

SAUDI ARABIA ON THE ROAD TO MODERNIZATION: REALITY OR MYTH?

Abstract: In June 2017, King Salman of Saudi Arabia has appointed his son Mohammed bin Salman (also known as MBS), as crown prince replacing his nephew, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef¹, as first in line to the throne. King Salman bin 'Abd al-'Aziz, a son of King 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Saud the founder of Saudi Arabia, acceded to the throne in January 2015 after the death of his half-brother Abdullah bin 'Abd al-'Aziz. Mohammed bin Salman is currently serving as the country's deputy prime minister (the title of prime minister being held by the King) and is also chairman of the Council for economic and development affairs, chairman of the Council of political and security affairs, and minister of defence. In 2016 Mohammed bin Salman set out a possibly over-ambitious development plan "Saudi Vision 2030". Bin Salman's progressive advancement was suggesting that the matter of succession in Saudi Arabia was already resolved, and that King Salman intends to surmount the possible royal intrigues and fierce competition to make his son King of Saudi Arabia. Prince Mohammed bin Salman could, potentially, lead Saudi Arabia for decades.

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia, reforms, moderate Islam, Iran, Shi'ism, Wahhabism, ultra conservatism, religious fundamentalism, human rights*

Introduction

Mohammed bin Salman has offered a plan for the modernization of Saudi Arabia. The reform programme aims to overhaul most aspects of social, economic and religious life in the Kingdom. According to official data, the Crown Prince is working on improving the rights of women in the Kingdom and expanding their role in the work force. Women's appointment

¹Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (born 30 August, 1959) is a prominent member of the House of Saud. He was the Kingdom's security chief for many years and was known for his strong stance against jihadist militants. As deputy prime minister and interior minister, he headed up the counter-terrorism portfolio. Muhammad's father Nayef was one of the Sudairi Seven, a power bloc of sons of the Kingdom's founder, King Abdel Aziz (known as Ibn Saud), and Hussa bint Ahmed Al Sudairi. Thus, Prince Muhammad was born to an especially privileged position in the House of Saud dynasty: a paternal grandson of the founding monarch, and child of one of the original King's favourite sons. Two of Prince Muhammad's full uncles, Fahd and Salman, have reigned as King during Muhammad's lifetime.

to various political posts has increased in recent times. A number of key appointments have been made on political levels, such as Princess Reema Bint Bandar as President of the Saudi Federation for Community Sports, making her the first woman to lead a sports federation in the Kingdom, and Fatimah Baeshen, spokesperson for the Saudi embassy in Washington DC, USA, the Kingdom's first female spokeswoman abroad. Women have finally been allowed to enter public stadiums, and the country's longstanding prohibition on women motorists that had been in place since 1990 was also lifted. Women's involvement in sports has grown. There is a trend toward not wearing the abaya and niqab and only wearing the hijab. It should be noted that there are small changes related to women's rights. It is a fact that women have the right to drive not only cars, but also motorcycles and even airplanes. The crown prince has encouraged more public entertainment in the Kingdom and relaxed rules on gender segregation in public places. He has also limited the power of the "religious police," who enforced those strict rules of gender segregation and "proper" behavior in the public sphere. The religious police was previously focused on imposing modest dress on women and preventing interactions between unrelated women and men.²

Information on the construction of the "sci-fi" city, Neom, was also no less interesting. Saudi Arabia said it will start building the first residential area in a proposed \$500 billion futuristic city that has become a symbol of Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitions for life after oil. The planned megacity, unveiled in 2018, is part of the prince's grand plan to bolster non-oil revenue and attract foreign investment with eye-popping proposals to transform the economy, including two other tourism developments. Neom is to be financed by the Saudi government, its sovereign wealth fund, and local and international investors. The first phase of residential development will be completed by 2020.³

It was with this backdrop that the crown prince, in November 2017, ordered the arrest of over 300 of the country's economic and political elite, including a number of members of the ruling family. The anti-corruption scandal caused a huge international shock. The prisoners were rounded up and detained at the Ritz Carlton hotel in Riyadh. Among them was one of the world's billionaires, Prince Waleed bin Talal, who was released a few months later after signing a confidential "confirmed understanding" with the

² "Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman champions women's right," *About her*, <https://www.abouthier.com/node/9306/people/features/crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-champions-women%E2%80%99s-rights-saudi-arabia> (accessed March 5, 2019).

