

# The Authority of Policy: Transitioning from Traditionalist to Modernist Moderate in Saudi Arabia

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## Abstract

Saudi Arabia has long been known for its rigidity and conservative image, influenced by the close relationship between the kingdom and religious leaders. However, in the twenty-first century, Saudi Arabia began to embrace a more modern and moderate direction, moving away from conservatism and traditionalism. This shift is attributed to the Saudi reform policy, known as Saudi Vision 2030, which has had a significant impact on the country's social, cultural, and religious aspects. As a result, the authority of the Saudi kingdom has strengthened, while the authority of religious leaders has diminished. The research utilizes Plato's theory of authority and the modernization theory of Evsey Domar and Roy Harrod, combined with a socio-political approach, to analyze the policy authority of the Saudi kingdom and its impact on other sectors. The findings of the research indicate that the 21st century marked the beginning of socio-cultural changes in Saudi society, spearheaded by King Salman ibn Abdul Aziz and his son, Muhammad ibn Salman. The authority they wielded allowed for transformative ideas that aimed to modernize the conservative country. The introduction of Saudi Vision 2030 has brought about significant changes, including a shift towards modernist policies in social, political, and religious matters. Examples of these changes include increased freedoms for women, decreased reliance on oil in economic policies, the development of tourist attractions and entertainment venues, and greater equality in education and employment opportunities.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a governmental system, authority is crucial for achieving state goals by providing benefits that can be distributed among all levels of society (Stefanovic et al., 2016). At least all the policies that have been issued or will be issued should avoid conflicts or internal political turmoil that can occur at any time, as seen in Arab countries during the Arab Spring (Agastya, 2013) as happened in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and others where many countries experience government transitions or revolutions due to dictatorial, authoritarian, and also corrupt governments (Agastya, 2013).

Political upheavals that occur are often indicated by tensions between countries that have conflicts, either old conflicts, new conflicts or even conflicts that are potentially expected to resurface (R. Sihbudi, 1991). It is important to anticipate and handle unexpected situations, as has been seen in Saudi Arabia. The country, which has ongoing conflicts with other nations, has also initiated policy reforms aimed at modernization. This indicates that Saudi Arabia is making significant strides towards changing its religious and social traditions (Alajmi et al., 2023).

Saudi Arabia is a country that has a government system in the form of a pure monarchy or absolute monarchy (Sjadzali, 1990) where the pillar of leadership is held by a king as the ruler of the kingdom and also the main leader of the country. With absolute power without being limited by law, the affinity of the royal family is the most important thing, especially in the succession of power. The king limits people's participation in the political sphere. Liberal and democratic values do not exist because of the strong tradition or Islamic law which is used as the basis of legitimacy (Anwar, 2016). So far, the legitimacy of the Saudi Arabian Monarchy has been maintained. Officially the kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded on 23 September 1932 when the areas in the

Hijaz and Najd were unified, after using the emirate system for a long time and making Muhammad ibn Saud as the founder of the Saudi Arabian emirate system and his generation living a nomadic life or moving from one place to another since the 18th century, since the beginning of the alliance between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (Imam Wahyuddin, 2018). The Kingdom or Region of Saudi Arabia occupies a very important and vital position for the Middle East Region and the Islamic world (Alnaim et al., 2023)

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is a Central Arabian alliance between the Islamic Revivalist Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab -whose group or followers are known as Wahhabi - and the local ruler, Muhammad ibn Saud. The religious reformer figure and the prince married Spiritual Vision with temporal ambition which later resulted in a glorious religious-political movement (Esposito, 1990). The relationship between Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and Ibn Saud became mutually beneficial. On the one hand, Abdul Wahhab can continue to channel his understanding of the doctrine of God's Reign or *al-Hukūmah al-Ilahiyyah*, a concept based on the doctrine of the classical *Khawārij* group, namely *Lā Hukma Illallah* or no one has power in this universe except Allah, because He is the only God, Creator (Al-Asymawy, 2004). On the other hand, Ibn Saud gained political benefits from the religio-political doctrine offered by Abdul Wahhab. Because what it offers is the concept of absolute obedience of society to the authorities. This was to strengthen Ibn Saud's position before the rulers of Arabia (Mas'odi, 2020).

This doctrine has increasingly made the image of Saudi Arabia as an Absolute Monarchy country with ultra-conservative diversity very visible (Ismail et al., 2016). In addition, there is no direct contribution from the community in the process of selecting the existing leadership or councils, because the leader or king will be chosen by and from the great kingdom of Ibn Saud and there are also no political parties (Sjadzali, 1990). So the people never have a voice, but there is only obedience to the authorities and can only accept all policies issued by the authorities.

