



BRIEFING PAPER

Number CBP 7781, 29 November 2016

Saudi Arabia update 2016

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Summary

In 2015 King Abdullah died and was succeeded by Salman, his half-brother. Salman is son of Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia and likely to be the last of the founder's sons to sit on the Saudi throne.

Abdullah had made some modest political reforms, increasing consultation with the populace and improving higher education, for example.

Salman's policies so far have stressed a firm approach to internal security and if anything a tightening of the screws on dissent. Mohammed bin Nayef, son of the long-serving interior minister Prince Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz, was appointed interior minister, first deputy Prime Minister and Crown Prince.

Salman's son Mohammed bin Salman was appointed second deputy Prime Minister and defence minister. At 31, he is very young for a Saudi cabinet minister, and is thought to be highly influential. Some see him as a breath of fresh air with a welcome enthusiasm for more dynamic policies and faster change. Others think he is impetuous and takes dangerous gambles. Many analysts see his influence behind the decision to take military action in Yemen (although moves towards a more independent and activist foreign policy were already underway under the previous King, conditioned by a cooling of the relationship with the United States, particularly since 9/11).

Mohammed bin Salman (or MBS as he is often known) is also seen as the driving force behind Saudi Vision 2030, a comprehensive strategy document that foresees economic reform aiming at weaning the state and its citizens off oil revenues. The strategy envisages increasing the size of the private sector and charging for public services, for example. It also implies some social changes, making education more practically useful, increasing opportunities for cultural expression and encouraging healthy lifestyles. The strategy also sets out a target of increasing transparency and enhancing engagement with citizens.

Sceptics wonder whether the Saudi state is capable of delivering the changes at the speed envisaged, when many public servants are steeped in traditional ways of doing things.

The Saudi-led campaign against the Houthi/Saleh rebellion in Yemen, seen by the Saudis as an example of Iranian aggression, is the biggest test for the newly activist Saudi foreign policy; some observers think that it will damage the reputation of Salman's defence minister, MBS. The Yemen campaign has come in for increasing criticism, as it appears to be making little progress and is causing immense suffering to Yemenis.

While Western governments, including the UK, have signalled their disapproval of events such as the attack on the funeral in the Yemeni capital Sanaa that killed some 140 people, they have also come in for criticism themselves for supporting the Saudi-led operation.

Human rights groups and others allege that UK-supplied weapons have been used in ways which violate international humanitarian law, and there have been questions about the role of UK military advisers in the conflict. In September 2016 the House of Commons Business and International Development Committees recommended a suspension of arms sales to Saudi Arabia until a full international investigation has taken place.

The protection of human rights in Saudi Arabia remains weak. Freedom of expression has been further curtailed in recent years; new anti-terrorism laws introduced in 2014 were very widely drafted, giving the authorities wide scope to use them to repress dissent, according to human rights campaigners. The right to assemble and to form associations is also severely restricted.

Shias are frequent targets of repression and discrimination. Their standard of living is on average lower than that of Sunni Saudis. Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shiite sheikh and critic of the Government, was executed in 2016.

The number of executions has increased in recent years; Saudi Arabia is one of the biggest users of the death penalty, along with Iran and China.

The justice system is deeply flawed, according to rights groups such as Amnesty International, and torture and ill treatment of prisoners remains “common,” according to the group.

Women were included in the democratic reform of municipal councils and have been appointed to the Consultative Assembly, under reforms brought in by King Abdullah. They are also increasingly entering the workforce and more than 50% of graduates are women (one of the aims of the Vision 2030 strategy is to increase women’s participation from 22% to 30% by 2030). There remain, however, significant obstacles to their full participation in society – they are still banned from driving for example and their freedom is hampered by the male guardian system.

Although Saudi society remains very conservative, faster change may be inevitable:

- The Saudi population is young on average: about half the population is aged under 25.¹
- the take-up of social media and other internet services is very high: the Gulf region has the highest penetration of smart phones in the world.²
- Saudi Arabia’s economic model cannot last for ever
- the government has policies in place to accelerate social and economic change
- a generational change is taking place in the highest leadership
- there are more women than men in higher education³
- the whole region is in flux.

¹ Caryle Murphy, ‘[Saudi Arabia’s Youth and the Kingdom’s Future](#)’, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2012

² ‘[Why Saudis are ardent social media fans](#)’, *Economist*, 23 March 2015

³ ‘[Saudi Women More Educated Than Men Are Wasted Resource](#)’, *Bloomberg*, 4 June 2013

1. Abdullah to Salman

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. The King is expected to rule by Sharia law according to the Constitution. He appoints and chairs the Council of Ministers, which reaches decisions by majority vote; decisions are subject to royal approval.

Since 1993 there has been a Consultative Council, appointed by the King, and this has grown in membership from 60 at its inception to 150 now.

Tribes and villages also have councils composed of a presiding sheikh, legal advisers and two other notable persons. These councils have the power to enforce regulations.

Political parties are not permitted and elections are restricted to municipal councils, which have little power. The religious establishment is very influential, particularly in the judicial system. Its privileged position owes much to the fact that the monarchy relies heavily on traditional Islam for its own legitimacy. In 1986, King Fahd assumed the title of Guardian of the Holy Places.

1.1 Reign of Abdullah

Abdullah was one of the sons of Abdulaziz ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia, and had ruled for 15 years, the first five as *de facto* King after his predecessor, King Fahd, was incapacitated by a stroke.

King Abdullah's rule was generally seen as cautious, encouraging some limited reforms in the politics of Saudi Arabia.

In 2011 it was announced that 20% of the seats on the Consultative Council would be reserved for women; it had been a men-only body up till then.

Elections to municipal councils were held in 2005 and 2011; males over the age of 21 were allowed to elect half of the members of the councils. Women were enfranchised for the December 2015 municipal election.

A programme was instituted to send Saudi students, both male and female, abroad to attend university, and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology was set up in Saudi Arabia, where religious restrictions are eased and teaching takes place in English.

Abdullah also made some attempts to reform the judicial system, including introducing more training for sharia judges and codifying Saudi sharia law, to try to avoid the sort of judgments that had attracted negative publicity internationally. He also tried to bring the religious establishment more under the control of the government, issuing a decree that only approved religious scholars could issue *fatwas*. He replaced the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Justice

Women on the
Consultative
Council

and the President of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice with less conservative figures.

During Abdullah's reign, the first woman was made a government minister.

Abdullah's foreign policy was equally careful – he was anxious to avoid any rift with the United States and other Western countries, which continued to underwrite Saudi security through arms sales and defence agreements such as the stationing on Saudi territory of a US control base for unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs/drones) in the fight against insurgents in Yemen.

Saudi relations with the US were particularly strained by the events of 2011, when the West was perceived to have abandoned an old ally in Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. Saudi royals no doubt feared that their regime could suffer a similar fate.

Mubarak
'abandoned'

There was also growing concern in Saudi Arabia at the warming relations between the US and Iran, Saudi Arabia's great rival for leadership in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the sectarian divide in the region became ever deeper, exacerbated by the conflicts in Iraq/Syria and Yemen.

1.2 Salman

On 23 January 2015 King Abdullah died after a short illness. Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, reportedly the 25th son of Ibn Saud, acceded to the throne on 23 January 2015. He is aged 80 and his health is uncertain.

In domestic matters he was expected to continue the policies of his predecessor and institute some relatively minor reforms while aiming to maintain the power of the crown and the strength of traditional Islam.

A bonus equivalent to two months' salary was given to state employees on his accession to the throne, with similar bonuses to pensioners and social security recipients.

Any idea that Salman's accession would lead to liberalisation was quashed by the fact that 39 executions were carried out in Saudi Arabia in the first two months of 2015, according to reports, about three times as many as during the equivalent period of 2014.⁴

Mohammed bin Nayef

Salman appointed Prince Mohammed bin Nayef as the Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister. He is heir presumptive, aged 57 and a new generation of the royal family, being a grandson of Ibn Saud. He is a security hardliner, like his father Prince Nayef, who was minister of the interior from 1975 to 2012 and led the crackdown on al-Qaeda from 2003 and 2006.

Mohammed bin Salman

Salman appointed his son Mohammed bin Salman, sometimes known as MBS, as Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. The

⁴ [Saudi Arabia](#) in Europa World online. London, Routledge. House of Commons

prince was just 29 years old when he was appointed, a stark change from the ageing princes who have been the norm in high government positions.

29-year-old appointed to the Ministry of Defence

MBS's role as Defence Minister was particularly significant: analysts see his influence in the decision for Saudi Arabia to lead a military campaign in Yemen, something that past Saudi ministers might have been too cautious to do.

The execution of Nimr al-Nimr is said by observers to be a sign of a tough approach to dissent. MBS has been described as "a hawk in the region's sectarian conflicts."⁵

Analysts are divided on MBS's influence. Some see him as reckless, and the difficulties of the Yemen campaign may be supporting that view. One academic familiar with Saudi affairs said he is "the best thing that has happened to Saudi Arabia in long time".⁶ Another said "MBS has been heavily damaged by Yemen. Salman was very foolish to give him so many roles... he suffers from a confusion of roles."

