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Saudi Arabia in transition

by Lawrence G. Potter

King of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (center), Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (right) and Crown Prince, First Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior Muhammad bin Nayef (left) pose for a photograph before the announcement of the economic reform plan known as "Vision 2030" in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on April 25, 2016. (BANDAR ALGALOUD/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES)

As 2017 began, the incoming administration of Donald J. Trump was faced with a difficult situation in the Middle East, with active conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the nuclear agreement with Iran under renewed attack, the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians still stalled, and strained relations with Egypt and Turkey. Proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia continued in Yemen and Syria, drawing in the U.S. A military offensive against Mosul and Raqqa, with American participation, is now contesting ISIS' control of parts of Iraq and Syria, but this will be a prolonged struggle.

The Arab Spring, the region-wide upheaval demanding reform and democracy that swept the Middle East starting in early 2011, led to the downfall of rulers in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, yet did not lead to the reforms ardently wished for. Gulf rulers were alarmed by demands for political reform, and responded by blaming Iran, seeking to buy off political opposition and stepping up internal repression.

The situation in Saudi Arabia has now been transformed by the accession to power of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, 81, in January 2015 following the death of his half-brother, King Abdullah, who had ruled the country since 2005. The new leadership includes the crown prince, Muhammad bin Nayef, 57, also the interior minister, who

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Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (left), deputy crown prince and defense minister of Saudi Arabia, and U.S. President Barack Obama meet at the White House in Washington, D.C, on June 17, 2016. (ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES)

has a background in counter-terrorism. The king's son, Mohammed bin Salman, 31, is deputy crown prince and the person many regard as the real decision-maker. Ambitious and brash (he did not hesitate to upbraid President Obama over U.S. policy), he is spearheading major changes in domestic policy. The new team has also embarked on a much more aggressive foreign policy to oppose Iranian inroads in the region, intervening in the conflict in Syria and initiating a disastrous war in Yemen.

The change in government coincided with a precipitous drop in the price of oil—the state's main resource—which started in mid-2014, after a decade of high prices. Prices fell from a peak of $145 per barrel in 2008 to below $30 in 2016, ending the year in the $50 range. This has led to an economic crisis and a massive budget deficit of $98 billion in 2015, and a projected $87 billion in 2016. In response, the government has introduced a plan for major reforms and reductions in expenditure, dubbed "Saudi Vision 2030." These reforms amount to a rewriting of the "ruling bargain" long in effect between the government and its citizens during the age of plenty: As long as the government took care of people's needs, including employment, housing, education and health care, and did not tax them, they would delegate decisions of how to rule to the Al Saud. Such major policy changes have unsettled Saudis, and, if implemented, there is no guarantee they will work.

The U.S. hope of reducing its footprint in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf, has had to be repeatedly deferred. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that President Obama inherited from his predecessor, George W. Bush, were supposed to be over by now, but American troops are still fighting in both. Official ties with Saudi Arabia, the U.S.' most important Arab ally, are badly strained, and support for the Saudis has plummeted in public opinion. On September 28, Congress overrode the president's veto of a bill (the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act or JASTA) that would allow families of victims of the September 11 attacks to sue the Saudi government for any role in the event. Although the official investigation of the 9/11 attacks concluded that there was "no evidence" that they were funded by the Saudi government or senior officials, questions have persisted as to whether lower-level officials or other Saudis were complicit and information was being suppressed. The Saudis have threatened to retaliate by selling off their assets in the U.S.

The war in Yemen, which has so far claimed an estimated 10,000 casualties, has put the U.S. in an untenable position. The Obama administration has reluctantly supported the air war that began there in 2015 in hopes of reinstalling President Abdu Mansour Hadi, who was removed from power by Iranian-aligned Houthi rebels. U.S. assistance has included aircraft, munitions, training and in-flight refueling. This support is partly payback for Saudi acquiescence in the Iranian nuclear deal. In the opinion of the *New York Times*, "If the Saudis refuse to halt the carnage and resume negotiations on a political settlement, Mr. Obama should end military support. Otherwise, America could be implicated in war crimes and be dragged even deeper into the conflict."

Saudi Arabia is also facing criticism for the export of Wahhabism, its austere version of Islam that is widely believed to have contributed to the spread of jihadist violence. The paradox is that although the country is accused of funding and exporting terrorists, it has been fighting a homegrown terrorist movement since al-Qaeda first targeted the Al Saud, and is now experiencing attacks by ISIS.

In the face of perceived U.S. unreliability, coupled with financial crisis at home, Saudi Arabia has undertaken dramatic policy changes. According to Prince Turki Al Faisal, former ambassador to the U.S. and former head of intelligence, "America has changed, we have changed and definitely we need to realign and readjust our understandings of each other." Americans have started to wonder: Should they regard Saudi Arabia as a friend or foe? Clearly, some readjustment of relations is in store.

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Religion and state in Saudi Arabia

Tribes were the key to forming modern states in the Arabian Peninsula, although the dynasties ruling there are mostly of urban origin. Particularly significant was a religious reform movement known as the Wahhabis, which arose in the central region of Najd in the 18th century. It was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d.1792), a preacher who formed a partnership in 1744 with a local chieftain, Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765), and went on to conquer much of the peninsula.

This led to the formation of three Saudi states, the first lasting from 1744 to 1818 (destroyed by the governor of Egypt, acting on Ottoman behalf); the second from 1824 to 1891 (put to an end by the Rashidis, a tribal dynasty); and the third state, founded by Abdulaziz Ibn Saud in 1902, which persists today. Although Ibn Saud incorporated much of Arabia into what became the new state of Saudi Arabia in 1932, he was prevented by the British from swallowing up the small shaikhdoms they protected along the Gulf coast, or expanding into Iraqi and Jordanian territory. The discovery of oil in 1938 by American prospectors ensured the state's survival. Since Ibn Saud died in 1953, only his sons have ruled the country, including the present King Salman.

Wahhabi Islam

The Wahhabi version of Islam is austere. Like other Islamic schools, it emphasizes monotheism and the obligation to pay *zakat,* or taxes to be remitted to the leader of the community. Its theology, however, rejects any form of intercession with God, such as visiting the shrines of saints. Wahhabism seeks a return to a purified faith and opposes all it regards as *bid'a* (reprehensible innovation), such as Sufism and Shi'ism. It enjoins believers to carry out jihad ("holy war") against those who do not follow these principles. This led in the early 19th century to attacks on Shi'a holy places in present-day Iraq, as well as in Medina.

While religion was the main animating force of the movement, economic reward was also a key to its success. Historian Hala Fattah notes that the Wahhabi tendency to label Muslim opponents as unbelievers (*kafir*, plural *kuffar*), and thereby excommunicate them by the act of *takfir*, led to an early struggle over pilgrimage and communication routes in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as to attempts to collect protection money and impose a trade monopoly. Before oil, the annual Hajj pilgrimage was a significant source of income. Today, Saudi control of the Hajj is very important for political and economic reasons.