The Saudi Arabian authorities consider the Al-Qur'an and Hadith as the constitution of the state, with sharia as the basic law enforced by sharia courts and Ulema serving as judges and legal advisors. Therefore, the king and the clergy have mutual interests. The kingdom seeks to maintain its power, while the clergy aim to promote their religious beliefs (Mahoney & Alboaouh, 2017).

The implementation of the Qur'an and Hadith as the legal foundation for government is closely linked to the teachings of Ibn Taimiyah, with Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab playing a key role. This movement influenced the efforts to purify the faith in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Roji, 2017). The form of the kingdom's influence on Ibn Abdul Wahhab is evidenced by two things, first, his movement has an emphasis on the problem of purification of monotheism. Second, the movement has the full support and cannot even be separated from Ibn Saud's politics (Hamim, 2004).

Saudi Arabia has a very traditional and conservative interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith, shaped by its scholars. They have adopted the slogan "Back to the Qur'an and Sunnah" to form a strict religious ideology, considering only their own view as right and rejecting others as wrong and misguided (Hendropriyono, 2009). This is shown by the strong Islamic tradition which is rigid and at the same time lacking or even not accepting ideas from other groups. As expressed by Ibn Taimiyah regarding the traditional Muslim view.

This particular group holds a strong advantage due to their deep knowledge of religious matters and exceptional interpretative abilities. Their profound understanding of sacred texts allows them to extract valuable wisdom using a unified approach. Their comprehension can be likened to a plow, preparing fertile ground for growth, setting them apart from other groups whose primary focus is on preserving and authenticating texts. They also collaborate with other groups to relay messages from the existing texts (Arkoun, 1996).

With this understanding, they consider that what they understand about God's texts is the most correct and even authentic compared to what is understood by other groups. In fact, they do not hesitate to openly blame the understanding and behavior of other groups regarding the practice of Islam by saying *bid'ah* for matters related to worship and heresy must be fought according to the

principle of *'amr ma'rūf nahi munkar* (Haif, 2015) or with the title *tāgūt* for a model of a government system that is not in accordance with what they understand, be it in the form of democracy, nationalism, and secularism. This becomes a strong assumption that the strong currents of contemporary theological hard schools in the world today have been connected with the rigid thinking of Ibn Abdul Wahhab (Hendropriyono, 2009).

Over time, it becomes clear that the progress in this era has been significant. This progress is closely linked to the development efforts of every country in the world. Every country desires development and modernization in order to keep up with the times. Saudi Arabia is no exception. While the country has traditionally prioritized adherence to religious texts and maintained a conservative nature, it also recognizes the need for advancement in areas such as technology, social freedom, and the economy to align more closely with other nations. As a result, substantial reforms are necessary in Saudi Arabia, specifically in the form of modernization.

In the study of international relations, there is an assumption that dominates that a country that is experiencing modernization will definitely transform into a more secular state (Juergensmeyer, 2015). In reality, the interaction of religion and politics in Saudi Arabia seems to contradict this assumption. The Oil Boom of the 1970s and the subsequent development of Saudi Arabia's infrastructure, economy, and even the social environment has not changed in their theocratic nature (Guettabi & James, 2020). The relationship between the Al-Saud monarchy and the formation of religion by Wahhabism is complex and raises the question of whether the state controls religion, or religion controls the state (Izaqi, 2016). However, recently this assumption is very likely to be true even though it does not extend to massive secularism. With the adjustment of the situation and also the renewal programs that are echoed by the kingdom at this time, namely the vision of Saudi Vision 2030 (Derajat & Kurniawan, 2021). Thus, this program shows a new direction for state power to become more moderate. This vision is a big agenda towards modernity from the authority of the State of Saudi Arabia, by not involving religious elements in implementing the Saudi 2030 vision, because the Wahhabi religious understanding will be considered an obstacle to achieving the vision. This shows that the ulema must also submit to the kingdom's decision and must work together to realize the social reform (Hibatul Wafi, 2018).

The purpose of the reform is in accordance with Muhammad ibn Salman's statement that returning to 'moderate Islam' and eliminating the remnants of extremism immediately is the key to his plan to modernize the country (Martin, 2017). The statement suggests that in the 21st century, Saudi Arabia will introduce a new approach to implementing its policy direction. This will result in a struggle between political authority and religious authority, which has existed since the formation of Saudi Arabia. The policies may involve disregarding the previously rigid religious authority when implementing socio-cultural policies. As a result, traditionalist Islam needs to be viewed from a different perspective in order to accept changes in the lives of Saudi society (Al-Atawneh, 2009).