Another sign of a generational change came with the appointment of Khalid Al-Falih, a close associate of MBS, as petroleum and mineral resources minister in May 2016, replacing an octogenarian. He was already chairman of the state oil company Aramco and had been health minister.

Mecca disasters

On 11 September 2015, over one hundred people died when a crane near the Grand Mosque at Mecca collapsed. Less than two weeks later, a stampede at the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the *Hajj*, caused the deaths of 769 pilgrims and injuries to another 934, according to official figures.⁷ Figures from other countries suggested that the death toll had in fact exceeded 2,000.⁸ Iranians were easily the most numerous nationality among the dead.

Thousands killed at the Hajj

The disaster was the worst *Hajj* accident in Saudi Arabia's history, and exacerbated tensions with Iran, many of whose citizens died. Salman ordered an immediate investigation.

⁵ 'Saudi Arabia: Execution of Nimr Al-Nimr forces the sectarian divide ever wider', *Gulf States Newsletter*, 7 January 2016

⁶ 'Saudi Arabia: Unravelling the MBS phenomenon, an enigma wrapped in multiple policies', *Gulf States Newsletter*, 31 March 2016

⁷ '[Nearly 2,000 died in Hajj stampede in Saudi Arabia: Foreign data](#)', *Middle East Eye*, 20 October 2015

⁸ [Europa World online](#). London, Routledge. House of Commons.

2. Economic policy

2.1 Oil market strategy

The sustained fall in the oil price since 2014, added to politically-motivated increases in government spending since 2011, put an unaccustomed strain on the Saudi government's finances (see economic profile, below).

Saudi policy has been partly responsible for the price drop. The Kingdom increased production in 2014, aiming to reduce prices on world markets and force more expensive oil off the market. Such oil particularly included US shale oil, which is generally more expensive to produce than Saudi oil. The strategy was also aimed at cutting Iranian revenues as their oil re-entered world markets.⁹

The strategy has not been a great success. The price fell much more than expected and US producers managed to reduce their costs considerably; the Iranians, with a lot of underused capacity, have been able to expand production rapidly to keep revenues up. Other Middle East suppliers have also increased production and discounted aggressively, to fight for market share.¹⁰

Meanwhile, it is countries like Venezuela that have been most damaged by the oil price fall, along with Saudi Arabia itself. The deficit has led Saudi Arabia to borrow unprecedented amounts on international financial markets, including in London.

Since the arrival of Khalid al-Falih at the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, the policy has been abandoned and production cuts are being discussed in OPEC. As the biggest oil producer in OPEC, the Kingdom is likely to implement the bulk of any cuts so it not clear when or if revenues will recover.

2.2 Vision 2030

As well as these immediate economic factors, there are other problems looming for Saudi Arabia, including possible long-term reduction in the demand for oil and persistent regional instability.

Partly in response to these worries, the Government published the Saudi Vision 2030 document in April 2016, outlining plans to increase the size of the private sector among other things. The document envisaged:

- A target of 450,000 new private sector jobs for Saudi nationals by 2020
- The 'digital transformation' of the Saudi economy
- Increasing investment in education
- Opportunities for men and women, young and old

⁹ ['The Saudis' strategic failure'](#), *Financial Times*, 10 October 2016

¹⁰ Hadi Fathalla, ['Saudi Arabia and the Oil Pricing Wars of the Middle East'](#), Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, 17 November 2016

- A bigger role for small and medium-sized business
- Decreasing unemployment to 7% by 2030
- Privatising more state assets and government services
- Supporting growth sectors
- Increasing renewable energy.¹¹

National Transition Plan

In June 2016, the Government published a National Transition Plan containing measures to implement the Vision strategy up to 2020. It was interpreted by some as meaning that Saudis would soon be paying income tax, but the Ministry of Finance said that only foreign workers and companies were to be targeted. The plan did involve increases in charges for public services; these might meet as much resistance as taxes since they will entail a significant hit to Saudis' disposable income.

Although the government intended to raise more money from the population, former Ambassador to the UK Prince Turki al-Faisal denied in an interview that democratisation should go along with the changes.¹²

In May 2016 Salman announced a major reorganisation of government departments following the publication of the Saudi Vision 2020 strategy.

Taxation but no representation?

¹¹ Full text of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, 26 April 2016. [English translation on alarabiya](#)

¹² 'Saudi Arabia to push for more taxation, but no representation', *Gulf States Newsletter*, 16 June 2016

3. Foreign affairs

It is in foreign policy that the arrival of Salman and his son Mohammed has brought a different style, and it is in the struggle against Iranian influence that this new style has been put into action.

The signature of the nuclear deal with Iran was a major trauma for Saudi Arabia, where it tends to be seen as an opportunity for Iran to increase its resources and consequently to expand its programme of perceived mischief-making in the region. Riyadh has led a military campaign without much direct US backing against the perceived Iranian allies, the Houthis, in Yemen. The campaign aims to re-install the Saudi-backed President al-Hadi in the Yemeni capital, in a country that is very much Saudi Arabia's back yard. Whether it will achieve that aim is not clear, but it is a bold policy.

Saudi Arabia has also softened its opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, persuading the Egyptian government to drop its terrorist designation of Brotherhood-linked Hamas. A new approach to the Brotherhood helped improve relations with Qatar – the two had previously clashed over treatment of the Brotherhood – and Turkey.

Despite concerns over US policy towards Egypt and Iran, Riyadh has continued to value its relationship with Washington. It also pledged to support the US-led campaign of air strikes against ISIS in Syria.

There was a sharp deterioration, however, in April 2016 when the US Supreme Court upheld legislation providing for victims of terrorist attacks to sue countries complicit in those attacks. The Saudi Government announced that it would sell Saudi assets held in the USA, if such cases proceeded against it. In October 2016 the widow of a man killed in the attack on the Pentagon was the first to start proceedings against the Saudi Government.

3.1 Iran and Yemen

Saudi Arabia is locked in a struggle for regional influence with Iran. The rivalry dates back centuries and springs from tension between the Arabs of Saudi Arabia and the Persians of Iran – and between Shia and Sunni branches of Islam. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the leader of the Sunni world and of the Arabs. In 1986 the monarchy revived the ancient style 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques' (Mecca and Medina). Saudi Arabia frequently denounces alleged Iranian "meddling" in Arab affairs.

Since the 1979 revolution ended Iran's Western alignment, the two Middle East heavyweights have become sworn enemies. Iran sees itself not only as the leader of the Shia world and protector of Shiites against Sunni oppression but also as the vanguard of resistance to Israel and US influence in the region. Iran often accuses Saudi Arabia of clandestine collaboration with the Israelis and abandonment of the Palestinians.

Iran denounces Saudi backing for radical Sunni groups. An article on Supreme Leader Khamane'i's website reads:

... Saudi rulers are inhumane and have no self-respect [...] for continuing to support, arm and fund Wahhabi terrorists all across the world and most importantly for hijacking the Muslim faith under the banner of the tyrants Al Saud.¹³

In March 2016 the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose biggest member is Saudi Arabia, designated Hizbollah as a terrorist organisation. Hizbollah's principal patron is Iran.

In May, negotiations between Saudi and Iranian officials over access for Iranians to the 2016 Hajj broke down. Each side blamed the other for the impasse.

Relations took a turn for the worse in September 2016. Ayatollah Khamenei accused the Saudi authorities of "murdering" the Hajj pilgrims that died in 2015:

The heartless and murderous Saudis locked up the injured with the dead in containers- instead of providing medical treatment and helping them or at least quenching their thirst. They murdered them.¹⁴

"They murdered them"

Khamenei also called on Muslims to reconsider the Saudi guardianship of the Muslim holy places.

Responding to the speech, the Saudi Grand Mufti, who is appointed by the King, said that Iranians are not Muslims:

We must understand these are not Muslims. They are the son of the Magi and their hostility towards Muslims is an old one, especially with the People of the Tradition [Sunnis].

"Magi" refers to the Zoroastrians who dominated Persia before it was conquered by the Muslims in the 7th century.

The Saudis and the other Sunni Gulf monarchies, particularly the Bahrainis, are quick to blame Iranian interference for social unrest among their Shiite populations, although analysts think that the evidence for this is thin..

Yemen conflict

In March 2015, a Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes on Yemen after a request for help to the Gulf Cooperation Council from President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Saudi-led forces targeted the Houthis and, importantly, allied elements in the army still loyal to previous President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has been held largely responsible for the striking success of the Houthi rebellion.

Despite heavy bombardment and a blockade of many Yemeni ports, mounting civilian casualties and the destruction of vital infrastructure, the Saudi-led campaign has reached something of a stalemate; little movement in positions has been achieved in the past year. Meanwhile,

¹³ Marwa Osman, ' [What is Wahhabism? Does ISIS emerge from Wahhabism?](#)', Khamanei.ir, 11 September 2016

¹⁴ ' [Imam Khamenei's Hajj Message – 2016](#)', Khamanei.ir, 5 September 2016

a humanitarian disaster was mounting in Yemen, with increasing incidences of malnutrition and starvation.¹⁵

The US military provided intelligence and operational support to the Saudis during their intervention in Yemen from March 2015, according to reports. Other Western countries have sold weapons to Saudi Arabia.