³ Sarah Algethamy, "Saudi Arabia to Begin Building Homes in \$500 Billion Futuristic City Neom," *Bloomberg*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-16/saudi-arabia-to-begin-building-homes-in-futuristic-city-neom> (accessed February 20, 2019).

government.⁴ The anti-corruption commission headed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman referred more than 60 people for prosecution, according to a royal court statement. Saudi authorities said they've recovered about \$107 billion from people implicated in what the government has described as a crackdown on graft that has rattled the Kingdom's business elite and weighed on economic growth.⁵

The de facto leader of Saudi Arabia also swept away many of the ineffective timeservers in government offices and replaced them with young Western-educated technocrats.⁶ There are now fewer members of the ruling family in the cabinet than at any time in modern Saudi history. MBS has cultivated support among the next generation of the royal family, princes close to his own age who are often from the family's fourth generation - the great-grandsons of the founding King. He has appointed them to governorships and deputy governorships in the provinces and to sub-cabinet positions in Riyadh.⁷

Can Mohammed bin Salman transform one of world's most retrograde autocracies from its status as an exporter of oil and terrorist ideology into a force for global progress? Over the course of three years since his father became King, bin Salman has ruthlessly consolidated control over the Kingdom's economic and security power centers. He has introduced modest liberalization and sharply escalated a proxy war with Iran across the region, creating a humanitarian crisis in neighbouring Yemen. "He is an ambitious young man willing to act aggressively and decisively to consolidate power," says Chas Freeman, a former U.S. ambassador to Riyadh under President George H.W. Bush.⁸

"Moderate" Islam vs. ultra-conservatism

The Saudi Kingdom has long been an absolute monarchy that does not tolerate public debates. The system was intolerant and harsh against political

⁴Vivian Nereim, "Alwaleed promises more details on settlement to calm investors," *Bloomberg*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/business/alwaleed-promises-more-details-on-settlement-to-calm-investors> (accessed April 3 2019).

⁵Zaid Sabah and Sarah Algethami, "Saudi Arabia Collects \$107 Billion as Prince Ends Crackdown," *Bloomberg*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-30/saudi-arabia-recovers-107-billion-in-anti-corruption-campaign> (accessed March 15, 2019).

⁶"Saudi King's son Mohammed bin Salman is new crown prince," *BBC News*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40351578> (accessed January 9, 2019).

⁷"After the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi: Mohammed bin Salman and the Future of Saudi-U.S. Relations, *Center of Strategies and International Studies*," December 12, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-killing-jamal-khashoggi-muhammad-bin-salman-and-future-saudi-us-relations> accessed (April 5, 2019).

⁸Karl Vick, "The Saudi Crown prince Thinks He Can Transform the Middle East. Should We Believe Him?," *The Time*, April 5, 2018, <http://time.com/longform/mohammed-bin-salman> (accessed April 2, 2019).

and human rights activism and made it difficult for the religious authorities to allow a more pluralistic and moderate practice of Islam. Nevertheless, the old system allowed limited channels to express opinions. Those channels have been closed during the reign of King Salman and his son, Mohammed. The new rulers have reorganized agencies and rewritten the laws on counterterrorism - a legitimate security concern - to gain more power to quash dissent and imprison people for long periods on the slightest pretext.⁹

The Crown Prince purged his cousin, Mohammed bin Nayef, who controlled the interior ministry. In its place a powerful new agency, the Presidency of State Security, was created, which reports directly to the King and can conduct “search, investigation, seizure, criminal and administrative prosecution” without judicial oversight.¹⁰ In October 2017, the Kingdom updated its counterterrorism law, which was already overly broad, to add a host of tripwires to criminalize free expression. For example, the definition of terrorism was extended to those who “describe” the King or crown prince “in any way offensive to religion or justice”.¹¹

