ROCZNIK ORIENTALISTYCZNY, T. LXXIV, Z. 2, 2021, (s. 82–97)
DOI 10.24425/ro.2021.139547

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Beyond tradition and modernity: challenges of transformation in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to analyze the political trajectory of changes in Saudi Arabia during the reign of Prince Muhammad Ibn Salman and the effects it has on the traditional and conservative values of the Saudi kingdom. The point of reference for the prince's reform policy is the Vision 2030 project of changes announced in 2016, which aims to maintain a balance between modernization, including economic reforms, privatization and cultural initiatives, on the one hand, and Islam and political authoritarianism on the other. The structure of my article is built around the hypothesis that assumes that the reformist policy of Muhammad Ibn Salman is aimed at improving the economic and social conditions of Saudi Arabia in order to obtain social legitimization and loyalty and in the long term to ensure regime survival and its stability. I have posed three research questions which are as follows: 1) Can traditionalism and modernization be combined? 2) What is the impact of the authoritarian regime on modernization policy? 3) How has the relationship between the political authority and the Wahhabi establishment changed?

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Muhammad Ibn Salman, modernization, traditionalism, Vision 2030, Wahhabism

Introduction

Saudi Arabia (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, KSA) is as a conservative state with traditional values and a tribal character. It is the cradle of the Islam, the world second largest religion and is governed along Islamic lines. An inherent part of the Saudi monarchy is Wahhabism, a strict puritanical form of Sunni Islam and "the predominant feature of Saudi culture." Strict adherence to the principles of this doctrine has led to a poor human rights record (i.e. capital punishment for adultery, witchcraft, homosexuality, religious discrimination, violation of women's rights, lack of religious freedom or pro-democracy activities).[1]

The conservative nature of the Saudi state is contrasted by the "reform policy" of Muhammad Ibn Salman Ibn Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (MBS) former minister of defense and the current heir to the throne. The traditional values of the Kingdom were faced with the modernization processes initiated by the new crown prince. This was reflected in the Vision 2030 reform package announced by MBS in 2016, which aims to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy through investments in non-oil sectors. This program has been supported by decisive action by MBS, who is aware that economic growth requires a revision of the religious and social order. The Saudi Crown Prince decided to reduce the powers of the religious police, lift the ban on female drivers, weaken the male-guardianship system, ease gender segregation and give women a more prominent role in public sphere. Because existing norms and regulations were established in cooperation between representatives of the state and religion, their changing put the existing alliance of state and religious forces on a collision course. Changes like reducing the power of the religious police or improving women's rights are extremely important and can be seen as a blow to the religious establishment.

On the social level this collision shows a very sharp contrast between two parts of the Saudi society: the more progressive and the more conservative. MBS seems to be aware of the existing divisions, therefore he cannot only present fully reformist or fully traditionalist attitudes. Rather, he tries to combine both approaches, driven by the need to meet the needs of both citizens who want change and those who want to preserve the importance of religion and tradition. Such a policy is aimed at securing power, gaining its legitimacy and strengthening its position, and is characteristic for most authoritarian regimes.[2]

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[1] More information about Wahhabism can be found in: *Saudi Arabia in Transition*, eds Bernard Haykerl, Thomas Hegghammer, Stephane Lacroix, Cambridge 2015; Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: a critical essay*, Oneonta 2015; Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of faith: migration, education and the Wahhabi mission*, Stanford 2017; Simon Ross Valentine, *Force and fanaticism: Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and beyond*, London 2015.

[2] Madawi al-Rasheed, 'Beyond tradition and modernity. Dilemmas of transformation in Saudi Arabia', *Al-Jazeera Center for Studies*, Viewed 15 December 2020, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/05/tradition-modernity-dilemmas-transformation-saudi-arabia-180514084243670.html>.

Research methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyze the reform policy advocated by the crown prince Muhammad Ibn Salman and their consequences for religious traditionalism. The main conclusion of this analysis is that MBS seeks to combine modernization and tradition similarly to the UAE model where conservative values co-exist with an open and globalization-friendly society – a model which is generally accepted by the West.[3] This is even more difficult, given how more divided Saudi society is - into the supporters of modernization, mainly the young generation, and those who stick to tradition, including the Wahhabi one.

