



مركز الملك فيصل للبحوث والدراسات الإسلامية
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies



Vision 2030: Religious Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Special Report

September, 2020 / Muharram 1442 H.



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Abstract

1. This report examines Saudi Arabia's current dual approach to reforming the education system. On the one hand, Riyadh is working to weed out extremist narratives directly by encouraging the religious establishment to adopt and promote a moderate interpretation of Islamic rhetoric. On the other hand, the government is working to introduce modern content to the curricula, such as science, philosophy, music, and Chinese language that will help the Kingdom to build a modern economy led by the private sector.
2. Under Vision 2030,⁽¹⁾ reform of the education system was presented as the means of implementing economic reforms; this deliberate path has had a measure of success, especially when combined with targeted purges of radical teachers who refused to implement the changes.
3. Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's (MBS) approach to reforming education differs from those of his predecessors, in that their approaches focused entirely on the educational apparatus. MBS's focus has shown that he is prepared to work with institutions beyond the education apparatus, such as religious institutions. Addressing the wider issue of religious institutions and the role they have played in education and society makes MBS's novel approach more likely to succeed than past efforts.

(1) Vision 2030 is Saudi Arabia's plan that sets the strategic goals for the Kingdom's economic and social future up to the next decade. The main core of the plan is to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil and diversify the economy to provide revenue sources that can help the government develop better public services. See: "Vision 2030: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," 2016, http://vision2030.gov.sa/sites/default/files/report/Saudi_Vision2030_EN_2017.pdf.

Introduction

Since the introduction of Saudi Arabia's economic and social reform plan, Vision 2030, the country has embarked on a series of domestic reforms to aid in its ambition of diversifying the economy away from oil. While this development has attracted much scholarship and debate, discussions thus far have largely focused on the economic and social reforms. There is scant literature, as well as much caution within Saudi Arabia, debating how far reform has gone in challenging the Kingdom's controversial religious education. This was especially the case after it came under global scrutiny following the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, then following the outbreak of a jihadist insurgency inside the Kingdom during the 2003–07 war on al-Qaeda, and again from 2015 to 2017 following the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS).⁽²⁾ Recent studies on Saudi religious education reform, such as "Saudi Middle School Text Books" by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)⁽³⁾ and "Teaching Hate and Violence" by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL),⁽⁴⁾ suggest the Saudi Islamic syllabus is moving toward greater tolerance, yet some content likely to incite persists. What these studies do not touch on is that reforming the Islamic curricula is part of a wider complex issue of geopolitics, religion, and cultural legacies in the country, which obstruct a quick reform of the education system similar to the currently ongoing social and economic reform. This paper aims to fill this gap by focusing on the complexity of addressing education throughout different eras of Saudi history and the changes currently under way to reverse the trend.

The Kingdom's present leadership has adopted a twofold approach to reforming education. Firstly, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has publicly and repeatedly called for an end to religious extremism. Ever since his father, King Salman, ascended the throne in 2015, MBS has spearheaded a campaign to return the Kingdom to a path of "moderation and tolerance"

(2) Najah al-Otaibi, "Terror Overseas: Understanding the GCC Counter Extremism and Counterterrorism Trends," Henry Jackson Society, February 13, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/terror-overseas-understanding-the-gcc-counter-extremism-and-counter-terrorism-trends-2/>.

(3) David Andrew Weinberg, "Teaching Hate and Violence: Problematic Passages from Saudi State Textbooks for the 2018–19 School Year," Anti-Defamation League, November 20, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/11/teaching-hate-and-violence-problematic-passages-from-saudi-state-textbooks-for-the-2018-19-school-year.php>.

(4) "A Survey of 2017–2018: Saudi Middle and High School Textbooks," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2018, <https://www.uscifr.gov/reports-briefs/special-reports/survey-2017-2018-saudi-middle-and-high-school-textbooks>.

by accelerating efforts begun by the late King Abdullah to expunge extremist ideology and rhetoric from the Kingdom's textbooks and classrooms.

Secondly, MBS has used Vision 2030, the Kingdom's blueprint for socioeconomic transformation, to realign the education system with economic, rather than religious, imperatives.

Part One:

MBS's Approach to Reforming Religious Education

Background—Role of Religion in Education

Formal primary education in Saudi Arabia began in the 1930s, and by 1951 the country had 226 schools run by the government's Directorate of Knowledge, with around 29,000 male students.⁽⁵⁾ Those schools only accommodated boys, because society thought that women's education conflicted with their traditional and religious values, which typically forbade women from leaving home unless in an emergency.⁽⁶⁾ Later, a pilot school for boys and girls was founded by the late King Faisal and his wife Queen Effat in 1946 in the city of Taif.⁽⁷⁾ It was unique because it was boarding school that had girls among its students, but it was quickly shut down due to the protests of the conservative factions.⁽⁸⁾ Fifteen years later, in 1961, the education system was expanded to include non-compulsory primary education for girls, and the country initially approved just 15 girls' schools for the entire country.⁽⁹⁾ In 1981, gender parity was reached in the Saudi school system.⁽¹⁰⁾

Even though the Saudi education system incorporated art and science subjects (e.g., mathematics, history, and English), the government insisted that the curriculum should prioritize the country's religious teachings. The Educational Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (a document issued by the Council of Ministers in 1969) laid out this fundamental principle for education in the Kingdom.⁽¹¹⁾ It states that "religious sciences will occupy a central place at every level of primary, intermediate, and secondary education . . . and the Islamic culture will be a central subject at all levels of higher education."⁽¹²⁾

(5) "About Saudi Arabia: Education," Washington, DC: The Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/education>.

(6) Amani Hamdan, "Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Achievements," *International Education Journal* 6, no. 1 (2005), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ854954.pdf>.

(7) Abdullah al-Madani, "al-Malikah 'Ffat Ayqonat Ta'lim al-Banat," *Okaz*, February 3, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.Okaz.com.sa/local/na/1525150>.

