne. However, this system meant that over time, the successive heirs to the throne were getting older and older. The looming crisis had become evident by 2005 at the latest, when Crown Prince Abdallah, already 80 years old, ascended the throne following the death of King Fahd (who reigned from

1982 to 2005). During his rule (until 2015), Abdallah's health deteriorated, often leaving him unable to act. Since many decisions could not be made without him, the kingdom often seemed politically paralysed under his reign.

However, the Saudi sovereigns had ceased to be absolute rulers no later than the death in 1975 of King Faisal, who had been a strong monarch. At that time, an informal group of particularly powerful princes had formed within the ruling family. Besides the king and his crown prince, it included other sons of Ibn Saud, who held the most important ministerial posts, and influential grandsons of the founding ruler, most notably the sons of King Faisal. In all, the group comprised a dozen or more princes who made the most important decisions by consensus.

In the decades that followed, the elderly princes insisted on retaining their positions in the hope – among some of them – of one day ascending the throne themselves or securing it for their own sons. However, by 2011–12 at the latest, it had become clear that the country's traditional succession process had reached its biological limits. During those two years, two crown princes, Defence Minister Sultan and Interior Minister Naif, died in quick succession, at the ages of 83 and 79, respectively. The most significant immediate consequence of the deaths of the two brothers was that Salman (b. 1935), the father of Muhammad Bin Salman, was appointed crown prince in 2012 and at the same time took over as head of the Ministry of Defence. When Salman became king in January 2015, he appointed Muqrin, the youngest son of the founder of the state, Ibn Saud (b. 1943), as the new crown prince. Muqrin's deputy was Muhammad Bin Naif (b. 1959), a nephew of the king.

The appointment of Muhammad Bin Naif – who, following in his father's footsteps, also served as interior minister – marked a decisive turning point. Bin Naif belonged to a branch of the family that had become known as the "Sudairi Seven" or the "Fahd family" (Al Fahd). Originally, there were seven full brothers among the sons of Ibn Saud; and since the 1960s, they had been working closely together to

strengthen their standing within the family. In addition to King Fahd, Defence Minister Sultan and Interior Minister Naif, the group included the new King Salman and – as representative of the next generation – his deputy crown prince, Muhammad Bin Naif. As a result of the 2015 overhaul of the succession process, it seemed quite possible that the Sudairis would prevail in the battle for the throne.

By 2016, the discussion in Saudi Arabia was no longer about if Muhammad Bin Salman would become crown prince; it was about when.

That outcome became even more likely when, in April 2015, Salman deposed Muqrin – who was not a Sudairi – and appointed Bin Naif as the new crown prince. At the same time, however, he promoted his own son, Muhammad Bin Salman, to deputy crown prince, which suggested he might be aiming not only for the succession of a Sudairi (namely, his nephew Muhammad Bin Naif) but even for that of his own direct descendant. Muhammad Bin Salman quickly set about strengthening his own position at the expense of his cousin. In January 2015, his father appointed him minister of defence, chairman of a newly established Council of Economic and Development Affairs and head of the Royal Court. Bin Salman launched one initiative after another, the most notable being the “Vision 2030” economic reform programme, which was announced in April 2016. By that time, the discussion in Saudi Arabia was no longer about if Muhammad Bin Salman would replace his cousin as crown prince; it was about when.

In June 2017, Muhammad Bin Salman saw the opportunity to overthrow Muhammad Bin Naif. A few days earlier, the Saudi government, together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt, had imposed a blockade on neighbouring Qatar. Bin Naif is said to have opposed this move, called for a diplomatic solution and, without Bin Salman’s knowledge, established a secret channel of communication with Qatari Emir Tamim. Bin Salman then appears to have persuaded his father to take action against Bin Naif. The latter was summoned to King Salman’s palace in Mecca, where a follower of Muhammad Bin Salman threatened him and demanded that he sign a letter of resignation and pledge allegiance to the new crown prince, Bin Salman. Having initially refused to do so, Bin Naif was reportedly detained overnight and

denied his regular medication for high blood pressure and diabetes. The next morning, after having given up resisting, he was led into a room in which Bin Salman was waiting for him and forced to swear allegiance to his cousin in front of a camera.¹

The crown prince’s position was thereby secured. However, there was another potential rival in the person of Mitab Bin Abdallah. While the son of the late King Abdallah had not shown any royal ambitions, he was serving as commander of the powerful National Guard. In early November 2017, Prince Mitab was deposed. At the same time, the crown prince ordered that a dozen or so princes and around 200 entrepreneurs, businessmen, civil servants and officers be detained and placed under house arrest at the Ritz-Carlton hotel on the outskirts of Riyadh. The Saudi media portrayed the arrests as part of a major anti-corruption campaign initiated by Bin Salman. In the weeks that followed, those detained were forced to transfer what was alleged to be illicitly acquired money and property to the state before being released. Witnesses spoke about torture and violence; one of the detainees even died in the hotel. Bin Salman nevertheless considered the operation a complete success and said in interviews that around US\$100 billion had been returned to the Saudi state.²

Mitab Bin Abdallah was reportedly forced to pay US\$1 billion to the Saudi state.³ But it is likely that he was targeted in the campaign not least because he commanded the National Guard and held ministerial rank in that capacity. Shortly before his arrest, he was removed from office and replaced by a loyal follower of the new crown prince; it is thought that he has been under house arrest since 2017. Thus, Bin Salman not only held the title of crown prince but also had control over the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of

¹ For a detailed account, see Anuj Chopra, “The Godfather, Saudi-Style’: Inside the Palace Coup That Brought MBS to Power”, *The Guardian* (online), 29 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/29/mbs-v-mbn-the-bitter-power-struggle-between-rival-saudi-princes> (accessed 21 July 2025). The loyal follower is said to have been Turki al-Sheikh.

² Norah O’Donnell, “Saudi Arabia’s Heir to the Throne Talks to 60 Minutes”, *CBS News* (online), 19 March 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-talks-to-60-minutes/> (accessed 21 July 2025).

³ “Saudi Anti-Corruption Drive: Prince Miteb Freed ‘after \$1bn Deal’”, *BBC News* (online), 29 November 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42161552> (accessed 21 July 2025).

the Interior and the Ministry of the National Guard – that is, the country's entire armed forces. Since November 2017, King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman have no longer had to fear that a rival prince will use his power base to stage a coup.

The centralisation of domestic policymaking

Muhammad Bin Salman's rise was accompanied by the centralisation of policymaking in the person of the crown prince – a process that continued until he was in full control of the country's politics. In 2015, he took over the running of the newly established Council of Economic and Development Affairs and, two years later, the Council for Political and Security Affairs, through which he steered the work of the specialist ministries. The two councils became central bodies of the state bureaucracy. At the same time, the crown prince surrounded himself with a circle of loyalists; in particular, two of these acolytes, the ruthless enforcers Saud al-Qahtani and Turki al-Sheikh, attracted attention during the period until 2019, helping to eliminate rivals such as Muhammad Bin Naif and Mitab Bin Abdallah. Bin Salman also relied on a group of loyal but competent individuals who, along with several of the less prominent princes, took over important ministries and agencies under his aegis. What they all had in common was their complete dependence on the favour of the new ruler.

The economic and security councils

In the move to replace the decentralised decision-making process (which had been based on consensus among the leading princes) with a centralised one over which he had full control, Muhammad Bin Salman appears to have had the support of his father, Salman, who was already 79 years old when he ascended the throne in January 2015. According to many reports, Salman had suffered at least one stroke and had also been diagnosed with dementia. That he intended to give his son broad scope for action was apparent within just a few days of his accession when Bin Salman was appointed minister of defence, head of the Royal Court and chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs.⁴

⁴ Peter Waldmann, "The £1.2 trillion project to get Saudi Arabia's economy off oil", *Bloomberg*, 21 April 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-04-21/the-2-trillion-project-to-get-saudi-arabia-s-economy-off-oil> (accessed 8 July 2025).

Formally, this newly established body was a sub-committee of the Council of Ministers. In reality, however, it had superior powers to those of the ministries responsible for economic issues, which it both coordinated and controlled.⁵ Through this 25-member institution, Muhammad Bin Salman immediately gained sweeping influence over economic policy and oversaw the work of the ministries dealing with economic affairs. In spring 2015, the king's son also took control of the state oil company Aramco and the sovereign wealth fund PIF, appointing loyal followers to head them.⁶ As a result, he presided over all economic, financial and energy policymaking.

It took longer for Bin Salman to extend his decision-making powers to Saudi Arabia's security policy. Although he had taken over the Ministry of Defence from his father in 2015, Muhammad Bin Naif was the strongman of the kingdom's internal security. Following the elimination of his cousin in June 2017, Bin Salman was able to assert himself in this area as well: the same month, he assumed the chairmanship of the Council of Political and Security Affairs, which, established in 2015, held sway over the ministries responsible for the country's internal and external security.⁷ Immediately thereafter, the new leadership reorganised the security authorities. The hitherto particularly powerful Ministry of the Interior was stripped of its control over the special forces and domestic intelligence service; together with responsibility for counter-terrorism, that control was transferred to a newly established body called the Presidency for State Security (*Ri'asat Amn al-Daula*), which was directly subordi-

www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-04-21/the-2-trillion-project-to-get-saudi-arabia-s-economy-off-oil (accessed 8 July 2025).

⁵ For an official description of the council, see "Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA)", *Saudipedia*, <https://saudipedia.com/en/article/152/government-and-politics/government-affairs/council-of-economic-and-development-affairs-ceda> (accessed 9 July 2025).

⁶ On Aramco, see Mathias Brüggemann, "Prinz Mohammed Bin Salman: Revolution im Königreich", *Handelsblatt*, 4 May 2015. On the sovereign wealth fund, see "Saudi Arabia Reshuffles Government Funds under Finance Ministry", *Gulf Business*, 24 March 2015, <https://gulfbusiness.com/saudi-arabia-reshuffles-government-funds-finance-ministry/> (accessed 28 July 2025).

⁷ Ahmed Al Omran and Andrew England, "Saudi Crown Prince's Inner Circle Vulnerable to Shake-up", *Financial Times* (online), 12 December 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/718085ae-f8b0-11e8-8b7c-6fa24bd5409c> (accessed 9 July 2025).

nated to the royal court and thus to the crown prince. Abd al-Aziz al-Huwairini, a general from the Ministry of the Interior considered to be a loyal follower of Bin Salman, was appointed its head.⁸

**The crown prince was
utterly convinced that his rise
to power was in line with the
traditional order of things.**

Within just a few years of his father's ascension to the throne, Bin Salman was making the most important decisions in all the aforementioned policy areas. It was probably a conscious decision on the part of King Salman to give his son a more or less free hand. While it is sometimes said that he intervened in matters of strategic importance and in times of crisis (such as after the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018), the evidence for such interventions is significantly lacking.⁹ The crown prince openly asserted his claim to sole power in Saudi Arabia and was utterly convinced that his rise to power was in line with the traditional order of things. This is all the more remarkable because it was not until 2012 that the prospect of Salman still becoming king had materialised, while Bin Salman himself emerged as a serious contender only when his father ascended the throne in January 2015. Immediately thereafter, the crown prince began making decisions without observing the customary practice of consensus-building among the leading princes.¹⁰ His supporters celebrated the new political style as bold and decisive, while his opponents denounced it as both reckless and ruthless.¹¹

⁸ Hadeel Al Sayegh, "Saudi King Overhauls Security Services Following Royal Shakeup", *Reuters* (online), 20 July 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-decrees/saudi-king-overhauls-security-services-following-royal-shakeup-idUSKBN1A52N9/> (accessed 9 July 2025).

⁹ On the relationship between father and son in general, see Christopher M. Davidson, *From Sheikhs to Sultanism. Statecraft and Authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE*, London: Hurst & Company, 2021 (Oxford Scholarship Online Political Science), doi: 10.1093/oso/9780197586488.001.0001.