The structure of my article is built around the hypothesis that assumes that the reformist policy of Muhammad Ibn Salman is aimed at improving the economic and social conditions of Saudi Arabia in order to obtain social legitimization and loyalty and in the long term to ensure regime survival and its stability. This is a carrot and stick policy because these reforms are accompanied by repressions of political opponents (e.g. in the fall of 2017 when there was a massive purge that apprehended hundreds of politicians and businessmen, including senior princes from the Saudi dynasty) and human rights activists.

There are two arguments that support this hypothesis. First, Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian state where political elites do not require social legitimacy as the state can force obedience. On the other hand, MBS comes from a young generation that, in principle, expect internal changes in the Kingdom. People under 30 are the largest age group in the country.[4] More than 60% of young people in Saudi Arabia support Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 reform plan. Equally important is the fact that "All the previous crown princes who then became kings, or not, were older, so they had their own base inside the state and in society. They had occupied positions inside the state that allowed them to be known in society and build personal legitimacy around their person. Prince Mohammad didn't have years of service to build such support and relationships. However he found a base to target in Saudi Arabia's youth."[5] Prince Mohammad's reform policy is a way to build his own personal legitimacy.[6]

The second argument is economic and more pragmatic. The sharp fall in oil prices (which fell from over $ 100 per barrel in early 2014 to around $ 26 in February 2016) led to an unprecedented budget deficit. Economic success could improve MBS's position

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[3] Stephane Lacroix, 'Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17/2 (2019), p. 3.

[4] At least 26% of the total Saudi population is less than 15 years old; 19% between ages of 15–24; approximately 47% between 25–54 and only 3.2% is older than 65. See, for example: 'Demographic Survey 2016', *General Authority for Statistics*, Riyadh 2016, Viewed 10 January 2021, <www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/en-demographic-research-2016_2.pdf>.

[5] Priyanka Boghani, 'The paradox of Saudi Arabia's social reforms', *PBS Frontline*, Viewed 10 January 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-paradox-of-saudi-arabias-social-reforms/>.

[6] Jane Kinninmont, 'Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract', Chatham House, Viewed 25 April 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/vision-2030-and-Saudi-Arabias-social-contract-austerity-and transformation>.

in the country now and in the years to come. These two arguments go hand in hand because increasing the number of women in the labor market will help to achieve economic success. Obviously, this does not means that MBS will give up authoritarian methods of governance, but he will present more liberal social and economic views and remain authoritarian in political matters, as is the case in the United Arab Emirates.

To verify the above hypothesis, three research questions were posed which are as follows: 1) Can traditionalism and modernization be combined?[7] 2) What is the impact of the authoritarian regime on modernization policy? 3) How has the relationship between the political authority and the Wahhabi establishment changed?

To analyze the relationship between modernization and traditionalism, author decided to refer to the theory of modernization which is used to explain the process of modernization from a traditional society to the modern one. According to Fuad Baali the basis of this theory could be found in the division into rural and urban societies introduced by Arab scholar Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) in the 14th century. According to Baali, the Arab scholar divided Arabian societies into two types: the "Hadara" society (urban areas) and the "Badawa society" (Bedouin and rural areas). The "Badawa" society was characterized by its simple and limited division of labor, religiosity, austere living conditions, illiteracy and a strong tribal society. The "Hadara" society was the opposite of the "Badawa" society. Ibn Khaldun argued that in urban areas, more services and facilities are available than in the "Badawa" areas. The more people in "Badawa" areas interacted with the people of "Hadara" areas, the more "Badawa" societies would change into "Hadara" societies.[8]

Similar interactions between traditional and modern societies can be seen today as a result of globalization processes that have brought Saudis into contact with other cultures and nations. These exchanges significantly influenced the progress and development of Saudi social patterns, religious attitudes and culture. Globalization has had a particular impact on the Arabic language, as seen in the field of education, which is spreading in English, as well as on the many Arabic satellite channels that broadcast Western movies and TV series promoting Western thought and values. Consumer culture, the internet and mobile phones, modern cars, computers and Western clothing influence Arabs lives, undermine identity and weaken religious attitudes. There is no doubt that globalization

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[7] According to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* traditionalism refer to "an attitude of mind intended to curb the pretensions of present reason to criticize traditional beliefs, institutions and practices" while tradition itself refer to "body of practice and belief which is socially transmitted from the past. It is regarded as having authority in the present simply because it comes from the past, and encapsulates the wisdom and experience of the past. For some, the very idea of tradition is anathema. It is characteristic of modernity and modernization to reject the authority of the past in favor of the present deployment of reason, unencumbered by tradition or prejudice. While prior to the seventeenth century tradition was largely unquestioned as a source of insight, and in need of no defense, since the Enlightenment the notion of tradition has been defended by traditionalists such as Burke and, more recently, Hayek", Anthony O'Hear, 'Tradition and traditionalism', in: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1998, Viewed 11 Novembner 2021, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/tradition-and-traditionalism/v-1>.

