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### SAUDI ARABIA: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

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SAUDI ARABIA FOUNDED AS A RESULT of an alliance between emir of Ad-Diriyah Muhammad bin Saud and Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The alliance that known as Diriyah Treaty was the base that allowed Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab to provide religious cover for the rule of the Saud family, also their military conquests against the emirates and other tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. On the other hand, Saud family helped Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab to spread the Salafist doctrine<sup>1</sup> of Islam. Thus, since its establishment, Saudi Arabia has become an Islamic state of a radical Salafi/Wahhabism character, which adopts a radical Salafi ideology. Saudi Arabia also worked to harness all its resources as a rich oil state and as a reference for the Islamic world because it contains the Islamic holy places to spread the Salafist/Wahhabism to achieve hegemony and influence in both Islamic and international arenas.

#### Saudi Institutions

##### *King and Supporting Bodies*

The political system in Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, in which all powers are concentrated in the hands of the king. The rule is transferred through inheritance. Its constitution is adopted from the Quran and the provisions of Islamic law. In 1992, the former King Fahd bin Abdulaziz Al Saud issued the so-called Basic Law of Saudi Arabia to serve as the executive framework to clarify the administrative mechanism of the Kingdom. This statute does not depart from the principles and limits of the Quran. Saudi Arabia does not know the parliamentary system, but there is a Consultative Council, which is an advisory council, all its members appointed by the King. The council does not have any actual powers; all that it presents is recommendations that require approval from the Council of Ministers, which is also headed by the king. King Abdulaziz Al Saud, the founder of the third Kingdom of Saudi Arabia<sup>2</sup>, has established this council. In 2007, the late King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz issued a decree establishing the Allegiance Commission; the body responsible for determining future succession to the throne of Saudi Arabia, the commission consists of the sons of the founding king and his grandchildren, as well as two other persons chosen by the king.

##### *The religious institution*

The religious establishment in Saudi Arabia occupies an advanced position, as previously we explained that Saudi Arabia since its first state is based on an alliance between Al Saud and Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In addition to the nature of Saudi Arabia as a religious state, Islamic law is applied, and a constitution is taken

from the Quran. The following institutions are at the head of the most important religious institutions on which the Saudi state depends:

##### *Council of Senior Scholars*

It was founded in 1971 and includes a limited committee of religious figures in the country, from several schools of jurisprudence, and its head is Mufti of Saudi Arabia, it is authorized to issue fatwas and express their views on several things, the Council Currently headed by Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh<sup>3</sup>. A permanent committee is formed from the council, whose members were chosen from among the members of the council by royal order. The committee task is to prepare the researches for discussion by the council and issue fatwas by answering the questions in matters of beliefs and individual affairs. The committee known as Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta.

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(...) the performance of Mohammed bin Salman was characterized by enthusiasm and confrontation.

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##### *Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Religious Police)*<sup>4</sup>

This committee existed even before the modern form of the Kingdom. At the time of the establishment of the third Saudi state by King Abdul Aziz Al Saud, he commissioned Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al Sheikh to carry out the duties of promotion of virtue and prevention of vice, and since its establishment, this committee had great influence on Saudi society and its way of life.

##### *Change Movement*

##### *King Abdullah (The beginnings of Changing)*

The demand for a change in Saudi Arabia is very old. The international institutions concerned with human rights and freedoms have always included these claims in their annual reports, but these claims received little response from the king. The religious establishment supported the idea of not accepting the change because it was incompatible with the applicable Islamic system in Saudi Arabia.

After the storm of change that hit the region in 2011, the late king found himself facing the need to make any changes that contribute to improving the image of the Kingdom and reduce the severity of the criticism that has always been directed to it, and ensure that the revolutions

wave will not reach the Kingdom. King Abdullah undertook economic reforms to improve the living conditions of many Saudis, but the most prominent event in the change package was the king's appointment of thirty women to the Consultative Council, giving women the right to vote and run for municipal elections. These reforms led to a state of discontent by the religious institution, followed by sharp criticism by some of its members to the king, creating a state of tension between it and the king. This conflict was not the latter, but was followed by other confrontations between King Abdullah and the institution following his decision to mix between the sexes in the university.

As a result of this tension and criticism, the king issued a decision to dismiss a number of the Council of Senior Scholars members. In 2013, the king issued a decision to dissolve and reform the Council after a new wave of unprecedented criticism by the majority of the Council members.

##### *Mohammad Bin Salman (Hurricane of Change)*

In January 2015, King Abdullah died and his brother King Salman bin Abdul Aziz took over the reins of power in the kingdom. Afterwards, quick and unexpected changes took place within the Saudi government body. During these changes, the young prince Mohammed bin Salman ascended to the political scene in the Kingdom and took up many important positions, starting from the position of Minister of Defense coinciding with the arrival of his father to power, then a number of important economic and political positions. In June 2017 he acquired the position of Crown Prince after a soft coup against Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who held that position before him. Thus, all-important positions in the Kingdom were transferred to Mohammed bin Salman, and he became the real king as a result of his father's age and bad health situation.