In the absence of extensive literature, there is limited discussion of authorities in Saudi Arabia. Previous research has primarily concentrated on Saudi Arabia's progress in modernization and its efforts to achieve its 2030 vision as a developed country. Anis Rosida, for instance, in her article titled "The discourse of modernization in the challenge of civilization: the role of women as a milestone in the history of Saudi Arabia," emphasizes the close connection between the formation of modernization and women's issues, highlighting the significant role of women in shaping the cultural identity of Saudi Arabia (Rosida, 2018). Second, an article from Muhamad Hibatul Wafii entitled "Saudi Arabia's Reform Discourse: Contestation of the Saudi Kingdom and Wahhabi" explains that the reforms carried out by Saudi Arabia had a huge impact on relations between the Saudi kingdom and the Wahhabis which were increasingly waning (Hibatul Wafi, 2018).

There is also an article entitled Saudi Vision 2030 and the Challenge of Competitive Identity Transformation in Saudi Arabia written by Leni Winarni and Aberrant Pratama Yoga Nur Permana, explaining that the Saudi Vision 2030 is very important in building a competitive identity, while Saudi is a land that cannot be separated from conservatism and resistance to adopting transformation, so there are still obstacles that hinder the construction of Saudi Arabian identity

(Winarni & Permana, 2022). Next, the article entitled Saudi Arabia's Economic Reforms by Citra Nur Hikmah, explains in basic terms the realization of the Saudi vision 2030 in an effort to stabilize Saudi Arabia's economy so that it does not always depend on its oil wealth (Hikmah, 2019).

According to the previous literature, the author suggests that there is a lack of research discussing the urgency of the authorities in determining policy steps in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this research aims to address these gaps and demonstrate that the authority of a ruler or leader plays a fundamental role in shaping policies in specific regions, such as Saudi Arabia. The ruler's authority can significantly influence the direction of implemented policies. The reform and modernization policies introduced by the rulers of Saudi Arabia can potentially bring about changes in the lifestyle of the Saudi people, leading to greater openness in social, religious, and educational aspects, as well as increased employment opportunities for both men and women. Consequently, this could contribute to Saudi Arabia transforming its traditionalist image to that of a more moderate and progressive state, aligning with its developmental goals.

## METHODS

This study is qualitative in nature and focuses on library research. It specifically looks at previous studies to support and improve research methodology, theoretical frameworks, and gain insights into similar research conducted by other researchers (Surahman, Mochamad Rachmat, 2016). Primary data for this study was obtained from sources such as books, journals, or news, containing new scientific knowledge or understanding of known facts or ideas (Soekanto, Sarjono, 2006) related to Saudi Arabia. The selection of literature to be studied is based on three criteria. Firstly, the relevance between the theoretical objectives used and the variables being studied. Second, the completeness of the reading data that the author obtained from various sources. The more literature data obtained, the more complete the references in the study. Third, the use of up-to-date data sources as reference material in the study process. This means that the sought bibliographic data is focused on the latest information and has adequate qualifications (Surahman, Mochamad Rachmat, 2016). The data collected was examined descriptively-analysis-crisis. The study relates to data obtained using sources from various events and phenomena, both historical and social, which have a correlation with the problems in this study (Yin, 2004).

In the study of phenomena in Saudi Arabia, the author employs a Social and Political approach to examine the issues at hand. This approach focuses on power, government, authority, and command at all levels of society, aiming for optimal arguments and research results (Villanueva, 2014). According to Leon Duguit, in every human group from the smallest to the largest, from the temporary to the stable, there are people who have the task of ruling and there are people who are ruled, there are those who make decisions and there are those who obey those decisions (Sahid, 2011). Saudi Arabia is a country that in recent years has created a new phenomenon in changes in authority which has resulted in a new face for Saudi Arabia that is more modern and moderate. The theory used in this research is the plato authority and modernization theory of Evsey Domar and Roy Harrod. Plato said that people who have an extraordinary capacity to reason correctly are those who deserve to be given the right to run the government (Nikolov, 2022). Reasoning is the main requirement for politics and justice with prosperity as the main goal. This means that the competence of someone who has authority or authority is an inherent obligation and must be really good. Because that way the government can become more stable and then a balance will be created between the rulers and the ruled (After, 1985). So that each serves the other in good and contextual ways because they both have a common goal. A stable government can then produce public satisfaction. People who are satisfied can feel comfortable working to produce human or natural resources for the continuity of a stable, orderly and harmonious government.