[8] Fuad Baali, *Society, state, and urbanism: Ibn Khaldun's sociological thought*, New York 1988, p. 100.

is eroding Saudi socio-cultural norms, where young Saudi wear jeans and sport clothes rather than thobes, sport "trendy haircuts," eat Western fast food (burgers, pizza), play video games such as PlayStation or do body-building or sports like boxing. Two decades ago if a young man was wearing Western clothes in public "society would have said he was betraying his culture," but this is no longer the case. In short, the Western style of life, accelerated by globalization, has profound impact on Saudi identity and culture.[9]

Whereas Ibn Khaldun laid the foundations for the modernization theory, it is widely believed that it was derived from the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–1883) who opened a debate on the influence of religion and the role that modernization plays in social change.[10] This debate was continued by Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), Daniel Lerner (1917–1980) and Daniel Bell (1919–2011) who claimed that modernization changes culture. They argued that economic development and the modernization appeared as its result can reduce the influence of religion.

Max Weber (1864–1920) and Samuel Huntington (1927–2008) challenged this view, arguing that religion is deeply entrenched in societies and that economic development does not necessarily lead to cultural change. Weber maintained that the basic tenets of Protestantism led to the economic development in the Western world. According to Weber, religion was the key condition that determined that China and India did not become capitalist societies[11]. Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) argued that traditional societies would develop if they adopted more modern practices.

Modern societies have certain characteristics which are in contrast to those of traditional societies as presented in the table below. Most of these indicators have grown in Saudi Arabia in recent decades from education and industrialization to technologies in agriculture and production.

The table below shows that the "transformation" of a traditional society into a modern one leads to an increase in wealth and power in general. The standard of living of the citizens also increases as a result of the growing economy. At the same time, according to Richard Clayton, modernization processes lead to a decline of traditional religious beliefs and cultural values.

However, the below table shows only two dimensions of the division into traditional and modern societies while ignoring other possibilities such as a modern state with traditional norms such as Saudi Arabia. This Arab monarchy is an interesting case study that goes against the existing assumption that modernization equals secularization and provides interesting insights into the correlation between religion and modernity at the state level.

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[9] Mark Thompson, 'The impact of globalization on Saudi male millennials' identity narratives, *Asian Affairs* 50/3 (2019), pp. 1–21.

[10] Jeremiah Dibua, *Modernization and the Crisis of Development in Africa: The Nigerian Experience*, Aldershot 2006, pp. 20–22.

[11] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and "The Spirit of Capitalism"*, (trans.) Stephen Kalberg, Roxbury 2002, pp. 19, 35; Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993), pp. 22–49.

Table 1. Characteristics of traditional and modern societies

Traditional societies	Modern Societies
Rural	Urban
Illiterate	Literate
Agricultural	Industrial
Designative political structure	Electoral political structure
Extended family system	Nuclear family system
Low economic participation	High economic participation
Low per capita income	High per capita income
Low productivity	High productivity
Little commerce	Much commerce
Poor transportation system	Developed transportation system
Oral media system	Mass media system
Poor nutrition	Good nutrition
High birth and death rates and short life expectancy	Low birth and death rates and extended life expectancy

Source: Richard Clayton, *The family, marriage and social change*, 2nd ed., Lexington 1978, p. 75.