Since his presence in the scene, the performance of Mohammed bin Salman characterized by enthusiasm and confrontation, manifested in the launch of the war on Yemen in March 2015, a war that continues so far to confront the Houthis militias backed by Iran. On the economic side, Bin Salman launched the ambitious 2030 plan aimed at reforming the Saudi economy and preparing it for the post-oil phase, after being affected by the wave of decline in oil prices in recent years, causing a budget deficit. This plan seeks to turn Saudi Arabia's economy into a real economy that relies on a variety of incomes other than oil, which is almost the only resource for the country.

On the side of social changes, Bin Salman took a series of steps that were considered far-fetched, such as allowing women to drive, which was a long-awaited demand for Saudi women. King Abdullah did not take this decision during his reign to avoid further clashes with the religious institution. This decision was preceded by another decision of no less importance, which is restricting the powers of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (religious police), removing judicial control, and preventing them from arresting, detaining, chasing, seeking documents, verifying or following people. Which provides space and respite for Saudi society from the grip of the religious authorities. The concerts began to make their way to the Kingdom for the first time; it hosted a number of Arab and foreign singers and musicians, at parties attended by men and women alongside. The first movie theater in Saudi Arabia was recently opened as part of a plan to spread movie theaters in various Saudi cities.

For education, Saudi Arabia began to withdraw books that study the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood, which formed the education system in the Kingdom during the period of hosting of the Brotherhood members in the fifties and sixties of the last century during the conflict with the national ideology of nationalism and Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Bin Salman said in the West that the Wahhabism and extremism that the kingdom is accused for, came as a result of two things:

1. In response to the Islamic revolution that broke out in Iran in 1979 and transformed it into a radical Islamic republic.
2. As a demand from Western countries to spread Wahhabism by funding and supporting schools and mosques around the world to act as a wall against communism during the Cold War.

## Challenges

As part of the process of change undertaken by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the young prince faced a lot of opposition, both in terms of alleged economic or social reform. Economic reform and anti-corruption slogans led Bin Salman to clash with dozens of princes, businessmen and officials in the kingdom until they were arrested at the end of last year and jailed at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh. They were forced to give up huge amounts of their wealth in return for their release. Among them were the prince and well-known billionaire Al-Waleed bin Talal, which the US newspapers reported that he had paid about \$ 6 billion in exchange for his release and settling his affairs with the Crown Prince and the strong man of the Kingdom. This step has made them enemies of bin Salman that will work to undermine the rule of bin Salman in the case of lifting Western support for him.

As for the movement of social change based on the openness and the increase of women's rights, which the religious institution sees as coming against the will of religion and Sharia and the

Islamic system on which Saudi Arabia was founded. Bin Salman may succeed in passing these changes for now, despite the dissatisfaction of the religious institution, which may accept these changes to keep pace with the present situation and to remain in the scene, avoiding the clash with the unruly prince. Nevertheless, this does not mean the total recognition by the religious establishment of Bin Salman's wishes. Religion is an indisputable element in Muslim societies, and these changes will create a kind of rift in Saudi society and cause a kind of sharp division between conservatives who cannot see Saudi Arabia outside the framework it grew up with and between those who aspire to change and catch up with civilization.

## Conclusion

Despite the successive efforts, which Bin Salman tries to use to promote the Saudi society, all these efforts are no more than surface treatments that lack any radical dealings with the problems of Saudi society and are unable to provide real long-term solutions.

As for economic change, Bin Salman did not provide a plan for the development of the kingdom's administrative structures that could provide real oversight mechanisms that would reduce corruption and waste state resources. Bin Salman did not also achieve any progress in terms of political freedoms and freedom of opinion and expression. On the contrary, there has recently been an extensive series of arrest campaigns for anyone who has a view contrary to what is happening in the Kingdom. A number of activists, jurists and opponents have been sentenced.

Such unbalanced changes that attempt to achieve a rapid change in the identity and shape of the kingdom, may lead it to lose its status as a protector of the true image of Islam and affect its international and regional standing amidst a conflict between it and other regional powers, led by Iran, Turkey and Qatar. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Salafism, also known as Wahhabism, is the most extreme form of interpretation of Islam. Its proponents want to return Islam and Muslims to the first formula that existed during the period of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.

<sup>2</sup> The third Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the heir to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the first and second. It was founded by King Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1902 and reached its maximum expansion in 1921 and was known as the Sultanate of Najd, but in 1932 the name was changed and became Saudi Arabia Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Is one of the descendants of Imam Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and holds the position of Mufti, which confirms the continuation of the role of religion in the formation and protection of the rule of Al Saud, according to the agreement between Al Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

<sup>4</sup> Is a committee with the powers of judicial control, responsible for monitoring the behavior of people and the extent of their commitment to apply the provisions of religion and Islamic law. Such as the commitment to Islamic clothing and prayer at its time, and ensure that there is no mixing of the sexes without legal ties such as marriage.