(8) Before this, there were a few schools for girls, such as Dar al-Hanan school, which was established by Queen Effat al-Thunayan, wife of King Faisal, in 1955. See: Sherifa Zuhur, *Saudi Arabia (Middle East in Focus)* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 234.

(9) Abdul Malik ibn Duhaysh, "Ta'lim al-Banat Fi al-Mamlakah al- Arabiyyah al-Sa'udiyyah Bedayatuh, Masyratuh, Hadiruh," (Makkah, n.p. 1998), 81.

(10) Hamdan, "Women and Education in Saudi Arabia," 50.

(11) Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 46.

(12) . Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 46.

Arguably, the Kingdom's religious education policy was also affected by the political events that ravaged the Middle East at the time: notably the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamic extremists and the Iranian revolution of the same year. These events coincided with the influx of foreign teachers, many of whom were Muslim Brotherhood exiles from Egypt and Syria into Saudi Arabia.⁽¹³⁾ They influenced the Saudi educational system not only as teachers on a practical level but also as a major philosophical force that reconfigured the education system and curricula. More specifically, they politicized the Directorate's religious curriculum, transforming Wahhabi quietism into political activism.⁽¹⁴⁾ This adaptation came to be known as "the hidden curriculum."

Scholars estimate that in 2006 Islamic studies in the Saudi schools constituted about one-third of students' weekly classroom hours in primary and intermediate classes.⁽¹⁵⁾ Until 2011, religious studies were divided across six different modules: *Quran*; *tawhid* (declaration of the oneness of God); *tajwid* (intonation); *tafsir* (interpretation of and commentary on the Quran); *hadith* (the record of the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions); and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

Following the 9/11 event and the involvement of 15 Saudis in the attack, Riyadh had revised textbooks to eliminate intolerance. Some intolerant concepts within Islamic discourse were removed from textbook, such as the removal of the instruction from the 2005–06 fifth grade *tawhid* text that "[s]omeone who opposes God, even if he is your brother by family tie, is your enemy in religion."⁽¹⁶⁾ But due to a great deal of resistance from the traditionalists and pro-Muslim Brotherhood cadres, who had permeated various levels of the Saudi educational system,

(13) The Muslim Brotherhood is an Islamic fundamentalist movement created by the pious Egyptian Muslim schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna (b. 1906, d. 1949) in 1928. It aims to rejuvenate Islam and impose Islamic law (Shariah) upon all social and political activity. See: Oxford Reference, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100218696>.

(14) The influence of political Islam on Saudi education was promoted by many Egyptian and Syrian members of the Muslim Brotherhood who found refuge in Saudi Arabia to escape the crackdown by Jamal Abul Nasir's secular regime in the 1950s, after the establishment of the United Arab Republic, which joined Egypt and Syria under Nasir's rule. The Saudi monarchy found the Brotherhood exiles convenient, involving them in the creation of education institutes and in teaching at a time when no one else in Saudi Arabia was qualified to take on that task. See: Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett, eds, *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 168.

(15) Tariq Elyas, "The Attitude and the Impact of American English as a Global Language within the Saudi Education System," *Novitas Royal* 2, no. 1 (2008): 35.

(16) Center for Religious Freedom of Hudson Institute with the Institute for Gulf Affairs, "2008 Update: Saudi Arabia's Curriculum of Intolerance with Excerpts from Saudi Ministry of Education Textbooks for Islamic Studies" (2008) 26, <https://www.hudson.org/research/5729-2008-update-saudi-arabia-s-curriculum-of-intolerance>.

religious teaching material continued to include problematic elements.⁽¹⁷⁾ For example, the 2007–08 edition of the first-grade textbook of *tawhid* says: “Every religion other than Islam is false.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Youth and Home-Grown Terrorism

The debate over the role of Saudi religious curricula in spreading terrorism remained a center of dispute among politicians and media both in the West and in Saudi Arabia, even after 9/11. While these critiques overlap, they diverge in terms of emphasis. In the West, the US Congresses, European parliament officials, and media analysts have looked for the roots of terrorist ideology in Saudi textbooks.⁽¹⁹⁾ Saudi critics, meanwhile, have tended to focus on the role of teachers as having indirect potential for creating a frustrated and confused generation of young Saudis who are vulnerable to radicalization and terrorist propaganda.⁽²⁰⁾

This should come as no surprise given that following the September 11 attacks, al-Qaeda followers in Saudi Arabia perpetrated more than 20 attacks between the years 2003 and 2007 against Saudi nationals, Western expats, government sites, and oil establishments.⁽²¹⁾ These activities were driven by a distorted interpretation of Quranic verses that were taught to students by radical teachers—notably those who rejected any idea, ideology, or theology that contradicted the thoughts of the eighteenth-century Islamic scholar Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s religious doctrine (*aqida*), most especially the core message of the absolute oneness of God (*tawhid*).⁽²²⁾ For example, Saudi students were taught that secular laws were blasphemous because they were made by human beings and not by God. On this basis, Muslim sects such as Sufis and Shias were

(17) By the late 1960s, hundreds of Brotherhood cadres had permeated various levels of the Saudi education system, including universities. Brotherhood thinkers made up the bulk of the faculty at the Islamic University of Medina, and, in the 1980s, Umm al-Qura University in Mecca, where Muhammed Qutub, brother of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood radical Sayed Qutub, taught. (See Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, 43). Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Brotherhood member and Osama bin Laden’s mentor, taught the al-Qaeda founder at King Abdul-Aziz University, where bin Laden was enrolled as an engineering degree student.

(18) Center for Religious Freedom of Hudson Institute with the Institute for Gulf Affairs, 2008, 39.

(19) Rohan Davis, *Western Imaginings: The Intellectual Contest to Define Wahhabism*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018), 33.

(20) Turki al-Dhakil, “Ida’at: al-Amir Khalid al-Faisal 6/2,” YouTube, September 13, 2009, accessed August 31, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wepp_p7enSo.

(21) Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Responses to Terrorism (START), 2009–2019, University of Maryland, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?country=217>.

