

Authoritarian policies of MBS and implications for Saudi US relations

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Introduction:

In recent years, the reforms in Saudi Arabia have paced up as crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman came into power as the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. While the new reforms are emerging a pattern of liberalization, there have also been some brazen acts by the Saudi government which indicate the notion of regional hegemony. Since MBS, who represents himself as a modernizer, came in power the masses have grown critical towards Saudi Arabia due to repressive internal policies, the crack down on dissenting voices and the hegemonic designs put forward by the Saudi government. This paper will be divided in two sections, the first section will focus on the policies put forward by MBS, socioreligious, economic and political, and its analysis in terms of the implications of these policies domestically, regionally, and internationally. The second section of this paper will focus on the implications of MBS' policies on the US- Saudi relationship in specific, in terms of economic and strategic alliance between both the countries and the current US policy towards Saudi Arabia under the government of democrats. Finally, the paper will specifically focus on the role of United States in maintaining a balance between the hegemonic designs and anti-human rights policies of the Saudi government and what kind of bilateral and multilateral measures can the US take in this regard while safeguarding its economic interests.

Section 1

1.1. Socio-religious reforms:

The socio-religious reforms that were brought forward by Muhammad Bin Salman caused a significant change in Saudi Arabia's general lifestyle. MBS's social policies portrayed him as a modernizer but on the other hand, these policies also gave rise to a crackdown of all sorts of

activism and political dissents. According to, Ben Hubbard in his book, ‘MBS: The rise to power of Muhammed Bin Salman’, many populist authoritarians use the nationalistic rhetoric to rally the public to cause the collapse of opposition outlets.¹ MBS also used a similar strategy and loosened up restrictions on the social reforms of the country. MBS brought forward social changes such as allowing women to exercise more control over family matters, allowing women to travel without permission of a male guardian, allowing music to be played in restaurants, initiating different forms of activities for public entertainment such as amusement/theme parks, festivals, and concert markets. In 2017, MBS ended a 35- year prohibition on cinemas and planned to open up 300 new movie theatres by 2030, .² In 2019, MBS ended the requirement for women to wear all covering robes and also repressed the powers of religious police that patrolled public spaces to impose rules and enforces bans on music, alcohol and mix gender gatherings.³ Musicians such as Mariah Carey and Black Eyed Peas were also permitted to perform in Saudi Arabia once MBS started to loosen up social restrictions. In 2018, he reversed the ban on women’s right to drive, brought forward regulatory changes to allow women have more control over family matters and provided them with a diverse range of employment opportunities, however several women activists were arrested shortly after the ban on driving was lifted.⁴ According to MBS, the detentions occurred because people misused their right to free speech. Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East studies director at Human rights Watch said, “The message is clear that anyone expressing skepticism about the crown prince’s agenda faces time in jail”.⁵ Muhammad Bin Salman has also been working on introducing social reforms which reflect Islam as a moderate and modern religion. His social reforms form close ties with his religious policies for the country. He aims to open the country to foreign investors and tourists by portraying Saudi as a moderate and liberal state. In an investment conference Prince Muhammad elaborates on his social reforms by saying that his government is

¹ Ben Hubbard, “MBS: The Rise of a Saudi Prince”, Newyork Times, March 21 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/world/middleeast/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia.html>

² Reuters Staff, Tuqa Khalid and David Clarke, “FACTBOX- Saudi Arabia’s key economic and social reforms”, Reuters, October 25 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-investment-reforms-idUKL5N2763K6>

³ Reuters Staff, Tuqa Khalid and David Clarke

⁴ Reuters Staff, Tuqa Khalid and David Clarke

⁵ “Muhammad bin Salman: The dark side of Saudi Arabia’s crown prince”, 9 March 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/9/mohammed-bin-salman-the-dark-side-of-saudi-arabias-crown-prince#women>

reverting a moderate Islam that is open to the world and all religions. ⁶ All the socio-religious reforms introduced by MBS are playing a prominent role in setting up a more modernized reputation of Saudi Arabia on the world stage, hence breaking the religious clout which represents Saudi as an ultraconservative nation, further depriving country of a diversified range of opportunities to improve its economy and foreign relations. These socio-religious changes in the country will uplift the economy and improve the foreign relations of Saudi Arabia on the world stage.

1.2. Economic reforms:

Muhammad Bin Salman has put forward multifarious economic reforms in order to decrease Saudi Arabia's dependence of oil and diversify Saudi's economy. One of the major economic initiatives that have been taken under the reign of Prince Muhammad is the project known as 'Vision 2030'. It is a strategic framework proposed by the Saudi Prince to minimize Saudi dependence on the energy resources and transform Saudi Arabia into a global logistics and industrial powerhouse. Vision 2030 comprises of three core elements: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. ⁷The Saudi government aims to develop a vibrant society which is essential in forming a strong foundation of economic prosperity. The government plans to achieve this by focusing on the people and the Islamic faith, hence the social and religious themes will play a vital role in achieving this goal. The Saudi government aims to revamp the heritage sites and the historical areas of the country by doubling the number of UNESCO registered Saudi heritage sites in the country. One of the intrinsic strengths of Saudi Arabia is the presence of two Holy mosques, which positions the country at the heart of the Islamic world. Through vision 2030, Saudi Arabia aims to bring developmental reforms to uplift the economy by utilizing the religious significance that the country holds in the Muslim world. The government aims to increase the number of Umrah-Islamic pilgrimage visitors from 8

⁶ Priyanka Boghani, "The Paradox of Saudi Arabia's Social reforms", Frontline, October 1 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-paradox-of-saudi-arabias-social-reforms/>