The use of the derogatory term "Wahhabi" is, however, problematic, and it was originally introduced by the opponents of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. By naming a movement after a man (like the analogous "Muhammadism"), it seeks to emphasize that its doctrines were created by a man and that its followers belong to a heretical cult, not mainstream Sunni Islam. The current use of the term to refer to (and delegitimize) movements outside of Saudi Arabia is also misleading. Most Saudis regard themselves as Sunni Muslims who adhere to Salafism; that is, they follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, who constitute the worthy ancestors of today's true Muslims (*al-salaf*). Salafists are mainly concerned with problems of the Islamic world and questions of individual piety, not international relations or even politics. The Western media usually refer to the radical and militant branch of Salafists as "Jihadi" or "Salafi Jihadi."

"Salafism morphed into a religious movement with a number of political manifestations, only one of which was the blend of social conservatism and political quietism represented by the official Saudi variant," according to F. Gregory Gause III, professor at the Bush School of Government at Texas A&M University. While acknowledging that the Saudis have set up institutions and networks to spread a puritanical, intolerant form of Islam abroad, he points out that they long ago lost control of the global Salafi movement, if they ever had it, and it is unrealistic to think that they control it. "This means that leaning on the Saudis to become 'less Wahhabi' is unlikely to have much effect on jihadist movements like Al Qaeda and Islamic State [ISIS]."

The role of the ulama

Like other religions and religious tendencies, over more than 250 years the doctrine and practice of "Wahhabism" has undergone an evolution. In the beginning, it was a partnership between a religious and a secular figure, in which the descendants of Muhammad bin Saud provided "secular" leadership of the state, and the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (the Al Shaikh family) provided religious leadership. As Ibn Saud consolidated his power in the early 20th century, this balance had to change. In 1929, the Ikhwan (Brethren), his fervent tribal warriors, wanted to attack the British Mandate of Iraq against his wishes. A major battle took place (Battle of Sibila), in which the forces of the king vanquished these religious zealots.

From then on, the balance between religion and state changed. The role of the Wahhabi *ulama* (Muslim religious scholars with recognized authority in matters of sacred law and theology), originally partners with the secular Al Saud, was increasingly circumscribed. While the state pays deference to the ulama, since the defeat of the Ikhwan it has always been

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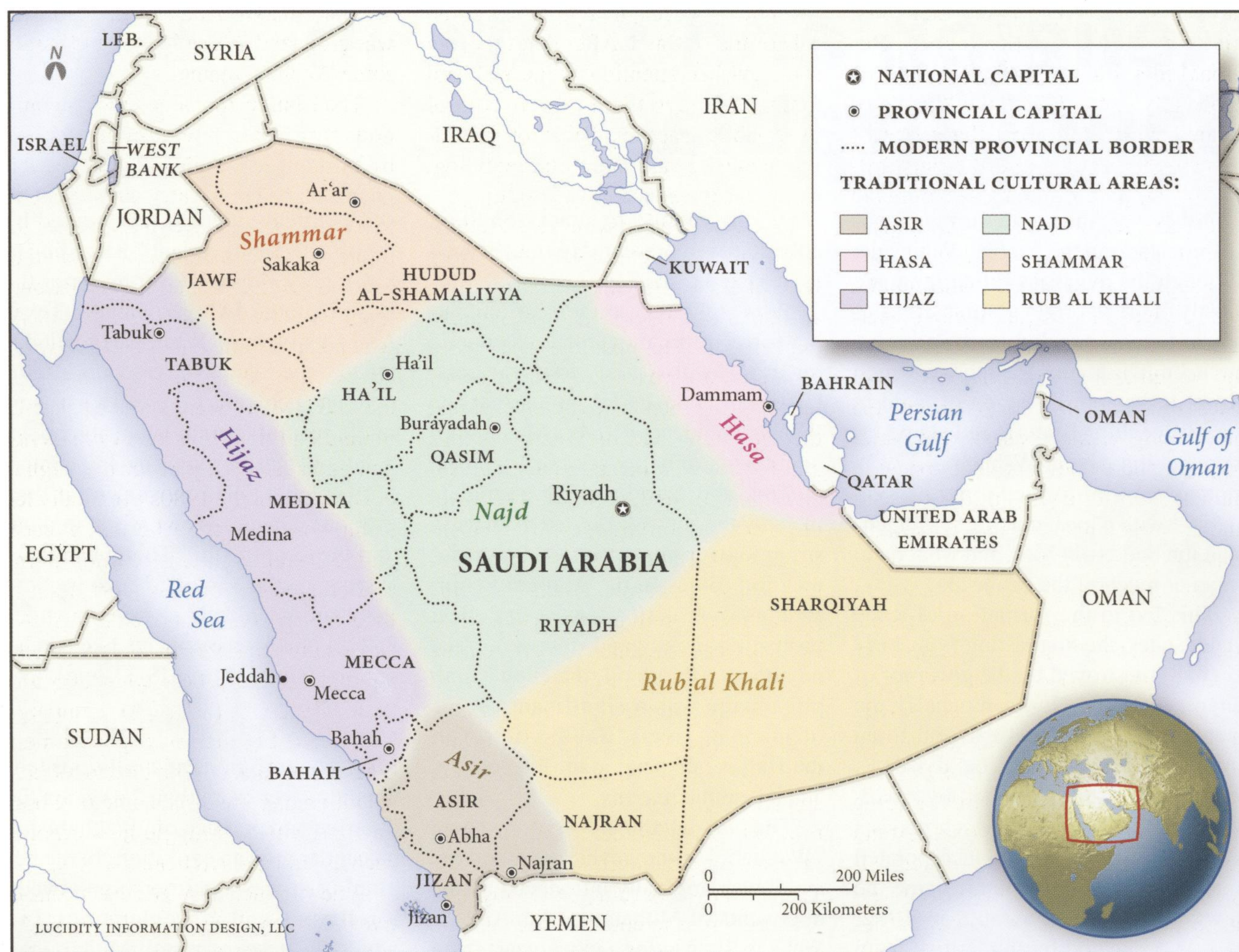

in charge, and most ulama have been part of the government bureaucracy. While some marriages have occurred between the Al Shaikh family and the Al Saud family since the 1940s, these are not important when it comes to the political affairs of the country. In 1971, King Faisal created a Council of Senior Ulama, which, by means of its *fatwas* (religious edicts), provides religious sanction for state policies.