In February 2016, the European Parliament passed a motion calling on member states to impose an arms embargo on Saudi Arabia because of its actions in Yemen, saying that the Parliament:

Is deeply shocked by the fact that EU Member States continue to authorise the provision of arms licences and military training to Saudi Arabia and its coalition allies and underlines the fact that past, present and future arms deliveries by EU Member States to Saudi Arabia represent not only breaches of legally binding EU arms exports rules under Common Position 944/2008 but also violate several provisions of the Arms Trade Treaty and relevant national legislation.¹⁶

In October 2016, Saudi-led forces launched air strikes against the funeral of the father of the Yemeni interior minister, a close ally of former president Saleh. The attack in the Yemeni capital Sanaa killed more than 140 people, many of them significant political figures.

Funeral attack

Initial inquiries in Saudi Arabia concluded that the attack had been based on "incorrect information" and had violated coalition rules of engagement; "appropriate action" would be taken against those responsible and compensation offered to victims.¹⁷

The funeral attack brought warnings from both the UK and US governments, with the US government saying that its allegiance was not a blank cheque, and the UK saying that its export licensing decisions were kept under review:

The UK Government are deeply concerned by the conflict in Yemen, including recent events in Sana'a. As part of the careful risk assessment for the licensing of arms exports to Saudi Arabia, we keep the situation under careful and continued review. All export licence applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria, taking account of all relevant factors at the time of the application.¹⁸

There were also direct calls in the media for Western support for Saudi Arabia's Yemen campaign to end.¹⁹

¹⁵ ['Children dying of starvation in Yemen's conflict'](#), *BBC News Online*, 21 September 2016

¹⁶ European Parliament, [Motion for a Resolution on the situation in Yemen](#) (2016/2515(RSP)), 27 January 2016

¹⁷ ['Arab coalition says it 'wrongly targeted' Yemen funeral'](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 16 October 2016

¹⁸ [Written question - HL2262](#), 26 October 2016

¹⁹ See for example ['Saudi Arabia's senseless pursuit of war in Yemen: The massacre in Sana'a should mark an end to western support'](#), *Financial Times*, 13 October 2016; ['America's moral duty in Yemen'](#), *New York Times*, 11 October 2016;

UK support for the Saudi-led coalition

The widespread unease over alleged UK support for Saudi Arabia has been focused on arms sales and the links between UK military advisers and the Saudi-led operation in Yemen.

According to the Campaign Against Arms Trade, government figures show that the UK issued £3.3 billion-worth of arms and dual-use export licences to Saudi Arabia from April 2015 to the end of March 2016.²⁰ Amnesty International alleged in 2015 that UK-supplied weapons were being used in breach of international humanitarian law by Saudi Arabia in Yemen.²¹ A legal opinion had also criticised sharply UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia in the context of the Yemen conflict. In an exchange in the House of Commons, the Government said that the UK export licensing system is “vigorous”:

Caroline Lucas: [...] Has his Department assessed the legal opinion published last month by Matrix Chambers which concluded that the Government have misdirected themselves in law and in fact in continuing to grant authorisations for the transfer of weapons to Saudi Arabia that are capable of being used in the conflict in Yemen?

Tobias Ellwood: We have one of the most vigorous export licensing schemes in the world. Indeed, it was set up by the previous Government. If there are any genuine examples of the misuse of weapons systems that have been sold to any country, the process is in place to ensure that they are examined. If such examples are brought forward, we will certainly look at them.²²

Another controversy arose over suggestions that UK military advisers had helped the Saudi military to select targets. On 19 January 2016 the government repeated its position that UK personnel are “not directly involved” in the Yemen conflict, and explained how they assess compliance with international humanitarian law:

Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, whether he has received any reports of any potential breaches of international humanitarian law from UK personnel working with the Saudi military.

Philip Hammond: We are aware of reports on alleged violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in Yemen by the Saudi Arabians and take these very seriously. The UK is not a partner to the Coalition and British military personnel are not directly involved in Coalition operations. The Ministry of Defence closely follows alleged IHL violations, using available information, which in turn informs our overall assessment of IHL compliance in Yemen. We consider a range of information from government sources, foreign governments, the media and international non-governmental organisations. We are also offering advice and training to Saudi Arabia to demonstrate investigations best practice and to help ensure continued compliance with IHL.²³

Arms sales

Military advisers

²⁰ Campaign Against Arms Trade, [UK Arms Export Licences Saudi Arabia](#)

²¹ [‘Bombing of schools by Saudi Arabia-led coalition a flagrant attack on future of Yemen’s children’](#), Amnesty International press release, 11 December 2015

²² [HC Deb 5 January 2016](#), c102

²³ [HC Written question – 22031, 19 January 2016](#)

Following an inquiry into the use of UK supplied arms in Yemen, the Committees on Arms Export Controls (CAEC: joint meetings of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, the International Development Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee) published two separate reports in September 2016.

Parliamentary
committees
disagree

The joint report from the Business and International Development Committees recommended a moratorium on arms sales:

Given that the UK has a long history of defence exports to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners, and considering the evidence we have heard, it seems inevitable that any violations of international humanitarian and human rights law by the coalition have involved arms supplied from the UK. HM Government has obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty, as well as European and domestic law, to ensure there is no risk that arms it has licensed might be used in contravention of international humanitarian law. We therefore recommend that HM Government suspend sales of arms which could be used in Yemen to Saudi Arabia until the independent, UN-led investigation has come to its conclusions and then review the situation again.²⁴

The Foreign Affairs Committee differed from the other two committees in that it did not call for a suspension. It said that the legality of the government's actions would be determined in the UK High Court, where the Campaign Against the Arms Trade is arguing for a suspension of all current licences and the refusal of any new ones.²⁵

The Foreign Affairs Committee did call for a convincing international investigation:

...an independent, United Nations-led investigation of alleged violations by all parties to the conflict is necessary to supplement the internal investigations of the Saudi-led coalition.

The Foreign Affairs Committee also said that the government should publish an explanation of its risk assessment process and what level of risk would trigger the refusal of a licence.²⁶

3.2 Iraq and Syria

The Saudi position in relation to violent Sunni jihadism in Iraq and Syria is equivocal, according to some. While groups such as ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham oppose the Gulf State monarchies, largely because of their closeness to the US and the West, observers argue that such groups received covert assistance, particularly from unofficial sources. Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of the UK MI6, argues that such unofficial support, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, was central in the rise of ISIS in Iraq: "Such things do not happen spontaneously."²⁷

"Such things do not
happen
spontaneously..."

²⁴ Business Innovation and Skills Committee and International Development Committee 1st joint report, [The use of UK-manufactured arms in Yemen](#), HC 679, 16 September 2016

²⁵ 'High Court grants permission for legal challenge over UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia', Leigh Day Solicitors press release, 30 June 2016

²⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee 4th report, [The use of UK manufactured weapons in Yemen](#), HC 688, 15 September 2016

²⁷ Patrick Cockburn, 'Iraq crisis: how Saudi Arabia helped ISIS take over the north of the country', *Independent*, 12 July 2014

Apart from the funding, Dearlove said that the tribal forces backing ISIS in Iraq would be unlikely to do that without clearance from Saudi Arabia, which maintains close links with them.

Saudi policy in Iraq and Syria may be changing, however, particularly since a spate of attacks inside Saudi Arabia claimed by ISIS over the last two years.

Conflict

Saudi Arabia participates in the international coalition taking military action against ISIS/Daesh, but only in Syria. In a statement in 2016, the Foreign Ministry said:

Saudi Arabia is one of the founding countries of the Islamic military alliance' against terrorist organization (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, and the first countries that actively participated in the military intervention against (ISIS) in Syria.

In this sense, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia expresses support for the intensification of alliance efforts including the expansion of Britain's participation to include military operations.²⁸

In practice, however, after some sorties at the beginning of the campaign, the Saudi military and their colleagues from the United Arab Emirates have taken little part in the military action, being preoccupied with the Yemen campaign.²⁹

The kingdom is one of the biggest suppliers of money and weapons to 'moderate' Islamist and nationalist rebel groups in Syria, while also maintaining its relationship with Sunni tribal forces in Iraq. But there is a thin line between those moderate groups and the *jihadi* groups such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Fighters move from one group to another and alliances between them form and dissolve.