⁷ The embassy of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington DC, Vision 2030, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/vision-2030>

million to 30 million annually and they are also establishing the world's largest Islamic Museum.⁸ As the state aims to establish a vibrant society, it is significant to bring forth some social reforms to transform the ultraconservative narrative of the country, for this purpose, vision 2030 aims to promote the cultural and entertainment opportunities around the kingdom, promote healthier lifestyles and also rapidly develop the cities in the kingdom. The second theme which Vision 2030 is built on is a thriving economy. To achieve this, it is significant to diversify the economy sustainably by unlocking sectors of entrepreneurship, education, tourism, underdeveloped industries such as renewable energy resources and manufacturing etc. Thirdly, to achieve the last theme of Vision 2030, which is ambitious nation, Saudi government aims to focus on the accountability, transparency, and effectiveness in terms of the governing strategies. In order to achieve this goal, the state is planning to establish the King Salman program for human capital development which aims to train around 500,000 government employees to strengthen the nonprofit sector and promote its efficiency and impact.⁹

Vision 2030 offers numerous strategies and initiatives that the state should take to modify the Saudi economy but one of the most noteworthy reform which has received international attention is the proposal to privatize a small portion of the kingdom's most significant asset industry, Saudi Aramco which is valued by the authorities at 2 trillion dollars.¹⁰ Another significant element of Vision 2030 is developing an investor-friendly environment through privatization. MBS aims to replace the traditional role of public sector by the private sector and in this regard the Saudi government decided to cut down a complex system of benefits in the public sector causing a prominent shift in the job market.¹¹ In light of the economic reforms and the primary themes of vision 2030, Prince Muhammad also launched an anti-corruption campaign to bring forth bureaucratic reforms in the kingdom. Critics have

⁸ The embassy of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington DC, Vision 2030, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/vision-2030>

⁹ The embassy of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Washington DC, Vision 2030, <https://www.saudiembassy.net/vision-2030>

¹⁰ Jerry Feirstein, The foreign service journal "*The plan for sweeping changes to meet economic and demographic challenges does not appear to include an opening-up of the political system.*" May 2018, <https://afsa.org/saudi-arabia-liberalization-not-democratization>

¹¹ Jane Kinninmont, "*Saudi Arabia's crown prince promises reforms- to everything except politics*", Prospect, July 21 2017, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/saudi-arabias-new-crown-prince-promises-reforms-to-everything-except-politics>

developed alternate hypothesis about the real motive behind this campaign; some think it was a real corruption crackdown while some believe it was a powerplay against the rivals of the crown prince. The members of the Saudi kingdom from economic and political sector were detained at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Riyadh in 2017 and a total of \$106 billion were recovered from this crackdown¹². In defense of this anti-corruption drive, Prince Muhammad called it ‘shock therapy’ which is foundational in order to transform and ameliorate the Saudi economy.¹³

The Saudi Prince Muhammad has brought forward numerous reforms in the country and has represented himself as a modernizer, hence gaining abundant support from the youth and women of the country. Around 90% of the Saudi youth believes and supports the proposed reforms of MBS and considers him as a strong leader who is bringing beneficial changes to the kingdom. ¹⁴MBS is working towards reforming the reputation of the kingdom on the international forum by bringing waves of economic, religious, social changes etc. and in this regard he is focusing particularly on the youth of the country to direct more Saudi youth towards the employment opportunities present in the private sector. In the light of Vision 2030, privatization remain an integral element leading towards economic transformation as this strategic framework also proposes plans to make Saudi private sector more competitive and business friendly to attract a larger number of foreign investors. While MBS’ plan to transform Saudi Arabia through vision 2030 and other transformational reforms is intriguing, it is also significant to understand that these changes accord with the notion of liberalization and modernization of the country. These economic reforms guarantee success based on eradication of the traditional and contentious Saudi values, most of which are related to the gender issues in the country. MBS is observed to be focusing on the role of women in the society and he value their contribution can bring to the Saudi economy hence various social reforms are implemented in the country now

¹² Abdullah Al Shihri, Aya Batrawy , “Saudi prince’s anti corruption sweep ends with \$106B netted”, January 31, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/91be03753b7d4dbbacfc4bb0d1dcca3d>

¹³ Stephen Kalin, Reuters staff, “*New Saudi anti-corruption chief to target public servants*”, September 1 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-corruption-idUSKCN1VM10X>

¹⁴ Holly Ellayatt, “*Young Saudis get behind Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s reform drive, mostly*” CNBC, , May 8 2018,

some of which are also a part of vision 2030. A significant element of vision 2030 is to maximize the proportion of women in the workforce by 30 percent and in this regard, Riyadh is dropping the requirement for gender segregation in the workplace.¹⁵ Saudi Arabia is also taking advantage of the country's geography as it aims to become a regional hub for trade, connecting three major continents; Africa, Asia and Europe.

The Saudi government has also been working towards, 'Saudization' of the economy. In this regard, the government has announced that some of the businesses will not be allowed to hire 'non-Saudis'. It is important to note that the private sector of the Saudi economy is still dominated by foreign nationals and the public sector has been unable to cater to the Saudis in search of employment, hence Saudization serves to be an alternative to create more employment opportunities for the Saudi nationals in the private sector.¹⁶

1.3. Political reforms:

Despite, the success of socio-religious and economic reforms proposed by MBS, the reforms in the political arena do not seem to be transformative and are leading towards a more authoritarian rule. There are three dimensions of the political policies of MBS; domestic, regional and international.

Domestically, MBS has not put forward any major political reforms in the kingdom but Prince Muhammad's journey to rise on the throne explains the non-transparency and controversy behind his political agenda. When King Salman, the father of MBS came in power, in three months he decided to dismiss his apparent successor, Prince Muqrin who was seventy years old at that time and instead gave the title to his 56-year-old nephew, Prince Muhammad Bin Nayef. Soon, in 2017, Nayef gave up his throne to MBS, who at that time was only 31 years old.¹⁷ The reason which led Nayef to give up his claim to MBS is shrouded in mystery, but the New York times reported that MBS and his father plotted this ouster for a long time and held Nayef at the palace against his own

¹⁵ Jerry Feierstein, The foreign service journal "*The plan for sweeping changes to meet economic and demographic challenges does not appear to include an opening-up of the political system.*" May 2018, <https://afsa.org/saudi-arabia-liberalization-not-democratization>

¹⁶ Jerry Feierstein,

¹⁷ Sissi Cao, "*How Saudi Arabia's 33-Year-Old Crown Prince MBS Rose to Power: A Visual Explainer*", Observer, January 21 2019, <https://observer.com/2019/01/how-saudi-arabia-crown-prince-mbs-rose-to-power/>

will before formal takeover by MBS.¹⁸ Many people find it unclear how MBS influenced his father and replaced the nominated heir.