The features of traditional and modern societies presented in Table 1 are of interest to the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), published annually since 1990. Human development is measured by a combination of three components: life expectancy at birth, literacy of the population over 15 years of age plus the school enrolment ratio for all students and the GNP per capita in U.S. dollars. Saudi Arabia ranks 40th and is the second Arab country after the UAE that ranks 31st. Since 1950, Saudi Arabia have evolved from a mostly illiterate population to a mostly literate one which can be seen as an impressive improvement. The current indicators in the Kingdom are: life expectancy at birth is almost 75 years, while general literacy is at 95%. These indicators are empirical evidence of modernization, especially, as the name suggests (Human Development Index) in its social dimension. The increase in these indicators is important because, as Samuel Huntington suggests, the political system must first be able to apply social and economic reforms, which means changing traditional values and patterns of behavior, extending loyalty from family to nation and secularizing public life. Providing social groups with access to economic and social benefits may create a demand for their participation in the political system.[12]

[12] Samuel Huntington, 'The political modernization of traditional monarchies', *Daedalus* 95/3 (1966), p. 766.

Table 2. Saudi Arabia's HDI trends based on consistent time series data and new goalposts

	Life expectancy at birth	Expected years of schooling	Mean years of schooling	GNI per capita (2011 PPP$)	HDI value
1990	69.0	10.8	5.7	43,941	0.697
1995	70.9	11.4	6.2	44,513	0.722
2000	72.4	12.0	6.7	43,138	0.743
2005	73.1	12.7	7.6	45,798	0.770
2010	73.6	14.3	8.9	45,951	0.808
2015	74.4	16.9	9.5	51,885	0.854
2016	74.6	16.9	9.5	51,329	0.854
2017	74.7	16.9	9.5	49,680	0.853

Source: *Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update.*

However, the theory of modernization began to be criticized for its clearly ambivalent division between tradition and modernity, which was seen as a Western model of development that did not take into account development trajectories in other parts of the world.[13] This would mean that the Middle Eastern countries should choose between development and religion. In response, this theory began to be modified by many scholars since the 1960s.

According to some modernists, attention must be devoted to specific historical and cultural conditions. Samuel Huntington claimed that modernity is independent of culture and can be adapted to any society. Huntington argued that modernity and traditionalism are not mutually exclusive which means that they can coexist.[14] Such a relationship may be observed in the UAE. As noted by Eickelman and Piscatori, tradition is susceptible to changes, and the family can introduce them, because according to them, tradition is invented and does not always refer to older values. If traditions are constructed, then old norms and practices might be replaced by new ones in a changing society.[15] This is visible on the already mentioned example of women's right to obtain a driving license and drive a car. In 1957 a ban on women driving was introduced by Riyadh. There have been many explanations for this prohibition, ranging from that women need a male

[13] Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man*, New York 1960, p. 41; Walt W. Rostow, *Politics and the Stages of Growth*, Cambridge 1971, pp. 1–6.

[14] Samuel Huntington, 'The change to change: Modernization, Development, and Politics', *Comparative Politics* 3/3 (1971), pp. 283–322.

[15] Dale Eickelman, James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics (Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics)*, Princeton 2004, pp. 28–29.

guardian to the more absurd arguments that it could negatively affect female fertility.[16] This ban was supported by religious conservatives as it was closely associated with the separation of the sexes and the existing social order based on *fiqh* (human understanding and practices of the Quran and Sunna) regulations. Despite the fact that the ban on driving car by women was lifted, the separation of the sexes remains.[17]

However, a result of modernization, as Huntington claimed, is secularization, which means reducing the dominance of religion's influence on the public aspects of life and separation between state and religion. This influence is attracting more and more politically aware citizens, who demand participation in the political life of the state.[18] This twofold attitude to modernization and traditionalism can be observed in Saudi Arabia where infrastructure and services are modernized while Wahhabism, and the monarchical system, as bastions of traditionalism, remain almost unchanged.[19] This means that societies can choose the path of modernization and at the same time preserve tradition. There is still a long way to go to separate the state from religion, but it is worth noting that this hybrid model, which combines modernization with traditionalism, differs from the one that Western countries chose many centuries ago when dominate the belief that modernity and traditionalism are on opposite ends and traditionalism stands as an obstacle to modernity. Such a view prove that model of "Western development" is not the only path. In religiously conservative Arab states that have difficult experiences with Western countries, the simple choice between traditionalism and modernity cannot be accepted.

The modernization processes in Saudi Arabia also concern religion, which can be seen in the Vision 2030 Saudi reform program. Saudi Arabia presents itself as a country proud of its Islamic roots, and the driving force behind the implementation of Vision 2030 are the principles of Islam. Even organizing a mandatory Islamic pilgrimage (the Hajj) holds the Saudi state's responsibility for pilgrims who need to have free access to airports, subways, railroads, restaurants, hotels etc. In the program we can find an entry that "if God wills, we will build a brighter future based on the foundations of Islamic principles."[20] Such state references to Islam clearly shows that religion should be the source of legitimacy for future modernization processes. But these processes, according to MBS rhetoric (and caring for his own public image), should also serve Islam, as well as the project to build an Islamic museum, library and research center.