The US has also been ambivalent about Saudi actions, aware of the danger of support going to proscribed groups. The plight of rebel forces in Aleppo may have changed that, however. In September 2016 the US lifted its ban on Saudi Arabia and Qatar supplying man-portable air defence systems (Manpads) to rebel groups in Aleppo. The policy came with an instruction that only Syrian aircraft were to be targeted, although it was not clear that the rebels would abide by this.³⁰

Manpads

The Syrian/Iraq conflict and the rise of ISIS underlined the contradictions between Saudi Arabia's promotion of fundamentalist Sunni Islam and the threat that the ideology could pose to the Saudi monarchy. It was also the theatre for a massive escalation in the rivalry with Iran for regional leadership.³¹

²⁸ ['The Kingdom is one of The Founding Countries of The International Coalition Against ISIS to and Supports Intensifying its Efforts'](#), Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy note

²⁹ For more information, see the Commons Briefing Paper [ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), November 2016

³⁰ ["Aleppo must not fall": US allies to flood city with anti-aircraft missiles'](#), *Middle East Eye*, 28 September 2016

³¹ ['Salam accuses Iran of meddling in Arab affairs'](#), *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 22 January 2016

Syria

In spite of the difficulties of deciding which Syrian groups to support, Saudi policy is still to aim for the removal from power of Bashar al-Assad. Foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir said in September 2016 that the Assad government had made any political solution impossible to achieve, and that Saudi Arabia was willing to consider a military operation to tackle ISIS and to topple Assad.³² At the same time he indicated Saudi support for Turkey in Syria, including Turkish action against Kurdish forces there.

Iraq

Relations with the Iraqi government have traditionally been tense. Under Saddam, the Saudis cut off diplomatic relations with Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait, and allowed the US to use Saudi territory for *Operation Desert Storm*.

Since 2003 and the installation of a Shia-led government, Saudi Arabia has tended to see the Baghdad government as too strongly influenced by Iran. The replacement of Nouri al-Maliki with Haider al-Abadi in 2014 eased some tensions but diplomatic relations were only fully restored in 2016, with the opening of an embassy in Baghdad. The move was intended to improve security cooperation in the fight against ISIS.

The Saudi Ambassador to Iraq said recently that Iraq's Shiite militias are contributing to sectarian tensions and has accused them of trying to assassinate him.³³ Iraq responded by requesting his withdrawal. The leader of an important Iraqi Shiite militia responded to the Saudi ambassador's comments by saying he was not welcome in Iraq: "...the enmity of al-Sabhan to Iraq is very clear to everyone. If there was such an attempt to assassinate him it's an honour that everyone claims."³⁴

Analysts viewed the events as a further deepening of the Iranian/Saudi 'cold war'.

"an honour that everyone claims"

3.3 Other regional relations

Saudi Arabia traditionally maintains good relationships with many of the Sunni-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa.

Egypt

There has been strong support for the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt. Although the Saudi budget is under unaccustomed pressure following post-2011 spending increases and the low oil price since 2014, Riyadh has maintained its commitment to Cairo, with a \$24 billion support package in April 2016 and a further \$2 billion in August.

However, the two countries do not see the Syria conflict in the same light: Egypt argues for a political solution to the Syria crisis and is not

³² ['Saudi Arabia backs Turkish action against Kurds in northern Syria'](#), *Middle East Eye*, 9 September 2016

³³ ['Iraq asks Saudi Arabia to remove ambassador'](#), *BBC News Online*, 28 August 2016

³⁴ ['Behind the Saudi ambassador's scuffle in Baghdad'](#), *Middle East Eye*, 2 September 2016

fully supportive of Saudi Arabia's decision to participate in the international coalition in Syria.

In October 2016 the disagreement over Syria came to a head when Egypt voted in favour of a draft Security Council resolution tabled by Russia setting out a ceasefire agreement that did not call for an end to bombing in Aleppo. Egypt also voted for a competing French draft. Neither was successful.³⁵ Having agreed in April to provide 700,000 tons of fuel a month for five years on easy repayment terms, Saudi state oil company Aramco said in October it would not be sending any oil.³⁶

The Saudis have also been disappointed in the Egyptians' failure to send ground troops to help against the Yemen rebellion, despite early indications of support.

No Egyptian troops

Lebanon

As well as Syria and Yemen, Lebanon is a theatre for the struggle between Sunni and Shia and between Riyadh and Tehran. A series of bombs detonated in Beirut in 2015 and 2016 exacerbated tensions to alarming levels. In May 2016 the funeral of a Hizbollah commander killed in Syria was marked by chants of "death to Al Saud": Lebanese Shias were blaming Saudi Arabia for the actions of fundamentalist Sunni groups in Syria.

Relations between Saudi Arabia's traditional Sunni allies in Lebanon, led by Saad Hariri (former Prime Minister and son of the assassinated president) have become strained since Salman's accession. A gift of \$4 billion from Saudi Arabia to the Lebanese government to buy French weapons had been arranged during the reign of Abdullah. But the ever-shifting alliances in Lebanon had convinced Salman and MBS, now in charge of arms deals, that the Lebanese government was an unreliable ally, particularly after the Lebanese Foreign Minister, a Christian, had abstained on an Arab League vote on Saudi Arabia's approach to Iran.

Riyadh may also have concluded that Hizbollah has such control over the Lebanese state that aiding the army may be counterproductive; in any case, these are hard times for the Saudis to be giving away \$4 billion.³⁷

Hard times to be giving away \$4 billion

In October 2016 Michel Aoun, veteran Maronite Christian leader favoured by Iran and the Syrian government, was elected President while Hariri became Prime Minister. The votes in the Lebanese Parliament marked a small victory for Iran in its tussle with Saudi Arabia, which had backed another candidate. However, the Lebanese leadership struggle was also a rare opportunity for discreet negotiations between the two rivals.

³⁵ ['Saudis furious after Egypt backs 'Aleppo aerial slaughter'', *New Arab*, 10 October 2016](#)

³⁶ ['Saudi Aramco informed Egypt about suspending oil product supply: official', *Reuters*, 10 October 2016](#)

³⁷ 'Reappraising alliances and priorities, Riyadh cuts adrift long-standing Lebanese allies', *Gulf States Newsletter*, 4 March 2016

Pakistan

Saudi Arabia has traditionally been close to Pakistan, the Sunni giant in South Asia. While Saudi Arabia has money, it has a small population, particularly in comparison to Iran. Pakistan's Sunnis number roughly 150 million, Pakistan has a significant conventional military capability and shares a long border with Iran. Saudi finance is thought to have helped Pakistan become the only Muslim-majority country with nuclear weapons, while the two collaborated in backing the Mujahideen battling to expel Russia from Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia has funded mosques and religious schools in Pakistan over several decades, promoting a traditionalist form of Islam, one that some Muslim opponents describe as *takfiri* – which describes a tendency to declare other Muslims *kafir* (non-believer). Critics argue that the traditionalist Saudi religious doctrine encourages Sunnis to view Shiites (and adherents of other branches of Islam) as *kafir*.

There has been increasing sectarian violence in Pakistan, with the Shiite Hazara minority coming in for particular repression.³⁸ Extremist Sunni groups have also increasingly targeted Pakistani army and police.

Despite traditional closeness, the relationship is far from straightforward. The Pakistani parliament voted against participating in the Yemen operation in 2015, something which disappointed the Saudi leadership.

In early 2016 there was a series of meetings between the Saudi and Pakistani leaderships, when Pakistan pledged its support for Saudi sovereignty and custodianship of the holy sites in Mecca and Medina.

³⁸ [‘The Plight of the Hazaras in Pakistan’](#), *The Diplomat*, 4 July 2013

4. Terrorism

Saudi Arabia suffered from some large scale terrorist attacks over the years and from around 2003 there was a spate of incidents large and small as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula mounted a campaign against the Kingdom.

The Saudi Government implemented a domestic counter-terrorism policy involving determined action by the Saudi security services, arresting thousands of suspects and giving religious re-education to imprisoned militants. The rehabilitation programme was at first hailed as a model, although its success was later questioned. At the same time, the Saudi intelligence services stepped up their cooperation with Western agencies, helping to foil several serious bomb plots aimed at Western targets.

The domestic campaign was largely successful at driving al-Qaeda from Saudi Arabia and there were not many incidents for several years after 2006.

In 2014 Saudi Arabia proscribed ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda. In 2015 ISIS started to coordinate more attacks on Saudi soil, largely by 'lone wolf' operatives, bringing the level of terrorist incidents almost back to where it had been in the early 2000s.

In 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for a bomb attack on a Shiite mosque in the Eastern Region, killing 21. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has declared its opposition to the Saudi royal family, saying that they outwardly embrace Islam while really betraying it. Hundreds of alleged ISIS supporters were arrested in 2015 and 2016.

ISIS attacks

47 people were executed in January 2016, a majority of them convicted of involvement with Al-Qaeda (four were Shia activists including dissident cleric Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr).

Faced with the argument that Wahhabi doctrine may be encouraging violence, the Saudis point out that there are more Tunisians than Saudis fighting with ISIS in Syria, even though Tunisia has a strong secular tradition.

4.1 2014 terrorist law

Tough new legislation against terrorism was passed in 2014, including prohibiting the terrorist financing.

The drafting of the legislation was questioned by some legal experts, who argued that its definition of terrorism was too broad. The law extends the jurisdiction of the Specialised Criminal Court, set up to deal with terrorism, to anyone who supports changing the ruling system of the State. According to one US legal specialist, that "comes dangerously close to infringing on the freedom of thought and speech that is at the core of human rights."³⁹

³⁹ Michael Newton, '[A Legal Assessment of the Penal Law for Terrorism and its Financing](#)', Vanderbilt University School of Law, 14 July 2015

The law also covers those who aim to damage the “interests, economy, and national and social security of the Kingdom.” This is again a loose definition, giving courts wide discretion.