In the view of the Harrod-Domar theory, modernization is closely related to changes in the development of a nation or region. This development model is based on the level of economic growth which is influenced by the availability of capital. The basic assumption is that the problem of modernization of development is basically a problem of increasing investment and capital. So



economic growth is largely determined by high savings and investment (Budiman, 1995). If savings and investment in the region or country are low, then economic growth will also be low. On the other hand, if a country's investment is considered to be developing well, then its economic growth will also be good (Rahayu, 2010). So, modernization becomes something that is easy to achieve. This type of modernization can be found in developing or developed countries and Saudi Arabia can be taken as an example in this category. In this region, the country or its people have quite high investment, which is shown in the form of shares, indices, and/or other forms of investment from foreign parties. Apart from that, moderation is also an important point in this study, moderation which means *tawāsuṭ* or the middle way or balance between two different things. Because diversity is a necessity for human life and Islam really respects differences (Ramdhan, 2018). Islamic moderation in Saudi Arabia means that the middle path taken is neither too far to the right nor too far to the left. So, in every aspect, whether religious, social, cultural, or educational, it must be a priority that can be carried out fairly in Saudi Arabia. In this way, the development of Saudi Arabia into a developed and open country will become a new type of country that has its own character in implementing Islamic Sharia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Saudi Arabia and the Policy Authority

Saudi Arabia is a country located on the Arabian Peninsula, with the largest geographical area in the Middle East, covering 2,240,000 square kilometers. Most of the region consists of a sandy desert, often referred to as the Arabian Desert. The population of Saudi Arabia is estimated to reach 37,442,142 in 2024 (Monica & Theodora, 2019). Saudi Arabia borders directly with Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, the Persian Gulf, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen and also the Red Sea (jatmika, 2016). The state of Saudi Arabia was formed over a long period of time (Derajat & Kurniawan, 2021). Its existence was not born directly or suddenly until it reached the form known today. The beginning of the Saudi Arabian dynasty is an inseparable part of a series of social history of the Arabian Peninsula which has been active from time to time, namely from the 18th century AD as evidenced by the existence of an alliance between Muhammad ibn Saud and the religious movement led by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab which later gave rise to the name *al-Mamlakah al-‘Arabiyah as-Su’ūdiyyah* (Vassiliev, 1995).

The collaboration between the two was the precursor to the success in building Saudi Arabian nationalism. Muhammad ibn Saud pursued his political vision and mission to consolidate political power, while Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab pursued his religious vision and mission by contributing to the establishment of ideology, morality, and the legitimacy of leadership, free from religious deviations such as *syirk* and *bid’ah*, carried out by Muslims.

After controlling much of the Arabian Peninsula, on September 23 1932 Abdul Aziz ibn Abdurrahman succeeded in proclaiming himself as king of Arabia and also inaugurated the founding of the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia (*al-Mamlakah al-‘Arabiyah as-Su’ūdiyyah*) (Haif, 2015) from his first name, *al-Mamlakah al-Hijāziyah an-Najdiyyah* (Khoiruddin, 1988). With this proclamation, the recognition of Saudi Arabia as an official kingdom was also recognized by international circles and became a kingdom based on the Islamic religion by following the understanding of Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, hereinafter referred to as Wahhabi ideology. In the process, this ideology is used as legitimacy in making the state of Saudi Arabia a form of integration between religious elements and elements of royal or governmental power that will be united at least until the first decade of the twenty-first century in developing its influence in the Arab or international world (Murofikoh et al., 2022).

The modern state of Saudi Arabia has until now been led by seven leaders in turn, all of whom are from the Saud family. First, Abdul Aziz ibn Abdurrahman. He was a proclaimer and led Saudi Arabia for 51 years from his conquest of Riyadh in 1902 M until his death in 1953 M (Khoiruddin, 1988). Secondly, Saudi Arabia was led by King Saud ibn Abdul Aziz, who was born