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16 David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, London 2009, p. 109.

17 Unequal treatment of women manifest itself in: longer waiting for women driving license, detaining women activists, who fought for the right to drive, women still require a male guardian's approval to marry, be released from prison or obtain certain sexual and reproductive health care. Men can still file cases against their daughters, wives, or female relatives for "disobedience," which can lead to their forcible return to their male guardian's home or imprisonment. 'Saudi Arabia: Proposed Reforms Neglect Basic Rights Ongoing Repression, Absence of Civil Society Impede Progress', Viewed 30.04.2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/25/saudi-arabia-proposed-reforms-neglect-basic-rights>.

18 Teresa Bernheimer and Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, New York 2012, pp. 182–185.

19 Alfred Stepan, 'Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations', *Journal of Democracy* 11/4 (2012), p. 37.

20 'Vision 2030. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', Viewed 10 January 2021, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>.

According to Cihan Tugal, "Islamic politics" and modernity create an alternative form of modernity that will not be based on simple divisions between modernity and traditionalism or secularism and religion.[21] The term "moderate Islam" is an example of adapting pro-western and partially democratic views by Islamists, even those radical like Hamas or Hizbullah. This is clearly shown in Vision 2030 which states that Islam is a constitution of the state and moderation is the method of the state.[22]

Similar attempts to liberate Islam and reconcile religion with modernity were made by former kings Fahd Ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud and Abdullah Ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud. Particularly the administration of King Abd Allah attempted reforms within the Kingdom, starting with the government's scholarship program sending students abroad to study, proclaiming the national day of the country, taking over the supervision of the ministry of education from the Wahhabis, significant contributions in fighting against terrorism and radicalism at home and abroad (by starting a "war of ideas" centered upon issues of legitimacy, authority, and legality/illegality in Islam) and, last but not least, granting women the right to vote in the city council elections in 2015 and the right to participate in the Olympic Games (2012). The Saudi King also appointed 30 women to the Consultative Council (2013) and approved a law that makes domestic (psychological and sexual) violence a crime. From this perspective, Vision 2030 can be seen as a continuation of efforts to reconcile Islamic traditions with the needs of the modern economy and persuade powerful conservative clergy, who fiercely opposed these reforms, to accept them.

Basing on the case study of Saudi Arabia, the modernization theory should be revisited. At the same time it remains useful to discuss the current Saudi trajectories but only when local conditions such as religion, culture and the political system are included. Saudi Arabia can not be fully classified as a classically modern or classically traditional state. Such multiple forms are highlighted by neo-modernization. Countries can modernize in many different ways and Saudi Arabia presents a model in which political change will be very limited (maintaining an authoritarian system), while economic and social change will be revolutionary.

An authoritarian system as an obstacle of the modernization process

When analyzing the modernization processes, local conditions determining its scale should be taken into consideration. One such condition in the case of Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian political system that certainly limits the scale and scope of (political) changes. The point of departure for explaining this thesis is the assumption that the main goal of the authoritarian state is to secure the rule of one man / one party / one dynasty at all costs. Thus, the emergence of new political institutions (e.g. civil society institutions) or an increase in the powers of existing institutions (e.g. the army) or political organizations

[21] Cihan Tugal, *Passive Revolution Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism,* Stanford 2009, p. 3.
[22] 'Vision 2030. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', p. 6.

(e.g. the Consultative Council) would weaken the central power and perhaps even lead to its collapse.

Analyzing the policy of change led by MBS, it can expected that the state authorities will seek to neutralize or co-opt opposition institutions and forces that may pose a threat to it government, as with the *Al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Awakening) several years ago. Back then their representatives opposed any kind of secular reform linked with Westernization, but today they cooperate or work with government officials as advisers or lawyers. In authoritarian states, all new political institutions require the legitimization of state power, but for political power it seems unacceptable to involve citizens in the political life of the country and to promote political pluralism[23]. Therefore, it is rare for a monarch to limit his power in favor of social groups. The emergence of new political movement could raise public awareness, lead to the rise of an anti-system opposition and contribute to an impasse in the modernization process, as we saw in Morocco under King Hassan II and Jordan under King Hussein (1952–1999). This is why the main authoritarian leaders oppose the modernization of the political system.