Prince Muhammad Bin Salman has also taken extreme steps to establish his control over palace politics. In the anti-corruption campaign in 2017, MBS arrested Prince Abdul-Aziz bin Fahad, the deputy emir of northern Al-jouf region and there are rumors he was killed in the hotel when resisting to arrest, but till date his fate is not known.¹⁹ This sweeping anti-corruption crackdown played a major role in the detentions of many prominent royal family members. It is also known that King Salman's lawful successor, Prince Mansour bin Muqrin was also killed in a helicopter crash near the border of Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Just after a few years of MBS coming to power, most of the potential rivals, especially from the royal family were detained or killed due to allegations of corruption, hence filtering out all the potential threats to MBS' political career and cementing his power more firmly.

As the new leadership was trying to strike a balance between socio-religious reforms and political oppression, many events occurred in the country simultaneously which led to an increasing intolerance of political dissent and a major backlash from many activists. One of the most prominent examples of the political dissent is that just a few weeks before the ban on women driving was lifted, many major women's right advocates were arrested, who had previously campaigned for it. Their real motive behind this major step taken by the Saudi government is still not known, but Adam Coogler, middle east researcher at Human rights watch mentioned about previous warnings given to the women activists to not talk about the lifting of the ban publicly as they feared a shift of credit from the Saudi government to the women right's advocates of the country, if any international media outlets try to reach out to them.²⁰ This incident is one of the many examples of how Saudi monarchy aimed to suppress all sorts of political dissents in the country.

Saudi Arabia's attempt at cracking down dissenting voices using physical repression to censor online and free speech is now prominent worldwide. In 2011 a social media campaign, challenging the ban on Saudi women driving started circulating with the hashtag #women2drive. A women's

¹⁸ Sissi Cao

¹⁹ House of Saud, Prince AbdulAziz Bin Fahd Al Saud, <https://houseofsaud.com/saudi-royal-family-profiles/abdul-aziz-bin-fahd-al-saud/>

²⁰ Priyanka Boghani, "The Paradox of Saudi Arabia's Social reforms", Frontline, October 1 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-paradox-of-saudi-arabias-social-reforms/>

right activist, Loujain al-Hathloul, as a part of this movement, live-tweeted her attempt to drive from UAE to Saudi Arabia. She was stopped at the Saudi border; her passport was confiscated and was told to drive into Saudi Arabia the next morning where she was immediately taken away by the Saudi Police and was detained.²¹ She was later sentenced to five years and eight months in the prison with the charges of sharing information with foreign diplomats and attempts to challenge and alter the Saudi system. A part of her sentence was then suspended, and she was released on 10 February 2021 on a probation for three years to remain silent on social media. Al-Hathloul also informed her family that she was tortured and sexually tortured in the prison.²² Although Hathloul was not arrested during MBS' rule, she remained detained and was tortured throughout his reign. Many other detentions also took place before MBS decided to lift the ban off of women's driving officially.

A six-page charge sheet for Hathloul's case was seen by CNN, in which a section titled, "Crimes committed" mentioned activism against kingdoms male guardianship and contact with foreign diplomats.²³ The US President Joe Biden has called for a 'reassessment' of US-Saudi relationship due to the deteriorating human rights record of the kingdom in response to which Hathloul was released.²⁴ The arrest of Loujain- Al-Hathloul reflects on the notion that MBS was against the welcoming of any new ideology or vision of reforms, while he was in process of establishing himself as a social reformer. His strategy to crackdown the dissent has shattered the narrative of women empowerment, right to free speech, online dissent, new visions of reforms etc.

The utilization of traditional media seems very controlled in the kingdom and any sort of political dissent is criminalized under the Saudi monarchy. The Saudi government reacts to online mobilization through online censorship and in other cases, through physical repression. This strategy adapted by Saudi Arabia regarding the treatment of the dissidents, journalists and women

²¹ Jennifer Pan, Alexandra A. Siegel, "How Saudi Crackdowns fail to silence online dissent", American political science review, https://aajims.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Alexandra_Siegel_pan_siegel_2020.pdf

²² Tamara Qiblawi and Kara Fox, "Saudi womens right activist Loujain- al- Hathloul released from prison", CNN world, February 11 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/10/middleeast/hathloul-saudi-released-intl/index.html>

²³ Tamara Qiblawi

²⁴ Fatma Tanis, "Saudi Activist Who Led Campaign to Legalize Driving For Women Is Released From Jail", NPR, February 10 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966258281/loujain-al-hathloul-saudi-activist-jailed-for-driving-has-been-released>

has been heavily criticized by a number of countries at the Human rights council in Geneva. The killing of Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashogi, who was critical of the Saudi leadership was killed at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey in 2018. Initially the Saudi officials denied the responsibility of the murder but later accepted it. According to the US intelligence report and MBS' statement in an interview with Norah O'Donnell, he takes 'full responsibility' as the murder was committed by the individuals working under his government.²⁵ The US President, Joe Biden, under his 2020 campaign, condemned the killing of Jamal Khashogi and pledged Saudi Arabia would be a 'pariah'.²⁶ Recently, Prince Khalid Bin Salman, a senior Saudi official was welcomed to the US under Biden administration, and this created a turmoil in the public regarding the stance of the western governments towards Saudi Arabia in the light of Jamal Khashoggi's murder.²⁷ This incident represents the gap that exists between the publicly displayed distancing of United States from MBS and the internal reality of the bilateral relation of the US with the kingdom, as a significant trading partner and a profitable arms customer.