in the same year that his father conquered Riyadh from Ibn Rosyid's control. He served as the crown prince while Abdul Aziz was the king, and his leadership lasted for 11 years, from 1953 until his death in 1964. Following King Saud, Saudi Arabia was led by King Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz, the son of Abdul Aziz from the Wahhabi descent named Tarfah. King Faisal ruled for 11 years, from 1965 to 1975. After King Faisal, King Khalid ibn Abdul Aziz took over the leadership. He was elected as the King of Saudi Arabia an hour after King Faisal's passing in 1975. King Khalid led Saudi Arabia for seven years until he passed away in 1982 due to a chronic heart condition that was untreatable. Following King Khalid's death, King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz, the previous crown prince, ascended to the throne. In addition to being well-versed in governance from an early age like his brothers, Fahd also received education in various fields of study abroad. King Fahd's reign lasted for 23 years, from 1982 until his passing in 2005. Following King Fahd's passing, another son of Abdul Aziz, Abdullah, ascended to the throne as the King of Saudi Arabia after serving as Crown Prince. Abdullah was effectively in control of Saudi Arabia since 1995 when King Fahd suffered a stroke (Rachmadie& Ediyono, 2017). He is called a reformer for the development of modern Saudi Arabia. On January 23 2015, he died due to pneumonia. *Seventh*, Salman ibn Abdul Aziz was appointed king on January 23 2015 to replace his older brother who died on the same day (Koç, 2019). He became king of Saudi Arabia at the age of 79 (Nurul Fajar, 2021). The most prominent policy in King Salman's government was to immediately appoint his son Muhammad ibn Salman as crown prince (Koç, 2019). This appointment seems to be a perfect combination of collaboration between father and son in the Saudi government in building the twenty-first century Saudi Arabian state. In other words, the state of Saudi Arabia is de jure led by a king, namely King Salman, and de facto led by the crown prince, namely Muhammad ibn Salman (MBS). Both are reformist figures and have high enthusiasm for the development and change of the Saudi Arabian state until now (Ali, 2021).

Table 1. Periodization table of kingdoms in Saudi Arabia

| No              | King's Name                | Period      |
|-----------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> | Abdul Aziz ibn Abdurrahman | 1932 – 1953 |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> | Saud ibn Abdul Aziz        | 1953 – 1964 |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> | Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz      | 1964 – 1975 |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> | Kholid ibn Abdul Aziz      | 1975 – 1982 |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> | Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz        | 1982 – 2005 |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> | Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz    | 2005 – 2015 |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> | Salman ibn Abdul Aziz      | 2015 – Now  |

Saudi Arabia is a region where Islam has grown since its emergence until today. Saudi Arabia is the most historic place for all Muslims in the world, especially in it there are two large holy places that are always visited by Muslims, namely Mecca and Medina, so that with various theological interests the existence of Saudi Arabia in the eyes of Muslims or even the world becomes a very strategic place or country (Kamila, 2022). The development of Modern Saudi Arabia was formed from the relationship between two great power interests, namely political power and religious power. This is represented by Muhammad ibn Saud as a representative of the political power element and Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab as a representative of the religious power element (Fauzan & Fata, 2018). With the collaboration of these powers, Saudi Arabia has adopted an absolute monarchy form and system of government, namely a system that centers its government on the unlimited power and authority of the king and this power is inherited laterally and then passed down (Vassiliev, 1995). The combination of political and religious power in Saudi Arabia since its founding shows that in addition to the goal of expanding Saudi Arabia's political power, there is also resistance carried out against Muslims who do not have the same religious understanding as the Wahhabi ideology which is considered deviant by them. With the aim of unifying ideology and the many processes of resistance and war that have been carried out, Saudi

Arabia is then known as a country that is conservative and rigid in religion. So that the two powers between Bani Saud and Wahhabi not only show the unification of two great powers, but also a collaboration that seeks to form the socio-cultural of Saudi Arabia (Ridwan, 2020).

The system has been in place since before the inauguration of Saudi as a modern state. Naturally, the king remains the central figure in the system of power, serving as imam, military commander and supreme judge (Zahir, 2019). Despite using an absolute monarchy system, Saudi Arabia still has executive, judicial and legislative institutions without any political parties that could possibly compete for power, as in a republic, except that these three institutions are directly controlled by the king (Warsito & Wulandari, 1970). The king holds the ultimate authority in Saudi Arabia, playing a crucial role in formulating and implementing policies. The king's directives significantly influence government operations and justice administration, including recent 21st-century policies aimed at economic development and modernization in Saudi Arabia. These policies have led to substantial socio-cultural and religious transformations, moving away from a historically conservative image to a more open and progressive stance. For instance, Saudi women now have greater freedom to pursue education in their desired field, choose their careers, drive, attend sports events, visit tourist attractions, and enjoy nationwide access to cinemas—activities that were previously restricted by the Saudi authorities. The country's shift towards more open policies has contributed to improved welfare for Saudi citizens, a reduction in excessive consumption, and a decreased reliance on oil wealth.

### **Modernization and Moderation in Saudi Arabia**

Basically, modernization in Saudi Arabia is not something new. The seeds of reform and modernization have existed since the third king of Saudi Arabia, namely King Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz (Ahmad, 2018). King Faisal demonstrated brilliance and courage by breaking away from the traditional Wahhabi framework and challenging orthodox views held by the Wahhabis. He achieved this through significant reforms, including the abolition of slavery, modernization of administration, restructuring of financial and judicial institutions, efficient utilization of natural resources, and the development of infrastructure. King Faisal also established Darul Hanan, a Girls' School in Jeddah. His reign saw the formation of various educational and ministerial institutions such as the first five-year development plan, King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, the Faculty of Petroleum and Mining in Dhahran, the King Faisal Air Academy, the construction of the Islamic Port in Jeddah, and the establishment of ministries including Telegraph, Post, and Telephone, Public Works and Settlements, Development Planning, Higher Education, and Industry and Electricity (Ridwan, 2020).