Hicham Alaoui calls the Saudi model "modernization without modernity."[24] The Saudi regime, like Saudi youth, supports material progress, social harmony, greater gender equality, and even the limited role of religion. But the regime does not want to bear the political costs of modernity and therefore will not accept a revision of the state-society relations that pertain to the system of the rentier state.[25]. Even if the formula of the rentier state has exhausted its logic. New trends in renewable energy, the COVID-19 pandemic or new producers and exporters of non-Arab oil (i.e. the USA) have contributed to the decline in oil prices and the revenues from its exports. Reconceptualizing the Saudi state as not purely "allocative" remains a good idea, but its government still perceives the business class as potential political dissidents to be co-opted or suppressed. While the Saudi state remains more flexible on economic issues, it does not intend to share power on political issues with its citizens, who reject its paternalistic and loyal imperatives in principle. For this reason, these changes can result in prosperity and social security, as well as instability and volatility.[26]

The Saudi regime is also wary of challenges posed by the Internet. Young people talk about human rights online, post videos on YouTube attacking the Saudi monarchy, use Facebook to organize demonstrations or tweet jokes about Islam or the Kingdom. It might be difficult to differentiate between youth social and economic engagement from

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[23] Samuel Huntington, *Political order in changing societies*, New Haven 1968, pp. 166–169.

[24] Hicham Alaoui, 'Youth, Technology, and Political Change in Saudi Arabia', *Spring Series* 519 (2019), Viewed 10 February 2021, <https://www.hoover.org/research/youth-technology-and-political-change-saudi-arabia>.

[25] Rentier state is a state which derives all or a substantial portion of its national revenues from the rent paid by foreign individuals, concerns or governments. Oil-wealthy Arab Gulf states increase the productivity of the domestic economy or political development of state without taxation. Hazem Beblawi, 'The rentier state in the Arab world' in: *The rentier state: Nation, state and integration of the Arab World*, eds. Hazem Beblawi, Giacomo Luciani, London 1987; G. Luciani, 'Allocation vs production states. The theoretical framework' in: *The Arab state*, ed. Giacomo Luciani, London 1990.

[26] Alaoui, 'Youth, Technology, and Political Change in Saudi Arabia'.

their political activism. As I mentioned above, MBS might be looking for a kind of controlled pluralism which can be found in monarchical autocracies like Morocco and Jordan. It could allow for some public contestation and political debate in elected bodies or civil society organizations and consequently create an impression of acceptance of the opposition without underpinning royal power. This could strengthen the legitimacy of state power. But internal policy must be in line with foreign policy, which means the abandonment of military intervention causing human rights tragedies (Yemen etc.), which so far has cost the Kingdom a lot.[27]

Wahhabism as an obstacle of the modernization process

Another local factor that determines the scale and scope of modernization processes is religion. According to some modernists (i.e. Andrew Rippin),[28] modernization can reduce the influence of religion and strengthen secularism. However, in order to contradict this thesis, it is necessary to take into consideration local conditions.

The alliance between the Saudi dynasty and the Wahhabis started in 1744 when Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Saud concluded an agreement that assumed that they would bring the Arabs of the peninsula back to the "true Islam." The leader of the House of Saud promised to protect and propagate the doctrine of Wahhabi Islam, while Ibn Abd al-Wahhab would support the ruler, supplying him with glory and power. Lasting over 270 years, the alliance survived many political upheavals but in the last two decades there were three events that particularly influenced the position of the Wahhabis in the Saudi kingdom.

The first event were the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Al-Qaeda. Fifteen of the 19 suicide terrorists who carried out the attack were citizens of Saudi Arabia, and it was widely believed that the attacks were "an expression of Wahhabism". The Saudi monarchy came under international pressure to adopt a decompression policy and promote more moderate Islam. Wahhabism was under strict surveillance, religious police power was limited, intra-religious dialogue was opened, many students went abroad and the status of women was slightly improved.