¹⁰ Jonathan Rugman, "Power, Oil and a £450m Painting – Insiders on the Rise of Saudi's Crown Prince", *BBC News* (online), 19 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4gz8934wrro> (accessed 22 July 2025).

¹¹ See, for example, Samuel Willner, "The Saudi Arabia of Mohammed Bin Salman: Adapting to the Changing World

Bin Salman quickly became known as a particularly industrious politician who works unflaggingly late into the night and demands full commitment from his subordinates. However, numerous reports also point to a tendency towards control freakery and micromanagement. Above all, this proved problematic when the crown prince had to deal with a bureaucracy that often worked very slowly and achieved few or no evident results. His wrath often fell upon ministers whose departments had failed to meet his expectations. For a long time, the Ministry of Petroleum, the state oil company Aramco and parts of the Ministry of the Interior had been considered islands of efficiency in an otherwise inefficient apparatus. But in order to push ahead with his plans, Bin Salman put his trust in a small circle of loyal supporters whom he appointed to key positions from where they had to put his ideas into practice.

The most important advisers

Between 2015 and 2019, it was Saud al-Qahtani and Turki al-Sheikh, in particular, who made names for themselves, rising to the innermost circle of power around Bin Salman and serving as loyal enforcers in the fight against the crown prince's opponents. Saud al-Qahtani appears to have been Bin Salman's closest confidant until 2018. He was an insignificant administrative employee at the royal court with responsibility for media monitoring before being promoted to adviser to the crown prince with ministerial rank in 2015. Qahtani was entrusted with promoting Muhammad Bin Salman's rise – partly openly and partly covertly – using electronic means. To this end, he was appointed head of an agency called the Saudi Centre for Studies and Media Affairs, from where he turned Saudi Arabia into a "laboratory of electronic authoritarianism". Besides his own Twitter account, which had more than 1 million followers, he and his staff operated numerous bots that spread the crown prince's propaganda. Inside the country, Qahtani expanded electronic surveillance to an unprecedented level.¹²

At the same time, Qahtani's people hacked into the mobile phones of prominent figures abroad by pur-

and Preserving the Monarchy", *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 16, no. 3 (2022), 365–78.

¹² Ben Hubbard, "The Rise and Fall of M.B.S.'s Digital Henchman", *The New York Times* (online), 13 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/sunday-review/mbs-hacking.html> (accessed 9 July 2025).

chasing and using state-of-the-art spyware — the most important being the Pegasus programme, which allows smartphones to be monitored remotely. This campaign was directed primarily against Saudi dissidents, especially Jamal Khashoggi. It is considered to have been established that Saud al-Qahtani was responsible for the murder of the journalist at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 (the US intelligence services assume that the order to arrest or kill Khashoggi came from Bin Salman) and that he was in contact via Skype with the perpetrators, who were members of the Saudi security services.¹³ Shortly after the murder, Qahtani lost his official titles but was exempted from prosecution in Saudi Arabia, which, in any case, was opaque and likely intended for public consumption only.¹⁴ In May 2021, pro-Saudi social media accounts launched a months-long campaign that celebrated Saud al-Qahtani as a “hero,” “patriot” and “leader” and published photos and videos of him alongside Bin Salman.¹⁵ It was also reported that he had been seen at the royal court for the first time in a while. Whether he had resumed his role as adviser to the crown prince — or whether he had ever given it up — was not clear.¹⁶

Turki al-Sheikh came from the security services and was originally a bodyguard to the crown prince, who entrusted him with some particularly questionable assignments. It was Turki al-Sheikh who detained Muhammad Bin Naif in King Salman’s palace in Mecca in June 2017 and who, by making threats and withholding his medication, forced him to step down as crown prince in favour of Muhammad Bin Salman.¹⁷ In November 2017, Turki al-Sheikh and his men were responsible for what was at times the violent detention of hundreds of princes and busi-

nessmen at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh.¹⁸ At the time, he officially headed the General Sports Authority, which is responsible for promoting sport in the country. In December 2018, he was appointed head of the General Entertainment Authority, founded in May 2016, which was tasked with the rapid expansion of the entertainment sector.¹⁹ In the following years, Turki al-Sheikh focused primarily on this area, which was particularly important for the success of “Vision 2030”, and continued to play an active role in sports policy. Although he remained a public figure, he was no longer regarded as the crown prince’s enforcer.

The reorganisation of the circle of advisers

After Khashoggi’s murder, Bin Salman’s circle was reorganised. While Qahtani and Sheikh lost prominence, at least outwardly, lesser-known figures came to the fore who were not quite as close to Bin Salman and who had made a name for themselves since 2015 primarily as economic advisers. They included Muhammad Al al-Sheikh, who, at least during the first few years after 2015, was considered the crown prince’s most influential economic adviser. Al al-Sheikh is minister of state and a member of both the crown prince’s economic council and the board of directors of the sovereign wealth fund; however, he is likely to be even more important than his official positions suggest.²⁰ Among other things, he is said to have played a central role in the negotiations with the

¹³ Julian E. Barnes and David E. Sanger, “Saudi Crown Prince Is Held Responsible for Khashoggi Killing in U.S. Report”, *The New York Times* (online), 26 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/politics/jamal-khashoggi-killing-cia-report.html> (accessed 30 September 2025).

¹⁴ Hubbard, “The Rise and Fall of M.B.S.’s Digital Henchman” (see note 12).

¹⁵ “Pro-government Saudi Twitter Hails Embattled Royal Adviser”, *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 23 May 2021.

¹⁶ Martin Chulov, “Saudi Aide Accused of Directing Khashoggi Murder Edges Back to Power”, *The Guardian* (online), 8 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/08/saudi-aide-accused-of-directing-khashoggi-moves-closer-back-to-power> (accessed 9 July 2025).

¹⁷ Chopra, “The Godfather, Saudi-Style” (see note 1).

¹⁸ Gus Garcia-Roberts, “Saudi Arabia’s Tightening Grip on Sports”, *The Washington Post* (online), 9 November 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2023/11/09/saudi-arabia-wwe-sports/> (accessed 9 July 2025).

¹⁹ “Turki Al-Sheikh: From Cultural Activism to Head of Saudi Entertainment Authority”, *Al Arabiya English* (online), 27 December 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/life-style/entertainment/2018/12/27/Turki-al-Sheikh-new-Chairman-of-the-General-Authority-for-Entertainment> (accessed 9 July 2025).

²⁰ On his official functions, see “Mohammad Bin Abdulmalik Al al-Sheikh”, *Saudipedia*, <https://saudipedia.com/en/article/922/figures/officials/mohammad-bin-abdulmalik-al-al-sheikh> (accessed 9 July 2025). On his role shortly after King Salman’s accession to power in January 2015, see Karen Elliott House, *Profile of a Prince. Promise and Peril in Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030*, Senior Fellow Paper (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, April 2019), 13, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/ProfileofaPrince.pdf> (accessed 22 July 2025).

detained princes and businessmen at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in 2017.²¹ A better known figure than Al al-Sheikh is Yasir al-Rumayyan, director of the sovereign wealth fund and private banker to the crown prince.²²

Muhammad al-Jadaan and Muhammad al-Tuwaijiri are considered to be among the crown prince's most influential followers, too. Muhammad al-Jadaan has been minister of finance and a member of the board of directors of the sovereign wealth fund since November 2016. Muhammad al-Tuwaijiri, who served as minister of the economy for several years (2017–2020), is similarly a member of the fund's board and also serves as political adviser to the royal court with ministerial rank. Perhaps one notch below the individuals mentioned above is Ahmad al-Khateeb, who has served as minister of tourism since February 2020 but is also head of the state-owned defence contractor Saudi Arabian Military Industries and a member of the board of directors of the sovereign wealth fund.

There are other individuals from the bureaucracy who are believed to have close ties to the crown prince because they serve as external representatives of Saudi policy in important areas. They include Khalid al-Falih, who lost his post as energy minister in September 2019 but was appointed minister of investment in 2020. He is an expert on oil policy, having risen through the ranks of the state oil company Aramco before becoming its chief executive officer in 2008 and taking over the ministerial post in 2016.²³ However, his influence is likely to be significantly less than that of Bin Salman's close confidants. Finally, there are a number of princes who hold ministerial posts and are considered important figures in the government, such as Defence Minister Khalid Bin Salman Al Saud and Foreign Minister Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud.

21 Human Rights Watch, *The Man Who Bought the World. Rights Abuses Linked to Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and Its Chairman, Mohammed Bin Salman* (New York, November 2024), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2024/11/saudiarabia1124web.pdf (accessed 22 July 2025).

22 For more details about Yasir al-Rumayyan, see Jacob Whitehead, "Yasir Al-Rumayyan: A Life of Power, Privilege and Risk for Golf's Most Powerful Man", *The Athletic* (online), 29 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/4343985/2023/03/29/yasir-al-rumayyan-newcastle-profile/> (accessed 22 July 2025).

23 For an earlier overview of the most important personalities and their functions, see Omran and England, "Saudi Crown Prince's Inner Circle Vulnerable to Shake-up" (see note 7). See also Davidson, *From Sheikhs to Sultanism* (see note 9), 113f.

Internal purges

As early as 2015, Muhammad Bin Salman set about stabilising his rule by identifying several groups of people whom he considered a threat and who have since (and increasingly from summer 2017 onwards) become victims of intensified repression. First, there were the members of the ruling family – such as Muhammad Bin Naif – who, despite having been stripped of their power, found themselves in the sights of the security authorities once again. Second, there were the religious scholars, most of whom did not belong to the once powerful religious establishment but rather to a movement that performed no official functions and, precisely for this reason, were popular. Third, journalists, publicists and political activists of various orientations were targeted for persecution because they had openly criticised Bin Salman and his policies. All in all, Bin Salman's authoritarianism is much more radical and uncompromising than was the case in Saudi Arabia until 2015.

The ruling family

The removal from power of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Naif and National Guard Commander Mitab Bin Abdallah amounted to a coup d'état. It also demonstrated that Bin Salman regarded rival members of the ruling family as the greatest threat to his rule. This was underscored in March 2020, when several leading princes and their followers were caught in the crosshairs of the crown prince's campaign against potential rivals.

Once again, Muhammad Bin Naif was the main target of the measures. Having been under house arrest since his abdication as crown prince in June 2017, he reappeared in public for the first time at the end of 2019. But a few months later, in March 2020, he was detained, along with other family members. Around the same time, Ahmad Bin Abd al-Aziz (b. 1942) was arrested, too – a move that attracted significant public attention. As the younger full brother of King Salman, Prince Ahmad is a member of the "Sudairi Seven" and the uncle of Bin Naif and Bin Salman. From 1975 to 2012, he was deputy minister of the interior and then minister of the interior for several months until handing over that office to his nephew Muhammad Bin Naif in November 2012. At least from that time onwards, Ahmad numbered among the most prominent princes; and it is said that after 2015, some leading family members proposed

him as crown prince, instead of Bin Salman or Bin Naif. In 2018, Ahmad criticised the policies of the new Saudi leadership during a stay in London but returned to Saudi Arabia, despite warnings, because he reportedly felt safe owing to his good relationship with King Salman.²⁴ Neither Muhammad Bin Naif nor Ahmad Bin Abd al-Aziz has been seen since March 2020, so it can be assumed they are either under house arrest or still in custody.

At the time of their arrest in March 2020, the government is said to have accused the two princes of attempting a coup.²⁵ According to other sources, Bin Salman was angry with his cousin and uncle because they had spoken disapprovingly about him within the family circle.²⁶ It seems that the crown prince may have feared he was in serious danger, as is suggested by his having identified the Ministry of the Interior as the centre of resistance. Apart from the two princes, who had long (co-)led that department, the new measures affected at least one other person with a background in internal security – namely, Major General Saad al-Jabri. Until his dismissal by King Salman, Jabri had been number two at the Ministry of the Interior and Muhammad Bin Naif's closest associate. Although he managed to leave the kingdom just in time in spring 2017, he has been in the sights of the crown prince's henchmen ever since. In March 2020, Muhammad Bin Salman stepped up his campaign against potential rivals and had two of Jabri's adult children arrested so that he would be forced either to return to Saudi Arabia or to behave himself in exile.²⁷

²⁴ Summer Said, Justin Scheck and Warren Strobel, "Top Saudi Royal Family Members Detained", *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 March 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/top-saudi-royal-family-members-detained-11583531033> (accessed 22 July 2025).