The development of these reforms cannot be separated from the strengthening of the economy due to the abundance of petroleum as a valuable commodity in the world, with the existence of 26 sources of world oil reserves which contribute 75% of Saudi income and contribute 90% of total foreign exchange which makes Saudi a country that does not have foreign debt, so that this influences the policies of the kings of Saudi Arabia (Sarah, siti, Nana Fitiana, Elza Ramona, 2023).

Various initiatives for change were then carried out by King Fahd ibn Abdul Aziz during his reign. King Fahd issued decree no. 1 which contained four agendas for change, including: the establishment of the *Majlis al-Syura* at the central and provincial levels, the drafting of regional autonomy laws, the drafting of laws on the protection of civil and political rights, and finally the establishment of a royal council that regulates the pattern of royal succession (Ahmad, 2018). King Fahd was also a successful king in terms of foreign policy, especially in matters related to the Salafi Wahabi Islamic ideology, such as sending 5000 preachers to various Islamic countries, printing books by Salafi scholars, establishing Islamic study centers in various cities and remote areas of Saudi Arabia, establishing Islamic and Arabic knowledge institutions in Mauritania, Islamic and Arabic knowledge institutions in Jakarta, in Japan, in Djibouti, Washington, then establishing an Islamic academy in Washington, establishing the King Fahd academy in London and Moscow, and establishing Islamic study centers in various countries and major cities in the world. This means

that the development of Saudi Arabia during the time of King Fahd was not only in terms of politics, but also in terms of Islamic education (Ridwan, 2020). The development of Saudi Arabia's reforms was then continued by King Abdullah ibn Abdul Aziz. King Abdullah himself is often considered a reformist figure. During his reign, he introduced new policies in an effort to reform a more open political system and provide greater participation to his people, including women in terms of education and economy (Rachmadie& Ediyono, 2017), even the western world considers him as a reformer. This can be seen from the foreign policy he made with the aim of diversifying Saudi Arabia's bilateral relations (Muttaqin, 2022).

The idea of modernization during the reign of King Salman, initiated by the crown prince, Muhammad ibn Salman, can be seen as a manifestation of the Saudi Arabian kingdom's concern for its economic sector. Where oil and gas are the main commodities supporting this country which seems increasingly unfriendly. Oil prices are weakening and international economic competition is increasing. Saudi's addiction to oil could even be a disaster for them if there are no brilliant steps to anticipate it. Then came the grand plan "Saudi Vision 2030" to transform the Saudi economy for the better and bring Saudi towards a more modern, moderate and open direction to the world. The development and diversification of non-oil sectors are Saudi's main targets. One of them is the development and development of the tourism sector. In fact, MBS has also announced that Saudi Arabia will build a world-class tourist location in the Red Sea region complete with various modern and sophisticated facilities.

### ***Oil as the Initial Foundation of Arab Saudi Economic Progress***

Oil is the main source of income for Saudi Arabia. The Middle East region is rich in natural resources, namely oil. This situation makes Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia dependent on oil revenues, which is a problem for the sustainability of their economy. This dependence began when oil was discovered and was driven by the commercial process that occurred in 1938, which quickly changed the various structures in the country. After World War II, the need for oil increased fourfold and in the last fifty years has reached seventy percent of the world's total energy consumption (R. D. Sihbudi, 1995). The existence of the Middle East began to be considered important with the discovery of large amounts of petroleum in the 1930s, especially in the area around the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Oman). As we know, petroleum is the main fuel and raw material that is most needed in today's contemporary industrial civilization (Dipoyudo, 1981).

The oil sector contributes 70% of Saudi Arabia's state revenue. The country has oil reserves of 268 billion barrels, which are considered quite large. Stable oil exports generate significant revenue for the country and support the development of basic infrastructure, such as roads, airports, ports, schools, and hospitals. The Middle East holds half of the world's total oil reserves and plays a crucial role in determining the world oil market. As the main energy source globally, fluctuations in world oil prices greatly affect the development of the global economy. This is also because many Western countries depend on oil as their primary energy source. Therefore, any political crisis in the Middle East causes great concern for the global economy (Rikadi, 2007). In addition, this region is also prone to conflict, because many countries want to exert their influence in this region. Various interests that come from outside the region compete and attract the sympathy of countries in the Middle East region, especially Saudi Arabia which is an oil producer. This is done by providing assistance or technological cooperation to utilize oil production, there are also statements of support for Arab countries to create peace in the Middle East region whose main goal is to be able to easily access oil for their own countries (Ruslin, 2013).