The support of the Wahhabi ulama remains a key source of legitimacy for the rule of the Al Saud. "In Saudi Arabia, stability depends to a large degree on cooperation between the ruling family and the *ulama*," according to Czech scholar Ondrej Beranek. "During the second half of the twentieth century...the expression of traditional Abd al-Wahhab's doctrine changed from the revivalist Salafi movement to apologetic institutionalized religion, which has supported two very controversial, yet very frequent political habits in the history of Islam: hereditary political power and absolute submission to the ruling authority."

National identity

Since the current state was founded in 1902, it has tried to foster a sense of national identity where none existed before. As Saudi historian Madawi Al-Rasheed explains, "Saudi historical narratives create a memory of a population riven by warfare, instability, and rivalry as a prelude to the paramount role of the Wahhabi call...more importantly, the narrative asserts the leading role of the Najdi population." Ignoring the unique identity and historical roles played by regions such as Hijaz, Asir and al-Ahsa, Saudi texts speak of the country's "unification" rather than "conquest."

The result is a skewed portrayal of pre-oil Arabia and the Gulf, with a loss of the diversity and ambiguity that characterized it. Thus the heritage of the sedentary Najdi population is emphasized to the exclusion of other elements. However, rather than a state based on Bedouin and "tribal values," in reality Saudi Arabia was very much the exclusive project of those living in settled communities who were often in conflict with Bedouins, cautions Saudi scholar Abdulaziz Al-Fahad.

Today, all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are trying to create a historical memory and sense of loyalty to the ruling dynasties. This is promoted partly by state-sponsored histories, which omit or downplay the role of groups such as the Shi'a, who

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have responded by writing their own histories to correct the record. Regional identities nevertheless live on, especially in the Hijaz, the "cradle of Islam" which contains the cities of Mecca and Medina and the outward-looking seaport of Jiddah. According to anthropologist Mai Yamani, the Hijazis regard themselves as superior to the less-sophisticated Najdis, who run the country, while the Najdis regard Hijazis as being tainted by impure lineage and too liberal and westernized. The strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and the privileging of the conservative Najdi lifestyle and values has little appeal in the Hijaz or Shi'a parts of the country, and its attraction to the modern middle class is questionable.

In the past, there were a variety of identities that took priority over state identity in Saudi Arabia, including tribe, religion, ethnic group, city and province.

Now, according to Professor Al-Rasheed, "the old, mild nationalism that immediately followed the establishment of Gulf nation-states is developing into an assertive, hypernationalist trend centered on militarization—specifically in the UAE [United Arab Emirates] and Saudi Arabia, where both countries project themselves as being at war with an Iranian proxy whose tentacles reach their own backyard in Yemen."

The Islamic opposition in Saudi Arabia

The resurgence of religion in personal and political life that has marked the Middle East since the 1970s also affected the Arabian Peninsula. Ostensibly, Saudi Arabia was the most "Islamic" of states, being the birthplace of Islam and strictly ruled according to the Sharia, or Islamic law. However, in the Muslim world, political action has often been taken in the name of religion by governments and opposition groups alike. The Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist movement active for decades in Egypt, was welcomed in the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s and played a big role in the educational system. In 1979, Saudi security forces fought a bloody battle to oust Islamic militants who had taken over Islam's holiest site, the Grand Mosque in Mecca, in a protest over the rule of the Al Saud. After that time, the state lavished attention on the Wahhabi ulama and gave them greater control over public space and behavior, including television and radio programming, as well as the educational system.

The Gulf War, in which a U.S. military coalition evicted Iraqi forces from Kuwait (1990–91) changed everything and led to the rise of a potent Islamist opposition. "The post-war resurgence of Islamism was a reaffirmation of identity, a protest movement against the monarchy and its Western allies, and for some, a means to achieve social influence and, perhaps, a takeover of power," according to political scientist R. Hrair Dekmejian. A new generation of clerics known as the "Sahwa" (Awakening), influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, led resistance to state policies. They accused the ruling Al Saud of squandering resources, being puppets of the West, and not being sufficiently "Islamic" in their rule. A bitter split developed between the "official" religious establishment, supported by the state, and the outlawed opposition. Thus the fatwa, or ruling, allowing non-Muslim forces to enter Saudi Arabia in 1990, issued by the senior religious scholar, Shaikh 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Baz, was criticized as a sellout on the part of some Wahhabi ulama.

The Islamic opposition took an ominous turn when new groups inspired by militant ideologies of jihad in Afghanistan began to carry out violent attacks and to challenge the Sahwists for influence. Osama bin Laden, a Saudi of Yemeni origin, formed a transnational Islamist network, al-Qaeda, in 1988, which carried out a number of terrorist attacks, including the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. (Many were shocked that 15 of the 19 airplane hijackers were identified as Saudi.) Support for the Afghan *mujahideen* in the 1980s eventually led to blowback for the Al Saud, as radicalized Arab fighters returned home and created an offshoot, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP carried out a number of violent attacks against the state between 2003 and 2006. By 2008, the AQAP campaign had failed because of a government crackdown, lack of popular support and a split among jihadists, some of whom gave priority to struggle in war zones such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

A new branch of AQAP has been active in Yemen since 2009. While AQAP remains a threat in Saudi Arabia, today

Saudi Governor of Medina Faisal bin Salman bin Abdulaziz (second right) and security officers look at blood stains on the ground after a suicide attack near the security headquarters outside one of Islam's holiest sites, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina on July 4, 2016. (STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGESS)

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Saudi security men bombard a building near the site where police exchanged fire with suspected al-Qaeda militants in the city of Dammam, September 6, 2005. (STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Riyadh faces a more potent challenge from ISIS, which it also regards as a "deviant sect." ISIS has mainly targeted Shi'a mosques and the security services, but an attack last July on the Prophet's Mosque in Medina shocked Saudis. Their declaration of a caliphate in 2014 was a direct challenge to Saudi pretensions to be the leader of the Islamic world.

How dangerous is the Islamic opposition in Saudi Arabia? At present, it constitutes a security threat, but not a threat to regime stability. The Al Saud can count on the support of the Wahhabi ulama, revel in their custody of the holy cities in the Hijaz, and still have vast financial resources at their disposal. The legitimacy of the royal family to rule is well-established and religiously justified, and the unrest in nearby states such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen has made Saudis think twice about replacing their government. The ulama stood by the Al Saud during the Arab Spring protests.

A more recent concern is how winding down the wars in Iraq and Syria will affect Saudi Arabia. These conflicts have served as a destination of Saudi jihadists, who have gone there to fight against the Shi'a and the Americans. The Saudi government fears that these forces will receive training and experience, only to later return home and foment instability.