²⁵ This was reported, for example, by sources in the *Wall Street Journal*. *Ibid.*

²⁶ David D. Kirkpatrick, Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Roundup of Saudi Royals Expands with Detention of a 4th Prince", *The New York Times*, 7 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/07/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-mohammed-bin-salman.html> (accessed 22 July 2025).

²⁷ Robert Fife and Steven Chase, "Saudi Arabia Presses Canada to End Refuge for Saad Aljabri, Ex-Intelligence Officer", *The Globe and Mail* (online), 6 July 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-saudis-press-canada-to-end-refuge-for-ex-intelligence-officer/> (accessed 22 July 2025).

Religious scholars and preachers

The second group targeted by Bin Salman's repression campaign comprised religious scholars and preachers, most notably Salman al-Auda, Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omari, who were considered conservative celebrities and had millions of followers on the internet. They fell victim to a wave of arrests in September 2017, which followed immediately after Muhammad Bin Naif's forced abdication. A broad swath of actual and potential dissidents were affected, including not only religious scholars but also intellectuals, academics and numerous human rights activists. However, the three mentioned above were the most prominent faces of this early wave of repression against religious elites.

Born in 1956, Salman al-Auda is by far the most important representative of an opposition movement known as *al-Sahwa al-Islamiya* (Islamic Revival), which emerged in the 1980s. The *Sahwa* combines the orientation towards politics and revolutionary ideology of factions of the Muslim Brotherhood with the social and cultural conservatism of the Saudi Wahhabis. After having spent five years in prison, Auda gave up his opposition activities in 1999 and became a prominent scholar and intellectual in and beyond Saudi Arabia, maintaining close ties with the international Muslim Brotherhood and finding an audience of millions on the internet. At the time of his arrest in September 2017, he had 14 million followers on Twitter. It was probably the combination of revolutionary ideas and the socio-cultural conservatism of the *Sahwa* that Bin Salman saw as a potential threat. Although Auda was no longer a revolutionary, neither the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on his thinking nor his links to the organisation could be overlooked.²⁸

At times, it appeared that the prominent opposition figure Salman al-Auda faced execution.

The Saudi leadership regarded the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to the internal security of the kingdom and a danger to the stability of the region; and in March 2014, the movement was added to its list of

²⁸ This was particularly evident from his membership of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, which is considered to be strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood or a group within it. At the time of his arrest, Auda was deputy secretary-general of the organisation.

terrorist organisations.²⁹ Its policy vis-à-vis the movement found expression in the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia (together with the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt), which began in June 2017 and was aimed, among other things, at putting a stop to the emirate's support for the Muslim Brotherhood. The reason for Auda's arrest in September 2017 was a tweet, published shortly after a telephone conversation between Bin Salman and Emir Tamim, in which the scholar had expressed the hope that the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Qatar would reconcile.³⁰ However, in the following years it became clear that there was more to the matter than simply Auda's sympathy for Qatar. In September 2018, Saudi prosecutors were reported to be seeking the death penalty for Auda; and in May 2019, news spread that the execution was planned for shortly after the coming Ramadan.³¹ Although, in the end, he was not executed, the scholar remained in custody. Indeed, Auda has continued to be detained since the conflict between Riyadh and Doha was resolved in January 2021, which suggests it was the government's aim all along to silence a potential conservative opposition figure from the Muslim Brotherhood milieu.

The two other main *Sahwa* representatives were less well known than Salman al-Auda. Awad al-Qarni (b. 1957) had similarly undergone formal training as a religious scholar and, from an early stage, was one of the most influential representatives of the *Sahwa* after Auda. Before his arrest, he had repeatedly called for an improvement in relations with Qatar via his Twitter account, which had more than 2 million followers³²; and he was also accused by the prosecution of having

publicly supported the Muslim Brotherhood.³³ The much younger Ali al-Omari (b. 1973) was the least well known of the three. He, too, had undergone religious training and was popular among young Saudis, who knew him as a liberal-conservative television preacher. Like Auda, he was a member of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (*al-Ittihad al-'Alami li-'Ulama al-Muslimin* or IUMS), which, based in Doha and Dublin, is considered a front organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood and was added to the Saudi list of terrorist organisations in August 2017.³⁴ The fact that the three scholars remained in custody even after the reconciliation with Qatar suggests that the Saudi leadership was less concerned about their close ties to Qatar than about the oppositional potential of the *Sahwa* and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Political activists, human rights defenders and opposition figures

Muhammad Bin Salman and his followers also set about curbing public debate in Saudi Arabia, which from around 2012 onwards had taken place mainly on Twitter. To this end, they ensured that social media content was closely monitored and all critical voices silenced. Many well-known activists fell victim to the large wave of arrests in September 2017, but even more prominent critics of the regime as well as human and women's rights activists were detained in the following years. As a deterrent for others, many were sentenced to long prison terms and, in some cases, to death. The aim was to destroy what had been a very lively culture of debate in the country.

Until 2017, there was no freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia; but compared with many other countries in the Middle East, there were some liberties. Before 2011/12, an intense discussion had taken place about the country's politics in private and semi-public spaces. Both the ruling family and religion were considered taboo subjects, and those who adhered to this rule were able to engage in debate without being persecuted. With the advent of social media, the pub-

²⁹ "Saudi Arabia Declares Muslim Brotherhood 'Terrorist Group'", BBC News (online), 7 March 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26487092> (accessed 22 July 2025).

³⁰ The English translation of the tweet was: "May God harmonise between their hearts for the good of their people." See Florence Dixon, "Son of Saudi Death Row Cleric Blasts 'Brutal Regime'", The New Arab (online), 5 September 2018, <https://www.newarab.com/news/son-saudi-death-row-cleric-blasts-brutal-regime> (accessed 22 July 2025).

³¹ This was reported by the pro-Qatari news agency *Middle East Eye*. See David Hearst, "Saudi Arabia to Execute Three Prominent Moderate Scholars After Ramadan", *Middle East Eye* (online), 21 May 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-saudi-arabia-execute-three-prominent-moderate-scholars-after-ramadan> (accessed 22 July 2025).

³² "Saudi Arabia 'Arrests Clerics in Crackdown on Dissent'", BBC News (online), 13 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41260543> (accessed 23 July 2025).

³³ Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "Saudi Prosecutors Seek Death Penalty for Academic over Social Media Use", *The Guardian* (online), 15 January 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/15/saudi-arabian-academic-on-death-row-for-using-twitter-and-whatsapp> (accessed 23 July 2025).

³⁴ On Omari, see Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and Giorgio Cafiero, "Fate of Saudi Religious Scholars on Death Row", *Lobe Log*, 14 June 2019, <https://lobelog.com/fate-of-saudi-religious-scholars-on-death-row/> (accessed 23 July 2025).

lic discourse expanded considerably. Many Saudis took advantage of the opportunity to debate anonymously on Twitter. Since the Arab Spring, no other country in the world has seen this medium being used by such a high proportion of the population as in Saudi Arabia. In particular, corruption within the ruling family and widespread mismanagement of the public sector became subjects of public criticism, while the issue of liberal and Islamist political prisoners was heavily discussed, too.³⁵

As early as 2014/15, Muhammad Bin Salman launched preparations for a campaign against Saudi Twitter users, having seemingly identified the medium as a threat. While Saud al-Qahtani and the Saudi Centre for Studies and Media Affairs headed by him appear to have been primarily responsible for conducting the campaign, it began with an espionage operation in the United States. Two employees of Twitter in Seattle gained access to more than 6,000 accounts belonging to Saudi Arabians and passed on information about the identities of the account holders to the Saudi authorities.³⁶ Whether the subsequent measures were based on the data leak at Twitter is not clear in every case, but the Saudi leadership received the names of several critics who had previously remained anonymous as well as other information about them. A veritable hunt got under way for Saudis who were using Twitter to criticise their own government.

The exact number of those affected by the campaign is unknown, but there are reports of at least six Saudi Twitter users having been arrested and convicted on the basis of information obtained in 2014/15 (and possibly unknown operations thereafter). The most prominent case was that of the satirist Abd al-Rahman al-Sadhan, who, in his day job, worked for the Saudi Red Crescent (the local equivalent of the Red Cross). But he also maintained a popular anonymous

³⁵ Robert F. Worth, "Twitter Gives Saudi Arabia a Revolution of Its Own", *The New York Times* (online), 20 October 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/world/middleeast/twitter-gives-saudi-arabia-a-revolution-of-its-own.html> (accessed 23 July 2025).

³⁶ Aruna Viswanatha and Betsy Morris, "Former Twitter Employees Charged with Spying for Saudi Arabia by Digging into the Accounts of Kingdom Critics", *The Washington Post* (online), 6 November 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/former-twitter-employees-charged-with-spying-for-saudi-arabia-by-digging-into-the-accounts-of-kingdom-critics/2019/11/06/2e9593da-00a0-11ea-8bab-0fc209e065a8_story.html (accessed 23 July 2025).

Twitter account (@sama7ti) on which he mocked the ruling family. He was arrested in March 2018 and disappeared until February 2020, when he was allowed to contact his family by telephone for the first time.³⁷ In April 2021, he was finally sentenced to 20 years in prison.³⁸

Repression was also directed against outspoken critics of the government or various aspects of its policymaking. Among them was the well-known economist and entrepreneur Issam al-Zamil, who had criticised the crown prince's plans to sell shares in the oil company Aramco. He was arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to 15 years in prison in October 2020.³⁹ The liberal writer and journalist Jamil Farsi suffered a similar fate. He, too, had been critical of the sale of the Aramco shares and had campaigned on behalf of political prisoners. Following his arrest in September 2017, he spent seven years in prison.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "Saudi Arabia Jails Alleged Satirist 'Identified in Twitter Infiltration'", *The Guardian* (online), 9 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/09/saudi-arabia-jails-alleged-satirist-identified-in-twitter-infiltration> (accessed 23 July 2025).

³⁹ "Prominent Saudi Economist Sentenced to 15 Years in Jail 'for Not Publishing MbS Interview': Report", *The New Arab* (online), 6 October 2020, <https://www.newarab.com/news/prominent-saudi-economist-sentenced-15-year-imprisonment-report> (accessed 23 July 2025).

⁴⁰ Sakina Fatima, "Saudi Arabia Releases Journalist Jamil Farsi after 7 Years in Prison", *The Siasat Daily* (online), 31 October 2024, <https://www.siasat.com/saudi-arabia-releases-journalist-jamil-farsi-after-7-years-in-prison-3123464/> (accessed 23 July 2025).

Reforms II: Society and culture

The crown prince's political and economic reforms have been accompanied by radical social changes that have strengthened his position and boosted his popularity. First and foremost, Bin Salman pushed back against the influence of the Wahhabi religious scholars, which had remained strong until 2015, thereby paving the way for his modernisation course. Instead of seeking legitimacy from the religious elites, he promoted Saudi nationalism, at the core of which was to be found the ruling family. The formerly powerful standing of the scholars ran counter to his authoritarian self-image, according to which no parallel centres of power are to be tolerated. In addition, he appears to have reached the conclusion that the tight restrictions on public life were an obstacle to growth, as they prevented women from joining the workforce in large numbers. Moreover, the restrictions had to be relaxed in order to lure more qualified foreign personnel to the country, attract investment and promote tourism. Not least, it was the emancipation of women in the kingdom that caused a stir among the population.