(22) Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab was an Islamic Salafi scholar, from Najd. He founded the Wahhabi movement, a reform movement that focuses on restoring Islam to how it used to be practiced during the days of Prophet Mohammed. In particular, his ideology focused on the pillar of the monotheistic Islamic faith *tawhid*, which means the belief in the absolute oneness of God and that Mohamed is his only messenger.

accused of adding man-made innovations to the faith, and were thus considered polytheists. For decades these lessons in the textbooks used to present a general definition of ibn Abd al-Wahhab's concepts but leave it to teachers to fill in the gaps by explaining them according to their own personal, and at times highly radical and politicized, understanding of Islam. This approach was problematic (see section: Challenges to Education Reform: The Hidden Curriculum).

A further review of the country's national education has been undertaken following another phase of violent terrorism in the Kingdom, beginning in 2011, after the popular demonstrations across the Middle East—known as the “Arab Spring.” This time, from 2012 up until 2016 members of both al-Qaeda and of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) committed 235 attacks in Saudi Arabia.⁽²³⁾ Some of these attacks were well planned and lethal, and targeted Sunni and Shia mosques, such as three concurrent suicide-bomber attacks that took place in Medina, Jeddah, and Qatif and left several dead.⁽²⁴⁾

It is fair to say that the interrelations between the Kingdom's terrorism and education stems from a broader issue. These included an absolutist Islamic discourse and a religious traditional curriculum, the disproportionate emphasis on religious instruction at the expense of science, mathematics, and other subjects essential for a career in the modern economy. Likewise, the teachers themselves were the product of a system that relied on rote learning over critical thinking and therefore most of them were woefully unprepared to contextualize, let alone deconstruct, the texts put forward in the textbooks.

The complexity of the influence of teachers has been recognized by many Saudi officials. “Let me say it honestly,” former Minister of Education Prince Khalid al-Faisal said during a 2015 television interview. “The school curricula constitute 20% of extremism and violence content, but 80% are the hidden curricula and the way in which these ideas of violence and extremism are inculcated by those who are responsible for the students in the schools, institutes, faculties, and universities.”⁽²⁵⁾

(23) al-Otaibi, “Terror Overseas,” 2018, 6.

(24) “Saudi King Vows to Fight Religious Extremists after Bombings,” Reuters, July 4, 2016, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-blast-idUSKCN0ZK1RD>.

(25) . Turki al-Dhakil, “Ida’at: al-Amir Khalid al-Faisal 6/2.” 2009.

Challenges to Education Reform: The Hidden Curriculum

For Saudi Arabia, educational reform has traditionally presented itself as a conundrum in that the issue is both socioreligious and political. Islam as interpreted by Salafi Scholar Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab has been integral in shaping the Islamic identity and the politics of Saudi Arabia.⁽²⁶⁾ Because of this, there are large sectors of the Saudi public who will see any attempt to change the state's religious education system as a diminution of their Islamic identity. Consider, for example, the Ministry of Education's decision in 2011 to integrate all six modules of the religious curriculum into one class. The move triggered much anger among conservative teachers, who considered it a war against Islam and a sign that the government was being swayed by Western demands. The Riyadh-based *Al-Jazeera* newspaper quoted a female teacher who described the step as a “disaster,”⁽²⁷⁾ and said it would lead the Muslim nation to abandon its religion and could result in the country's “eliminating Islamic education totally or making it optional.” As a result of public pressure, the Ministry of Education (MoE) ultimately decided not to proceed with the plan.⁽²⁸⁾

Sometimes the position of some teachers on reform goes beyond just resistance but also takes the shape of contributing to what is known as the ‘hidden curriculum’—extremist teachings not sanctioned by the state nor found in state textbooks but rather propagated by schoolteachers, administrators, and staff, especially those with ties to the Brotherhood.⁽²⁹⁾

For decades Muslim brotherhood teachers took advantage of the Saudi monarchy's—dating back to the 1960s—to involve them in the creation of education institutes when there were few other choices. But instead of developing education discourse, they imposed their own

(26) Historically, the Saudi state was formed based on an agreement between the Salafi scholar ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Mohammed ibn Saud, who established the first of three states in 1744, and whose descendants rule the modern state. When the first Saudi state was founded, ibn Abd al-Wahhab brought political support for ibn Saud. In return, ibn Saud established a Sharia Law state according to ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Salafi interpretation of Islam that also underpinned the Kingdom's social and religious fabric. See: William Facey, *Dir'iyyah and the First Saudi State* (Richmond, TX: Stacey International, 1997).

(27) Sarah al-Sultan, “Khutwah Nahwa Elgha'a al-Fusul al-Diniyyah,” *al-Jazeera*, April 14, 2010, accessed August 31, 2020, <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2010/20100614/fe1.htm>.

(28) “al-Ta'lim Tanfi Damj Muqarrarat al-Mawad al-Diniyyah,” *al-Madinah*, (May 21, 2016), accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.al-madina.com/article/449974التعليم-تنفي-دمج-10مقررات-المواد-الدينية>

(29) The concept of the “hidden curriculum” is discussed in detail in subsequent sections. See also: Ahmed Abulkarim, “Manahij al-Saudiyyah Tataharrar min Qablat al-Ikhwan” *Asharq al-Aswat*, April 23, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/1245911/>.

interpretations on religious dogma. This included grafting Wahhabi principles onto political activism and promoting these ideas with students during schools' extracurricular activities.⁽³⁰⁾

These hidden curricula deviated from MoE curricula in subtle but important ways. For example, the curricula called for teaching the Quran, including the concept of jihad (struggle or holy war). But jihad in the Quran is subdivided into three types.⁽³¹⁾ Jihad of the heart, sometimes called the greater jihad, refers to the individual believer's internal struggle against sin and temptation. The other two types of jihad are external, sometimes called the lesser jihad. These include jihad of the tongue and the pen (debate and persuasion of non-Muslims to convert to Islam) and jihad of the sword (armed struggle), which is permitted by the Quran essentially as an act of defense. In the classroom, many Brotherhood teachers elevated armed struggle against disbelievers above the other two types and presented it as a legitimate premise for the use of excessive aggression against non-Muslims. Thus, even when the government rewrote how the concept was presented in textbooks to prevent misinterpretation, Brotherhood-influenced educators and others with a conservative mind-set continued to promote extremist interpretations that fed terrorism.