Saudi society: the urgency of reform

The succession

King Salman is likely to be the last of the sons of Ibn Saud to rule, and the transition to a new generation of leaders has begun. The crown prince, Muhammad bin Nayef, favored by the U.S., is next in line to the throne. Should King Salman die early, it is possible that Muhammad bin Nayef, as king, could dismiss Mohammed bin Salman and install a new deputy crown prince. It is unclear how this would affect the policies, such as the war in Yemen, that are identified with his rival.

Political decisions in Saudi Arabia are traditionally taken by consensus among a small family elite, with input from the Sunni ulama. There is also an appointed 150-member Shura Council that provides limited advice. Although given wide powers by his father, Mohammed bin Salman's youth and inexperience are concerns in a society that venerates and defers to its elders. However, the crown prince does reflect the young society he rules over—in Saudi Arabia, 70% of the population is under 30—and he will presumably have different priorities than his predecessors. He is not believed to be overly wedded to tradition. "The next generation of Gulf leaders will likely embrace an alternative model: good governance. Specifically, they will concentrate on delivering public services effectively, improving their management of public administration, and pursuing economic reforms that ensure the long-term prosperity of the GCC," according to RAND analysts Becca Wasser and Jeffrey Martini.

The new generation

Saudi Arabia is experiencing a "youth bulge" and needs to create about 226,000 jobs a year, although in 2015 only 49,000 were added. As in other GCC states, there is a widespread preference on the part of nationals to work in the public sector, since this assures them of higher wages, shorter working hours and longer holidays, plus the probability that they cannot be fired. However, it has led to a "culture of entitlement" and criticism that the new generation is not prepared to work hard.

Thanks to new information technology such as smart phones and satellite TV, governments no longer have a monopoly on information and the younger generation are much more aware of what is happening in their own country, the region and the world than in the past. Saudi youth are known to be heavily addicted to social media. The rulers, for their part, are making skillful use of such media to introduce the Vision 2030 plan, with a reported 190,000 Twitter users participating in a discussion about it. Mohammed bin Salman has cultivated younger clerics, who have millions of followers on social media. Government officials must now worry about accountability, and have to monitor their social media accounts to make sure they respond to any criticism.

The role of women

The role of women in Saudi Arabia is severely circumscribed compared to that in neighboring Islamic states. This is partly due to the religious necessity to separate the sexes. Modest dress is, of course, essential for both men and women. Without the permission of a male guardian, women can't leave their homes, get a passport, marry, travel or receive higher education. Last September, around 15,000 Saudis signed an online petition to the government to end the male guardianship system now in place. The younger generation still finds ways to have fun, such as meeting in malls and flirting on social media. While women make up an estimated 60% of university students, there are few jobs for them when they graduate, a situation that increasingly poses a financial hardship. So far they cannot drive, but this may change be-

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Female genetics researchers at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center on April 14, 2016, in Riyadh. (DAVID DEGNER/GETTY IMAGES)

fore long. Nevertheless, more women are now entering professions such as law. In 2013, King Abdullah appointed 30 women to the Shura Council, and in 2015, women were allowed to vote and run in municipal elections for the first time. Mohammed bin Salman has indicated that he wants women to be a more productive part of the economy, and he may be sympathetic to the loosening of social codes. He already has reined in the morality police who patrolled streets and malls, which was one of the most-criticized mechanisms of social control imposed by the Wahhabi ulama.

Human rights

When President Obama met with King Salman in Riyadh in April 2016, the sharpest exchanges came as he criticized the Saudi record on human rights, noting harsh sentences and beheadings, while the king defended the justice system. The Saudis are not interested in American advice about their domestic affairs. The U.S. has typically softpedaled criticism of Saudi Arabia, notably during the Arab Spring. According to the Human Rights Watch report for 2015, "The United States largely did not criticize Saudi human rights violations beyond congressionally-mandated annual reports."

The situation has not improved under King Salman. The Human Rights Watch report charged that Saudi authorities continued arbitrary arrests, trials and convictions of peaceful dissidents. They discriminated against religious minorities and sent people to prison for criticizing the authorities. Freedom of expression and freedom of worship do not exist. The rate of executions, including beheadings, rose dramatically in 2015. In one notorious example, in 2014 blogger Raif Badawi was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes (50 have been administered so far) for setting up a liberal website and "insulting Islam" online. This even prompted an objection from the State Department. Nevertheless, last October, Saudi Arabia was re-elected to the UN's Human Rights Council.

In a recent report, Hala Aldosari, a visiting scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington and the director of an online project on women's rights in Saudi Arabia, points out that human rights activists in Saudi Arabia are a diverse group containing many women, liberals and Shi'a. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, social networks in Saudi Arabia and abroad have been drawing attention to human rights abuses. She believes that the newly announced reforms can give activists an opportunity to press their case. However, she notes that "the king and his circle retain absolute authority to override otherwise binding laws, international treaty commitments, or other apparently official decisions."

The economy: end of an era

In the GCC states, the "ruling bargain" that evolved after the discovery of oil and development of a rentier economy (one that depends on revenue from oil rents) is now badly in need of reformulation. This is especially true in Saudi, whose population (31.7 million, about 33% of whom are estimated to be foreign) is higher and per capita income ($54,730) lower than other petro-states. As long as oil revenue was high, the government could take care of people's needs, such as employment, housing and health care, and expected obedience in return. The drastic reduction in income has now led to reduced salaries (even for princes) and subsidies, and the beginning of taxation. Presumably in return people will now expect more accountability and participation in affairs of state. But opening up society could in turn shake the legitimacy of monarchs who don't want to share power. Ruling families thus face a conundrum about how much to liberalize.

How bad is the situation? Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman warned in April 2016, "We have developed an oil addiction in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, among everyone. That is dangerous, and that is what has hampered the development of many different sectors in recent years." At the end of 2014, Saudi Arabia had a comfortable $740 billion in foreign currency reserves, but in light of its huge deficit took out about $115 billion in 2015, and clearly cannot sustain withdrawals at that clip. The International Monetary Fund, in a report released in late October, cited a breakeven oil price for Saudi Arabia of $80 a barrel—much more than it is earning now or is expected to earn in the near future. The Arabian Peninsula states all ultimately face a post-oil future. This is already arriving in Bahrain, Oman and Yemen, although it could be delayed by decades in Saudi, the UAE and Kuwait. Adjusting to the new reality will be painful after decades of excess, but there seems to be no alternative to implementing long-overdue structural reforms.

"Saudi Vision 2030," announced in the spring of 2016, is a major set of reforms that aim to reduce government subsidies,

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The Saudi Shi'a

In Saudi Arabia, the official Wahhabi school ignores other strains of Islam such as Sufism found in the Hijaz, the Shi'a in the Eastern Province, and smaller minorities such as the Ismaili Muslims and Christian foreign workers. But the most angst has been caused by the Shi'a, who have periodically dared to express open opposition to the Riyadh government.