The second event that influenced Wahhabism was the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government protests and uprisings that spread across much of the Arab world beginning in 2010s. Protests against anti-Shia discrimination and over human rights in Saudi Arabia started in 2011 and were rapidly suppressed by government forces. Wahhabism was at the forefront of the Saudi counter-revolutionary campaign. The Saudi monarchy went back to the Wahhabi principles in the public sphere and anti-Shi'ite discourse. There were even opinions suggesting that the Saudi political regime would not fall because

[27] Ibidem.

[28] Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, New York 2012.

of its religious foundation and the so-called Saudi-Wahhabi pact. The Council of Senior Scholars (CSS) in 2011 issued a fatwa that stated that "the protests are haram, prohibited by the Islamic Law. Saudi Arabia is based on the teaching of the Quran, Sunnah and the notion of 'ta'at' [obedience]". According to the fatwa, reform "would not be achieved through protests that lead to 'fitnah' [division] of al-ummah [the Muslims]" but rather through "munasahat wali al-amr," the secret advice of the ruler.[29]

The third event that affected position of the Wahhabis in the kingdom was the seizure of power by prince Muhammad Ibn Salman in 2017**.** Soon after he gave an interview for *Time* magazine expressing his desire to return to "moderate Islam" since religion in Saudi Arabia was "hijacked" in 1979 by extremists who do not practice social life.[30] This opinion also follows a trend prevailing in the Middle East where we can observe that states that took effort to modernize their policies and economies were marginalizing the ulama. The importance of religious authorities has declined even in the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf. In 2015 the UAE-based Tabah Foundation conducted a survey on the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia. Only one in three of young Saudi respondents said that they regarded the grand mufti of their country as having the right to determine what is permissible and forbidden in Islam, compared with 70% in Morocco and 61% in Egypt.[31]

The above-mentioned tendencies and opinions expressed in the survey are reflected in the Vision 2030 program announced by MBS in 2016. This reform package is seen as a response by the new Saudi government to Saudi social needs rather than the priorities of influential clerics. This agenda shows that the new Saudi leaders see a significant youth electorate and its needs and aspirations as important to fulfill in spite of opposition from the traditionally powerful religious establishment. Vision 2030 assumes a degree of social liberalization to enable the growth of the entertainment and tourism industries[32] but also includes reforms of the education system (reducing the number of religious subjects in favor of science subjects, focusing on the critical thinking) and social and family life as well which were traditionally a bastion of Wahhabi clerics.[33] Liberal changes also include women's rights to drive a car and join the military, increasing female employment, removal of requirement that women have to live with their male guardians, more protection from employment discrimination and the ability to get passports and travel abroad without requiring a male guardian's permission. It was a milestone on the way to divorce from

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[29] 'The Statement of the Council of Senior Scholars 2011', Viewed 7 February 2021, <http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Saudi%20Arabia/statement.pdf>.

[30] Joseph Hincks, 'The Saudi Crown Prince Says the Kingdom Will Soon Return to a 'Moderate Islam', Viewed 23 January 2021, <https://time.com/4996355/saudi-arabia-crown-prince-moderate-islam/>.

[31] Jane Kinninmont, 'Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's social contract', p. 21.

[32] Vision 2030 aims to increase household spending on entertainment from 2,9% to 6,0% and include hosting world-class events and festivals, improve visa issuance procedures for visitors and develop Saudi historical and heritage sites. More information can be found on the Saudi Arabia's nation-wide investment brand website: https://investsaudi.sa/en/sectors-opportunities/tourism-culture-entertainment.

[33] Kinninmont, Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's social contract, p. 2.

the patriarchal system. Many conservative clerics argued that these new laws and new behaviors would harm the family structure.[34]

But the change that attracted the most attention was the granting of driving rights to women.[35] Opposition from the conservative clergy was less than might have been expected even though it had been seen as a red line for many in the religious establishment. The above listed changes of social regulations might be interpreted as a modification of rules and laws derived from the Wahhabi interpretation of religious scriptures and a limiting of the influence and position of Wahhabi clerics. This was clearly visible in limiting the powers of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. The committee was established in 1976 with the main goal of supervising markets and public morality. It is often described as an Islamic religious police (also known as Mutaween or *Hay'a* which means "Committee"). The police was stripped of powers of arrest which curbed its policing function. When some of the clerics began to criticize the decree restricting the powers of the religious police, they were arrested. To prevent a similar situation in the future, in 2016 King Salman appointed more moderate clerics to the Council of Senior Scholars who will support the gradual social liberalization included in the Vision 2030. The Council issued a fatwa supporting MBS policy against Qatar, as well as against Canada. However the structure of this institution was not reformed.