The hidden curricula hindered attempts at reform. For example, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Saudi government moved to undercut extremist teachings by contextualizing some of the more complex concepts presented in textbooks. Chief among these was the controversial concept of *al-Wala'a Wa al-Bara'a*—"loyalty and disavowal"—which many teachers explained as granting the right to be hostile toward non-Muslims. Similarly, the concept of *takfir* was explained as the judgment that someone who was a nonbeliever was *kafir*. This carries the death sentence, which made it extremely dangerous. Although in Islam this concept has conditions and grades that do not result in someone automatically being expelled from the faith and cut off from being Muslim for minor transgressions, some teachers ignored the subtleties. This made students believe that a Muslim who committed even a minor sin deserved to be killed. It is worth noting that bin Laden's war against the Saudi government was

(30) Ahmad Abu Abdulkarim, "Khalid al-Faisal Yantaqid Tatarruf Ba'dh al-Mu'lammin fi al-Saudiyyah," YouTube, December 13, 2013, accessed August 31, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2KnfsyM7_s.

(31) Global War on Terrorism: Analysing the Strategic Threat, Center for Strategic Intelligence Research, Joint Military Intelligence College (2004), ix, <https://cryptome.org/2014/04/spy-terror.pdf>.

based on *takfir*. Bin Laden accused those in government of being nonbelievers because they had relationships with non-Muslim countries internationally.⁽³²⁾

In 2011, King Abdallah took a critical step toward expunging the hidden curricula by suspending 2,000 teachers—equivalent to 2 percent of the total number of teachers in Saudi Arabia—who were either sympathetic to al-Qaeda and/or alleged to have propounded extremist viewpoints to their students.⁽³³⁾ Others were sent for retraining. Even after the authorities weeded out those teachers, the problem persisted.

Countering Extremism Policy

During the October 2017 Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) told Fox Business Network’s Maria Bartiromo that he intended to tackle religious extremism head on. “We will not spend the next 30 years of our lives dealing with extremist ideas; we will destroy them today,”⁽³⁴⁾ he said. He also laid out a new vision for the Kingdom. “We only want to go back to where we were. The moderate Islam that is open to the world, open to all the religions.”⁽³⁵⁾ Less than two weeks later, the crown prince ordered the arrests of dozens of hardline clerics.⁽³⁶⁾

Many of the clerics who were arrested were alleged to have ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. The Kingdom also banned many Brotherhood and other radical Islamist publications from its libraries and campuses⁽³⁷⁾ and also removed staff who propagated the hidden curricula.⁽³⁸⁾

(32) Eric A. Croddey, Jeffrey A. Larsen, and James J. Wirtz, eds, *Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 9.

(33) “Iba’ad 2000 Mu’alim li-‘tihamihim bi Nashr al-Tatarruf,” *al-Anba’a*, July 13 (2010), accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/last/125059/13-07-2010-المطرف-بنشر-الفكر-المتطرف-ابعار-معلم-السعودية-لاتهامهم-بنشر-الفكر-المتطرف>.

(34) “Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Promises Country Will Return to ‘Moderate, Open Islam,’” *Independent*, October 24, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-saud-moderate-islam-vision-2030-conference-a8017181.html>.

(35) “Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Promises Country Will Return to ‘Moderate, Open Islam,’” *The Independent*, 2017.

(36) Ben Hubbard, “Saudi Prince, Asserting Power, Brings Clerics to Heel,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/05/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-wahhabism-salafism-mohammed-bin-salman.html>.

(37) In 2015, Riyadh withdrew 80 reference books from the school curricula and libraries of prominent Brotherhood theorists such as Sayed Qutb and Yusef al-Qaradawi, see: “80 Books promoting Brotherhood banned,” *Arab News*, December 2, 2015, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/844241>.

(38) Maryam al-Jabir, *al-Arabiyyah*, “Wazir al-Ta’lim al-Saudi: Na’am Hunak Tawwaghul li-l-‘Ikhwan fi al-Ta’lim” 20 May, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/saudi-today/2018/03/20/وزير-التعليم-السعودي-نعم-هناك-توغل-للإخوان-في-التعليم>.

In 2015, two years before the crackdown on the extremist clerics, MBS, under directions from his father, the King, began shaping policy, and oversaw the first major step toward curbing the power of those religious elites who appeared to hold extreme views, when the government eliminated the role of the formidable *mutawwa'in*, the religious police, whose official name is the Commission of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV).⁽³⁹⁾

The government also begun slowly chipping away at the guardianship law, which was used to make women (and girls) subordinate to the authority of men, preventing their right, for example, to enroll in school without a male relative's permission. It goes without saying that diminishing the traditional guardianship rule has helped to eliminate many extreme social practices in the education system for girls and young women. For example, the MoE approved a proposal from Princess Noura University (PNU), the Kingdom's largest all-women's university, with 60,000 students, to allow its students to leave campus without the permission of their male guardians,⁽⁴⁰⁾ a decision that had been opposed by the religious police. According to a statement issued by PNU, this decision was taken at the behest of the students. In addition, some schools used to require female students to wear the veil, but in 2019 the MoE made it explicit that this was not required,⁽⁴¹⁾ although hijabs, which cover only the hair, are still required.

Fundamental clerics have also been replaced by others with moderate views to promote moderate Islamic values of tolerance and interfaith dialogue. The secretary-general of the World Muslim League, Mohammed al-Issa, has led a campaign from 2018 that advocates the need to neutralize political differences between Muslims and other religions and combat anti-Semitism. As part of the campaign, he made a ground-breaking visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.⁽⁴²⁾

(39) For decades, the religious police wielded unrestrained power over society as the arbiter of Islamic morality. See: "Rise and Fall of the Saudi Religious Police," *Arab News*, September 23, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1558176/saudi-arabia>.