“Moderate Islam”

In an interview given to the US news channel Fox News just two years after his father had ascended the throne, Muhammad Bin Salman called for a “moderate, balanced Islam that is open to the world, all religions, all traditions and all peoples”.⁴¹ He elaborated on this idea in other interviews, citing 1979 as a turning point and explaining that his goal was to revive the more liberal Saudi Arabia of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, 1979 was a landmark year in Saudi history and the relationship between state and religion in the kingdom: it was when the ruling family initiated a conservative restoration that would shape Saudi

⁴¹ Quoted in “Crown Prince Says Saudis Want Return to Moderate Islam”, BBC News (online), 25 October 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41747476> (accessed 24 July 2025).

Arabia in the decades that followed. The most important trigger for the 1979 change of course was the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by several hundred Wahhabi fanatics protesting against the modernisation of the country. For two weeks, they held hundreds of pilgrims hostage before being driven out of the mosque. Hundreds of militants, security officers and pilgrims lost their lives during the siege of Mecca.⁴²

The Wahhabis are followers of a purist reform movement. From 1744/45 onwards, Wahhabism was the official interpretation of Islam in the Saudi state. Its most important representatives are the leading Wahhabi religious scholars, who from the 18th century until the reforms of Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman ensured that the Saudi state and society strictly adhered to Wahhabi rules. These included a strict ban on music and dance, the banishment of women from public life and the adoption of a hostile stance against the followers of other religions and Muslim schools of thought. Through the alliance they formed with the ruling family, the Wahhabi scholars exercised far-reaching influence over Saudi society, the judiciary and education, while endowing the rulers of Saudi Arabia with religious legitimacy.

The storming of the Grand Mosque was problematic not only because it challenged the religious legitimacy of the ruling family and its control over the sanctuary in Mecca. It was also because the occupiers were radical Wahhabis who wanted to return to the origins of their movement, rejected the modernisation of the country and enjoyed the sympathy of many leading religious scholars. Some of the mosque occupiers were students of Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz, who at the time was the most powerful cleric and later served as Grand Mufti (from 1993 to 1999) and who shared their unease about many aspects of the kingdom's policies. Nevertheless, the country's leading religious scholars decided to support the government and issued a legal ruling (*fatwa*) allowing the security forces to storm the com-

⁴² Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca. The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), *passim*.

pound, despite the ban on weapons in the Grand Mosque.

Following the recapture of the mosque, the ruling family sought to regain the support of the Wahhabis through a shift in its religious policy. Leading religious scholars were allowed to hugely expand their influence on Saudi public life. It was from this time onwards that they enforced stricter dress and behaviour codes. Women had to wear the traditional black robe (*abaya*) with headscarf (*hijab*) in public. All shops had to close during prayer times. Cinemas and music shops were banned. Public morality was monitored by a religious police, which had existed for decades but whose ranks were significantly strengthened after 1979. Its members patrolled the streets of Saudi cities, enforcing compliance with the stricter rules and even entering private homes if they suspected that illegal celebrations of any kind – from parties involving alcohol and/or drugs to Christian services of worship – were taking place there.

Nothing short of sensational are the numerous music festivals and large-scale parties that were unthinkable just a few years ago.

If, as he himself has stated, the crown prince wants to return to the pre-1979 era, this means that, above all, he wants to roll back the excesses of the conservative shift that came after 1979. In April 2016, Bin Salman banned the religious police from pursuing or arresting offenders and instructed them to report violations to the regular police instead.⁴³ Although the institution formally continued to exist, its squads, feared by many Saudis, disappeared from the streets of the kingdom. Subsequently, the crown prince lifted the ban on cinemas and music events. This led to a change in public life that has left many Saudis unable to recognise their own country. Nothing short of sensational are the numerous music festivals and large-scale parties that were unthinkable just a few years ago. These events have been taking place frequently since 2017, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors. Furthermore, daily life in Saudi Arabia has become much freer because the formerly strict gender segre-

gation is no longer monitored and, most important, women now enjoy far more freedoms. It is striking, however, that the religious police has still not been disbanded and its many offices and bases throughout the country remain in place, even if the force itself is no longer visible in public.⁴⁴ The reason for this could be that the leadership is trying to make clear to the Saudis that the new freedoms can be taken away at any time.

The religious police force was considered a powerful instrument of the Wahhabi religious scholars, who have always assumed its leadership. Thus, its removal from power suggests that the crown prince's primary concern was to curtail the influence of the religious establishment. But the calls for a "moderate Islam" and the criticism of the pro-conservative shift of 1979 were directed initially more at the *Sahwa* movement and the Muslim Brotherhood. In the interview with Fox News in which Bin Salman appealed for a "moderate, balanced Islam", he described the events after 1979 as a consequence of the spread of the *Sahwa* in Saudi Arabia and beyond.⁴⁵ While it is true that this movement grew rapidly following its emergence in the 1980s, at that time it consisted mainly of very young students and aspiring scholars who had no influence on Saudi religious policy. Rather, it was the much older, leading scholars of the Wahhabi establishment who were responsible for the hardening of the country's religious-political course.

Bin Salman apparently wanted to send the message that the *Sahwa* movement and the Muslim Brotherhood were the main religious-political enemies of the new Saudi Arabia. Shortly before the crown prince publicly spoke out in favour of a "moderate Islam" in October 2017, the most important representatives of the movement, Salman al-Auda and his colleagues, were arrested. But even though the Wahhabi scholars were not affected themselves, the arrests and the new rhetoric were likely intended as a warning to them. The message appears to have been clearly received, as there was no visible resistance to the disempowerment of the religious police or the measures against the *Sahwa al-Islamiya*. Even subsequent repressions that more directly targeted leading scholars did not provoke any protests.

44 Personal observations of the author, Riyadh, February 2023.

45 Cole M. Bunzel, "Refounding the Kingdom: Saudi Arabia from Islamism and Wahhabism to 'Moderate' Islam", *Middle Eastern Studies* (online), 2 April 2025, doi: 10.1080/00263206.2025.2482632.

43 Sewell Chan, "Saudi Arabia Moves to Curb Its Feared Religious Police", *The New York Times* (online), 15 April 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/16/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-moves-to-curb-its-feared-religious-police.html> (accessed 24 July 2025).

A new nationalism

For several years, the crown prince refrained from directly attacking the religious establishment. But right from the outset, he promoted a pronounced Saudi nationalism, which many observers have described as a “Saudi-first” policy and which stood in stark contrast with what until then had been the pan-Arabic and pan-Islamic focus of the Saudi self-image. This reorientation was accompanied by a history and memory policy that largely denied the Wahhabi scholars’ contribution to the creation and survival of the Saudi state and allowed the ruling Saud family to stand alone at the centre of state propaganda. Instead of building on religious legitimacy, Muhammad Bin Salman counted on the support of the young population, which has especially benefited from the reforms.

The new nationalism in Saudi Arabia has its roots in the reign of King Abdullah (2005–15). In 2005, Abdullah declared 23 September — the day on which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had been proclaimed in 1932 — to be a public holiday. While resistance from the scholars remained muted, it is well known that they reject all secular and Muslim holidays as un-Islamic, the exceptions being *Id al-Adha* and *Id al-Fitr*. It was not until 2017 that Bin Salman followed the trend, already established in the small Gulf states, of seeking to promote nationalism through the proclamation of new public holidays, the restoration of historical sites and the construction and renovation of museums. In the Saudi case, however, this policy was particularly impactful because, unlike in Qatar and the UAE, the Saudi ruling family had always relied on religious legitimacy, which it had gained through its alliance with the religious establishment. It was perhaps because of this centuries-old and still strong bond that Bin Salman hesitated for a long time before further whittling down the influence of the clergy beyond what had been achieved through the disempowerment of the religious police in 2016.

The first indication that Bin Salman had more ambitious goals came with the announcement that he had decided to develop the Nabataean ruins of al-Ula into the country’s main tourist destination. The site and its surroundings are famous for more than 100 Nabataean tombs that were built at around the same time as those in the world-famous Jordanian city of Petra and are very similar in design. The crown prince’s decision was far-reaching and highly controversial because, although it had long been known that the ruins existed, many Saudis frowned upon the idea of

visiting them as the religious establishment had described the tombs as pagan remnants of the pre-Islamic era and had prohibited visits. Bin Salman overrode the reservations of the country’s religious elite. In a ceremony full of pomp in February 2019, he laid the foundation stone for the project, called the “al-Ula Vision”, and had the site developed as a tourist destination.⁴⁶ The Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia saw this as an unprecedented breach of taboo; however, there was no open resistance. That calm prevailed was perhaps due primarily to the fear of consequences.

Three years later, the crown prince took another step that sent shockwaves through the religious establishment: he introduced “Foundation Day” (*Yaum at-Ta’sis*) as another public holiday, which was celebrated for the first time on 22 February 2022. The Saudi leadership claimed that the first Saudi state had been established as early as 1727, when the founder of the dynasty, Muhammad Ibn Saud (who reigned from 1727 to 1765), assumed power in the town of Dir’iya, the old capital of Saudi Arabia. This contradicted the narrative that had been widespread in the country until then — namely, that the first Saudi state was not established until 1744/5, when the alliance between Muhammad Ibn Saud and the religious scholar Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi movement, was forged.⁴⁷ The crown prince apparently wanted to elevate the role of his own family in Saudi history and assign a subordinate position to that of the Wahhabi scholars, many of whom to this day are descended directly from Ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

Bin Salman was also keen to credibly demonstrate how he himself is very much part of the Saud dynasty tradition. He achieved this primarily by emphasising his connection to Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, his grandfather and the founder of the third Saudi state, who ruled the country for more than half a century until his death in 1953. Huge billboards in public places, government buildings and hotels across the country displayed the portrait of the grandfather alongside those of his son and grandson — King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman. At the same time, the government propaganda sought to highlight the similarities between grandfather and grandson, which, viewed objectively, were rather limited. By

⁴⁶ Mo Gannon and Noor Nugali, “Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Launches Mega Tourism Projects in Ancient Area of Al-Ula”, *Arab News* (online), 10 February 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1449911/saudi-arabia> (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁴⁷ Bunzel, “Refounding the Kingdom” (see note 45).

drawing parallels with the powerful Ibn Saud, the new Saudi leadership sought both to underscore continuity and the central position of the Saudi dynasty and to ideologically reinforce its claim to power.⁴⁸

The crown prince's efforts to promote a new nationalism and the intensified suppression of dissenting opinions had an immediate effect on the public debate in the kingdom, which became significantly more uniform and nationalist. This was evident, for example, from the numerous comments on Joe Biden's visit to Riyadh in July 2022. Before his election as US president in November 2020, Biden had described Saudi Arabia as a "pariah state" in the wake of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. However, when the price of oil and the rate of inflation in the US rose after the start of the Russian war against Ukraine in 2022, he went to Riyadh to persuade Bin Salman to ramp up Saudi oil production. Many Saudis, including liberal ones, remembered Biden's earlier remark about their country and demanded on social media that the US president leave empty-handed. For his part, the crown prince proved uncompromising and, together with Russia, decided in October 2022 to cut production by 2 million barrels per day.⁴⁹

The new nationalism in Saudi political culture has also manifested itself in a new, at times excessive self-confidence. Bin Salman, who has always been prone to grand statements when it comes to Saudi Arabia's position in the world, seems to have become a role model for many Saudis. Since he commented at an investment forum in Riyadh in October 2018 that "the Middle East is the new Europe",⁵⁰ similar statements have been increasingly heard from Saudi officials and citizens who object to interference in the country's internal affairs. In 2024, for example, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* quoted a Saudi banker as saying about the West: "You still think you are the centre of the world.

48 Eman Alhussein, *Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2019), 7, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/saudi_first_how_hyper_nationalism_is_transforming_saudi_arabia.pdf (accessed 24 July 2025).

49 Hanna Ziady, "OPEC Announces the Biggest Cut to Oil Production since the Start of the Pandemic", *CNN Business* (online), 5 October 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/05/energy/opec-production-cuts> (accessed 24 July 2025).

50 "Saudi Crown Prince: the New Europe Is the Middle East, Even Qatar", *Al Arabiya English* (YouTube), 24 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sE9xCDfuuU> (accessed 24 July 2025).