However, the highly noteworthy thing for us is Mohammed bin Salman’s noteworthy intention to uproot the country from religious extremism and to return to “moderate Islam.” This is the matter which is of great interest to the outside world, since Saudi Arabia is viewed as a religiously conservative state that holds and “exports” extremist ideas. Saudi Arabia is an absolute Sunni monarchy, a “God-state,” a country that practices Wahhabism, which is one of the most conservative directions of Sunni Islam with foundations laid back in the 18th century. It was in this period that the founder of the Saudi dynasty, Ibn Saud, concluded an agreement with Wahhabi religious preacher Muhammad ibn Abdal Wahhab, and this became the foundation for the birth of the Emirate of Diriyah, and later, in 1932—for the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In fact, Saudi Arabia’s tradition of countering terrorism goes back to the founding of the Saudi state. Saudi efforts to counter extremism (*ghuluw*) emerged for the first time in response to the *Ikhwan* revolt in 1927-30. On the other hand, the contention that Wahhabism is part of the problem seems correct. It remains to be seen if Saudi counter-discourse can effectively fight its “inner demons” with basically the same religious reasoning on which radical currents draw their justification for violence.¹²

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Rosie Bsheer, “How Muhammad bin Salman has transformed the Saudi Arabia,” *The Nation*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-mohammed-bin-salman-has-transformed-saudi-arabia> accessed (April 2, 2019).

¹¹ United States Department of State, Country reports on terrorism 2017- Saudi Arabia, September 19, 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f85c.html> accessed (April 7, 2019).

Roel Meijer, “Saudi Arabia religious counter terrorist discourse,” *Middle East Institute*, February 15, 2012, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabias-religious-counter-terrorist-discourse> (accessed April 1, 2019).

Over the course of the 20th century through the beginning of the 21st century, Wahhabism in many cases has become the ideological basis for religious-political radical movements and militant Islamism, spreading to various corners of the world. Petrodollars were contributed for the purpose of “exporting” Wahhabism in the 1960’s. This contributed to the weakening of the position of national Islam in favor of the Wahhabi interpretations of Islam in different parts of the world, including in Europe and the USSR, and, after the latter’s collapse, in separate post-Soviet republics. It is perhaps no surprise that 15 of the 19 participants in the well-known September 11, 2001 New York terrorist attacks were Saudi Arabian citizens.¹³

“We are returning to what we were before - a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world,” Mohammed bin Salman said to international investors in Riyadh in October 2017 during the FII summit. The crown prince told the Guardian that “what happened in the last 30 years is not Saudi Arabia.” He explicitly blamed the Kingdom’s turn towards ultraconservatism on the Iranian revolution in 1979 and Tehran’s attempts to spread the revolution across the Middle East.¹⁴

Mohammed bin Salman asked for global support to transform the hard-line Kingdom into an open society that empowers citizens and lures investors. He said the ultra-conservative state had been “not normal” for the past 30 years, blaming rigid doctrines that have governed society in response to the Iranian revolution, which successive leaders “didn’t know how to deal with.” “We are a G20 country. One of the biggest world economies. We’re in the middle of three continents. Changing Saudi Arabia for the better means helping the region and changing the world. So this is what we are trying to do here. And we hope we get support from everyone”.¹⁵

Bin Salman’s remarks on “moderate Islam” came a month after Saudi Arabia made a landmark decision to allow women to legally drive vehicles starting in June 2018, a move that was criticised by some conservative voices among the Wahhabi ulama and social media, but welcomed by human rights activists. Saudi Arabia was the only country in the world where women were not allowed to drive.¹⁶

¹³Uri Friedman, “Where Americas terrorists actually come from,” *The Atlantic*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/trump-immigration-ban-terrorism/514361/> (accessed April 4, 2019).

¹⁴“Saudi Crown prince promises return to moderate Islam,” *Al Jazeera*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html> (accessed March 30, 2019)

¹⁵“I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says crown prince,” *The Guardian*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince> accessed (April 5, 2019).

¹⁶“Saudi Crown prince promises return to moderate Islam,” *Al Jazeera*, October 24, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/saudi-crown-prince-promises-return-moderate-islam-171024182102549.html> (accessed March 28, 2019).