(40) 'Maryam al-Jabir, "Limatha Samahat Jami't Nurah li-Talibatiha bi-l-Khuruj fi Ayyi Waqt," *Okaz*, September 17, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.Okaz.com.sa/local/na/1672033>.

(41) "Haya al-Awwad: la Elzam bi Shaki Mu'yyan li Hijab al-Talibat," *al-Jazeera*, September 13, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.al-jazirah.com/2018/20181231/lp1.htm>.

(42) "Muslim World Leaders Visit Auschwitz in 'Strong Signal' of Interfaith Support," DW, January 19, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/muslim-world-leaders-visit-auschwitz-in-strong-signal-of-interfaith-support/a-52034131>.

Part Two:

MBS's New Educational Policy

Overview—Role of Previous Monarchs

Prior to the launch of Vision 2030, Saudi monarchs pursued various approaches to developing the education system. Kings Faisal and Abdullah were the principal reformers of education in Saudi Arabia.

King Faisal was the first Saudi monarch seriously to reform the Kingdom's education system. His role in introducing public education for girls (as Crown Prince to King Saud) proved permanent, despite strong, even violent, conservative resistance and circumscription of the curricula. King Faisal also understood the importance of training to enable Saudi citizens to work in a modern economy. To this end, he created a series of specialized vocational institutions across the Kingdom. These were and still are run by the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) and have been successful in employing young people because they emphasize teaching special skills for particular jobs, such as mechanical and electrical technology, food production techniques, fashion design, and sewing skills. Faisal also provided funding for Saudis to study abroad, although the number remained small; by 1974, there were just 800 Saudi students in the United States.⁽⁴⁹⁾ He also encouraged those who were educated in the West to enter into and reform the Kingdom's own education system. While a few did, they found themselves outnumbered by a generation of officials and educators with a conservative mind-set and who tended to maintain the conservative Islamic form of education.

The late King Abdallah also modernized the Saudi education system. His approach was twofold. First, he attempted to remake the Kingdom's own education system by reforming pre-existing educational institutions and creating new ones. Second, he moved to equip citizens with the tools needed to work and compete in a modern, private-sector-driven economy by dramatically expanding the number of Saudi students studying overseas.

(49) WAS, "al-'ibti'ath 'ila Amarika.. min 9 Tullab fi al-Khamsiniyyat 'ila 125 Alf 'am 1975," *al-Madinah*, September 3, 1975, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.al-madina.com/article/400573/>.

The Kingdom established national standards for Saudi educators via the National Center for Education and Professional Development (Qiyas) in 2008.⁽⁵⁰⁾ As part of the MoE, Qiyas employs nationwide testing to evaluate teacher competency. The results thus far have been mixed. In 2016, 70 percent of all Saudi teachers failed the exam⁽⁵¹⁾—although it is important to note that those who do not pass may retake the exam up to four additional times. While this program may weed out some unqualified candidates, the MoE does not provide test takers with training or financial support to take expensive private preparation classes.

Accelerated Reform

In 2005, Saudi Arabia launched the King Abdullah External Scholarship Program (KASP). Until this time, the opportunity to study abroad had largely been reserved for those who could afford it (i.e., the wealthy elite). KASP made it possible for thousands of middle-class Saudis to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees at foreign universities.⁽⁵²⁾ The hope was that exposing Saudis to foreign universities, and especially prestigious Western institutions that emphasized creative skills and innovative thinking, would enable them to return to the Kingdom with an employable skillset.⁽⁵³⁾ It was also believed that securing meaningful employment in line with their expectations would reduce the number of Saudis susceptible to extremist ideas and, ultimately, help to transform the Kingdom economically as well.⁽⁵⁴⁾

KASP also aimed to promote tolerance by exposing Saudis to students from different cultures, societies, and religious backgrounds.⁽⁵⁵⁾ As of 2017, there were 87,000 Saudi students—including 29,000 women—studying in the United States on government scholarships.⁽⁵⁶⁾ According to former Minister of Education Ahmad al-Issa, KASP succeeded because it was a government-

(50) Saudi Arabia, Education and Training Evaluation Center, National Centre for Assessment, <https://etec.gov.sa/en/About/Centers/Pages/qiyas.aspx>.

(51) Nuha al-Saddawi, “Nisbat Rusub al-Mu’alimin fi Ikhtibar al-Qiyas 70%,” *Sayyidati*, March 3, 2016, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.sayidaty.net/node/403881/اختبار-القياس-في-نسبة-رسوب-المعلمين-في-اختبار-القياس>.

(52) “King Abdullah Scholarship Program to Continue for Five Years to Come,” Saudi Ministry of Education, 2010, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.moe.gov.sa/en/news/Pages/an74.aspx>.

(53) “King Abdullah Scholarship Program to Continue for Five Years to Come,” 2010.

(54) Hashim al-Samdani, “Barnamaj al-‘ibti’ath al-Khariji: Ru’yat Malik Tamuh li Mustaqbal Watan Mushriq,” *al-Jazeera*, April 14, 2014, accessed August 31, 2020, <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2013/20130414/fe14.htm>.

(55) “King Abdullah Scholarship Program to Continue for Five Years to Come,” 2010.

(56) Jamal al-Dubahi, “al-‘Isa: ‘adad al-Mubta’athin fi Amrika 89 Alfan,” *Okaz*, April 8, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.Okaz.com.sa/local/na/1630811>

run well-supervised program.⁽⁵⁷⁾ As such, it was directly linked to the King through ministerial committees, enjoyed high levels of ministerial cooperation and coordination, and was subject to governmental oversight, which allowed for self-correction.