But that is no longer the case."⁵¹ As the interview revolved around Saudi Arabia, the banker was clearly implying that the kingdom's importance was growing and the country itself was becoming a new such centre. These and similar statements reflect a change in Saudi Arabia's national self-image – a change that is rooted in the crown prince's reforms.

In the spring of 2021, Bin Salman took another step to further limit the influence of the once powerful religious scholars. In an interview with the state television channel *Al-Saudiya*, he announced a revolutionary change in the kingdom's Islamic law. The focus here was on the *ahadith* (singular: *hadith*), i.e., the reports of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, which, collectively, are referred to as the *Sunna* and, together with the Koran, constitute the most important source of Sunni Islamic law. For Wahhabi scholars, the science of the *hadith* is fundamental because they believe that, based on this source, it is possible to reconstruct in detail how the Prophet and the first generations of Muslims lived and what they believed (the Wahhabi scholars themselves seek to think and act in accordance with the example set by the Prophet and the early Muslims). And this was the underlying reason for the restriction of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, the obligation to pray in community and the prohibition of music and dance.

In his 2021 interview, the crown prince announced that he had commissioned a review of tens of thousands of *hadiths* to establish their authenticity. The aim was to select a small number of texts deemed authentic (probably in the hundreds) that would remain the basis for Islamic law in Saudi Arabia in the future. Tens of thousands of other texts would be discarded.⁵² As logical as such a step might seem –

51 Daniel Böhm, "Gaza-Krieg und Saudi-Arabien: ein Land, wie geschaffen von künstlicher Intelligenz", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 19 June 2024, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/saudi-arabien-und-der-gaza-krieg-ein-land-wie-erschaffen-von-einer-kuenstlichen-intelligenz-1.1829918> (accessed 28 July 2025).

52 For a summary of the interview, see Kamel Abderrahmani, "Mohammed Bin Salman Attempts to Reform Islam", *PIME Asia News* (online), 8 May 2021, https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Mohammed-Bin-Salman-attempts-to-reform-Islam-53085.html#_edn1 (accessed 24 July 2025). The original can be found here: "A meeting with Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman with the television station *Al Saudiya* on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the launch of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030" (Arabic), *Saudi Broadcasting Authority* (YouTube), 28 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eriiLN1XIa0>.

because most of the reports were written and compiled long after the Prophet's death and inevitably contain more fiction than fact – the crown prince's plan was revolutionary. On the one hand, Bin Salman challenged the scholars' monopoly on the interpretation of religious texts, to which they had laid claim for almost three centuries and which the Saudi rulers had never questioned in principle. On the other hand, the proposed radical reduction in the number of binding texts threatened to exclude numerous documents that are fundamental to Wahhabism, leading to a comprehensive reform and further secularisation of the law in Saudi Arabia.

It is, above all, young people and women who tend to react euphorically to social liberalisation.

In the years that followed, Bin Salman repeated his reform intentions to the English-language media. In an interview given in April 2022 he pointed out that the selection of hadiths would take some time and mentioned a deadline of about two years.⁵³ That deadline has long since passed, and no compilation has been forthcoming; thus, an assessment is not yet possible. But it is clear that simply by planning to reform Islamic law (and taking other steps against Wahhabi influence), Bin Salman relinquished a substantial part of the legitimacy that his predecessors had enjoyed through the support of the clergy. It is not known what exactly prompted the crown prince to take this course of action. However, it is likely that he considers social and cultural liberalisation to be a prerequisite for the success of his economic reforms and thus for the long-term survival of the kingdom, as well as that of the ruling family. And he is certain to have noticed the high level of support both for his reforms and for himself personally among the kingdom's young population. Indeed, it is, above all, young people and women who tend to react euphorically to social liberalisation. While many are aware that the process is being accompanied by tighter repression and surveillance, they consider this an acceptable price to pay for so many completely unacceptable restrictions on their freedom having been removed.⁵⁴

⁵³ Graeme Wood, "Absolute Power", *The Atlantic*, (April 2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/> (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁵⁴ Interviews conducted by the author, Riyadh, February 2023.

Improving the status of women

An important cornerstone of the crown prince's reforms is the improvement of women's status in Saudi society. Far-reaching changes were announced in the "Vision 2030" economic reform programme of 2016, which proposed the creation of a modern society in which women would be allowed to drive cars and take up employment without the permission of a male relative. The fact that the issue was already mentioned in this document suggested that Muhammad Bin Salman's primary concern was that women be mobilised as part of the workforce and thereby contribute to a new dynamic in the Saudi economy. But like many younger Saudis, the crown prince may simply have considered the widespread discrimination against women to be an anachronism that needed to be eliminated. Or perhaps he was driven by populist motives and was seeking as many supporters as possible for his reforms, which he knew would make him many enemies among the conservatives.

In fact, Muhammad Bin Salman's initial focus was to allow women to drive. In September 2017, the Saudi leadership announced the driving ban would be lifted at the end of June 2018. Many Saudi women enthusiastically took up the offer when it entered into force. The decision to lift the driving ban was a shrewd one, as no other restriction had caused as much outrage and incomprehension worldwide in recent decades. Consequently, it generated a lot of positive press. But the crown prince made it clear in interviews given shortly after the lifting of the ban that he had more than just PR in mind: there could be further improvements in the legal status of women, he hinted. Initially, however, only minor changes were evident, such as the relaxation of dress codes. From this time onwards, Saudi women were no longer obliged to wear a headscarf (*hijab*) and long black coat (*abaya*), although many continue to dress this way today. New freedoms also emerged for women in sport. Among other things, there was a veritable rush to join the girls' and women's football clubs that were founded throughout the country.

At the same time, Bin Salman made it clear from the outset that these were favours granted from above and not concessions won through decades of activism by Saudi women. In May 2018, shortly before the driving ban was lifted, he ordered the arrest of nearly a dozen female activists who had been demanding this very step for years. In this way, he sent a signal that civil society actors would not be allowed to try

to take the credit for successful measures such as the lifting of the ban. What is more, the pro-government media reported that those arrested were accused of “treason” — the language of the now typical nationalist discourse — and having been in contact with unnamed foreign forces with a view to undermining the security and stability of the kingdom.⁵⁵

Among those arrested was the women’s rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul, who in 2014 had attempted to enter Saudi Arabia from the UAE while behind the wheel of a car.⁵⁶ She was sentenced to more than 70 days in prison for committing that offence and quickly became internationally known. Moreover, in the months following the September 2017 announcement of the lifting of the driving ban, she repeatedly called in public for all remaining restrictions on women to be removed. This may well have been the reason why she was rearrested in 2018, along with the other women detained at that time.⁵⁷ An indication of just how serious the government took her was the fact that she was abducted from the UAE shortly before her rearrest in 2018, returned to Saudi Arabia and sentenced to six years’ imprisonment. Hathloul remained in prison until February 2021 and was subsequently banned from travelling.⁵⁸

It seems a large number of women have simply claimed many liberties for themselves, regardless of the legal situation.

But what most women wanted to see, in particular, was the abolition of the “guardianship system” and thus the obligation to obtain the permission of a male guardian for every single decision in their lives. Depending on the family situation, this could be the father, the husband, the son or even a brother. For example, consent had to be obtained for travel within the country and abroad, for taking up a course of study or training, for choosing a career, for entering

into marriage and even for opening a bank account or buying a car. The Civil Status Act of 2022 retained some restrictions, most notably that marriage must be approved by a guardian.⁵⁹ However, permission has not been required for travel for several years now.⁶⁰ It seems a large number of women have simply claimed many civil liberties for themselves, regardless of the legal situation. Saudis report that today, women are separating from or divorcing their husbands much more frequently than in the past and are living alone for the first time.⁶¹

The new freedoms enjoyed by women in professional life were remarkable, too. Some women appeared in top jobs — a development that was hailed particularly loudly and repeatedly in the state propaganda. More striking, however, was that women suddenly began working in the catering industry, which had previously been out of the question owing to the inevitable contact with men not related to them. Indeed, there seems to be hardly any professions left in which women are not allowed to work — the only known exception being military combat.⁶² “Vision 2030” set a target of increasing the proportion of women in the workforce from around 20 to 30 per cent. By 2025, this figure had already reached 36 per cent.⁶³

⁵⁵ Alhussein, *Saudi First: How Hyper-nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia* (see note 48), 7.

⁵⁶ Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (New York: Crown, 2021), 230.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 231.

⁵⁸ “Drei Aktivist:innen — drei Schicksale”, *Amnesty – Magazin der Menschenrechte*, (September 2024), <https://www.amnesty.ch/de/ueber-amnesty/publikationen/magazin-amnesty/2024-3/drei-aktivist-innen-drei-schicksale#> (accessed 24 July 2025). Hathloul’s family reported that Loujain was abused, tortured and threatened with death while in custody.

⁵⁹ Megan K. Stack, “The West Is Kidding Itself about Women’s Freedom in Saudi Arabia”, *The New York Times* (online), 19 August 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/19/opinion/saudi-arabia-women-rights.html> (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁶⁰ Interview conducted by the author, Riyadh, February 2023.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Karen Elliott House, *Saudi First. Kingdom Pursues Independent Path* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, July 2023), 19, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/pantheon_files/files/publication/Paper_SaudiFirst_v7.pdf (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁶³ “Saudi Society Has Changed Drastically. Can the Economy Change, Too?”, *The Economist*, (online), 8 May 2025, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2025/05/08/saudi-society-has-changed-drastically-can-the-economy-change-too> (accessed 24 July 2025). Another source mentions a 37 per cent share having been reached as early as 2022; see House, *Saudi First. Kingdom Pursues Independent Path* (see note 62), 17.

Reforms III: Economy

Economic reforms were launched in 2016 under “Vision 2030”, the reform programme aimed at diversifying the Saudi economy. During the years that followed, the Saudi sovereign wealth fund emerged as the most important instrument of economic policy; and it continues to enjoy that status today. According to its own figures, the fund now has deposits of more than US\$900 billion. On the one hand, it is intended to make strategic investments in urban development megaprojects, tourism and transport infrastructure. On the other hand, its purpose is to build up new industries – for example, in the areas of sports and entertainment. Overall, the aim is to create alternatives to oil and for the post-oil era and to stimulate the private sector. At the same time, the fund is being expanded into an instrument of power for the crown prince. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the reforms are having limited success only. Despite the economic upturn, Saudi Arabia remains dependent on its oil revenues.

“Vision 2030” and diversification away from oil

The economic reforms got under way before the intensification of the repressions, as the crown prince assumed control over economic and financial policy shortly after his father had ascended the throne. His “Vision 2030” reform programme was presented to the wider public on 25 April 2016.⁶⁴ It aims to strengthen the private sector, create jobs for a rapidly growing population and prepare the Saudi economy for the post-oil era through what at times are gigantic investments in urban development, transport and logistics, sports and entertainment, and tourism. From the outset, there was also a political dimension to the reforms: without successful economic diversification, the kingdom would face long-term instability, which,

64 Saudi Vision 2030, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en> (accessed 24 July 2025).

among other things, could threaten the rule of the Saudi family.

The economic reform process was underpinned by the diagnosis that the Saudi economy was too dependent on oil and therefore vulnerable to crises on the global oil markets. Saudi Arabia is the world’s leading oil superpower, with the second-largest oil reserves after Venezuela and the second-highest production capacity (more than 12 million barrels per day) after the United States. However, this wealth has created a particularly high level of dependency that has repeatedly plunged the kingdom into crisis. The share of oil sales in government revenue has averaged more than 80 per cent over the long term; and in the five years before King Salman took office (2010–14), it even exceeded 90 per cent.⁶⁵ During the period of low oil prices between 1982 and 2002, the loss of revenue contributed to serious domestic political crises. When prices remained consistently high from 2003 to 2014, the economic and political situation in the kingdom stabilised. However, in 2015, its dependence on oil had severe consequences once again: when the price a barrel of oil fell to around US\$30, the Saudi budget deficit rose to almost US\$100 billion. As a result, the government was forced to cancel numerous public contracts, cut subsidies for fuel, water and electricity, and levy a value-added tax for the first time.⁶⁶ Despite these measures, the country continued to struggle with high deficits in 2016–17.⁶⁷

Another problem was high unemployment, especially among young Saudis, owing mainly to demographics. The population of the kingdom is growing by about 2 per cent annually, which is why hundreds of thousands of people enter the labour market every

65 Bassam Albassam, “Public Finance in Saudi Arabia: The Need for Reform”, *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 3 (2019), 35–44 (36).