As regards, the policies of MBS in the middle east are concerned, most relevant are the conflict in Yemen, initiation of diplomatic channels with Israel, and Saudi's approach towards its archrival and adversary, Iran. As MBS came in power, one of his first acts was the launch of a military campaign in Yemen in 2015 along with other Arab states such as UAE, Morocco, Jordan, Qatar etc. The root cause of this conflict is the failure of a political transition in Yemen which was supposed to bring stability and peace in this country. As President Ali Abdullah Saleh handed over the power to his deputy Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, a Houthi movement started which advocated for Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority and captured a large part of the country's geographical territory.²⁸ As their control started to dominate the country, Mr. Hadi was forced to flee the country in 2015 and in response Saudi along with other Sunni Arab countries launched a military campaign

²⁵ CBS News' 60 Minutes, Jamal Khashoggi: Mohammed bin Salman denies ordering killing of journalist - BBC News, October 1 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tctRrXh1IFk>

²⁶ William Roberts, "No 'Khashogi Ban': Biden team criticized for hosting MBS brother", AlJazeera, 8 July 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/8/no-khashoggi-ban-biden-team-criticized-for-hosting-mbs-brother>

²⁷ Frank Gardner, "Khashogi murder, Us softens towards Saudi leaders", BBC, July 14 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57760786>

²⁸ "Yemen Crisis: Why is there a war?", BBC news, 19 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>

aiming to restore Mr. Hadi's government, bring a halt to Iranian dominance in Yemen and mainly defeat the Houthis. Saudis have carried numerous air strikes in North Yemen while the Houthis have also launched ballistic missiles into the Saudi territory.²⁹ Since the civil war started in 2015, around thousands of people have been killed and the situation is worsening day by day causing a humanitarian catastrophe. Saudi also offered a ceasefire plan to the Houthis, but the offer was downplayed. This deadlock between the countries has only exacerbated the situation. Many human rights associations have spoken up against the Saudi-UAE led coalition for attacking the civilians indiscriminately in response to which MBS stated, "In any military operation mistakes happen ... Of course, any mistakes made by Saudi Arabia, or the coalition are unintended mistakes."³⁰

Another aspect of regional political policies of MBS, involves Saudi Arabia's relationship with Israel and Iran. In 2020, UAE and Bahrian signed Abraham Accords to improve relationship with Israel and since then Jordan and Sudan have followed it as well.³¹ Saudi foreign minister also suggests that the normalization of relations with Israel can bring tremendous benefits to the region and the condition for any potential deal on a large extent depends on the progress of peace and stability to Palestinians.³² Saudi Arabia and Israel have been forming improved relations in the past to pursue mutual goals against the two common regional adversaries Iran and Turkey. In the aftermath of statements of Recep Tayyip Erdogan on murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Turkey is considered a s potential adversary to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Iran have not been on good terms since decades and the root cause behind this rivalry is not only the geo-strategic goals and sectarianism- a perpetual Sunni- Shi'a schism, but the involvement of both countries in the conflicts beyond their geographical territories to reach regional hegemony. Both the states view themselves as rivals for the influence in the Gulf areas, because of the ideological and geopolitical

²⁹ Jeremy M. Sharp, "Yemen: Civil war and regional intervention", Congressional research service, pg 6 March 12 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43960.pdf>

³⁰ "Muhammad bin Salman: The dark side of Saudi Arabia's crown prince", 9 March 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/9/mohammed-bin-salman-the-dark-side-of-saudi-arabias-crown-prince#women>

³¹ "Israel, UAE and Bahrain sign US-brokered normalisation deals", Al Jazeera, 15 Sept 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/15/israel-uae-and-bahrain-sign-us-brokered-normalisation-deals>

³² "Saudi FM: Deal with Israel will be 'extremely helpful' for region", Al Jazeera, 2 April 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/2/saudi-fm-says-normalisation-with-israel-extremely-helpful>

difference and have been attempting to enhance their regional influences through different bids.³³ This rivalry was highlighted in 2011, the Arab spring, as it introduced new political concerns for both the countries to consider in the light of their regional priorities and interests.³⁴ In the struggle of regional dominance and to uplift the domestic interests, both the countries have been making efforts to mold the regional order. Recently, MBS has shown a conciliatory tone towards Iran in an interview with Al-Arabiya TV stating that it wants good relations with Iran if any steps taken to materialize this initiative would be a pleasant step in the direction of establishing peace and stability in the region.³⁵

The third dimension of MBS' political policies is the role of Saudi Arabia in international and regional organizations. As far as the role of MBS' policies are concerned, there is no marked difference in the policies that Riyadh has followed in the previous regimes. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand has formed agreements with different countries that guarantee prospects for mutual benefits. MBS' proposed Vision 2030 is one of the major developments in the kingdom that has attracted countries from around the globe to establish bilateral relationships with Saudi, an example is the Saudi-China cooperation with regards to the belt and road initiative and vision 2030, considering which, China has signed 30 major cooperative agreements with Saudi Arabia as both the countries share strong complementarities.³⁶ Similarly, Japan also has a lot to offer Saudi Arabia in the light of vision 2030, through its approach or merging private and public sectors, PPP, Public-private partnerships, which is an attractive approach for Saudi Arabia in relation to its new economic reforms.³⁷

1.4. Implications of MBS' policies:

³³ W. Andrew Terrill, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the future of Middle east security", Strategic studies institute, September 2011, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/142831/pub1094.pdf>

³⁴ Noor Fatima, Sania Zehraa, Muhammad Shoaib Malik, "Saudi Arabia, Iran and Middle East - A dilemma", Global Political Review, pg 72-80, <https://www.gprjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2LALJouq9hkR/kaBat0hSDD.pdf>

³⁵ "Saudi Arabia's crown prince seeks good relations with Iran", BBC news, 28 April, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56913398>