Eastern Arabia, with strong historical links to Bahrain, has been predominantly Shi'a for hundreds of years. Both areas were conquered by Najdis and retain a myth of a "golden age" when Shi'a ruled. In other Gulf states, such as Kuwait, Qatar and Oman, the Shi'a are more recent arrivals and tend to support Sunni governments.

Relations between the Wahhabis and the Shi'a have varied since the area was conquered by Ibn Saud in 1913. At first, the Shi'a did not resist the Saudi takeover, hoping that the new rulers would establish peace in the region. The Al Saud practiced what Laurence Louër of the Center for International Studies and Research at Sciences Po, Paris, has characterized as "pragmatic sectarianism" in order to build the new state, for example allowing the Shi'a to have their own religious judges. However, following the politicization of Islam during the Iranian revolution (1978–79), and especially the takeover of the Mecca mosque by Sunni militants in November 1979, the Shi'a issue in Saudi Arabia became politically charged and the group was regarded as a threat. This led to what Louër describes as "a widespread state-sponsored policy of sectarian discrimination."

Saudi Shi'a have not lobbied for an independent state, but have been subject to discrimination in employment and religious expression, and are now feared to be a fifth column for Iran. Wahhabi ulama who have been sent to Eastern Arabia preach that Shi'a are apostates. A major grievance is that although Shi'a live in a major oil-producing area, little money has been returned to develop their region.

The rise of identity politics in the Gulf, and the politicization of religious movements, has led to anti-state activism. From 1979 until 1993, relations between the Saudi government and the Shi'a were confrontational. The first steps to reconcile were taken by King Fahd in 1993, and things improved under his brother, King Abdullah (r. 2005–15). Since the Arab Spring and the uprising in Bahrain, however, conflict has reignited. The execution in January 2016 of a Shi'a religious leader, Shaikh Nimr al-Nimr, who criticized the monarchy, led to outrage among Shi'a throughout the Gulf, especially in Iran, where it inspired attacks on Saudi diplomatic posts and the breaking of diplomatic relations. According to Dr. Toby Matthiesen, a senior research fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford, "As long as the state legitimises itself through a religious nationalism based on the Wahhabiyya the situation of Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia will remain precarious."

Saudi Shi'a children take part in a street procession commemorating Ashura in the Shi'a-dominated Gulf coast city of Qatif on October 11, 2016. Ashura mourns the death of Imam Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed by armies of the Yazid near Karbala in 680 AD. (STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

cut dependency on oil and empower the private sector. The plan would help the country live on less oil revenue, as well as provide jobs for many of the younger generation who are now unemployed. Some two thirds of employed Saudis work for the state, and in September, the government announced drastic cuts in salaries and perks. One of the most dramatic proposals is to sell 5% of the shares of Saudi Aramco, the state oil company, although investors would not have control over output, production or contracts. The huge amount of money raised will be key to carrying out the broad vision of change ahead. "Read in one way, the documents are an ambitious blueprint to change the Saudi way of life. Read in another, they are a scathing indictment of how poorly the kingdom has been run by Prince bin Salman's elders," according to Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, writing in the *New York Times*.

Can this plan work? "Broadly, the direction is right, but there are a lot of question marks about implementation and the size of what they are promising," according to Steffen Hertog of the London School of Economics. One serious problem is the education system, which promotes a religious education and does not prepare students with skills needed in a modern economy. According to an analysis by Theodore Karasik and Joseph Cozza of Gulf State Analytics, a Washington, D.C.-based geopolitical risk consultancy, "The NTP [National Transformation Plan] and Vision 2030 could make Saudi society more vibrant and sustainable. Or they could undermine the kingdom's relative stability and create devastating consequences for the greater Middle East region, as well as global energy and financial markets."

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Saudi foreign policy: a new activism

Traditionally the Saudis took a cautious approach to regional developments and preferred to exert their influence behind the scenes, as they are now doing in Syria. The new, more muscular foreign policy is inspired by the regional turmoil and a fear that Riyadh can no longer rely on the U.S. for protection. Since the overthrow of Saddam, Iraq has no longer been a counterweight to Iran, and for the first time, that country's government has been run by Shi'a. Iranian-supported Shi'a militias now play a significant role in Iraqi politics. GCC States fear increased Iranian influence in the Middle East, and new demands for political and social recognition on the part of their Shi'a minorities. For the first time, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have publicly constructed a military coalition to wage war on their periphery in Yemen. Saudis regard the Yemen conflict as a war of necessity, and so far it has had popular support. They are being subjected to missile attacks, and fear an unstable, failed state on their border that is a haven for terrorists or non-state actors that are proxies for Iran.

The rise of sectarian politics

One of the most harmful effects of the Iraq War in 2003 was the rise in sectarian discourse and a new conception of Shi'ism not merely as a different school of Islam, but an actual security threat to Sunni-led states. In December 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan warned that if the new Iraqi government fell under Iranian influence, a "crescent" of Shi'a movements would result, threatening Sunni governments. Former Egyptian President Mubarak, reflecting usually unstated anxieties, said in April 2005 that "[Shi'a] are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries where they live." This fear is especially salient in Saudi and Bahrain, which have substantial populations that they fear Iran may be manipulating. The increased influence of Iran in Iraq and Syria has put Saudi Arabia on the defensive, and in the fall of 2016 Riyadh was wary of the role Iranian-backed militias were playing in the battle for Mosul.

Many analysts conclude, however, that fears of a rising "Shi'a crescent" are misplaced. For one thing, the Shi'a community is not unified but divided, with many clerics competing for leadership. The most prominent clergyman outside Iran at present is Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, whose teachings many Arab Shi'a in the Gulf follow, and he strives to avoid political involvment except in dire circumstances.

In the Gulf states, Iranian influence is much more limited than in Iraq or Lebanon, according to Laurence Louër. She found that Shi'a movements in the Arab Gulf states were offshoots of Iraqi (not Iranian) movements, and there was a division between pro- and anti-Iranian Shi'a. Shi'a in the Gulf have generally sought to demonstrate loyalty to their own states rather than to Iran. The change of government in Iraq in 2003 did lead to an improvement of the lot of Gulf Shi'a, but this progress was reversed after the Arab Spring.

Israel and Saudi Arabia: a thaw in relations?

One recent regional trend is the strengthening of Israeli ties with the GCC states, stimulated by common hostility to Iran, aversion to radical Islamist groups and apprehension over the Obama administration's policies toward the Middle East. Although the Palestinian issue has always prevented formal bilateral ties between Israel and the GCC, there has recently been an upsurge in informal contacts based on mutual interests. The public visit of a delegation of Saudi academic and business figures to Israel in July 2016 may have been a trial balloon to test public opinion, while discreet off the record talks and business deals are known to have been taking place in recent years. Shared interest in fields such as desalination, renewable energy and military technology, and an appreciation for innovation, are behind such talks.