There have indeed been some highly controversial cases. Terrorism charges were the basis of a conviction in 2015 of Waleed Abu al-Khair, a human rights lawyer who, according to Amnesty International, had defended peaceful activists including Raif Badawi, rather than being a terrorist.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ [‘Waleed Abu al-Khair: An activist not a terrorist’](#), Amnesty International campaign, 12 November 2015

5. Human rights

5.1 United Nations Human Rights Council

With the many criticisms of Saudi Arabia's human rights record, their participation with the United Nations Human Rights Council has been controversial.

Questions were raised about the UK's role in allegedly helping secure the original election of Saudi Arabia to the Council in 2013. Documents leaked from the Saudi diplomatic service suggested that Saudi Arabia and the UK may have had a secret mutual support pact for the elections to the Council.⁴¹ Confronted with the allegation, the then Prime Minister David Cameron implied that if there were compromises with Saudi Arabia over human rights then they were made in the interests of UK national security.⁴²

In September 2015 Faisal bin Hassan Trad, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the UN in Geneva, was elected to chair the UN Human Rights Council panel that appoints independent experts.

Saudi Arabia was re-elected to the UN Human Rights Council in October 2016. The Saudi seat was not contested (a certain number of seats are allocated by region), but still had to achieve a majority assent vote. The British Government declines traditionally to reveal how it votes in such elections.⁴³

In a speech to the Human Rights Council in April 2005, a Minister of State at the Saudi Foreign Ministry said that his country was working to protect people's rights:

Saudi Arabia has gone a long way in taking actions that would promote and protect human rights, believing in the importance of the development of the individual and the community in accordance with their privacy and requirements and not according to theories and ideas imposed from abroad.

To this end, the Kingdom issued the basic law of rule (Law of Governance) and started a national dialogue among all segments of the Saudi society, and the number of Shura Council members has been increased, and its authority and powers have been expanded to include the review and development of laws and regulations.⁴⁴

5.2 Women

Saudi Arabia was ranked at 141 out of 145 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap 2016;⁴⁵ although the Kingdom has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of

⁴¹ ['UK and Saudi Arabia 'in secret deal' over human rights council place'](#), *Guardian*, 29 September 2015

⁴² ['David Cameron attempts to defend 'squalid' deal with Saudi Arabia in excruciating interview with Jon Snow'](#), *Independent*, 7 October 2015

⁴³ [Written question - HL1011](#), 14 July 2016

⁴⁴ ['British government refuses to rule out re-electing Saudi Arabia to UN human rights council'](#), *Independent*, 16 July 2016

⁴⁵ [The Global Gender Gap Index 2016](#) - rankings, World Economic Forum

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it did so with significant reservations.⁴⁶ Saudi Arabia's policy is to implement international human rights conventions as long as they do not contradict sharia law and cultural identity, as set out in a speech to the Human Rights Council in April 2016:

the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia noted that some human-rights-related reports and some countries which try to build fake situation through emptying the contents of human rights from their noble significance and politicizing them, have opted to neglect the cultural and religious privacy of individuals and nations and instead, attack their basic rights and, using a double standard, close an eye towards the religious and cultural identities of others.⁴⁷

The new monarch, King Salman, may be a less reform-minded leader than his predecessor, who made limited reforms: Salman replaced Abdullah's choice for the head of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the body that runs Saudi Arabia's religious police, with a more hard-line figure.

Political changes

Local elections

Back in 2011, the then King, Abdullah, announced that he intended women to vote and stand in local elections for the first time. The voting age was simultaneously reduced from 21 to 18. In December 2015 municipal elections took place in which some 1,000 women ran as candidates and at least 18 women were elected to the councils in various areas of the country.

However, the process made it difficult for women to register; only 132,000 women were registered to vote out of a possible 4.5 million, compared with 1.3 million registered men.⁴⁸ Of the registered women, a high proportion turned out.

Consultative Council

In January 2013 a royal decree established a minimum quota of 20% of women members for the Consultative Council, the 150-member appointed body that advises the king and can propose laws. 30 women have duly been appointed to the advisory body.⁴⁹

Education

Women traditionally received little education in Saudi Arabia; women's literacy stood at 2% in the 1970s.⁵⁰ From the 1970s, when increasing numbers of men went to the West to study, education of girls was gradually strengthened.

⁴⁶ [Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) 1979

⁴⁷ ['Saudi Arabia rejects any interference in its internal affairs while it respects international charters not contradicting Islamic Sharia law'](#), Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs policy note

⁴⁸ ['Saudi Arabia's women vote in election for first time'](#), *BBC News Online*, 12 December 2015

⁴⁹ ['Saudi women take seats in Shura Council'](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 19 February 2016

⁵⁰ ['Education: The Key to Women's Empowerment in Saudi Arabia?'](#), Middle East Institute, 30 July 2015

King Abdullah came to power in 2005 and extended the programme of overseas university study grants to women. Some 20% of overseas study grants are now taken by women.⁵¹ In the 2015 World Economic Forum Gender Equality Index Saudi Arabia scored a near perfect score of 0.988 (out of 1) for equality of educational attainment.

However, there are still big obstacles to broad education for females. An attempt to introduce physical education in girls' schools was resisted by conservatives, who thought it would lead to prostitution.⁵² A woman who wants to study abroad must be accompanied by a male guardian.

As well as promoting study abroad, King Abdullah opened the first co-educational university, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. The university was set up outside the control of the education ministry and in a remote, self-contained site where the religious police would have less influence.

Male guardian system

Under Saudi Arabia's guardian system, women have traditionally not been allowed out of the home – for example to work, go shopping or study – without the permission of a male relative. This is a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's patriarchal system, curtailing Saudi women's freedoms in many ways, including preventing Saudi women from driving. In October 2013 scores of women drove in defiance of the ban and several were arrested. In 2014, a woman was sentenced to 150 lashes and eight months in jail for driving.

The prohibition on women mixing with men leads to other restrictions on women: for example a woman was arrested in December 2014 for dressing as a man and trying to see a football match at a stadium.⁵³

Restrictions on working have been relaxed and women are often to be seen operating tills in shops, particularly those catering to women. There are more women entrepreneurs, particularly from wealthy backgrounds,⁵⁴ and there were 400,000 women employed in the private sector by the end of 2014, up from 183,000 in 2013.⁵⁵

Other social issues

Saudi Arabia is one of the few Muslim countries that imposes a dress code by law (Iran is another). Officers from the Saudi religious police rigorously enforce the dress code for both women and men. Women are expected to wear a long robe, a head scarf and gloves.

Domestic violence was traditionally hidden at home in Saudi Arabia and the authorities often did not interfere. As the problem was increasingly acknowledged, women's shelters began to be set up. New laws to

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² '[Unshackling themselves](#)', *Economist*, 17 May 2014

⁵³ US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014 - Saudi Arabia*

⁵⁴ '[Saudi women take the business path](#)', *Financial Times*, 22 December 2015

⁵⁵ Foreign and Commonwealth Office Human Rights and Democracy Report 2015: Countries of concern – [Saudi Arabia](#)

combat domestic violence were approved in late 2013.⁵⁶ The Saudi Ambassador to the UN stressed in April 2016 the Kingdom's commitment to tackling domestic abuse:

The Saudi government [...] established 17 committees for the social protection in a number of provinces. Their mission is to receive complaints about the victims of moral and physical abuses.⁵⁷

According to the US State Department, the legal system remains strongly prejudiced against women as well as against non-citizens, Shia Muslims and non-practising Sunni Muslims. A Saudi woman's testimony in court is usually worth half that of a man's.

The system contains almost no female practitioners: it was not until 2004 that women could first receive a legal education and 2013 that the first licences for lawyers to appear in court were granted to women – now 67 women are licensed to practise.⁵⁸

In 2012 the Saudi interior ministry announced that it would start issuing identity cards to women and men (previously women were included on a man's ID). From 2020, ID cards will be compulsory for both men and women equally.

Women's identity cards

5.3 Freedom of expression

Despite some moves towards improving consultation with the population, the oppression of dissent in the Kingdom has, if anything, increased over the last few years. This has happened in the context of the region-wide political unrest since 2011, the intensifying rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia for leadership and the sectarian divide between Shias and Sunnis.

The state showed its resolve to suppress dissent in the Raif Badawi case: he was a liberal blogger who was sentenced by a Saudi court to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison and fined more than £100,000 for apostasy and insulting Islam. Despite an international outcry the Supreme Court confirmed Badawi's sentence in June 2015.⁵⁹

The Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA) was ordered to be closed in March 2013. Most of the founders of the organisation have been jailed. Mohammad al-Qahtani, an economics professor, and co-founder of the ACPRA, was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment for his activism, recording human rights abuses and calling for peaceful reform, according to his supporters.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ ['New law fails to curb domestic violence in Saudi Arabia'](#), *Al-Arabija*, 26 November 2014

⁵⁷ ['Saudi Arabia Stresses its Keenness to Protect Woman Rights'](#), Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs information note.