³⁶ Consul General of the people's republic of China, "The Belt and Road Initiative +Saudi Vision 2030----Endowing China-Saudi Arabia Cooperation with New Opportunities and Broad Prospects", 2018/10/01, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/eng/zsgx/t1601404.htm>

³⁷ AlSaied, Najat, et al. "Japan's Important Role in Saudi's Vision 2030." *Middle East Institute*, 27 Aug. 2021, www.mei.edu/publications/japans-important-role-saudis-vision-2030

As the Saudi government consolidated its vision for the future of the kingdom, MBS institutionalized a diverse range of reforms to restructure the Saudi society in terms of religion, culture, politics, and economy. Based on the policies mentioned above, it is critical to analyze if MBS will be able to implement these in the kingdom and lead to a change in the Saudi society. Apparently, the proposed reforms seem promising and paint a rosy picture, especially based on the statistics, but through observation of practical realities it seems like a farce, as common with other dictatorial governments. Muhammad Bin Salman has been working towards liberalization in the society but there have been no attempts to shift the country towards democratization.

One of the major initiatives taken by MBS which has gained the most international attention is the enhancement of women's role and position in the society. MBS has efficiently dealt with the gender issues in the country a prominent example was lifting the ban from driving for women, in response to which there was an online dissent which led to the detentions of many women rights' advocates, and it is one of the many examples which proves MBS' intolerance towards any kind of criticism. MBS has been very restrictive in welcoming any other point of view other than his own regarding governing the kingdom and it is reflected by his policies around the notion of censorship and surveillance. The Saudi government is restrictive towards the political and civil rights and has criminalized any form of dissent, whether it is online by social activists or by journalists. According to 'Freedom House', Saudi Arabia scores 26/100 as its internet freedom score, which is claimed by the freedom house as 'not free'.³⁸ Saudi government has blocked and filtered a diverse range of content in the kingdom under the rule of prohibiting content that is considered anti-Islamic, critical of state policies and royal family, blocking news outlets linked to the political opponents etc.³⁹

The Saudi government has been trying to crackdown the online dissent by censorship, surveillance, and physical repression in response to which the notion of 'self-censorship' is prevalent in the kingdom. Internet users who use social media platforms to advocate for political rights, civil liberties, minority rights etc. are monitored by the government, causing the users to be extra careful in their social media activity under the threat of physical repression by the

³⁸ "Saudi Arabia: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report." *Freedom House*, freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-net/2020.

³⁹ Ibid

government. Saudi government has also been using internet as a source of advancement of political interest by closely controlling and manipulating the information available on the internet. The pro-government commentators share content that is in support of the monarchy, especially when there is criticism on the Saudi policies. ⁴⁰Under the rule of MBS, on one hand there have been developments such as WhatsApp, facetime being accessible but on the other hand there have been a limitation on content, violations of user's rights and a strict system of surveillance. According to a comparative report on global social media manipulation by the computational propaganda research project at Oxford University, the Saudi government actors employ staff for the spread of government propaganda and misinformation. ⁴¹ Muhammad Bin Salman is restructuring the Kingdom and working on a modernized agenda, to make Saudi Arabia a potential investment hub for the West considering vision 2030 and other socioeconomic reforms, but it is crucial at this point for MBS to loosen up state clutches on freedom of expression and media to ameliorate the Saudi positioning on the international forum. Although Vision 2030 is an ambitious document to bring forth the economic transformation in the country, it would have been more sagacious if stakeholders were consulted, and public opinion at large were taken in account while framing of this plan by MBS.

The modernized reforms introduced by MBS form ties with the economic condition and the religious reputation of the country on the international forum. Even though these reforms have succeeded in bringing forth a positive change, it is also significant to observe the dissent in the public regarding the nature of MBS' governing policies. While these reforms aim to transform the ultraconservative reputation of the country, there has been a major backlash from public, leading to challenges for MBS' government. Saudi Arabia is the leader of the Muslim world because of its geographical location and religious sanctity as it has Islam's most holy shrine, Kaaba, located inside one of the Holy mosques, which a significant constituent of Islamic heritage. This religious significance brings in high volumes of visitors to the country annually who look up to the Kingdom as a nation dominated by fierce religious traditions and values. By opening the society, MBS aims

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Bradshaw, Samantha, and Phillip N Howard. "The Global Disinformation Order, 2019 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation." *Computational Propaganda Research Project*, University of Oxford, demotech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf.

to make Saudi a modern Islamic nation, representing moderate and balanced Islamic values, but considering Saudi Arabia's religious positioning in the Muslim world these reforms may also disturb the religious sentiments of the Muslims in the kingdom and the sanctity and value of these religious sites. This socioeconomic shift will transform the Saudi culture to a certain extent and will create constituencies that will fear this transformation as a threat to their religion and culture. It is critical to form a balance between the extremist's groups and the liberals, as MBS' policies are prompting the kingdom towards a moderate and liberalized Saudi culture. This inconsistency in the social groups of the country will require subtle forms of political liberalization. While pursuing policies of liberalization in a subtle way there are many lessons Saudi can learn from the social policies of UAE, its close neighbor and ally.

In the fascists regime of MBS, Saudis hegemonic designs of governing and the repressive internal policies are prominent. The angle of consultation is hardly seen in his reign, ensuring unflinching compliance for all his policies visions etc. The Saudi king, MBS is observed presenting a façade of liberalization in the kingdom by loosening up restrictions on social reforms and women rights, but some brazen acts of the Saudi government indicate the notion of regional hegemony. Under the fascists vision of MBS, Saudi seems to be improving its position on the world stage in statistics only but, the kingdom is extremely brittle as a nation and can easily collapse. To keep MBS' proposed system intact, it is significant to combat the constant friction that comes from palace politics, hence, MBS has led an anticorruption campaign in Saudi Arabia under which along with businessmen many prominent royals were arrested in Ritz Carlton. This campaign was a strategic maneuver against the aspirants and potential threats in the royal family as MBS has formed a centralized political system. Considering MBS' socioreligious reforms and authoritarian policies, MBS should strengthen the political reforms so they can be sustained and result in leaving deep rooted impact on the kingdom in future.