Despite an absence of formal ties, Israel has maintained discreet relations with its Gulf neighbors. It opened trade offices in Oman and Qatar in 1996, although both were subsequently closed. Israeli tourists are acknowledged to be visiting Dubai, where Mossad assassinated a top Hamas operative in 2010. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince (later King) Abdullah's peace initiative, unveiled in Beirut in 2002, would have normalized relations between Israel and Arab states.

The current rapprochement has grown out of a new political realignment in the Gulf and the region since the Arab Spring. During the talks over the Iran nuclear issue, Israeli intelligence officials communicated with their Arab counterparts in Gulf states, and both were unhappy that an agreement was reached. Israel is not believed to have objected to the transfer of two small islands in the Red Sea from Egypt to Saudi Arabia in 2016. Trade between Israel and the GCC states does exist, but it is conducted through third parties.

It is likely that for the foreseeable future, a new generation in both Israel and the Arab states will take advantage of the changing regional realignment to make pragmatic decisions on cooperation, although any normalization has to await settlement of the Palestinian issue.

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War of words

For some time, both Saudi Arabia and Iran have engaged in heated rhetoric couched in sectarian terms. The death of almost 500 Iranian pilgrims in a stampede at the annual Hajj in September 2015, and the execution of prominent Saudi Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016, was followed by an attack by demonstrators on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran in January 2016 and the breaking of relations by Riyadh. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said at the time, "The history of Iran is full of negative and hostile interference in Arab countries, always accompanied with subversion." This is a feeling shared by all the GCC states to some extent. Abdullah Al-Shayji, a political science professor at Kuwait University, wrote regarding the nuclear agreement: "The deal will embolden Iran, rehabilitate it, enrich it with cash and make it act with hubris and confidence to advance its hegemonic project to dominate the region and undermine our security, sovereignty and stability through its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, and its interventions in GCC states."

In September, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* entitled "Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism," in which he blamed the ideology for instigating terrorism throughout the Middle East. The Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said that "Saudi rulers' refusal to offer a simple verbal apology [for the Hajj incident] was indicative of their ultimate impudence and shamelessness." He went on, "the stampede demonstrated that this government is not qualified to manage the Two Holy Mosques."

How serious is this war of words? Although Saudi Arabia is very concerned about the Iranian threat, the Iranians do not seem too worried about Saudi but keep their focus on relations with major states such as the U.S., Russia, China and Europe. Sectarian rhetoric plays a role in poisoning public opinion and is a factor behind the "proxy wars" around the region. In an interview with *The Economist* in January 2016, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said that "a war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the beginning of a major catastrophe in the region...for sure we will not allow any such thing." In a similar vein, a former top Iranian diplomat, Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, acknowledged the reality: "Security interests of nations and governments in this region are intertwined and security of one country cannot be ensured by fomenting insecurity in another country. On the contrary, when the entire region is made secure, security of all countries will be guaranteed."

Sponsors of global jihadism?

The greatest concern of the U.S., and the hardest one for Saudis to refute, is that the state's vigorous export of Wahhabi ideology has served as the rationale for jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. A classified memo sent by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in December 2009, revealed by WikiLeaks, concluded that "donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide." (It should be noted that such "donors" are private citizens who do not have the approval of the Saudi government.) An important goal of al-Qaeda and ISIS, after all, is to overthrow the ruling Al Saud family.

King Faisal of Saudi Arabia (Faisal ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud) at a luncheon being held at the Dorchester Hotel, London, May 12, 1967. (PIERRE MANEVY/EXPRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES)

Since the time of King Faisal (r. 1964–75), Riyadh has vigorously promoted Islam abroad, always in the Wahhabi version. It has supported a plethora of Islamic organizations, dispatching imams and spending freely to build 1,359 mosques, 210 Islamic centers, 202 colleges and 2,000 schools in countries that do not have an Islamic majority. The Saudis have helped finance mosques in the West, including 16 in the U.S. Saudi religious textbooks have been widely distributed, although their contents have been found to insult other religions, promote jihad and offer a harsh, exclusionary view of other Islamic sects and other religions. ISIS adopted official Saudi textbooks for use in its schools until it published its own in 2015.

Although considerable evidence exists, the Saudis have rejected accusations that their religion has radicalized foreign Muslims and negatively impacted the more moderate, tolerant Islam that exists in many countries, such as Indonesia. The previous king, Abdullah, maintained that "Saudi Arabia stands in the face of those trying to hijack Islam and present it to the world as a religion of extremism, hatred, and terrorism." The Saudi government claims to be cracking down on religious extremism: It fired some 3,500 imams between 2004 and 2012 for refusing to renounce radical views, according to the Ministry of Islamic affairs. While there is no denying the effect of Wahhabi ideology on jihadi groups, there are many other sources of terrorism, notably repressive ruling structures in states that do not provide any hope of change for their people. Internet recruiting is now very effective yet beyond the control of states.

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U.S.-Saudi relations: time of testing

The religion, lifestyle and values of Saudi society may be different from those of most Americans. However, the bargain reached in the post-World War II years that Saudi would supply oil to the world, especially U.S. allies, and the U.S. in return would guarantee its security, has continued to hold. Saudi Arabia has long been one of the closest U.S. allies in the Middle East. During the Cold War, it was a reliable friend that opposed any Soviet inroads. From the time the British voluntarily withdrew from the Gulf in 1971 until the Iranian revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran constituted the "Twin Pillars" that protected American interests. In the 1980s, Saudis worked closely with the U.S. in Afghanistan, providing money and fighters to the mujahideen resistance, which eventually expelled the Soviet invaders. The Saudis also funded anti-communist movements and organizations throughout the world. The one big issue on which the countries differed was Israel and the Palestinians, and during the 1973 war between Israel and Arab states, Saudis acted with others to embargo oil to the U.S. in protest.

President Barack Obama and King Salman walk to President Obama's motorcade after meeting at Erga Palace in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, April 20, 2016. The president began a six day trip to strategize with his counterparts in Saudi Arabia, England and Germany on a broad range of issues with efforts to rein in the Islamic State group being the common denominator in all three stops. (CAROLYN KASTER/AP PHOTO)

Today, the relationship has deteriorated in an alarming fashion. This is partly because of popular and media criticism that foreign policy elites can no longer control. Saudis felt betrayed during the Arab Spring when the U.S. did not prevent the overthrow of President Mubarak of Egypt, a close ally. Similarly, when Syria crossed Obama's redline by using chemical weapons in 2013, and the U.S. did not respond, Saudis questioned U.S. credibility. Worst of all, it seemed to Saudis that the U.S. under President Obama preferred Iran to the Sunni states who historically were the closest U.S. allies in the region.