66 Waldmann, “The \$2 Trillion Project to Get Saudi Arabia’s Economy Off Oil” (see note 4).

67 Stephan Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince. Economic Reforms and Power Consolidation in Saudi Arabia*, SWP Research Paper 8/2019 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2019), 7, doi: 10.18449/2019RP08.

year. The state is by far the most important employer in the country; but even during the period of high oil prices (until 2014), it was unable to provide enough jobs. Had the subsequent low oil prices persisted as long as those at the end of the last century (1982 – 2002), there would have almost certainly been unrest in Saudi Arabia. That scenario was averted as oil prices rose to an annual average of more than US\$50 between 2017 and 2019 and (following a very weak 2020, when a barrel cost just under US\$40) to more than US\$70 from 2022 until the early autumn of 2025. However, the end of the oil era had been foreseeable at the beginning of Bin Salman's reign.⁶⁸ Anyone with good foresight would have known back then that oil could lose its paramount importance as an energy source within a matter of decades. And if or when that happened, Saudi Arabia would no longer come anywhere close to being able to finance its expenditures in the absence of fundamental economic reforms.

Bin Salman's announcement that he wanted to partly privatise the state-owned oil company Aramco caused a stir in the country.

The reforms of “Vision 2030” were intended to address these issues. In spring 2016, the crown prince declared that Saudi Arabia no longer wanted to depend on oil exports in the future. Instead, the state would promote the private sector, in particular, with the aim of increasing its share of gross domestic product (GDP) from 40 per cent in 2016 to 60 per cent in 2030. In addition, the value of non-oil exports was to grow from 16 to 50 per cent of total exports and that of foreign investment from 3.8 to 5.7 per cent of GDP.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the education system was to be restructured to prepare young Saudis for working life in a modern economy. It was estimated that as a result, the official rate of unemployment would fall from just under 12 per cent to 7 per cent.⁷⁰

At the same time, Bin Salman's announcement that he wanted to partly privatise the oil company Aramco caused a stir in the country. A state-owned

enterprise since the early 1980s, Aramco has at times been the most valuable company in the world over the past decade. In 2018, the crown prince announced the sale of up to 5 per cent of its shares. The expected proceeds of more than US\$100 billion were to go into a sovereign wealth fund. Half of the funds were to be invested abroad to generate dividends, while the other half was to be used for the country's industrial restructuring and to promote the private sector.⁷¹

From the design of the plan, it was clear just how closely Saudi Arabia was following the example of the United Arab Emirates in implementing economic reform. The UAE has several large sovereign wealth funds; and by mobilising the bulk of its oil revenues, it has not only made possible its economic success but also strengthened the control of the ruling families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. For decades, the Emirates (especially Dubai) have been striving to become hubs for regional and international trade and for transport infrastructure, as well as lucrative markets for international capital. However, it is debatable whether the UAE economy would be able to survive without the high revenues from resource exports. A warning shot was fired during the financial and economic crisis of 2008/09, when the Emirate of Dubai was saved from bankruptcy only because of a US\$20 billion bailout from Abu Dhabi.⁷² And even if Abu Dhabi and Dubai are considered successful models, it is unclear whether a similar concept can work in Saudi Arabia. With more than 37 million inhabitants, including around 27 million citizens, the kingdom has a much larger population than the UAE (10 million inhabitants, of which 1 – 1.5 million are citizens). Its per capita oil reserves and revenues are therefore significantly lower than those of the UAE.

The PIF sovereign wealth fund

The Public Investment Fund (PIF) became the most important instrument of the crown prince's reform policy. In resource-rich countries, sovereign wealth funds are a popular means of cushioning fluctuations in the prices of raw materials – mostly oil and gas –

68 For oil price figures for the period 2015 – 25, see Macrotrends, “WTI Crude Oil Prices – 10 Year Daily Chart”, <https://www.macrotrends.net/2516/wti-crude-oil-prices-10-year-daily-chart> (accessed 24 July 2025).

69 Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince* (see note 67), 8.

70 Ibid.

71 Waldmann, “The \$2 Trillion Project to Get Saudi Arabia's Economy Off Oil” (see note 4).

72 Guido Steinberg, *Regional Power United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi Is No Longer Saudi Arabia's Junior Partner*, SWP Research Paper 10/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2020), 9f., doi: 10.18449/2020RP10.

and ensuring that funds will remain available once production declines or is over. To this end, the state allocates part of the revenues from resource sales to the funds, which invest and manage that money as profitably as possible. The largest sovereign wealth fund in 2025 was that of Norway, with around US\$1.7 trillion in deposits, followed by the China Investment Corporation (US\$1.3 trillion) and SAFE Investment Company (just under US\$1.1 trillion) of China. The sovereign wealth funds of Abu Dhabi and Kuwait (each just over US\$1 trillion) ranked fourth and fifth, with Saudi Arabia's PIF in sixth place.⁷³

Although the Saudi sovereign wealth fund was established in 1971, it was not until the launch of "Vision 2030" that it became significant for Saudi economic policy. That significance was reflected in the rapidly increasing amount of funds being managed: between 2016 and 2019, they grew to more US\$300 billion and by the end of 2024 had reached US\$925 billion.⁷⁴ However, the initial rapid growth was not due to the sale of Aramco shares. In 2018, the planned IPO was temporarily halted, reportedly owing to resistance within the company and among parts of the ruling family and the government.⁷⁵ But the main reasons for halting the IPO at that time were probably the transparency obligation associated with a public offering and disagreements over the value of the company (Bin Salman assumed US\$2 trillion, while international banks spoke of US\$1.1–1.7 trillion).⁷⁶

73 Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute, "Top 100 Largest Sovereign Wealth Fund Rankings by Total Assets", <https://www.swfinstitute.org/fund-rankings/sovereign-wealth-fund> (accessed 24 July 2025). The picture is slightly distorted by the fact that there are also other, somewhat smaller funds in the Emirates.

74 For the 2019 figures, see Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince* (see note 67), 5; for the end-2024 figures, see, e.g., "Saudi's PIF to Anchor New Gulf-focused Funds from Goldman Sachs", *Reuters* (online), 3 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/saudis-pif-anchor-new-gulf-focused-funds-goldman-sachs-2025-03-03/> (accessed 24 July 2025).

75 Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince* (see note 67), 14; "Exclusive – Saudi King Tipped the Scale against Aramco IPO Plans", *Reuters* (online), 27 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk/exclusive-saudi-king-tipped-the-scale-against-aramco-ipo-plans-idUSKCN1LC1N5/> (accessed 24 July 2025).

76 Samantha Gross, *The Saudi Aramco IPO Breaks Records, But Falls Short of Expectations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 11 December 2019), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-saudi-aramco-ipos-breaks-records-but-falls-short-of-expectations/>.

Instead, the crown prince used other means to fill the fund with capital. Aramco was instructed to buy the chemical and metals group Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), in which the sovereign wealth fund held a 70 per cent stake. That purchase cost the oil company just under US\$70 billion, and that money flowed into the fund in 2019.⁷⁷ At the same time, Bin Salman continued his efforts to sell Aramco shares for the benefit of the sovereign wealth fund but had to scale back his ambitions. In 2019, the Saudi state offered shares representing just less than 2 per cent of the oil company on the Saudi capital market (rather than internationally, which would have meant much stricter transparency requirements), achieving a total price of around US\$26 billion.⁷⁸ In 2022–23, the kingdom transferred 4 per cent of Aramco shares, worth a total of approximately US\$160 billion, to the fund.⁷⁹ The sovereign wealth fund thereby became a direct recipient of money from oil exports for the first time. In addition, other financing models were used. For example, capital transfers by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA) played an important role. There were also rumours that private assets belonging to Saudi princes and businessmen had been transferred to the fund. According to the crown prince, around US\$100 billion was paid to the Saudi state during the anti-corruption campaign at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in 2017; and it was reported by some outlets that this money had benefited the fund.⁸⁰ Moreover, the sovereign wealth fund itself took out loans and was able to generate its own investment

[saudi-aramco-ipo-breaks-records-but-falls-short-of-expectations](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-04-16/saudi-aramco-ipo-breaks-records-but-falls-short-of-expectations) (accessed 24 July 2025).

77 Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince* (see note 67), 14.

78 Stanley Reed, "Saudi Aramco Sets Its Market Value at up to \$1.7 Trillion", *The New York Times*, 17 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/17/business/aramco-ipo.html> (accessed 24 July 2025).

79 Dana Khraiche and Matthew Martin, "Saudi Arabia Transfers Another 4% of Aramco to Wealth Fund", *Bloomberg*, 16 April 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-04-16/saudi-completes-4-aramco-stake-transfer-to-sovereign-fund-unit> (accessed 24 July 2025); Pesha Magid, Yousef Saba and Claudia Tanios, "Saudi Arabia Doubles Sovereign Fund's Stake in Aramco", *Reuters* (online), 7 March 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/saudi-arabia-transfers-8-aramco-pif-portfolio-spa-reports-2024-03-07/> (accessed 24 July 2025).

80 See, e.g., Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince* (see note 67), 13.

returns over time, not least after having received the first dividends from its Aramco holdings.⁸¹

The PIF, which was closely integrated into the new economic policy power structures that emerged in 2015, has been completely controlled by Bin Salman for the past 10 years. This was made possible by removing the fund from the control of the Ministry of Finance and putting it under that of the newly established Council of Economic and Development Affairs. The crown prince chairs both the council and the board of directors of the sovereign wealth fund.⁸² Although several specialist ministers are represented on the two bodies – including those responsible for finance, the economy and investment – the decisive criterion for selection is their loyalty to Muhammad Bin Salman, not their affiliation with the government. Particularly close associates of the crown prince on the 10-member board of directors include Minister of State Muhammad Al al-Sheikh, Minister of Finance Muhammad al-Jadaan and Royal Court Adviser Muhammad al-Tuwaijiri.⁸³ However, the most important figure is the now widely known Yasir al-Rumayyan, who serves as the governor of the sovereign wealth fund and is thus responsible for its day-to-day running as second-in-command, after Bin Salman. Like so many members of the new power elite in Riyadh, Rumayyan owes his meteoric rise exclusively to the crown prince. Before King Abdullah's death in 2015, he was an investment banker with no political profile whatsoever; after the death of the sovereign, he was appointed by Bin Salman to the royal court, where he rose to become one of the crown prince's most important advisers within just a few months. But Rumayyan has had a much higher profile as governor of the sovereign wealth fund – a position he has held since September 2016. In addition, he has been a member of the board of directors of Aramco since August 2016 and was appointed its chairman in September 2019,⁸⁴ making him one of the leading figures in Saudi economic policy. Furthermore, he has become known to a wider public through his management roles at companies in which the sovereign wealth fund acquired shares. The acquisitions in

the area of sports have attracted a great deal of attention, especially the stake in the English traditional football club Newcastle United.