Section 2:

2.1. US-Saudi relations:

Saudi Arabia and United States have a long-established relationship since the 1930's, and till date, the Kingdom remains one of the closest allies of United States in the Middle East.⁴²The political relationship between both the countries was initiated in a meeting where Roosevelt met King Saud in 1945. This meeting laid the foundation of a longstanding US Saudi relationship based on common interests of security and a guaranteed access for US to the Saudi oil reserves.⁴³ A Diplomatic relationship between both the countries was formed in 1940 when the Kingdom accepted Bert Fish as an American envoy extraordinary.⁴⁴The relationship between both the countries is driven by mutual benefits such as nuclear energy partnership, arms sales, security commitments and economic interests. Over the years, the US- Saudi relationship has faced a lot of challenges including numerous global and regional conflicts but both the countries have remained firm in the continuation of strengthening their relationship based on mutual interests and values. Despite the challenges, both Saudi and US remained steadfast on their initial deal which ensures access to oil reserves to the US and security and defense to the kingdom. After the establishment of Organization of the petroleum exporting countries, OPEC, in 1973, Saudi made sure to pump the oil prices to an extent that the West could afford it without an economic shock and United States on their part remained firm in withholding its guarantee to provide security to Saudi from any potential threat, a prominent example is the US intervention in the region to counter Iran and its proxies.⁴⁵ Both the countries aim to preserve the stability and security in the gulf region and maintain a strong partnership in the security efforts in military, diplomatic and financial cooperation.⁴⁶

2.2. Economic relation:

⁴² "The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia." *Saudi*, www.saudiembassy.net/saudi-us-relations.

⁴³ *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v08/d2.

⁴⁴ *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, history.state.gov/countries/saudi-arabia.

⁴⁵ Shea, Jamie. *The US Rethinks Its Relationship with Saudi Arabia: or Does It?* Friends of Europe, 5 Mar. 2021, www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/the-us-rethinks-its-relations-with-saudi-arabia-or-does-it/.

⁴⁶ *U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia - United States Department of State.* *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, 15 Jan. 2021, www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-saudi-arabia/.

The US-Saudi alliance is commonly dominated by the issues of oil and security, which ensures mutual benefits for both the countries, but the economic ties between both US and Saudi are far more complex than this. Since MBS came into power, Saudi Arabia has been going through a major transformation including adoption of liberalized socioreligious policies and diversification of the Saudi economy to reduce its dependence on oil revenue. This underscores the importance of other economic and cultural links between both the countries that impact their economic relationship.

By initiating a transformative economic plan, ‘Vision 2030’, MBS aimed to diversify Saudi’s economy considering the potential risks that complete reliance on oil reserves brings to the Kingdom. As Saudi’s foreign reserves started declining, structural inefficiencies such as higher unemployment rates and complications related to geopolitical risks started to reveal, MBS developed a ‘national transformation plan’ to restructure the economic reforms in the country to diversify the economy and introduced ‘renewable’ energy resources as an option to expand kingdom’s industrial structure.⁴⁷ Since Saudi Arabia itself is trying to reduce its reliance on oil revenue for economic benefits, United States is also increasing its inventories to create a cushioning to withstand the economic impacts of any international events. United States’ dependence on middle eastern oil is gradually decreasing because of the American energy revolution which is suppressing the oil prices and is disarranging the global energy flows. The energy revolution has led to a rise in shale gas and tight oil production in the United States which has increased energy self-sufficiency for the country and heavily contributed to the redefinition of United States’ middle eastern policy.⁴⁸ The recent technological developments also guarantee extractions of oil from different parts of the world, according to the British oil and gas company, there is sufficient oil, of around 2.6 trillion barrels, to meet the current global demand until 2050 twice over.⁴⁹ Although the domestic oil production in the United States is increasing day by day,

⁴⁷ Tamimi, Nasir A. “Saudi Arabia’s Oil Dependence: Challenges Ahead.” *ISPI*, 24 June 2021, www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/saudi-arabias-oil-dependence-challenges-ahead-14997.

⁴⁸ Andrijanič, Mark Boris. “The American Energy Revolution: Challenging Europe and the Middle East - Mark Boris Andrijanič, 2015.” *SAGE Journals*, 1 Dec. 2015, journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1007/s12290-015-0374-2.

⁴⁹ Bousso, Ron. “Global Oil Demand to Grow into 2040s: BP Outlook.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 25 Jan. 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-bp-outlook/global-oil-demand-to-grow-into-2040s-bp-outlook-idUSKBN1591QQ.

it does not refer towards United states detachment from the global oil market as Saudi Arabia still plays an important role in the supply of oil across the globe as one third of world's oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz and any sort of disruption in this route can inflict negative effects on American economy.⁵⁰ Another major factor maintaining the US-Saudi connection is the petrodollar system which depends on Saudis and other members of OPEC. As the oil sale transactions are conducted in US dollars, an artificial demand for dollar gets created, increasing the dollar's value. This system ensures that US- Saudi alliance since the system is heavily dependent on Saudi cooperation.⁵¹

The US-Saudi relationship regarding energy resources is not limited to crude oil export only. One of the major economic reforms introduced by MBS involved the privatization of Aramco, as the government planned to sell five percent of it through an IPO, initial public offering.⁵² As Aramco transitioned to be a global energy company, it aimed to expand its production cycles globally.⁵³ One of the largest refineries in the world, located in Port Arthur, Texas is completely controlled by Saudi state company and it seems like Aramco has formed a firm grip on both the upstream and downstream business, as the entire downstream revenue is going back to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁴

The US- Saudi economic relationship is not confined to oil revenue only, but under the rule of MBS, numerous economic and cultural linkages have been formed between both the countries. The US-Saudi economic relationship has grown more multi-faceted especially since Saudi Arabia

⁵⁰ Loris, Nicolas. "Does the United States Still Need Middle East Oil?" *The Heritage Foundation*, www.heritage.org/coal-oil-natural-gas/commentary/does-the-united-states-still-need-middle-east-oil.