When Obama was asked if he regarded the Saudis as friends, he replied, "It's complicated." His last official visit to the country in April 2016 revealed deep differences, despite critical cooperation over security and counterterrorism. King Salman did publicly endorse the nuclear deal with Iran, to U.S relief. And a broader rapprochement between Iran and the U.S. has not developed as many in the region feared. Obama pressed the king to be willing to "share" the neighborhood with Iran—an appeal he did not appreciate. He has criticized the kingdom's harsh human rights record, as well as dissatisfaction with the war in Yemen. Obama also reiterated his view that Saudi Arabia and the GCC states in the future needed to rely less on the U.S. for their security.

The top U.S. priority in the region is neutralizing militant jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS. However, the Saudi priority is to counter Iranian and Shi'a influence, which U.S. actions seem to have increased. Since March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition has carried out airstrikes in Yemen in hopes of putting down an insurrection by the Iranian-backed Houthis. (The amount of actual Iranian support for them is often exaggerated.) In response to a series of airstrikes on October 8 that "wrongly targeted" a funeral in the capital, Sanaa, more than 140 people were killed, leading to an international outcry. The National Security Council spokesman, Ned Price, said the U.S. would conduct an immediate review of its support for the Saudi-led coalition. (The administration could, as in the case of Bahrain's desire to buy additional F-16s, put the government on notice that it will not approve the sale unless there is progress on human rights issues.) The war in Yemen is an urgent policy concern, as the U.S. considers whether to scale back military assistance. If it does not, Congress could act to force it to do so.

There have been calls in Congress for the U.S. to take some action to curb the export of Wahhabism, regarded by

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Children sit amidst the rubble of a house hit by Saudi-led coalition air strikes two days earlier on the outskirts of the Yemeni capital Sanaa on November 14, 2016. (MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

many as the root cause of terrorism. For example, Chris Murphy, a Democratic senator from Connecticut, charged in a January 2016 speech that "though ISIS has perverted Islam...the seeds of this perversion are rooted in a much more mainstream version of the faith that derives, in substantial part, from the teachings of Wahhabism." Professor Gause writes in *Foreign Affairs* that much of this is true: "Wahhabism is indeed intolerant, puritanical, and xenophobic... furthermore, ISIS and al Qaeda do share many elements of the Wahhabi worldview, especially regarding the role of Islam in public life." However, he points out that the Islam that Saudi Arabia was exporting until the time of the conflict in Afghanistan (1979–89) was not politicized, and by the 1990s the Saudis no longer controlled the global Salafi-Wahhabi movement. "What all of this means," Gause observes, "is that no amount of U.S. pressure on Saudi Arabia will alter the trajectory of Salafi jihadism, for that ideological movement is now independent of Saudi control."

Some point out that Saudi Arabia, especially at this time, is too important to lose as an ally. It is one of the few functioning states in the Middle East, and continues to supply the world with 13% of its oil—badly needed by U.S. allies—and as of October 2016 was the second largest supplier to the U.S. itself. Washington depends on close cooperation with Saudis on counterterrorism, and they have provided warnings of imminent attacks—for example, a tip in 2010 foiled an attack on two American cargo planes. Saudi Arabia has also been a reliable customer for arms for decades, with some $110 billion sold under the Obama administration. Tens of thousands of Saudis have been educated in the U.S., and thousands of Americans have lived and worked there to build the modern state.

David B. Ottaway, longtime *Washington Post* reporter, believes that the effort to vilify Saudi Arabia is badly misplaced. He comments, "At a time when the United States is struggling mightily to find Middle East partners to implement its counterterrorism agenda, Saudi Arabia remains indispensable and still a willing one." Last October, a senior official in charge of blocking terrorist financing had praise for Saudi efforts to cut off funds for groups like al-Qaeda.

A struggle over U.S. legislation that would embarrass the Saudis and open the possibility of suing the government for supporting the 9/11 terrorists played out during 2016. The Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism act (JASTA) was passed by overwhelming majorities in Congress, only to be vetoed by President Obama in September. With an eye on upcoming elections, and feeling a duty to support the 9/11 families, Congress voted to override the veto on September 28. This bill was opposed by the administration on the basis that it would overturn longstanding principles of international law that protect sovereign states from lawsuits. It opens the door to lawsuits against individual Americans in foreign courts and puts U.S. assets at risk of seizure by overseas litigants.

Saudis had threatened that should the legislation pass, they would be forced to withdraw hundreds of billions of dollars in assets from U.S. jurisdiction, to protect themselves. So far, they have not done so. Some congressmen had second thoughts after the vote, and the administration hoped to make some adjustments in the lame-duck Congress. Even though they had hired an army of lobbyists to defeat the legislation, the vote clearly demonstrated that Saudi Arabia's clout with Washington is not what it used to be.

The next administration

What are the implications of a Trump presidency for U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf? Since the election, there has been much speculation about this, although little to go on given President-elect Trump's lack of specifics during the campaign. A lot will depend on who Trump chooses as advisors. Obviously his comments on banning Muslims from entering the U.S. and use of the term "radical Islamic terrorism" has upset some regional allies. The president-elect made clear his hostility to the Iranian nuclear deal, which he may seek to abrogate or more likely renegotiate. Trump clearly sides with the Sunni monarchs in their struggle against Iran, which could lead to improved ties with Saudi Arabia. However, he has also said (like Obama) that the Gulf monarchies were "free riders" that were dependent upon the U.S. for their security and have to "pay their way" in return for our defending them. It is likely that periodic U.S. complaints about human rights abuses and advocacy for democracy promotion in the region will be toned down. Saudi officials do

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not necessarily favor democratization, which they associate with the disastrous civil war in Iraq and the failed Arab Spring.

Trump seems to have a neo-isolationist bent and is disinclined to support sending U.S. ground forces to the region, which could affect the outcome in Iraq, Syria and other places. It is possible that by the time he takes office, successful offensives against Mosul and Raqqa, the main urban centers of ISIS, could have eliminated the threat of a territorial "caliphate." A major unknown is whether the U.S. could work with Russia against ISIS and acquiesce in leaving Bashar al-Assad in power in Damascus, at least in the short term. This would upset Gulf monarchs who see this as a win for Iranian policy.