⁵⁸ Katherine Zoepf, ['Sisters in Law: Saudi women are beginning to know their rights'](#), *New Yorker*, 11 January 2016

⁵⁹ ['Saudi court upholds blogger's 10 years and 1,000 lashes'](#), *BBC News Online*, 7 June 2015

⁶⁰ ['"Our ray of light" – my husband, a jailed activist in Saudi Arabia'](#), Amnesty International campaign, 28 October 2016

Saudis are among the most enthusiastic users of social media in the world.⁶¹ Several websites are blocked in a nationwide system of censorship, including pornographic sites, pro-Shia sites, those promoting lesbian and gay rights, and sites critical of the government.

Press freedom

In Reporters without Borders' international ranking on press freedom, Saudi Arabia's position and score have declined since 2013: Saudi Arabia now ranks at 165 out of 180 countries. Freedom House describes Saudi Arabia as "one of the most restrictive media environments in the world."⁶² Freedom House says:

Media hews to views considered acceptable by the Saudi government and religious authorities; reporting critical of the Saudi system of governance or Wahhabi Islam is staunchly suppressed, as is unfavourable reporting on Saudi foreign and domestic policy. This has intensified amid the Saudi-led military coalition's ongoing offensive against Houthi rebels in Yemen: reporting that does not support the military action has been suppressed in local newspapers.⁶³

Internet content is less regulated than that of traditional media outlets and there are millions of Twitter users.

New laws controlling internet information were brought in in 2015 requiring online outlets to be registered and licenced. Large numbers of local news websites were blocked after the new legislation came into force.

In March 2016 a prominent newspaper journalist, Alaa Brinji, received a five-year prison sentence, an eight-year travel ban and a fine after being found guilty of 'insulting the rulers and inciting public opinion' in messages posted on a social media site. Amnesty International sharply criticised his sentence:

...a clear violation of international law and the latest demonstration of the Saudi Arabian authorities' deep-seated intolerance of the right to peaceful expression.⁶⁴

Saudi Arabia has used its control of Yemeni ports and border to limit foreign and Saudi journalists' access to the conflict there.

Shias

The government has been accused of discrimination and oppression targeted specifically against the Shiites. Their standard of living is generally lower and their access to government services and funding restricted.⁶⁵

There have been about 20 deaths during demonstrations in Shia areas since 2011; in November 2014, seven Shiite worshippers were killed by Sunni gunmen.⁶⁶

Alaa Brinji

⁶¹ 'Why Saudis are ardent social media fans', *Economist*, 23 March 2015

⁶² Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2016, [Saudi Arabia](#)

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ 'Saudi Arabia: Journalist sentenced to five years in prison for tweets latest victim of crackdown', Amnesty International press release, 25 March 2016

⁶⁵ 'Saudi Arabia has a Shiite problem', *Foreign Policy*, 3 December 2014

⁶⁶ 'Saudi Arabia Has a Shiite Problem', *Foreign Policy*, 3 December 2014

Nimr al-Nimr

In October 2014 the leading Shiite preacher Nimr al-Nimr was sentenced to death. He was executed, along with 46 others, on 2 January 2016.

Amnesty International said that many of the trials of the 47 executed were “grossly unfair” (most of them were Sunnis accused of association with ISIS and other violent Sunni *jihadi* groups).⁶⁷ In particular, the organisation says that Nimr’s conviction was “part of a campaign by the authorities in Saudi Arabia to crush all dissent, including those defending the rights of the Kingdom’s Shi’a Muslim community.”⁶⁸

Amnesty says that he was originally charged with banditry, because security officers claimed that he had opened fire on them at the time of his arrest. He was also accused of ‘aiding terrorists’, ‘carrying guns in the face of security men’, ‘supporting Tamarod Movement in Bahrain’, and ‘allowing foreign interference’. These charges were dropped; he was convicted only on other, vaguer, charges of ‘disobeying the ruler’ and ‘inciting sectarian division.’⁶⁹

Amnesty claims that at no time in his sermons and interviews does he advocate violence. Human Rights Watch quotes Nimr specifically rejecting violence.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks covering conversations with US diplomats suggest that his position on Iranian intervention and violence was equivocal at least:

Al-Nimr's private remarks were consistent with his previous public statements in their disregard for the [Saudi government], their support of foreign intervention on behalf of the Saudi Shi'a, and their inferences that the Sheikh at the very least will not denounce the idea of violent uprising.⁷¹

Rehman Chishti said in a Parliamentary question that many of those executed along with al-Nimr were members of Hezbollah al-Hejaz, affiliated to Lebanese Hezbollah. Tobias Ellwood replied for the government that the death penalty was unjustified whatever the charges:

He makes an important point about the charges against these people. I underline, however, that we do not believe that the death penalty was deserved, whatever the charge. Britain has stood by that position for some time.⁷²

⁶⁷ [‘Shia cleric among 47 executed by Saudi Arabia in a single day’](#), Amnesty International press release, 2 January 2015

⁶⁸ [‘Saudi Arabia: Appalling death sentence against Shi’a cleric must be quashed’](#), Amnesty International press release, 15 October 2015

⁶⁹ [‘KSA: ANHRI Condemns the Execution of Cleric Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr’](#), Arab Network for Human Rights Information statement, 3 January 2016

⁷⁰ [‘Saudi Arabia: Prominent Shia Cleric Sentenced to Death’](#), Human Rights Watch press release, 16 October 2014

⁷¹ [‘The cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran that’s tearing apart the Middle East, explained’](#), *Vox*, 4 January 2016

⁷² [HC Deb 5 Jan 2016, c109](#)

After the execution, the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was ransacked and burnt. Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran, and Sudan and Bahrain then followed suit, deepening the sectarian divide that is shaking the Middle East.

Saudi Embassy
ransacked

5.4 Judicial system

Saudi courts enforce Sharia law. The penal code, insofar as it exists, associates broadly-defined offences with criminal penalties but does not provide detailed guidance to courts, leaving judges with wide discretion over arrests, including of minors, and sentencing. Courts do not always inform prisoners of the offence they are charged with, and impede lawyers from helping suspects during interrogation. Courts sometimes prevent defence lawyers from presenting evidence at trials, while detention without trial and without any form of judicial review can last for years, according to Human Rights Watch.⁷³

Death penalty

In November 2015 Amnesty International said that 151 people had been executed so far that year, a sharp increase over recent years that Amnesty described as a “bloody execution spree.”⁷⁴ Saudi Arabia is one of the biggest users of the death penalty, along with China and Iran.

The use of the death penalty is contested for the nature of the cases where it is used, as well as the number. Amnesty said in 2015 that nearly half of those executed are not Saudi nationals, that juvenile offenders and those with mental disabilities have also been executed and that almost half of executions are for non-lethal crimes.⁷⁵

On 18 October 2016 Prince Turki Bin Saud Al-Kabir was executed, having been found guilty of murder. It is not unheard of for members of Gulf royal families (which are very extensive) to be executed.

5.5 Migrant workers

Over half the Saudi workforce is non-Saudi.⁷⁶ Migrant workers do a wide range of jobs from domestic work to highly-paid professional consultancy. Some migrants are subjected to abusive conditions, sometimes amounting to forced labour, according to Human Rights Watch.⁷⁷ The sponsorship system means that employers sponsor the workers to get work permits; workers must then get written consent from their sponsor to change employers or leave the country under normal circumstances. Employers sometimes illegally confiscate migrants’ passports, withhold wages and force people to work against their will.

The Saudi authorities have gradually tightened the regulation of migrant labour use, particularly since October 2015, when the labour law was

⁷³ Human Rights Watch *World Report 2016*, [Saudi Arabia](#)

⁷⁴ ‘[Saudi Arabia: 151 executed this year in highest recorded toll in nearly two decades](#)’, Amnesty International press release, 9 November 2016

⁷⁵ ‘[Saudi Arabia: Rampant executions fuelled by justice system ‘riddled with holes’](#)’, Amnesty International press release, 25 August 2015

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch *World Report 2016*, [Saudi Arabia](#)

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch *World Report 2016*, [Saudi Arabia](#)

widely amended and stronger fines were introduced for those breaking regulations. Domestic workers (mainly women, often the ones most in need) were excluded from the new protections. Migrants entering the country on limited term contracts were also excluded.⁷⁸

As well as improving the lot of migrants, the government is keen to increase indigenous employment rates and reduce the dependence of citizens on the state – especially with unemployment among Saudi citizens at over 10% (youth unemployment is much higher).⁷⁹ A quota for the proportion of indigenous workers was introduced in 2011 and there was a big campaign to detain and deport undocumented migrant workers in 2013.