However, despite all these social changes that have affected the social order based on religious norms, we cannot ignore the fact that religious conservatives still have a strong influence on and position in the education system; they control selected ministries (Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Counseling), mosques, supervise public order and have their representatives in charity and international organizations (World Muslim League, World Muslim Youth Assembly, International Aid Organization, Social Welfare and Development). It was through these organizations that the Wahhabis carried out the distribution of huge amounts of copies of the Quran around the world. The purpose of these activities is to strive to play the role of a promoter of pan-Islamism, although in reality the doctrine of Wahhabism does not find applause among other Muslim countries. Even more important is the fact the country's legal system operates within Islamic law, which still remains the ultimate source of legislation in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, we should be aware of the important role that Islam continues to play in politics and public life in Saudi Arabia.

To sum up, behind the social changes that have taken place in Saudi Arabia in recent years is the need to improve the economic situation and bring about the economic growth of the country, which is more and more clearly expressed by the young generation. Low oil prices, high unemployment and high public debt led to the initiation of a new economic policy that includes women as an engine of the Saudi economy and aims

[34] David Ottaway, 'Will Saudi Arabia's Social Revolution Provoke a Wahhabi Backlash', *Viewpoint* 126 (2018), pp. 1–4.

[35] Jess Staufenberg, 'Saudi Arabia is 'not ready' for women drivers, says deputy crown prince,' *The Independent*, 28 April 2016, Viewed 1 February 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-not-ready-women-drivers-says-deputy-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-a7004611.html>.

to diversify it. The policy includes restricting the welfare state and the provision of services and subsidies to citizens. Within the Al Saud family itself, there is a division into supporters of conservative policy based on religious norms and reformists who see the need of reform and a limited role of religion. Internal changes are also intended to attract international investment and change Saudi Arabia's negative opinion following the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018.

It is too early to talk about secularization but on the other hand Saudi citizens have gained new leisure opportunities that were before banned for religious reasons. These new-old forms of entertainment (cinemas, theaters, concerts etc.) or increasing the freedom of women (to drive or access to jobs so far banned) will divert the citizens' attention from religion. Even the Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Ibn Abd Allah al-Sheikh argued that cinemas and concerts are forbidden in Islam (*haram*) because they promote immorality, but he did not call for their closure.[36] The question remains: what political and social influence will the Wahhabi clergy be able to maintain and how will they try to strengthen their position in the face of unfavorable changes?

Conclusions

MBS strives to implement the vision of an economically well-developed state with certain social freedoms, but he does not intend to change the structure of the political system, because it would weaken his position. This fact naturally limits the scope of the reforms he intends to introduce. The clergy's influence will probably decline as well. However, it is unlikely that the alliance between political and religious establishment will be broken. MBS might rely on a few official religious figures that he trusts. Wahhabi critics are now in jail so the process of de-Wahhabization will be rather limited in its scope.[37]

That said, we cannot exclude a scenario in which the Saudi family will try to rule without the support of the Wahhabi clergy. It will happen if and when the ruling dynasty supports the popular trend among young people youth and gains the trust from the younger generation.. The Saudi elites would then employ an idea that is consistent with the attitudes of Saudi public opinion and focus on development and modernization. However, this would require restructuring the Saudi political regime and reforming political power. This would mean, in turn, that the political regime would not be tied to some social ally. Then a new modern form of political system would play the role that the Wahhabis had long played in stabilizing the Saudi political regime.[38] Even if this scenario seems to be the least likely, the fact that MBS is playing a very cautious game that aims to "liberate"

[36] Kinninmont, 'Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's social contract', p. 30.

[37] Lacroix, 'Saudi Arabia and the Limits of Religious Reform', p. 5.

[38] Faisal Mukhyat Abu Sulaib, 'The Role of Religion in the Politics of Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi Concept: ta'at wali al-amr', *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 13/3 (2020), p. 73.

the Saudi society from the religious grip can not be ignored. It is important to stabilize the internal and external situation in Saudi Arabia and its neighborhood as religious fatwas are the most needed when regime survival is threatened. We can therefore recall the assumption at the beginning of the article that MBS will pursue moderate policies while preserving the religious foundations of the Saudi state and securing regime survival.

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