⁵¹ Webb, Whitney. "Trump Is Taking the US-Saudi Relationship to the next Level." 27 Mar. 2017, www.vanderbilt.edu/olli/class-materials/2017Spring.GDBrentwoodWk4B.pdf.

⁵² "Aramco Value to Top \$2 Trillion, Less than 5 Percent to Be Sold, Says Prince." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 25 Apr. 2016, www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-plan-aramco-idUSKCN0XM16M.

⁵³ Young, Karen E. "U.S.-Saudi Economic Ties: Why Saudi Arabia Matters." *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 19 Mar. 2018, agsiw.org/u-s-saudi-economic-ties-why-saudi-arabia-matters/.

⁵⁴ Gramer, Robbie. "Saudi Arabia Now Controls the Largest Oil Refinery in North America." *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, 3 May 2017, foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/03/saudi-arabia-now-controls-the-largest-oil-refinery-in-north-america-energy-middle-east-aramco

is diversifying its economy. Over the years, Saudi Arabia has grown into a significant trade market for American goods. In 2019, United States exported a total of \$23.9 billion in goods and services to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁵ The bulk of these exports is made up by heavy industrial sectors which includes non-military goods such as aircraft parts, automobiles and vehicle parts, and machinery such as furnaces etc.⁵⁶ As the American goods have formed a trade market in the Kingdom, the Saudi students have also played a substantial role by contributing around \$1.3 billion to the American economy in 2019.⁵⁷ Considering Vision 2030, Saudi has transformed into an investor friendly country and United States has played a major role in this economic initiation by contributing a cumulative level of investment to \$10.8 billion in 2019, according to the data from department of commerce's bureau of economic analysis.⁵⁸ The investment has increased by 45% since 2010 which represents Saudi Arabia's improving position on the international forum with regards to its business sector.⁵⁹ The economic liberalization has also led to developments in the areas of sports and entertainment which mutually benefits both the countries, strengthening their economic relationship. A prominent example is the opening of first licensed AMC movie theatre and a partnership between Netflix and Saudi animation studio Myrkott.⁶⁰

President Trumps meeting with the crown prince Muhammad bin Salman, marked a 'historic turning point' and pointed towards a revived partnership between both the countries. This meeting marked a significant shift in the US-Saudi relations in the field of politics, security, defense, and economy. During Donald Trump's era, one of major advancements was the US-Saudi economic

⁵⁵ "Saudi Arabia." *United States Trade Representative*, ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/middle-eastnorth-africa/saudi-arabia.

⁵⁶ Kenner, David, and Kameal Al Ahmad . "US-Saudi Economic Relationship: More than Arms and Oil." *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, Mar. 2021, www.foreignlobby.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SaudiReport.pdf.

⁵⁷ Kenner, David, and Kameal Al Ahmad . "US-Saudi Economic Relationship: More than Arms and Oil." *King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies*, Mar. 2021, www.foreignlobby.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SaudiReport.pdf.

⁵⁸ "Bureau of economic analysis", US department of commerce, <https://www.bea.gov/>

⁵⁹ "Saudi Arabia." *United States Trade Representative*, ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/middle-eastnorth-africa/saudi-arabia.

⁶⁰ Lakhpatwala, Zaira. "Netflix Exec on the 5-Year Partnership with Saudi Animation Studio Myrkott." *Arab News*, 16 Sept. 2020, www.arabnews.com/node/1735386/media.

plan, through which US offered its support for Saudis deteriorating economic conditions, directly and indirectly by investing more than 200 billion dollars in four years.⁶¹ According to the Saudi Energy Minister Khalid Al Falih, the infrastructure program of President Trump interests the Saudi government as expands Saudi's portfolio and guarantees a low risk, healthy return investment.⁶² The Saudi government also estimated a total investment of 1 trillion dollar in the United States in 2017, including the government and central bank holdings and investments by state-controlled organizations.⁶³ A media report also verified that during the Trump era, the Saudi government was planning to invest a total of 40 billion dollars in the US infrastructure development project launched by President Donald Trump.⁶⁴ Not only the economic relations between both US and Saudi Arabia seem to have improved during Trumps era but the overall amity between both the countries has grown to be stronger during Trumps presidency, as the President openly backed up Saudi Arabia's stance against Iran and aimed to maintain its strategic relationships with the kingdom despite the killing of Khashoggi.⁶⁵ According to Robert Jordan, US ambassador to Saudi Arabia in the administration of George W. Bush said, "The Saudis have a green light from the Trump administration", which further elaborates how during the Presidency of Trump the alliance between both the countries was remained cozy.⁶⁶ While under the Biden administration the situation seems to be taking a turn, as Biden describes Saudi as 'pariah'.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Althunayyan, Hamad. "The US-Saudi Relations in the Trump Era." *Donald Trump | Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 19 May 2017, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/5/19/the-us-saudi-relations-in-the-trump-era.

⁶² Hadley Gamble, Tom DiChristopher. "Saudi Oil Minister Praises Trump 'Bond,' Says US Relationship Has Never Been Better." *CNBC*, CNBC, 17 Mar. 2017, www.cnbc.com/2017/03/17/saudi-us-ties-stronger-than-ever-countries-see-eye-to-eye-on-iran-saudi-oil-minister-says.html.

⁶³ Hadley Gamble, Tom DiChristopher.

⁶⁴ Tom dichristopher. "Saudis Reportedly Plan to Invest \$40 Billion in US Infrastructure." *CNBC*, CNBC, 11 May 2017, www.cnbc.com/2017/05/11/saudis-reportedly-plan-to-invest-40-billion-in-us-infrastructure.html.