Two years later, the government earmarked \$15 billion to establish the King Abdullah Education Development Company Tatweer (Development).⁽⁵⁸⁾ Tatweer's mission was to modernize the Kingdom's public education system by introducing new educational technologies, teaching methods, and curricula, and updating the Kingdom's educational infrastructure.⁽⁵⁹⁾ To meet these objectives, the MoE signed a series of collaborative agreements with other organizations. One such agreement was with the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, which aimed to promote a culture of dialogue, debate, and respect for divergent opinions.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Despite receiving enormous sums of money, Tatweer did not wholly achieve its mandate aims.⁽⁶¹⁾ In his book *Education Reform in KSA*, former Minister of Education al-Issa writes that schisms between traditionalist and liberal bureaucrats, a lack of coordination between government agencies, and a near-total absence of transparency with regard to project expenditures, impacted its effectiveness.⁽⁶²⁾

King Abdallah also helped to inaugurate a number of higher education institutions to improve the Saudi education outcome. The King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) opened in 2009 as the Kingdom's first co-educational institution⁽⁶³⁾ (a few others have since been established, such as al-Faisal University). KAUST was unique in that it was

(57) Ahmad al-Issa, "*Islah al al-Ta'lim fi al-Sa'udiyyah: Bayna Ghayab al-Ru'ah al-Siyassiyah, wa Tawajjus al-Thaqafah al-Diniyyah, wa 'Ajz al-Idarah al-Tarbawiyah*," (Beirut: al-Saqi, 2009, 21), 21.

(58) Rfah Alyami, "Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Tatweer Schools as a Unit of Development," *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal* 5, no. 2 (2014), <https://infonomics-society.org/wp-content/uploads/licej/published-papers/volume-5-2014/Educational-Reform-in-the-Kingdom-of-Saudi-Arabia-Tatweer-Schools-as-a-Unit-of-Development.pdf>.

(59) Alyami, "Education Reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," 2014.

(60) "Wizarat al-Ta'lim wa Markaz al-Malik Abdulaziz li-l-Hiwar al-Watani Tubriman Muthakkirat T'awun Mushtarak," Saudi Press Agency, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/1769009>.

(61) al-Issa, "*Islah al al-Ta'lim fi al-Sa'udiyyah*," 2009, 21.

(62) It is important to note here that the KASP program's first graduates had difficulty securing jobs upon returning home. However, to overcome the issue, the Ministry of Higher Education created an initiative called "Your Scholarship, Your Job," which linked graduates directly with employment. In 2017, this led to 9,000 KASP graduates securing job placements that saw them being sent abroad on scholarships, to major in subjects including aviation, cyber security, and tourism. See: "Foreign Scholarship Tied to Employment," *Arab News*, June 8, 2015, <https://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/758566>.

(63) Saudi Arabia Investment and Business Guide (Washington, DC: International Business Publications, 2015), 119.

a graduate school, with no enforcement of the Islamic dress code for women, where many of the educators were of diverse nationalities, and which employed English as its language of instruction.⁽⁶⁴⁾ KAUST presents a mixed picture. Its approach to learning and cultural norms has not been successfully replicated. In addition, KAUST students are disproportionately elite and international. In 2015, Saudi nationals comprised just 35 percent of the student population.⁽⁶⁵⁾ At the same time, it is rightly lauded for offering a first-rate graduate education in engineering, mathematics, biology, and environmental science. In 2018, the university conferred 243 masters and doctoral degrees—111 to Saudi students⁽⁶⁶⁾—and KAUST graduates occupy approximately 75 percent of all research posts in Saudi Arabia.⁽⁶⁷⁾ It also supplies a steady stream of talent to the Kingdom’s two most important companies, state oil company Saudi Aramco and petrochemicals giant SABIC, both of which have joint research and development centers with the university.⁽⁶⁸⁾

New King, Different Approach

Although the steps of the previous Kings to develop the education added elements of progress to the overall education system, these steps have not always been united by a strategic vision. This is due to conflicts of opinion and interest originating within the various decision-making bodies of government, including different views of different monarchs who made their own individual small steps toward reform. The developments, in short, amounted to a serendipitous alignment of real events and personal attitude toward reform. As a result, the net consequences were incremental rather than the conclusion of decades-long reform programs, which inevitably stalled and failed to succeed wholly to create a greater impact despite the huge budgets allocated to them.

However, the current reforming of education in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030 indicates that it is two-pronged. The first prong involves amending the content of religious textbooks

(64) Saudi Arabia Investment and Business Guide, 2015, 119.

(65) It should be noted that at least 50 percent of the student population must come from abroad for KAUST to maintain its status as an international university. See: Chris Havergal, “Staying Away from Politics,” *Inside Higher Education*, March 12 (2015), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/03/12/president-kaust-says-he-wont-criticize-saudi-policies>.

(66) Aisha Ja’afari, “KUAST Tahtafil bi Takhrij 243 Talib wa Talibah fi Duf’atiha al Tasi’ah,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, December 14, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/1504826/> “كاوست - تحتفل - بتخريج - 243 - طالباً وطالبة - في - دفعتها - التاسعة -”.

(67) “‘Am Hafil bi-l-‘Injazat li Jami’at al-Malik Abdullah li-l-‘ulum wa al-Taqniyah,” 2016, December 29, 2016, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.kaust.edu.sa/ar/news/kaust-year-in-review-selected-highlights>.

(68) “ARAMCO al Sa’udiyah Tudashin Markazan li-l-Abhath,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, December 16, 2016, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/808286/>.

and curricula in order to decrease the emphasis on religious topics and put more emphasis on technical and creative skills and critical thinking, vet teachers more closely, and reduce religious oversight of the education system by enacting policy to maintain moderate religious teaching in the curricula. The second prong is to experiment with new and more market-oriented forms of education and educational policies with the aim of implementing economic reforms that seek economic diversification and employment for Saudis. Given this, we see that the education system has been harnessed to national economic growth and a change in society, which in the process will allow moderate religious discourse to develop.