Therefore, political stabilization is carried out to support the development of a command economy which is basically related to the relationship between business and politics (Solihah, 2016). Political economy is the pursuit of income by means of monopoly, licensing and use of capital power in business, the kingdom will gain profit. This pattern of political and economic interests is carried out by the government (the ruler of the kingdom), by trying to support and



protect its interests ([Rachbini, 2006](#)). For example, the policy of allowing women to drive is one of the Saudi government's policies to encourage economic development with the Saudi Vision 2030 plan which advocates oil diversification, economic liberalization, and industrial development such as tourism.

Prince Mohammed's goal of increasing female labor force participation from 22 percent to 30 percent will also make it easier for highly educated women to control their ability to travel and give them greater access to the economy as consumers. The lifting of the ban will also improve Saudi Arabia's image in the eyes of the world as a country that gives equal rights to women, which is expected to increase foreign investment. Moreover, by allowing women to drive, car production sales in the Saudi region will also increase, so that with this increase the kingdom will receive a very significant economic intake, plus the large number of car users means the kingdom will be able to regulate costs and tariffs in both taxation and fuel. So indirectly the kingdom's government will support this implementation ([Rachbini, 2006](#)).

### ***Muhammad ibn Salman and Saudi Vision 2030***

Muhammad ibn Salman ibn Abdulaziz al Saud was born on August 31, 1985. He is the son of King Salman and his third wife, Fahda bint Falah ibn Sultan. Muhammad ibn Salman is the eldest son of his mother. After graduating from college, he spent several years in the private sector before becoming his father's personal assistant. He worked as a consultant for the expert commission and also worked for the Saudi cabinet. When he was 24 years old, Muhammad ibn Salman entered politics as a special advisor to his father when he became governor of Riyadh province. Over time, King Salman's sons began to rise in positions, such as secretary-general of the Riyadh competition council, special advisor to the chairman of the King Abdul Aziz Foundation for research and archives, and also became a member of the supervisory board ([Rahmania, 2019](#)).

On June 21, 2017, Muhammad ibn Salman was appointed crown prince by his father, King Salman. This appointment was quite surprising as it was sudden. During his time as crown prince, he modernized the economy of the desert country, reducing dependence on oil production, and privatizing the state-owned oil company, Aramco. His influence is considered impressive, albeit daunting. He also played a role in escalating tensions with Iran and the crisis in Yemen during his tenure as defense minister.

Crown Prince Mohammed ibn Salman is often praised as a progressive reformer for his efforts to introduce social reforms in Saudi Arabia, including opening cinemas and allowing music concerts. In recent years, Dir'iyah, a suburb of the capital Riyadh, has seen young people wearing western clothes and dancing to music as well as women driving luxury cars. These social changes signify a new Saudi Arabia, which was unimaginable a few decades ago, especially considering the past restrictions enforced by the sharia police. These changes began when Mohammed ibn Salman assumed the position of crown prince.

Then on Monday, April 25 2016, Saudi Arabia through Muhammad ibn Salam, finally announced an economic policy targeting that by 2030, Saudi Arabia would no longer be dependent on fossil fuels which could run out and fluctuating prices ([Hidriyah, 2016](#)). This reform was carried out with the aim of maintaining the stability of the Saudi Arabian economy through the planning of the Saudi Vision 2030 program.

Saudi Vision 2030 has 3 important pillars: A Vibrant Society, Thriving Economy, and an Ambition Nation ([Hikmah, 2019](#)). A vibrant society is one that is healthy, happy, and upholds moderate Islamic values. It is committed to the kingdom and nation, proud of its national identity and cultural heritage. People in such a society live in a good and healthy environment with access to adequate health facilities, recreation, entertainment, and other infrastructure.

A thriving economy provides opportunities for education and employment across all levels of society. Education is aligned with market needs, and businesses of all sizes are encouraged to create job opportunities. Investment in the real sector is also encouraged to generate employment. Encouraging a healthy competitive environment is crucial for national development. An ambitious

nation fosters transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in bureaucracy, and aims to improve the performance of government officials to build a positive and effective economic climate (Burdah, 2020).