Accusations against Iran

Mohammed bin Salman's plans to modernize and reform Saudi Arabia became a subject of extensive discussions beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia — both in academic and political circles. During this period, several questions were raised as to what extent such assurances were sincere and realistic, and, ultimately, to what extent Saudi Arabia was more open and moderate throughout its entire history; that is, the period of time until 1979 that Mohammed bin Salman was speaking about. Let us note once more that he believed that until the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Islamic interpretations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did not come from radical positions. It was noted that the Saudis were living in the same way as in the other Arab countries, they were going to movie theaters, and the women were driving cars.

It should be noted that after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the situation somewhat destabilized in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf area. The political awakening of Islam entered a new international phase. The religious regime of Iran had the objective of “exporting” the Khomeini interpretation of political Shi'ism to the outside world. Political Shi'ism created an opposition, even a competition, with Sunni Islam's conservative directions that were rooted in the Gulf region, including in Saudi Arabia. This caused serious concern, first and foremost, in the Gulf's Sunni monarchies, where there were Shi'ite confessional communities, as well as in Iraq, where more than 60 percent of the population was Shi'ite. Besides the fact that the Sunni regimes of the Gulf were concerned that the wave of revolution would also spread in their countries and make the local Shi'ite communities become active, there was another important fact which was making what occurred in Iran more unacceptable: Wahhabism's traditionally intolerant approach toward Shi'ite Islam. This created a completely new tension and distrust in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Some time after the Islamic revolution in Iran, the situation became extremely destabilized in Saudi Arabia. On November 20, 1979, under the influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Great Mosque of Mecca was seized by a group of revolutionaries, whose leader was Juhayman al-Utaybi (1936-1980). The seizure lasted for two weeks and caused a great shock, both in the Kingdom and in the region. The crisis was overcome by French Special Forces.¹⁷ However, the more religious and conservative circles of society protested against foreign intervention just as they did in August 1990, during the days of the second Gulf crisis, when the US-led coalition

¹⁷Stephen Rakowski, “How the 1979 siege of Mecca haunts the House of Saud,” *Stratfor*, July 2, 2017, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/how-1979-siege-mecca-haunts-house-saud> (accessed March 27, 2019).

armed forces used the territory of Saudi Arabia to prevent Iraq's aggression against Kuwait.

Starting from the 1980s, the royal family in Saudi Arabia further tightened control over internal dissident movements that were formed on religious grounds, and which have existed since the inception of the Kingdom. The royal family has fought and in some cases cooperated with members of the same Ikhwan, or Sahwa, as well as the Islamic movements.

After the Islamic revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia further intensified the Islamic vector of its foreign policy, which most likely had an objective of not only strengthening Saudi Arabia's position in the outside world, but also to take the conservative and radical sources out of the country's borders. The proof of this is Saudi Arabia's active intervention in the war that began after the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. With the help of the Wahhabi ulama, Saudi Arabia declared Jihad against the infidel Soviet forces, and acted in that country with assistance by military groups that were inspired by Wahhabism.

It should be taken into consideration that Mohammed bin Salman was quite right when he was saying that the Islamic revolution in Iran changed the situation in the region by forming a new religious agenda. However, MBS' remarks stating that Saudi Arabia was more open as a society and state, do not sound so valid.

Human rights under Mohammed bin Salman

Returning to Mohammed bin Salman's plans for Saudi Arabia's modernization and reforms, it should be noted that the most important precondition that would inspire confidence toward this process should have been the drastic and radical changes in the domain of human rights, surmounting the climate of fear and terror, and formation of free speech. According to human rights groups, arrests of human rights activists have risen under Mohammed bin Salman.¹⁸ The situation in the Kingdom has grown even worse in terms of free speech. According to media publications Mohammed bin Salman has reportedly created the Tiger Squad (*Firqat al-Nemr*), a team of assassins that act as a death squad, to target Saudi critics inside and outside Saudi Arabia.¹⁹

¹⁸ "Rights groups condemn Saudi arrests as crackdown on dissent," *Reuters*, September 15, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests/rights-groups-condemn-saudi-arrests-as-crackdown-on-dissent-idUSKCN1BQ1RR> (accessed April 3, 2019).