The Saudi sovereign wealth fund is not primarily a savings fund in which money is invested to build up reserves for hard times. Rather, it is a “stabilisation and development fund” that has three objectives: first, to offset the wide fluctuations in oil prices, which have occurred repeatedly in recent decades; second, to open up new economic sectors and sources of income; and third, to attract foreign companies and expertise to Saudi Arabia.⁸⁵ In the late 2010s, after the publication of “Vision 2030”, the PIF's activities focused, above all, on its role as a “growth engine” (Stephan Roll) for the Saudi economy. However, there are considerable doubts about the commitment to achieve the stated goal of the economic reform programme, which is to promote the private sector. Achieving that goal would require the sovereign wealth fund working towards the privatisation of the existing companies over which it has taken control and the new ones it has founded. The money spent would thus have been equivalent to start-up financing. But a decade after “Vision 2030” was published, there is still no evidence that the fund has withdrawn from newly established companies. In other words, no strengthening of the private sector has been observed.⁸⁶

**Through the sovereign wealth fund,
Bin Salman has control over
large sums of money that he can use
at his discretion.**

This suggests that the main role of the PIF is as much about centralising economic life under Bin Salman's control and securing his rule as it is about reforming the Saudi economy.⁸⁷ The sovereign wealth fund has created a structure parallel to that of the government, giving the crown prince sole authority over large sums of money that he can use at his discretion. Although the capital of the sovereign wealth

⁸⁵ Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince* (see note 67), 10.

⁸⁶ Vivian Nereim, “The Making of Saudi Inc. How MBS Has Presided over the Sovereign Wealth Fund's Oil-Powered Takeover”, *Bloomberg*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-07/making-saudi-inc-how-mbs-drove-the-sovereign-wealth-fund-s-oil-fueled-takeover> (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁸⁷ See, e.g., the detailed argument in Roll, *A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince* (see note 67), *passim*.

⁸¹ Ibid., 17.

⁸² Ibid., 10f.

⁸³ For a diagram showing the nine members of the board of directors in 2024 (alongside the crown prince), see Human Rights Watch, *The Man Who Bought the World* (see note 21).

⁸⁴ For details of his rise, see Whitehead, “Yasir Al-Rumayyan” (see note 22).

fund has so far been deployed mainly to implement the economic policy outlined in “Vision 2030”, this is a state-controlled and state-dominated reform process that not only has economic objectives but is also intended to strengthen the position of the crown prince.

Activities

The sovereign wealth fund has taken the initiative in developing new economic sectors in Saudi Arabia. Since 2016, it has focused on investments in urban development megaprojects, tourism and transport infrastructure, and the creation of industries that are new to the country, such as sports and entertainment.

Major urban development projects

Starting in 2016, the Saudi government launched a series of major urban development projects. Of these, Neom stands out and is seen as a symbol of the crown prince’s ambitions.⁸⁸ Officially, it is classified as a “giga project”. In 2025, there were five such projects, of which Neom is by far the most ambitious.

“Neom” is the name of a futuristic region and city on whose construction huge sums of money are being spent and which is a high priority for Bin Salman. It is a portmanteau that combines the Greek “neo” (for new) and the first letter (“m”) of the Arabic word for the future (*mustaqbal*). Bin Salman, who launched the project in October 2017, has repeatedly stated that it is the single-most important project of “Vision 2030”. Neom is to be built on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba in the province of Tabuk in the far northwest of the country. This region, which in the past was severely neglected by the central government in Riyadh, has only 1 million or so inhabitants. On an area roughly the size of Belgium, it is planned to build the individual components of Neom, which include the megacity called The Line, the mountain city and ski resort of Trojena and the industrial city (with port) of Oxagon.⁸⁹ Initial costs were estimated at US\$500 billion, but the total project is likely to be significantly more expensive – at US\$1 – 1.5 trillion.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Colin Foreman, “Funding Impacts Saudi Projects”, *MEED Business Review* 9, no. 9 (2024), 7.

⁸⁹ For an overview, see “NEOM: Made to Change”, <https://www.neom.com/en-us> (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁹⁰ Christian Hensen, “Wunderstadt ‘The Line’ in Schwierigkeiten: Saudis fahren Pläne offenbar zurück”, *Stern*

In January 2021, Bin Salman went on Saudi television to launch the sub-project The Line. Length and height, not width, are to inform the construction of this city: the plan is for a continuous, 170-kilometre-long mirrored structure that is 500 metres high and just 200 metres wide. In the long term, up to 9 million people are expected to live in The Line. High-speed trains will run underground and tunnels will supply the city, which is to be car-free and powered entirely by renewable energy.⁹¹ However, it is still unclear who will be interested in living in Neom. The region is a long way from the traditional population centres in the west, centre and east of the country.

Also unclear is the extent to which the crown prince’s vision will be realised. Construction work began just a few months after the initial launch in January 2021; however, what progress has been made is limited mainly to the least demanding parts of the project, such as the luxury resort on Sindalah Island, which was completed in 2024.⁹² It is, above all, the enormous costs of Neom that seem to have led to the ambitious plans being scaled back. Originally, housing was to be provided for 1.5 million people by 2030; that figure has since been reduced to fewer than 300,000. Moreover, just 2.4 of the total 170 kilometres of The Line are expected to be completed by the end of the decade.⁹³ There has been a reweighting of the many sub-projects of “Vision 2030” and Neom, with preference being given to those linked to fixed events such as Expo 2030 and the 2034 World Cup.⁹⁴

(online), 10 April 2024, <https://www.stern.de/digital/technik/wunderstadt--the-line--saudis-fahren-plaene-offenbar-zurueck-34614410.html> (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁹¹ Vivian Nereim, “MBS’s \$500 Billion Desert Dream Just Keeps Getting Weirder”, *Bloomberg*, 14 July 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2022-mbs-neom-saudi-arabia/> (accessed 24 July 2025).

⁹² Samer Al-Atrash, “Failed Beach Party Left Boss of Saudi Neom Project High and Dry”, *The Times* (online), 22 November 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/business-money/companies/article/failed-beach-party-left-boss-of-saudi-neom-project-high-and-dry-zhqtbsct> (accessed 25 July 2025).

⁹³ Zainab Fattah and Matthew Martin, “Saudis Scale Back Ambition for \$1.5 Trillion Desert Project Neom”, *Bloomberg*, 5 April 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-04-05/saudis-scale-back-ambition-for-1-5-trillion-desert-project-neom> (accessed 25 July 2025).

⁹⁴ Colin Foreman, “Riyadh Reins in Spending”, *MEED Business Review* 9, no. 6 (2024), 10 – 11 (10).

Critics complain about the high costs and poor planning of the urban development projects and cast doubt on their technical feasibility.

Overall, doubts have increased as to whether it will, in fact, be possible to complete the Neom project, as planned, by 2045. Supporters of the crown prince and his project maintain that Neom and The Line are bold, seriously planned projects and point out that Dubai – the model for Neom – was built from scratch in the desert, too. But recently they have acknowledged that Bin Salman's plans may not be realised in full. For their part, critics complain about the huge costs, poor planning and completely unrealistic ideas about which parts of The Line and Trojena are technically feasible.⁹⁵ Here the reference is to events such as the 2029 Asian Winter Games being held in Trojena, which seems absurd in a hot country like Saudi Arabia. In Riyadh, it is now an open secret that the Winter Games will not take place in Saudi Arabia at all or several years later than originally planned.⁹⁶ Moreover, according to recent reports, the construction of The Line might be about to grind to a halt.⁹⁷ But for the time being, work on most projects is continuing at full speed, especially those that are due to be completed by 2030 or 2034.

Tourism and air transport

A key objective of "Vision 2030" is to promote tourism in Saudi Arabia. In 2016, when the programme was launched, the target of 100 million foreign visitors by 2030 was set. Just a few years later, the figure quoted by Saudi officials was even higher. At the same time, the plan was announced to create 1 million new jobs over the same timeframe. Accordingly, three of the five official "giga projects" of "Vision 2030" are in the tourism sector. In addition, as mentioned above, the Nabataean ruins of al-Ula are being developed into the main tourist destination in the kingdom. To this and other ends, the expansion of

⁹⁵ Nereim, "MBS's \$500 Billion Desert Dream Just Keeps Getting Weirder" (see note 91).

⁹⁶ South Korea is usually mentioned as an alternative venue. Author's conversations, Riyadh, October 2025.

⁹⁷ Marco Dittmer, "Arbeiten an der Mega-Stadt 'The Line' vor dem Aus", *Bild* (online), 2 October 2025, <https://www.bild.de/news/ausland/arbeit-an-mega-stadt-mit-stadion-und-skigebiet-in-der-wueste-vor-dem-aus-68dba2cda429f108c5621ff7> (accessed 21 October 2025).

the transport infrastructure is in full swing. Among other things, a new King Salman International Airport is planned in Riyadh, along with a new flagship carrier, Riyadh Air, which is intended to become the largest in the region.

The two most important tourism projects of "Vision 2030" are "Diriyah Gate" and "Red Sea". The first is centred around the ruins of the old Saudi capital, Dir'iya (which was destroyed in 1818, whereupon Riyadh took its place). It foresees the construction of numerous hotels, a promenade and an opera house as well as the extensive restoration of the ruins. The estimated cost of the project was initially put at around US\$20 billion but has since risen to US\$63 billion.⁹⁸ The "Red Sea Global" project is located in the west of the country north of Jeddah and will comprise 50 hotels and more than 1,000 residential complexes at several dozen locations on an archipelago and on the mainland. Its estimated cost is almost US\$24 billion.⁹⁹ In September 2023, the Red Sea International Airport, which is part of the project, was opened.

Meanwhile, the town of al-Ula and its surroundings, located inland not far from Red Sea, are being developed into the country's most important tourist destination. In early 2019, the crown prince announced the construction of the first luxury hotel and the opening of a nature reserve in al-Ula.¹⁰⁰ Subsequently, work began on tourist infrastructure intended to turn the area into an international attraction. Some US\$15 billion has been earmarked for the project.¹⁰¹

Amid all the development and construction under way in the tourism sector, there is considerable doubt about the figures given by the Saudi government for expanding the sector. The target of 100 million visitors by 2030, announced in 2016, compares with the

⁹⁸ Neil Halligan, "Saudi Arabia Megaprojects 2024: From Neom to AlUla, 17 Developments Shaping Its Future", *The National* (online), 3 February 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2024/02/03/saudi-arabia-mega-projects-17-developments-set-to-shape-the-kingsdoms-future/> (accessed 25 July 2025).

⁹⁹ "Inside Saudi Arabia's Red Sea: Everything You Need to Know", *Arabian Business* (online), 7 December 2022, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/travel-hospitality/inside-saudi-arabias-red-sea-global-everything-you-need-to-know> (accessed 25 July 2025); Halligan, "Saudi Arabia Megaprojects 2024: From Neom to AlUla" (see note 98).

¹⁰⁰ Gannon and Nugali, "Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Launches Mega Tourism Projects" (see note 46).

¹⁰¹ Halligan, "Saudi Arabia Megaprojects 2024: From Neom to AlUla" (see note 98).

figure of just 17.5 million foreign visitors in 2019.¹⁰² That discrepancy has led many observers to question whether the government can come anywhere close to achieving its target. In interviews given in recent years, Bin Salman nevertheless raised the target to 150 million visitors.¹⁰³ In 2024, after the Covid pandemic had subsided, the number of visitors did at least rise to almost 30 million.¹⁰⁴

The government's main objective in expanding the tourism sector was to create jobs and diversify the economy (it was envisaged that the sector would eventually account for 10 per cent of GDP).¹⁰⁵ In fact, many jobs have been created in tourism and are often filled by young Saudis. However, unemployment remains particularly high in this population group. According to official figures, the "Vision 2030" target of a general unemployment rate of 7 per cent was achieved in 2024.¹⁰⁶ By contrast, the official jobless rate for young people is around 12 per cent, although most independent estimates put it at more than 20 per cent or even close to 30 per cent.¹⁰⁷

The expansion of transport infrastructure – primarily air transport – is an essential part of the country's tourism strategy. Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has been building several new airports as well as modernising and expanding a few existing ones. The largest such project is the new King Salman Inter-

national Airport, near the capital's old airport, King Khalid International. With a projected capacity of 120 million passengers in 2030, the new airport is set to become an internationally significant hub – in fact, one of the largest in the world.¹⁰⁸ The Saudi leadership has since said it expects 185 million passengers in 2050.¹⁰⁹ To meet the official targets, the new carrier Riyadh Air, founded in 2023, is to be based at the new airport. It is projected to become a global airline.¹¹⁰ In addition, several regional airports are being built or expanded to bring visitors to all parts of the kingdom, especially the northwest.