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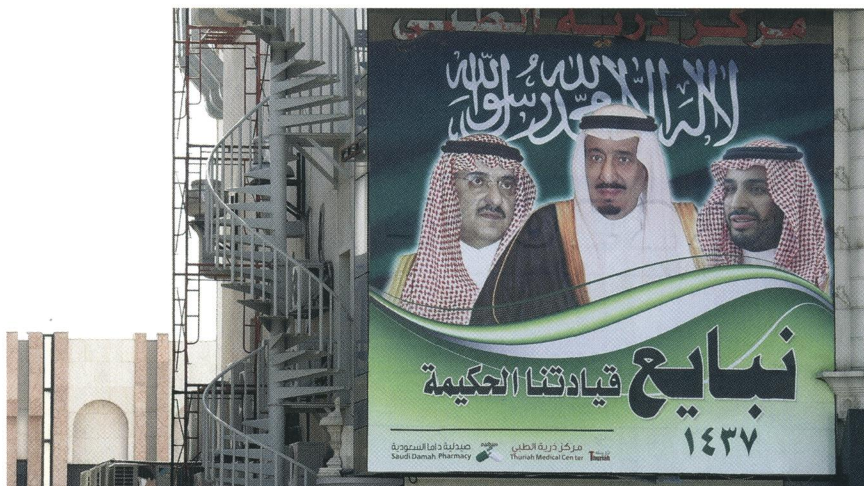
These are difficult times in the Middle East, with the lack of effective regional leadership, the rise of sectarian politics, and drought, migration and economic crisis made worse by the plunge in oil prices. All these factors have helped produce radical Islamic groups and fueled wars in the region. The implosion of states such as Iraq and Syria that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire has led to a questioning of the borders imposed by colonial powers. The younger generation that drove the Arab Spring has been bitterly disappointed that its aims of democracy and better governance have not been met. A blame game is taking place among governments that are acting defensively and refuse to take responsibility for their actions.

Outside powers, such as the U.S., do not have solutions or even expertise, and have been worn down by never-ending conflicts in the Middle East. They would rather focus their attention elsewhere. But, inevitably, the Persian Gulf region is still important, above all as a major source of oil and gas and a market for U.S. goods. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, especially Saudi Arabia, are critical allies in fighting the terrorist threat, and they can play a role in resisting extreme jihadi Islam.



A picture taken on January 17, 2016 in the Saudi capital Riyadh shows a portrait of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz (center), Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (left) and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. (FAYEZ NURELDINE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

How much should it matter if many are repressive societies? How important should human rights be in forming U.S. policy toward the region? In the past, the answer was, not very. Should the U.S. push them to democratize? So far this has not worked well: Nation-building as it has played out in Afghanistan or Iraq has been a disaster. Should the U.S. press harder for women's rights, and if it does, will it get anywhere? Is it good policy to assuage Saudi anger by supporting their war in Yemen, as the U.S. and Britain have done?

Americans and U.S. policymakers are torn. The Saudis did not seem to appreciate that the Iran nuclear deal would protect them first and foremost, but were obsessed that the U.S. now seemed to favor a larger regional role for Iran at their expense. Conspiracy theories are the lifeblood of the region, after all. According to Robert S. Ford, former U.S. ambassador to Syria and Algeria, "Americans like to have someone to blame—a person, a political party or country. But it's a lot more complicated than that. I'd be careful about blaming the Saudis." Making foreign policy in a democracy is always a lot harder than in a country where one person, such as the Shah of Iran, or a small elite like the Al Saud, make all the decisions. Despite many predictions of its inevitable downfall, the House of Saud is still standing after 250 years.

The issue of terrorism troubles Americans greatly, and on this Saudi sends mixed signals: Wahhabism is clearly a source of radical Islamic ideology, but on the other hand, the Al Saud themselves are targets for not being Islamic enough. So far they have been helpful to the U.S. in exposing terrorists and warning of imminent attacks. Perhaps more of a distinction should be made between state policy and private support for jihadis. This is also a question of leverage, and the U.S. does not seem to have much at the moment.

For all its faults, Saudi Arabia is still one of the most stable countries in the Middle East. Of course, if the Vision 2030 plan fails, oil prices stay low and the government hesitates to impose a new social contract, the danger is there that things could go wrong quickly. The possibility of another change in Saudi leadership in the near future is unsettling. The U.S., it seems, is as divided over how to interpret Saudi actions as the Saudis are about U.S. fidelity. The reputation of Saudi these days in Washington is at a nadir, and defenders are hard to find. They may be "free riders" but they buy billions of dollars worth of weapons from the U.S. There is an important legacy of decades of friendship and security cooperation between the two countries, but it is clear that the relationship must continue to evolve. It is now up to the Trump administration to devise policies for a new era in the Middle East. ■

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discussion questions

1. In formulating U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia, how much emphasis should be placed on human rights? Should the U.S. continue to soft-pedal criticism out of strategic concerns?

2. Is "Wahhabism" the main problem in international terrorism?

3. The U.S. has talked about reducing its footprint in the Gulf and pivoting to Asia. Is this a realistic goal any time soon?

4. What has been the fallout of the Iraq War in the region? Why has sectarianism become worse afterward?

5. The U.S., Iran and Saudi Arabia all view the war in Yemen differently. How would you characterize the positions of the various sides, and how do you think the U.S. should proceed?

6. Should Saudi Arabia be willing to "share the neighborhood" with Iran, as President Obama suggested?

Don't forget: Ballots start on page 115!

suggested readings

Al-Rasheed, Madawi, **A History of Saudi Arabia (2nd ed.)**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 342 pp. This overview by a prominent expatriate Saudi historian discusses the challenges facing the state in the 21st century.

Gause, F. Gregory, III, "The Future of U.S.–Saudi Relations: The Kingdom and the Power," **Foreign Affairs**, vol. 95 no. 4, 2016, pp. 114–26. This article by a leading scholar provides a recent update on the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

– – –, **The International Relations of the Persian Gulf**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 270 pp. This one-volume treatment covers the wars that have reshaped the region since 1980.

Haykel, Bernard, Hegghammer, Thomas and Lacroix, Stéphane, eds., **Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 360 pp. In this book, prominent Saudi and foreign scholars present the conclusions of their research on the Kingdom's society, culture, economy and politics.

Long, David E., and Maisel, Sebastian, **The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2nd ed.)**. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010. 176 pp. Long and Maisel present a general survey of Saudi Arabia, based on extensive firsthand experience.

Matthiesen, Toby, **The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 292 pp. This book examines the role of Saudi Arabia's marginalized Shi'a minority, who are geographically focused in the Kingdom's oil-rich Eastern Province.

Munif, Abdelrahman, **Cities of Salt** (trans. Peter Theroux). New York: Vintage Books, 1989. 640 pp. Banned in Saudi Arabia, this novel chronicles the profound changes caused there by the discovery of oil.

Potter, Lawrence G., "The Persian Gulf: Tradition and Transformation." **Headline Series**, Nos. 333–34. New York: Foreign Policy Association, 2011. 136 pp. This publication provides an overview of the recent historical evolution of the Persian Gulf.

To access web links to these readings, as well as links to additional, shorter readings and suggested web sites,
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