¹⁹ Mustafa Abu Sneh, "The Saudi death squad MBS uses to silence dissent," *Middle East Eye*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/revealed-saudi-death-squad-mbs-uses-silence-dissent> (accessed April 6, 2019).

In June 2017, three months after becoming crown prince, MBS launched the arrests of several well-known clerics.²⁰ Among them were Sahwa movement²¹ representatives Salman al-Ouda and Awad al-Qarni. There were also opposition activists and journalists among the arrested. Several international human rights organizations have reacted to the domestic policy of Mohammed bin Salman. His biggest and most risky move may yet prove to be his bid to curb the power of the conservative religious establishment.

Sarah Leah Whitson, Executive Director of Middle East and North Africa Division at Human Rights Watch, made a statement noting that Mohammed bin Salman's pledges to uproot extremism are solely a showcase if people continue to be imprisoned. Severe violations of human rights, including not only torture, but also travel bans, terrorism, judicial proceedings, fraudulent schemes, etc., continue as before.²²

It is noteworthy that violence against women, which was already widespread, continues.²³ Human Rights Watch has documented numerous escape attempts by Saudi women over the years. Women face systematic discrimination and are left exposed to domestic violence under the male guardianship system and have few places to turn when they face abuse, leading some women to undertake dangerous escape attempts to flee the country.²⁴

To this day, it has not become clear as to what MBS meant when he was speaking about returning to moderate Islam. It is interesting that Mohammed bin Salman replaced clerics having dissenting voices with younger clerics from his circles so that they will not be able to obstruct the process of those reforms, the boundaries of which have been outlined by the crown prince. His appointments to the clerical establishment, particularly

²⁰“Saudi Arabia. Prominent clerics arrested,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 15, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/15/saudi-arabia-prominent-clerics-arrested> (accessed April 6, 2019).

²¹Sahwa is a Saudi term that refers to all political Islamic movements whose major umbrella is the Muslim Brotherhood. It's a faction of Saudi Qutbism. In Saudi Arabia Sahwa movement has been involved in peaceful political reforms. The representatives of this trend are active on social media and have earned some support amongst the more educated youth. The leader of the new national vision MBS intend to end the chapter of “Sahwa” promising to destroy extremists (accessed April 6, 2019).

²²“Saudi Arabia. Prominent clerics arrested,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 15, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/15/saudi-arabia-prominent-clerics-arrested> (accessed April 4, 2019).

²³“Allow to access to detained women activists,” *Human Rights Watch*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/06/saudi-arabia-allow-access-detained-women-activists> (accessed April 2, 2019).

²⁴“10 Reasons Why Women Flee,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 30, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/30/saudi-arabia-10-reasons-why-women-flee> (accessed March 30, 2019).

Sheikh Muhammad al-Issa, the new head of the Muslim World League, reflect a relative liberality in the interpretation of Islam.²⁵

In the meantime, human rights defenders continue demanding to review several cruel Shari'a punishments that are envisaged for infringing upon God's rights. There is a public demand in the country to set a minimum age of marriage, prohibit polygamy, dissolve religious police in general, etc.²⁶

A shadow was cast on Mohammed bin Salman's reforms' process by Saudi dissident writer and publicist Jamal Khashoggi's shameful murder in 2018 at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The Central Intelligence Agency has concluded that the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, ordered the killing of the journalist, Jamal Khashoggi. The C.I.A. made the assessment based on the crown prince's control of Saudi Arabia, which is such that the killing would not have taken place without his approval.²⁷

In the meantime, the topic is taboo in the Kingdom where restricted speech, climate of terror and fear, and a ban on criticizing the royal family is in effect. According to separate viewpoints, to maintain its international standing, Saudi Arabia should have renounced MBS and the prospect for his becoming King. Madawi al-Rasheed, one of the best-known dissident academics of the Saudi diaspora and who is the author of numerous works on the history of Saudi Arabia, noted that the ruling Saudi elite should find a solution to removing MBS, since some of Ibn Saud's sons, such as Prince Ahmed (who is King Salman's brother), who are eligible to become the successor, are alive.²⁸

The assassination of Khashoggi was a huge blow not only to Riyadh's standing, but also to the crown prince's aspirations to become the King of Saudi Arabia, while he is represented as an architect of reforms in the social and political domains of Saudi Arabia. Madawi al-Rasheed, a Saudi author,

²⁵ John Irish, "Wiping out extremist ideology is my mission: head of Saudi-based Muslim body," *Reuters*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-islam/wiping-out-extremist-ideology-is-my-mission-head-of-saudi-based-muslim-body-idUSKBN1DO1JV> accessed (April 5, 2019).