It is clear from the planned expansion of tourism and air transport in Saudi Arabia to what extent Dubai and Qatar served as blueprints for "Vision 2030". Dubai International and Hamad International airports are by far the most important Middle Eastern hubs for international air traffic, while Emirates and Qatar Airways are active and successful far beyond the region. With the construction of its new airport in the capital city and the establishment of Riyadh Air, Saudi Arabia is competing with the established airports and airlines in the Persian Gulf. While the outcome of this competition is uncertain, Saudi Arabia, with its current population of around 37 million and a significantly larger domestic market, has a distinct advantage over its smaller neighbours. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has a potentially very attractive tourist destination in al-Ula and around 12 million people visited the pilgrimage centres of Mecca and Medina in 2024. However, it remains questionable whether an international public is ready to discover the country as a tourist destination or stopover.

For several years, Saudi Arabia's ambitions have been underpinned by large-scale advertising campaigns designed to attract Western tourists. These activities will increase as soon as flights with an inter-

102 Eva Levesque, "Saudi Arabia Showcases Tourism Plans", *MEED Business Review* 8, no. 6 (2022), 34.

103 "Good Negotiations": Saudi Crown Prince Says 'Every Day' Is a Day Closer to Peace with Israel", *Fox News* (YouTube), 22 September 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_u8ghPr3HE; Miguel Hadchity, "Saudi Arabia's International Tourism Revenue Soars by 148%, Leading G20 Nations", *Arab News* (online), 27 April 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2598626/business-economy> (accessed 25 July 2025).

104 Colin Foreman, "Beaches and Luxury Drive Regional Tourism", *MEED Business Review* 10, no. 4 (2025), 18 – 19 (18).

105 Levesque, "Saudi Arabia Showcases Tourism Plans" (see note 102).

106 Mohammed Al-Kinani, "Saudi Arabia's Job Market Strengthens as Unemployment Falls to 7% in Q4 2024", *Arab News* (online), 27 March 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2595043/business-economy> (accessed 25 July 2025).

107 Estimates of youth unemployment vary widely. The World Bank put it at just under 30 per cent in 2021, but an article from 2023 estimated that youth unemployment would halve in 2022 to 16.8 per cent. John Bambridge, "Riyadh Prioritises Stability over Headline Growth", *MEED*, 28 September 2023, <https://www.meed.com/riyadh-prioritises-stability-over-headline-growth> (accessed 25 July 2025).

108 King Khalid Airport has a capacity of 25 million passengers per year. Giorgio Cafiero, "Saudi Arabia Eyes Aviation Expansion to Get In on Crucial Tourism Market", *Al Jazeera* (online), 31 July 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/31/saudi-arabia-eyes-aviation-expansion-to-get-in-on-crucial-tourism-market> (accessed 28 July 2025).

109 Levesque, "Saudi Arabia Showcases Tourism Plans" (see note 102).

110 Daniel Böhm, "Ein Aushängeschild für bin Salmans neuen Superstaat: Saudiarabien gründet eine neue Fluggesellschaft", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 22 June 2023, <https://www.nzz.ch/wirtschaft/luftkampf-ueber-arabien-saudi-arabien-gruendet-eine-neue-grossfluggesellschaft-ld.1743701> (accessed 28 July 2025).

nationally accepted airline and appropriate airports become available, along with a sufficient number of hotels and local transport options. The increasingly frequent major sporting events in the kingdom are often the subject of the campaigns. Of particular note are the 2029 Asian Winter Games, which – in the unlikely event that they do take place – would be closely watched because they are due to be held in Trojena and Neom and would thus offer a glimpse, at least, into the status of the construction projects under way there.

Entertainment and sports

The development of entertainment and sports industries is a central component of the crown prince's reforms. The aim is to shape the image of the kingdom projected abroad as open, modern and dynamic in order to attract investment and to stimulate interest in visiting the country as a tourist or using the new air transport infrastructure. At home, the growing range of entertainment options is intended to win over the many young Saudis to the crown prince's policies. However, the aim is also to create jobs and encourage Saudis to spend more money in their own country.

“Vision 2030” envisaged the rapid development of an entertainment industry. Since it was established in May 2016, the General Entertainment Authority has organised thousands of events.¹¹¹ From 2017 onwards the expansion of the sector took off in earnest. In early 2018, the then head of the authority, Ahmad al-Khateeb, announced that the kingdom would invest US\$64 billion in this area over the following decade.¹¹² An important milestone was the opening of the first cinemas in 2018. Other highlights have been music events ranging from large concerts by international stars such as Mariah Carey to raves in the desert and small-scale concerts by local bands. The “Soundstorm” festival, which has been held in Riyadh every year since 2019 (except in 2020 during the Covid pandemic in 2020), is a particular success,

attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors.¹¹³ “Riyadh Season” is the name given to a winter series of sports, music and dance events that have taken place in Riyadh annually since 2019, too.¹¹⁴ Even though most events seem harmless from a Western perspective, they were unthinkable until just a few years ago. In the early days of the reforms, there were still some restrictions on men and women attending events together, but that now seems to be a thing of the past. Since 2017, plans have been drawn up for numerous recreation and amusement parks. These include the enormous King Salman Park, which is to be built on a former air force base in Riyadh and will serve as a local recreation area for residents. There are also plans for a number of leisure parks, among which the Qiddiya giga project stands out. On an area of several hundred square kilometres southwest of Riyadh, huge amusement facilities, a golf course and a Formula 1 racetrack are to be built. Just under US\$10 billion has been allocated for this project.¹¹⁵

In sports, Saudi Arabia has followed the example of its neighbours, with Qatar, in particular, having set new standards as host of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Since the crown prince's rise to power, there has been a proliferation of major wrestling, boxing, Formula 1, tennis and golf events in which large sums of money have been invested. But football reigns supreme. The first step was the takeover in October 2021 of the English traditional club Newcastle United by the Saudi sovereign wealth fund. In December 2022, the Saudi club al-Nassr from Riyadh signed a contract with Portuguese world star Cristiano Ronaldo, which, according to press reports, was worth around €200 million. Finally, in June 2023, the fund announced that it would acquire 75 per cent of four teams in the Saudi Pro League – *al-Ahli*, *al-Ittihad*, *al-Hilal* and *al-Nassr*. The same year, the PIF was able to attract dozens of mostly older players from the top European leagues to the Saudi league. In the summer of 2023, Saudi clubs

¹¹¹ Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Arabia Lightens Up, Building Entertainment Industry from Scratch”, *The New York Times* (online), 17 March 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/17/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-entertainment-economy.html> (accessed 28 July 2025).

¹¹² “Saudi Arabia to Invest \$64 Billion in Entertainment Sector over Coming Decade”, *Arab News* (online), 22 February 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1251891/saudi-arabia> (accessed 28 July 2025).

¹¹³ House, *Saudi First. Kingdom Pursues Independent Path* (see note 62), 16.

¹¹⁴ Bandar al-Mosalam, “Riyadh Season Attracts 20 Million Visitors with 100% Qualitative Leap”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 11 March 2024, <https://english.awsat.com/business/4904441-riyadh-season-attracts-20-million-visitors-100-qualitative-leap> (accessed 28 July 2025).

¹¹⁵ Halligan, “Arabia Megaprojects 2024: From Neom to AlUla” (see note 98).

paid a total of almost US\$1 billion for new players.¹¹⁶ The Saudi league suddenly became more attractive and drew many enthusiastic visitors, albeit mainly from within the country.

The footballer purchases were also likely intended to draw attention to Saudi Arabia's bid to host the 2034 World Cup. The deadline for applications was 31 October 2023; and because Australia withdrew on that day and only countries from Asia and Oceania were eligible to apply, Saudi Arabia was the sole remaining candidate. In December 2024, the kingdom was officially confirmed as host. This was particularly surprising because Qatar, another Persian Gulf country, had hosted a World Cup just two years earlier. However, Saudi Arabia had the support of FIFA President Gianni Infantino, who used various tactics to ensure that the kingdom was awarded the contract.¹¹⁷ Planning for the tournament has now begun and is part of the country's infrastructure development programme. No fewer than 14 spectacular football stadiums are being built or expanded. They include the King Salman Stadium in Riyadh, which can accommodate 92,000 spectators and at which both the opening match and the final of the 2034 championship will be held.¹¹⁸

116 Edmund O'Sullivan, "Saudi Arabia's Football Vision Goes Global", *MEED Business Review* 8, no. 10 (2022), 43–44 (43).

117 For a detailed account of the process, see Tariq Panja, "Inside Man: How FIFA Guided the World Cup to Saudi Arabia", *The New York Times* (online), 15 November 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-fifa-world-cup.html> (accessed 28 July 2025).

118 Steve Luckings, "Saudi Arabia Unveils Plans for 92,000-Capacity King Salman Stadium to Stage 2034 World Cup Final", *The National* (online), 19 November 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/sport/football/2024/11/19/saudi-arabia-king-salman-stadium-world-cup/> (accessed 28 July 2025).

Conclusions and Recommendations for German Policy

The Saudi Arabian reform programme is so revolutionary as to justify speaking of a “fourth Saudi state”. Whether Muhammad Bin Salman will succeed in maintaining and consolidating his power through authoritarian reforms or whether he will be replaced by a rival from within or outside the ruling family remains to be seen. But for the time being, it looks as if the Crown Prince could remain in power in the long term, which is something that German and European policymakers will have to accept. Berlin and Brussels can try to influence Riyadh when it comes to the worst excesses of the new authoritarianism. They can also call on the crown prince to curb the repression of dissidents and the growing number of executions. However, they should not expect Bin Salman to meet such requests.

At the same time, Germany has a strong pragmatic interest in ensuring that the political, social and economic reforms in the kingdom are successful. This is the case with regard to the political reforms as a continuation of the situation prior to 2015/17 would have paralysed decision-making in the kingdom and most likely led to conflicts over the succession to the throne between various pretenders and factions within the ruling family. On the other hand, the extreme centralisation of power in the person of Bin Salman carries the risk that his sudden absence would trigger the collapse of Saudi Arabia’s entire political system. German policy should prepare for such a scenario as far as possible.

Germany and Europe’s interest in Muhammad Bin Salman’s social reforms is even greater because Wahhabism was one of the main reasons for the kingdom’s social backwardness, which manifested itself, among other things, in the marginalisation of Saudi women. The improved status of women under the crown prince’s reforms makes Saudi Arabia a much easier partner to deal with than it was in the past, when relations were repeatedly strained by this issue. In addition, Wahhabism was a major reason

why the kingdom’s internal security was threatened time and again by Islamist terrorists. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia itself was an exporter of thousands of terrorists, who, from the 1980s onwards, organised themselves into groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) in many countries of the Islamic world. The decline in the influence of the Wahhabis weakens one of the main pillars of Islamist terrorism.

Economically, too, Saudi Arabia would have continued to stagnate without the crown prince’s reforms and would have run the risk of losing revenues and economic power in the coming years and decades as the importance of oil for the global economy wanes. Thus, Germany and Europe also have an interest in the success of the Saudi economic reforms — at least those that do not merely serve the crown prince’s desire to consolidate his grip on power and gain prestige. Saudi Arabia is simultaneously an oil superpower, a leading power in the Arab world and an important state in the Muslim world. Even if Berlin and Brussels have no influence on the kingdom’s economic policy, the new dynamic in Saudi Arabia indicates that, overall, the country’s importance is increasing. This means that there is no reasonable alternative to striving for the closest possible political, social and economic relations.

Abbreviations

CEO	Chief executive officer
IS	Islamic State
IUMS	International Union of Muslim Scholars
PIF	Public Investment Fund
PR	Public relations
SABIC	Saudi Basic Industries Corporation
SAMA	Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority
UAE	United Arab Emirates