This approach by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) differs from that of King Abdullah, in the sense that the latter's approach to reforming education focused entirely on the educational apparatus. MBS's focus has shown that he is prepared to tackle the institutions beyond educational apparatus, which may hinder some reforms, such as the disbanding of the religious police *mutawwa'in* and cracking down on fundamentalists and pro-Muslim Brotherhood individuals. By tackling the wider issue of religious extremism and the role this has played in obstructing young Saudis, MBS's approach is novel—and potentially more likely to succeed.

Vision 2030: Education System Aligned with Economic Needs

So far, Vision 2030's plan to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil income has made the most concerted push to modernize the education system. The Kingdom has introduced hundreds of summer programs aimed at increasing teachers' competency.⁽⁶⁹⁾ It is also incorporating new learning technologies and new teaching methods into the classroom, including a plan to replace printed textbooks with interactive tablets and digital curricula.⁽⁷⁰⁾ That means that they can be reviewed and that any material deemed radical can be easily edited out. In 2018, the MoE launched the *Khibrat* (Experiences) program, which sent 1,000 public school teachers from all levels for pedagogical training in the United States and Europe, to improve their competence.⁽⁷¹⁾

(69) "Tatweer Maharat 430 Alf min Shaghili al Watha'if al-Ta'limiyah," *Makkah*, July 26, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://makkahnewspaper.com/article/1516328/..البلد/تطوير-مهارات-430-ألف-من-شاغلي-الوظائف-التعليمية>

(70) Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia Struggles to Check Extremism in Schools," *Financial Times*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/d399f4ec-eaf5-11e7-8713-513b1d7ca85a>.

(71) "Wazir al-Ta'lim Yu'linu 'an Tadrib 1020 Mu'alim fi al-Kharj," Ministry of Education, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.moe.gov.sa/ar/news/pages/ministerteachtrainlauncher.aspx>.

A year later, the MoE introduced a national teacher accreditation program, including a teacher certification license that can only be granted to teachers who pass an exam.⁽⁷²⁾

New modules of “Critical Thinking” and “Philosophy” are to be taught in secondary schools from 2021 in order to address the country’s deficits in these areas, after decades of using curricula built on rote memorization.⁽⁷³⁾

In another break with the past, the MoE has moved from a standardized curriculum and now allows students a choice of new electives, including classes in research and information resources and earth sciences.⁽⁷⁴⁾ In addition, Saudi secondary and tertiary schools will begin offering Chinese-language training this fall in order to prepare students to work in a globalized economy and also to forge closer economic ties between Riyadh and Beijing.⁽⁷⁵⁾

In recent years the government has significantly extended the External Scholarship Program, which provides the means for all Saudi students to obtain undergraduate and graduate degrees from foreign universities. Under Vision 2030, this has involved the first-ever cultural scholarship program in the arts, including studies in music, theater, film, and architecture, subjects⁽⁷⁶⁾ that were previously banned. Minister of Culture Prince Bader bin Abdullah explained that this move was taken “to meet the labor market needs,”⁽⁷⁷⁾ especially in the entertainment and tourism industries, a key component of Vision 2030’s push for economic diversification. The Minister’s statement demonstrates that Riyadh is attempting to incorporate modern subjects into its education system under the cover of economic reforms and Vision 2030, which explicitly calls for a modern education system that is adapted to the job market.

(72) Taghreed Al-Saraj, “Teacher Certification in Saudi Arabia Key to Raising Education Standards,” *Arab News*, July 18, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1527316>.

(73) Nadiyah al-Fawaz, “Wazir al-Tarbiyah wa al-Ta’lim: Hatha Maw’id Tadrīs al-Falsafah fi al-Maradris al-Sa’udiyyah,” *al-Arabiyyah*, 20 May, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/saudi-today/2018/12/11/-الفسفة-تدریس-مؤعد-التعليم-هذا-وزير-التعليم-مدارس-السعودية>

(74) “Dalil al-Ta’lim al-Thanawi: Nitham al-Muqarrarat,” Ministry of Education, 2016, 17, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://trc.t4edu.com/Docs/دليل%20التعليم%20الثانوي%20نظام%20المقرارات.pdf>,

(75) “Saudi Arabia to Include Chinese Language in Educational Curriculum,” February 22, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2019/02/22/Saudi-Arabia-to-include-Chinese-language-in-educational-curriculum>.

(76) “Cultural Scholarships on Offer to Saudi Students in an Educational First,” *Arab News*, December 30, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1606086/saudi-arabia>.

(77) “Agents Welcome New Cultural Scholarship Program in Saudi Arabia,” *The Pie News*, January 8, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://thepienews.com/news/saudi-arabia-agents-welcome-new-cultural-scholarship-program/>.

The Kingdom has also worked at including the arts and incorporating them into the curricula of public and private schools and universities. The initial plan in the initiative of teaching music and theater in the curricula of schools and universities involves launching an Arts and Culture Department at King Saud University in Riyadh and a Bachelor of Science in Cinematic Arts degree at Effat University, a university for women in Jeddah.⁽⁷⁸⁾

These curricula are expected to help Saudi Arabia to boost the entertainment and tourism sectors, generate billions for the country's economy and directly create jobs for Saudis.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Vision 2030 has a goal of reducing unemployment to 7 percent by 2030.⁽⁸⁰⁾ This means that the education sector and training should be enhanced with the appropriate knowledge and practical skills.

Already Vision 2030's economic focus has revived opportunities for training for Saudi youth in new fields like tourism, event management, and hospitality. In 2018, the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce trained 1,000 young males and females in small towns in hospitality, tourism, and digital marketing;⁽⁸¹⁾ such training opportunities are aimed at helping those who do not have university degrees and feel disadvantaged in a competitive job market. The Kingdom also created 17,000 jobs in tourism and entertainment, thanks in part to programs such as these.⁽⁸²⁾

Saudi Arabia allowed foreign universities to open branch campuses in the country for the first time so that Saudis can have quality education without needing to leave the country.⁽⁸³⁾ And in a historic move to improve its regulation, King Salman approved a new system to privatize higher education.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The application of the new law will start gradually at three universities;

(78) "Saudi Universities to Open Art, Theatre, Film Departments for First Time in History," *Ahram* online, June 16, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/372258/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/Saudi-universities-to-open-art,-theatre,-film-depa.aspx>.