Increase indigenous employment

⁷⁸ [‘Saudi Arabia: Steps Toward Migrant Workers’ Rights’](#), Human Rights Watch press release, 15 November 2015

⁷⁹ Saudi Labour Force survey [2016 second quarter](#)

6. Economic profile

Saudi Arabia is an oil-based economy – it possesses 18% of the world’s proven petroleum reserves and ranks as the largest exporter of petroleum.⁸⁰ The oil and gas sector accounts for roughly 80% of budget revenues, 45% of gross domestic product (GDP), and 90% of export earnings.⁸¹ GDP growth in Saudi Arabia has been significantly affected by the recent fall in global oil prices, with crude oil falling from US\$145 per barrel in January 2008 to a low of US\$26 in February 2008 (a loss of 82% of its value).⁸²

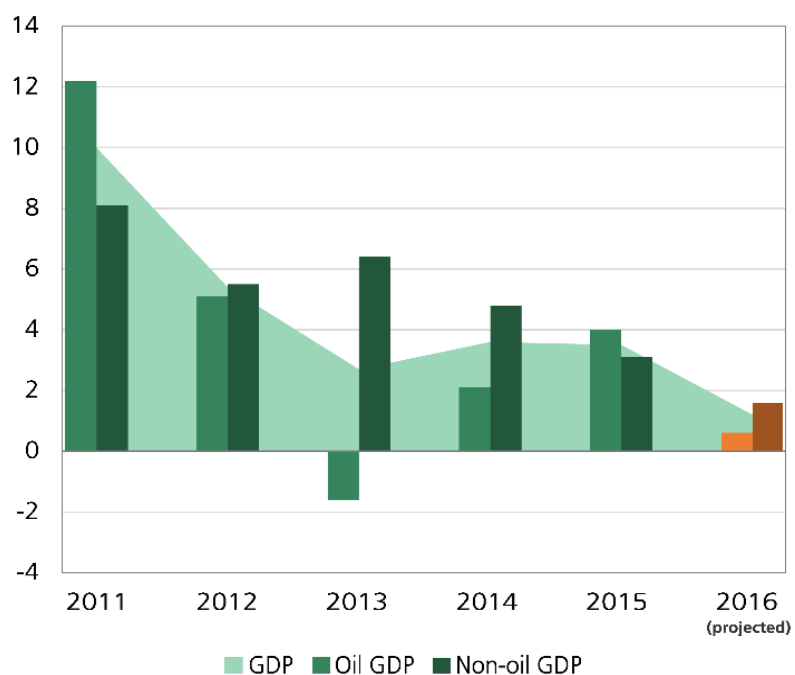
While the oil price shock has of course hit economic output in the oil sector the hardest, it has also affected the wider economy. Non-oil GDP fell by 6.5 percentage points from 8.1% in 2011 to a projected 1.6% in 2016 (see chart). While oil prices are expected to recover gradually over the next few years (due to reduced investment and increased demand), they are not expected to reach the levels of over US\$100 per barrel seen in the first half of 2014.⁸³

The contribution of ‘mining and quarrying’ (dominated by the oil sector) to total GDP fell from over 48% in 2011 to 25% in 2015. As a result, manufacturing, construction, services and other economic activities have become an increasingly important part of the economy (see below).

Low oil prices have also had a significant impact on public finances.

Despite a real terms reduction in government spending between 2014 and 2015, the fiscal deficit (the gap between government revenue and spending) increased substantially from 3.4% to 15.9%.

Saudi Arabia - Oil, non-oil and total GDP growth
Annual % change



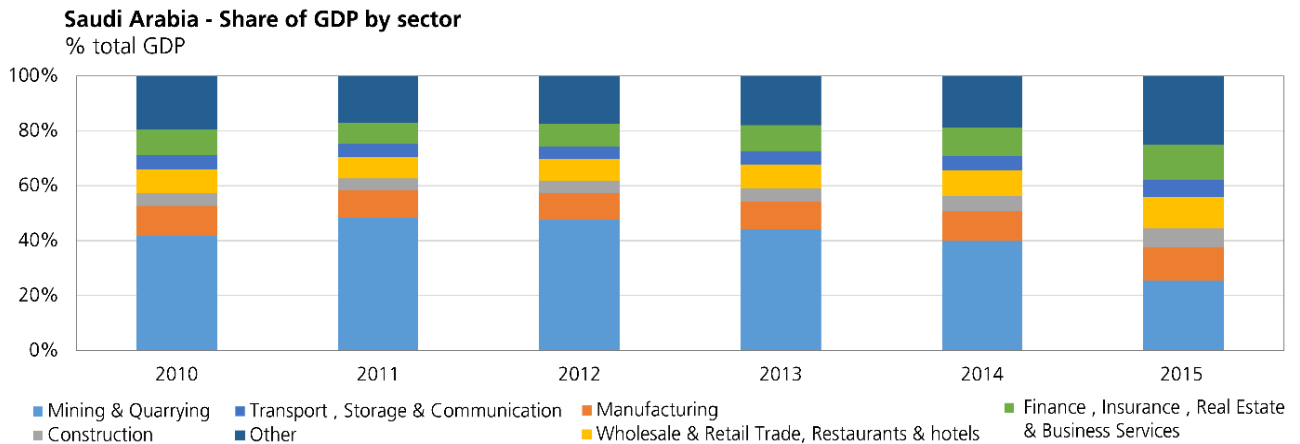
Source: IMF, 2016 Article IV Consultation - Press Release

⁸⁰ OPEC, [Saudi Arabia: Facts and Figures](#)

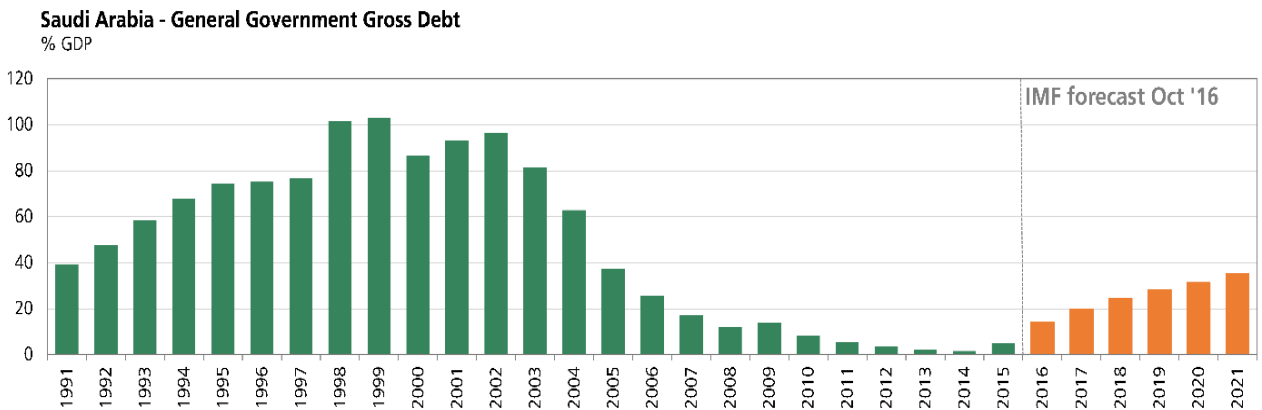
⁸¹ Forbes, [Saudi Arabia profile](#)

⁸² Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, [Crude Oil Prices: West Texas Intermediate \(WTI\)](#) (accessed 7 November 2016)

⁸³ IMF, [Staff Report for the 2016 Article IV Consultation](#), June 2016



This was driven by a 51% drop in oil revenue.⁸⁴ The IMF has recognised ‘fiscal consolidation’ (that is, narrowing the gap between revenue and expenditure) as a necessary step in the government’s policy priorities. However, Saudi Arabia still has relatively low levels of government debt at 5% of GDP in 2015 (compared with 89% in the UK) though this is forecast to increase in coming years (see chart).



The World Bank has attributed weak growth in Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to government austerity measures including cutting capital and current spending. It has said that Saudi Arabia alone may cancel more than US\$20 billion of projects this year.⁸⁵

Reforms and risks

Saudi Arabia has begun a fundamental policy shift in response to low oil prices. One of the key aims is to diversify the economy away from oil dependence, with the *Vision 2030* strategy at the core of the Government’s plans for economic transformation (see section above on Vision 2030). Early reforms included a 2.5% tax on undeveloped land, an airport fee for foreigners, and increases in fuel, gas and water prices.

⁸⁴ IMF, [Staff Report for the 2016 Article IV Consultation](#), June 2016

⁸⁵ World Bank, [MENA Economic Monitor](#), October 2016, p4

The Government has also announced a 5% Value Added Tax (VAT) and additional taxes on tobacco and soft drinks, though these are unlikely to be implemented right away. Further planned measures include privatising the postal system by early 2017 and considering new income taxes for expatriates.⁸⁶

The IMF has welcome the authorities' reform-minded approach to current economic challenges and has noted the need to increase the role of the private sector in the economy by focusing on privatisation and public-private partnerships, improve the business environment, develop local capital markets, encourage foreign direct investment, and support small and medium enterprises.⁸⁷ However, the World Bank has raised concerns that the absence of an overarching macroeconomic and fiscal framework for the medium-term means that reforms may remain partial and uncoordinated.⁸⁸

In addition to uncertainties around oil markets and the successful implementation of reforms, the IMF has also identified more volatile global financial market conditions and an escalation of regional tensions or domestic security concerns as potential risks to the economy.⁸⁹

IMF welcomes
reform plans

⁸⁶ World Bank, [MENA Economic Monitor](#), October 2016, p4

⁸⁷ IMF, [2016 Article IV Consultation](#) – Press Release, 28 July 2016

⁸⁸ World Bank, [MENA Economic Monitor](#), October 2016

⁸⁹ IMF, [Staff Report for the 2016 Article IV Consultation](#), June 2016

7. Change on the horizon?

There are several factors that suggest that Saudi Arabia is facing great pressure for change:

- Saudi Arabia is a very young country (70% under 30)⁹⁰ with a high take-up of certain social media, making it difficult to control outside influences.
- Even with the reforms envisaged in the Saudi Vision 2030 strategy, youth unemployment may well increase as young people enter the labour market.
- There are more women obtaining a university education now than men.
- Its previous model of 'rentier state', with social tensions eased by government spending, is under threat. No-one knows if previous high oil prices will return; the government is cutting expenditure.
- The new King has shown himself far less cautious than his predecessor in a number of policy areas. He appointed his 31-year old son as Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister.
- The Saudi/Iranian showdown across the region could shake up Saudi society even more.