²⁶ "Saudi Arabia advisory body aims to end child marriage, setting minimum age limit of 15, but loopholes remain," *South China Morning Post*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/middle-east/article/2181608/saudi-arabia-advisory-body-aims-end-child-marriage-setting> (accessed April 3, 2019).

²⁷ "C.I.A. Concludes That Saudi Crown prince Ordered Khashoggi Killed," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/politics/cia-saudi-crown-prince-khashoggi.html> (accessed April 8, 2019).

²⁸ Why King Salman Must Replace M.B.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/opinion/saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi-crown-prince-murder-king-salman-must-replace-mbs-stability.html> (accessed March 27, 2019).

said that Saudi Arabia should replace its crown prince in order to save its reputation and avoid becoming a pariah state.²⁹

Conclusion

The current human rights situation and solely cosmetic changes in Saudi Arabia show that Mohammed bin Salman's plans are not sincere and they do not inspire confidence, since the tough restrictions on free speech, as well as violence, torture, imprisonments, and travel bans continue in Saudi Arabia. Just like in most recent years, harsh persecutions against female activists who fight for women's rights continue. In many cases, a large number of women human rights defenders, who favor radical transformations in women's rights and in the country's patriarchal society, have found themselves in prison. Paradoxically, several reformist clerics are also in prison.

At the same time, the question of what support Mohammed bin Salman's reforms have in Saudi Arabia within the society and the Wahhabi ulama is of interest. It is a fact that it is virtually impossible to conduct public opinion polls in Saudi Arabia, in connection with the peculiarities of the political system of this state. According to scattered data, there are circles in Saudi society, especially among the youth, who defend the reforms and support Mohammed bin Salman. At any rate, this is how many of them respond to the surveys. I tend to believe that if there were a chance to speak freely and to oppose in Saudi Arabia, the same youth would take to the streets, just like in other Arab countries, and protest against the ruling Saudi family.

Even though the definitions of "moderate" Islam are not so clear, every change is viewed as a retreat from ultra conservatism. It is worth mentioning that radical changes will hardly be made in Saudi Arabia as long as it is still a "God-state" and the ruling royal family governs the country together with the Wahhabi elite, as long as the alliance between the Wahhabism and the Saud family is not dissolved, and while Wahhabism lies at the foundation of state ideology.

Finally, to what extent is the theory that Saudi Arabia was an open and moderate country before the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran true? This theory will not withstand any criticism, since Wahhabism has been an inseparable part of Saudi Arabia's education, ideology, public and political system - an ideology that disputes the truthfulness and orthodoxy of the non-Wahhabi interpretations of Sunni Islam. It can be stated that the Islamic revolution in Iran did not change or cause Islamic extremism in Saudi

²⁹Madawi al-Rasheed, "Why King Salman must replace MBS," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/18/opinion/saudi-arabia-jamal-khashoggi-crown-prince-murder-King-salman-must-replace-mbs-stability.html> (accessed April 1, 2019).

Arabia, but rather it changed the nature of geopolitical processes in the Middle East.

A huge rivalry began between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Iran and Arab states with a Sunni orientation. Saudi Arabia began to more intensively “export” the Wahhabi trend of Sunni Islam to the outside world, with the objective of defending its own positions in the outside world. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia also exposed some tension in inter confessional relations, which have (since 2003) become acute in Iraq, and then, during the “Arab Spring”, they continued in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. MBS’s regional foreign policy initiatives have not worked out as he had hoped. The *Trump administration’s* unwavering support for the Crown Prince despite all this has helped him successfully consolidate power in his own hands in a way that is unprecedented in recent Saudi history.