The National Transformation Program 2030 is a vital part of this vision. Through this program, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia aims to achieve several goals, including increasing employment, empowering the private sector, enhancing public-private relations, promoting local products, and improving digital infrastructure. By 2030, the goal is to reduce the unemployment rate from 11.6% to 7% and increase women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%. Laws and regulations are being adjusted to encourage interest in small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) entrepreneurship, privatization, and industrial investment. Additionally, the country aims to rank among the top 10 in the Global Competitiveness Index and increase foreign direct investment from 3.8% to 5.7%. Saudi Arabia is also investing significantly in developing transportation infrastructure to support investors and tourists, as well as strengthening economic integration and relations with other countries in the GCC and beyond (Alsuwaikhat, Habib M, 2017).

### ***Moderate Islam as a New Religious Movement***

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the influence of traditionalism and conservatism has made it challenging to introduce Moderate Islam. However, with the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030, there is a push to promote moderate Islam within Saudi society. Given the significant influence of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, there have been proposals to transition towards Moderate Islam as the dominant religious authority in the country. Although the specific characteristics of this moderate Islamic model are not yet clear, its focus seems to be on minimizing religious rigidity and extremism. This shift towards a moderate Islamic model reflects Saudi Arabia's efforts to embrace a new religious movement, one that can better adapt to the changes brought about by globalization (Izaqi, 2016). Globalization referred to is opposing the classical and conservative religious paradigm to shift to a format that is more relevant to current developments. It is not surprising that moderate Islam has become an alternative for the Saudi kingdom to shift the Wahhabi position.

Implementing moderate Islam also means that a Muslim's understanding of religious texts, the Qur'an and Hadith, should not be rigid and avoid recognizing subjective truths. A Muslim should also not easily blame other people's different ways of worship and must respect differences, whether in terms of religion, social, or culture. Therefore, initiating moderate Islam is a solution in building a civilization based on goodness and peace. Moderate Islam is an Islamic concept that emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between religious teachings and the demands of modern life. This moderate Islamic concept also encourages Muslims to take a middle stance in various aspects of life. The scope of moderate Islam is not only in the religious aspect, but also includes social, political and cultural aspects. Moderate Islam also places religious freedom and human rights as the main values.

Moderate Islam in Saudi Arabia began with the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030, aiming to have a positive impact on various aspects of Saudi society. The education sector, for example, is seeing a shift towards a focus on science. Despite being known for restrictions on free thinking, Saudi Arabia has historically had low rankings in science, and its education system has been considered one of the worst in the world. Furthermore, education has been less emphasized for Saudi women. However, recent efforts have been made to ensure equality in education for both men and women (Adriansah, 2021).

The social aspect is a major focus in the Saudi vision. The social sector is closely related to the understanding and implementation of religious teachings or rules in Saudi Arabia (Alrebh, 2017). In the past, the dominant understanding of Salafism Wahabbi led to strict religious rules that limited social freedom, especially for women. However, significant changes have taken place, and women now have more freedom in Saudi society (Samin, 2018). They can drive, obtain driver's licenses, travel alone without a guardian, work as they desire, socialize in public places without previous restrictions, join the military, and become part of the Saudi government.

Then, entertainment and tourism aspects. In the past, Saudi Arabia severely restricted entertainment and tourism for Saudi society (Orbaşlı, 2017). These restrictions included not allowing cinemas, television, and music concerts, and so on (Agius et al., 2017). This is certainly very different from any country that has given leniency to all of that. While currently, Saudi Arabia is very open in the field of entertainment and tourism, such as watching movies is allowed, going to the beach, watching music concerts, even for women (Mariani, 2021). In the aspect of religion. Understanding religion is the main foundation in Saudi Arabia for the obligation of its people to practice Islamic law (Al-Zwaini & Peters, 1994). Basically, it is the religious factor that causes restrictions in Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi understanding of religion which is used as the country's religious guideline makes it difficult for Saudi Arabia and its people to develop in any way (Abisaab, 2023). However, now everything has changed, such as the weakening of the role of the Saudi sharia police, the permission to celebrate other religious holidays, and freedom for women in public. All of that is a new direction for Saudi Arabia in changing the image of the country which was initially conservative to be more open and moderate in various aspects of life.

## CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia was formed through a collaboration of political power initiated by Muhammad ibn Saud and his generation, and the power of religion initiated by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and his generation. Together, they established the country as an absolute monarchy, led by a ruler with full authority to regulate the country. This system has influenced all aspects of Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural life and made the country conservative and resistant to development. In the 21st century, there has been a push for change, with the introduction of the Saudi Vision 2030 led by Muhammad ibn Salam. This ambitious program seeks to move the country away from its dependency on oil and towards becoming a modern, developed nation. As a result, there have been efforts to practice a more moderate form of religion, prioritize human rights and gender equality, and invest in areas such as tourism, sports, technology, and culture. This marks a significant departure from the conservative Saudi Arabia of the past.

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