Where these pressures will take Saudi society is not so clear. But it seems inevitable that there will be increasing pressure for change. Saudi Arabia's first romantic comedy film was released recently and will be the Saudi candidate for Best Foreign Film at the Oscars. The film deals with how young Saudis manage their lives in the face of restrictions. But there are no public cinemas in Saudi Arabia.⁹¹

Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi vision 2030 plan has been read principally as moving away from oil dependence. It is also, however, a social plan, aiming to improve the lives of Saudis, in part, perhaps, because the state may no longer afford to 'buy off' dissent through oil-funded generosity.

Moving away from oil dependence

Whether it is possible to maintain the monarchy's legitimacy in an environment of weak government revenues remains to be seen. Conservative elements in the state such as the religious police, on which the monarchy relies for legitimacy, are likely to resist a reduction in their influence and any loosening of social restrictions. There are also questions about how quickly the state apparatus can implement change: teachers moving away from seeing their job as mainly about imparting religious knowledge, for example.⁹²

⁹⁰ ['Saudi Arabia's King Salman marks year of change'](#), *BBC News Online*, 22 January 2016

⁹¹ ['Saudi romcom challenges conservative grip on the arts'](#), *Financial Times*, 31 October 2016

⁹² ['Saudi Arabia aims for social overhaul in reform plan'](#), *Reuters*, 8 June 2016

Western nations face difficult decisions about the extent to which they should support a monarchy whose values differ so strongly from their own, bearing in mind that recent departures of authoritarian leaders in the Middle East have not had happy outcomes. This authoritarian regime is an ally to the West, but since the Yemen conflict it is not so clear that Saudi Arabia is a force for stability in its region.

8. Basic information and timeline

Population (mid-2015): 31,521,418

Head of State: HM King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud

Head of Government: Prime Minister HM King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior: Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud.

Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence: Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud.

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Prince Adel al-Jubeir.

Saudis are relatively homogeneous, being largely ethnic Arabs (apart from the migrant worker population), and overwhelmingly Muslims. Most are Sunnis adhering to the fundamentalist Wahhabi beliefs, and the Shias are the most significant minority, at about 10% to 15% of the population, mostly based in the oil-producing Eastern Region on the Gulf coast. Some Sunni Saudis describe the Shia of the Eastern Region as 'Iranians.' Most Shia are excluded from the political system, apart from certain 'leaders' who benefit from proximity to power and are expected to keep the rest of the Shia population under control. Particularly around the time of the 2011 Arab uprisings, there was significant unrest in the Shia areas.

The country is an absolute monarchy. There are no political parties and no legislature. While the Council of Ministers (or Cabinet) develops policy, its decisions are subject to royal approval and the King is both Head of State and Head of Government.

The Majlis al-Shura or Consultative Assembly, was inaugurated in 1992 and is nominated by the King. Municipal councils are elected but have few powers. The Allegiance Council was set up in 2007 to agree the royal succession and is composed of senior members of the Royal Family. Its effectiveness is questionable, however.

8.1 Timeline

The ancient history of the Arabian Peninsula is one of small pockets of settlement in a region largely inhabited by nomads.

From the seventh century, Islamic civilisation developed and Arabic influence expanded from the Arabian Peninsula into the Levant and beyond.

By the eighth century the centre of gravity of the Islamic world moved with north. Caliphates were established in Damascus and Baghdad. The western Arabian cities of the Hejaz such as Mecca and Taif lost their importance as trading posts and the Arabian Peninsula, briefly united by Mohammed, returned to disunity.

From the 16th century, the peninsula was under the nominal control of the Ottoman Empire

At about the same time, Europeans began to influence the region: first the Portuguese then, from the beginning of the 19th century, the British, who displaced other European nations to establish their influence along the Gulf coast.

Emirates along the Gulf coast such as Bahrain signed protective treaties with the United Kingdom, while the Hejaz, on the Red Sea coast, remained a province of the Ottoman Empire.

In the mid-19th century, the leader of the Saud clan struck a bargain with the Wahhabi movement, a puritanical Islamic group, to support each other's designs. Saudi control extended over much of the centre of Arabia and beyond to parts of modern Iraq and Syria but they were fought back by opponents backed by the Ottomans.

20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Saudis started a campaign to re-establish their rule.

They reconquered much of central Arabia, including Riyadh, and took the crucial Shia region of al-Hasa, on the Gulf coast, giving it access to as-yet undiscovered oil reserves. Wahhabi settlements were established throughout the Saudi domains.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, or Ibn Saud as he became known, took control of the Hejaz on the Red Sea coast in 1924, including Jeddah. The boundaries of the modern Saudi state were gradually firmed up and in 1932 the country was named the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 1933 oil concessions were granted to Standard Oil of California (not the British-owned Iraqi Petroleum Company) and in 1938 oil was discovered.

King Abd al-Aziz died in November 1953 and was succeeded by Saud Al Saud, to be followed in 1964 by his half-brother Faisal. During the Arab-Israeli war of 1973 Saudi Arabia was active in organising the oil boycott against the US and other Western countries for supporting Israel.

1975

Faisal was assassinated by his nephew and succeeded by his half-brother Khalid. In 1979, there was a siege at the Grand Mosque in Mecca led by fundamentalist Muslims. 102 radicals were killed in the operation to reclaim the mosque and a further 65 were executed afterwards.

1979 saw the revolution in Iran and growing Soviet influence in the two Yemeni republics, coupled with fear of radical Islamism, causing growing insecurity among the Saudi ruling family. Defence expenditure increased. Saudi Arabia supported Iraq in the war against Iran.

The US Congress increasingly resisted arms sales to Saudi Arabia because of its opposition to Israel. This helped the Saudis to turn in 1985 to British Aerospace for the al-Yamamah deal, worth a record \$20 billion.

1989

Saudi mediation helped Lebanese parties reach the Taif Accord, marking the end of the Lebanese civil war and setting up a power-sharing government.

In 1990, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait brought Saudi Arabia to invite US troops onto their soil to deter Iraq from invading Saudi Arabia.

Diplomatic relations with Afghanistan were suspended in 1998 when that country refused to extradite Osama bin Laden. Relations with Iran were strained in the period, although the election of the Khatami government in Iran saw improvement. The Saudi government ramped up diplomatic pressure for the US to take action over the Israel/Palestine dispute.

21st century

2001

The participation of some 15 Saudi nationals in the 9/11 bombings led to a major crack down on sympathisers of violent jihad, and to increased tensions with the US.

2002

The then Crown Prince Abdullah presented the Arab Peace Initiative, which involved recognition of the Israeli state in return for the creation of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories and a fair deal for the Palestinian refugees.

2003

The invasion of Iraq led to a rise in anti-US feeling and there was a string of terrorist attacks and arrests. By 2005, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was successfully repressed within Saudi Arabia, moving its operations to Yemen. The Saudi de-radicalisation programme attracted attention, some favourable, some less so.

2005

King Abdullah succeeded Fahd. Limited domestic political and judicial reform speeded up. But tensions remained and there were clashes between Shia protestors and the religious police.

2006

A deal worth some £4 billion was signed to buy 72 Eurofighter Typhoons from the UK.

2007

Increasingly activist foreign policy. Saudi Arabia mediated an agreement between Hamas and Fatah in 2007. The Saudi government also tried to mediate between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government. Vladimir Putin was invited to visit Saudi Arabia in 2007.

With the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, tensions with Iran remained high. Saudi concerns over Yemen mounted, as it seemed to increasingly be a breeding ground for Al-Qaeda sympathisers.

An assassination attempt on the Saudi security minister narrowly failed in 2009. The Saudis were also worried about the increasing instability in Iraq and increasingly critical of the Maliki government there.

2011

2011 saw the Arab uprisings; the Saudi establishment was deeply worried by the fall of the Sunni authoritarian leader Hosni Mubarak in Egypt; and disappointed that the US administration had 'abandoned' a long-time US ally.

The government responded to the 2011 unrest with a hugely expensive programme of increased benefits, job creation, housing subsidies and other programmes, costing some \$36 billion.

There was a cabinet re-shuffle and a rearrangement of the order of succession. Political reforms, however, were not significantly accelerated and the grip on dissent and demonstrations was tightened, including for the Shia areas.

⁹³ History section based on Peterson, J. E. and Gerd Nonneman. History (Saudi Arabia), in Europa World online. London, Routledge.

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