(79) Thomas Abgrall, "Saudi Arabia to Diversify the Economy with Ambitious Plan for Entertainment Industry," *France 24*, April 22, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180422-saudi-arabia-diversify-economy-cinema-entertainment-industry-mbs-crown-prince>.

(80) Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia Raises the Alarm over Rising Unemployment," *Financial Times*, April 24, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/df579534-47c3-11e8-8ae9-4b5ddcca99b3>.

(81) "Ta'hil 1000 Shab wa Fatat fi al-Tasawwuq al-Raqmi," *Okaz*, January 10, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.Okaz.com.sa/economy/na/1698234>.

(82) "Da'm al-Tarfiḥ bi 240 Milyar Riyal . . . wa Istithdath 224 Alf Wathzifah," *Okaz*, February 23, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.Okaz.com.sa/last-stop/na/1617735>.

(83) Mohammed al-Kinani, "Foreign Universities to Open Branch Campuses in Saudi Arabia," *Arab News*, October 30, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1576231/saudi-arabia>.

(84) Eman al-Khatat, "al-Sa'udiyyah Tabda' Marhalat Istiqlal al-Jami'at," *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 17, 2020, accessed August 31, 2020, [https://aawsat.com/home/article/2394111/..السعودية-تبدأ-مرحلة-\"استقلال\"-الجامعات](https://aawsat.com/home/article/2394111/..السعودية-تبدأ-مرحلة-\)

King Saud University, Riyadh, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, and Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University, Dammam.⁽⁸⁵⁾ While the decision will not affect free education for Saudis, it will help higher education institutions to improve their programs and develop their financial resources in line with the Kingdom's Vision 2030's principles of privatization of education institutions.

Furthermore, the government has increased its commitment to technical and vocational training. Under Vision 2030, the government-backed Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) has launched 16 new initiatives in partnership with 35 different companies in order to meet Saudization goals in promising new sectors like renewable energy and mining.⁽⁸⁶⁾ Recognizing that a private sector that is less dependent on foreign labor will require Saudis to prepare for many of the blue-collar jobs they have traditionally shunned, TVTC is working to destigmatize these jobs in order to raise enrolment rates from less than 10 percent⁽⁸⁷⁾ of high school graduates to 12 percent.⁽⁸⁸⁾

(85) "al-Sa'udiyyah Tabda' Marhalat Istiqlal al-Jami'at," 2020.

(86) "al-Tadrib al-Fanny Yutliq 16 Mubadarah Jadidah li Muwakabat Ru'yat 2030," *al-Madinah*, May, 31, 2016, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.al-madina.com/article/451832>.

(87) "Expanding and Improving Vocational and Technical Education in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia", The Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC), 2012, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://www.educationinvestor.co.uk/Uploads/DanielT2014/TVTC-RFI2012Saudi-Arabia.pdf>.

(88) "al-Tadrib al-Fanny Yutliq 16 Mubadarah," 2016.

Conclusion

At present, despite the inevitable negative consequences for Saudi Arabia due to challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic and the steep drop in oil prices, there is a groundswell of optimism that, by following Vision 2030, Riyadh has already begun to overcome some of the educational shortcomings. The pressure toward diversification of the economy in just under a decade from now has pushed the country into taking up a more serious and bolder approach in addressing its overall education policy and realigning the system with economic, not religious, imperatives to support plans for the future.

Saudi Arabia's current attempts to reform the education system have been strategic ones, not only in attempts to reduce the sheer number of extremist precepts in developing more market-oriented modules, but also by empowering moderate religious clerics to join in the historic approach toward education reform and promote humanistic and moderate Islamic notions.

At the time of writing, the backlash from traditional conservative clerics and society has been minimal and has not gone beyond expressing indignation on social media, which suggests that MSB's strategy of integrating educational reform under the scope of generating non-oil sources of revenue and combating unemployment has had some share of success and made educational reform more acceptable to the majority of society.

However, the government is expected to continue exercising caution about debating its modernizing moves officially under the Saudi reformation plan because any public discussion by the government about the specific reform of its religious education policy must first tackle several understandings with the Ulema over recent decades. These are now too deeply entrenched in Saudis' identity and cultural legacy to be changed overnight.

The country's present leadership understands these fault lines and prefers to sidestep a full-frontal push on these issues, especially at a time when it is also carrying out radical social changes that include allowing women to drive and introducing public cinemas and music concerts; all these areas have involved taboos, which left some people drawing the conclusion that the reform program favored the liberals.

It is fair to say also that the deliberate lack of transparent discussion about education reform within Vision 2030—namely, the challenge of restructuring the Islamic education system—has helped give the strategy broad appeal to conservatives and liberals alike. To move forward too quickly and too insistently might stop reform in its tracks. But the move to avoid public debate is double-edged. It helps the policy makers to maneuver behind the scenes rather than provoking a huge outcry, which would happen were it out in the open. That being said, however, the reform of religious education will need to be publicly discussed sooner or later. The government should involve educators, media, and society as a whole if it wants to bring about these changes quickly. Ultraconservative interpretations of Islam that are not challenged and debated openly pose a substantial threat to Saudi Arabia’s desire to comply with Vision 2030 to create a more tolerant education system, face the homegrown threat of terrorism, and escape the backlash leveled at its education system for being a source of exporting radical ideology.

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Acknowledgment

I would like to extend my gratitude to his Royal Highness Prince Turki Al-Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) for his invaluable insights. I am also grateful to Dr. Saud Al-Sarhan, Secretary General of KFCRIS and his entire team for helping in this publication and supporting me throughout the writing of this report. I also wish to express my gratitude to Noura Al-Tamimi for her assistance with the early research for this project.



مركز الملك فيصل للبحوث والدراسات الإسلامية

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