⁶⁵ Smith, Saphora, and Dan De Luce. "U.S.-Saudi Ties Were Especially Close under Trump. Under Biden, That Looks Likely to Change." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 14 Nov. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/news/world/less-privileged-personal-how-u-s-saudi-ties-may-soon-n1247439.

⁶⁶ Smith, Saphora, and Dan De Luce.

⁶⁷ Ottaway, David. "Dawn of a New Era in U.S.-Saudi Relations." *Wilson Center*, 1 Mar. 2021, www.wilsoncenter.org/article/dawn-new-era-us-saudi-relations.

Saudi Arabia and United States have a long-standing relationship in terms of trade. In 2019, United States goods and service trade with Saudi Arabia totaled to an estimated amount of \$39.7 billion.⁶⁸ The exports were \$23.9 billion, and the imports were \$14.9 billion which clearly reflects that in balance of trade, United States is the beneficiary. The first meeting of President Trump with MBS was marked as a historical turning point in the alliance of both countries, and the major purpose of the meeting was to resuscitate the state finances by discussing the potential for United States to invest in the kingdom and increase its manifold to diversify industrial excellence as MBS aimed to diversify the economy with the introduction of vision 2030. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and United States has a pragmatic nature as Saudis guaranteed oil supply to US in return for security and supply of arms and technology, but as soon as America turned into an energy independent state as the US oil production steadily increased, the US-Saudi alliance was closely scrutinized by the members of Congress.⁶⁹ The new Biden administration is also expected to challenge the kingdom with increased congressional scrutiny based on the human rights violations committed by the Saudi government.

As the Biden administration is starting to take over the nature of relationship between United States and Saudi Arabia is expected to take turn as the establishment of the relationship between both countries will be reinstated and formed based on a more institutionalized foundation. Unlike Trump administration, the heinous acts committed by Saudi government leading to the violation of human rights might no longer be safeguarded by the new administration and MBS should now also expect legal repercussions of his new policies. While Trump administration remained firm on maintaining commercial interests with the kingdom regardless of their political issues, the Biden administration is adamant in bringing forth changes in the political relationship by refraining from offering any leverage to the Kingdom over their political actions. Although Bidens approach in this regard might instigate the notion of financial interests of United States, it is significant to recognize that Bidens position on some key factors is different from that of President Trumps, hence unblocking specific streams of income which previously served as obstacles regarding

⁶⁸ Saudi Arabia." *United States Trade Representative*, ustr.gov/countries-regions/europe-middle-east/middle-eastnorth-africa/saudi-arabia.

⁶⁹ Smith, Saphora, and Dan De Luce. "U.S.-Saudi Ties Were Especially Close under Trump. Under Biden, That Looks Likely to Change." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 14 Nov. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/news/world/less-privileged-personal-how-u-s-saudi-ties-may-soon-n1247439

economic benefits to the middle eastern region, especially Saudi Arabia. Bidens take on a adapting a different approach towards China will significantly affect the global- economic well-being. As Biden intends to counter the protectionist methods used by Trump, his approach will underscore the significance of all the benefits this will bring to the United States.⁷⁰The China trade war has drastically affected the supply chain, further abrading the global trade. In case, Biden reverses the trade war with China, it will largely impact the global economy, especially benefiting Saudi Arabia and other middle eastern countries as they heavily rely on global trade, commerce, tourism etc. These factors have been greatly affected as the global demand slowed down due to factors such as Covid-19 pandemic, the china trade war etc. Any potential changes that Biden might put forward will reset the global markets, providing countries with a chance to capitalize on the economy's return to normalcy. Amid the tensions between US and Saudi Arabia, MBS has made efforts to deepen its relationship with China. The nature of governance in both, Saudi Arabia and China is similar as both are absolute monarchies and hence are close allies, as China is Saudi Arabia's top economic trading partners because China is the largest importer of Saudi oil.⁷¹ The authoritarian model of governance in China is one of the major factors drawing Saudi Arabia's attention, as it represents a less complicated template for MBS in comparison to the polarized politics of representative democracy.⁷²While United States has always remained to be one of the closest strategic allies of Saudi Arabia the relationship between the two countries has been deteriorating, further affecting the economic and political positioning of Saudi Arabia on the world stage which serves to be the major factor contributing to the improving alliance between both China and Saudi as it is now one of the highest priorities of the kingdom to maintain its position globally. Since both the countries are Saudis allies and bring benefits to the kingdom, any reduction in trade tensions between the two, will allow Saudi Arabia, a chance to gain an economic dividend,

⁷⁰ "How the Biden Administration Will Impact Middle East Economies." *Atlantic Council*, 13 Jan. 2021, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-the-biden-administration-will-impact-middle-east-economies/.

⁷¹Riedel, Bruce. "Saudi Arabia's Relations with China: Functional, but Not Strategic." *Brookings*, Brookings, 6 Nov. 2020, www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-arabias-relations-with-china-functional-but-not-strategic/.

⁷² Haykel, Bernard. "Managing The Relationship Between The U.S. And Saudi Arabia." *Hoover Institution*, 8 Dec. 2020, www.hoover.org/research/managing-relationship-between-us-and-saudi-arabia.

specifically in the light of vision 2030, which is a major transformative endeavor for Saudi Arabia's economic future.⁷³

2.3 Strategic relation:

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has always maintained a strong strategic alliance with the United States because of the oil production, Saudi's status. Both the countries have a long-established security relationship and are strong partners in counterterrorism efforts. Saudi Arabia is the largest foreign military sales customer of United States with the sales of more than \$100 billion in active FMS cases.⁷⁴The FMS support three key security assistance organizations in Saudi Arabia- The National guard, the ministry of interior and the ministry of defense.⁷⁵ Since years, the Saudi armed forces have heavily relied on US arms sales and training. In 2017, during President Trumps visit to Riyadh, a package worth \$110 billions of defense sales was signed, with an intention to strengthen and deepen the bilateral defense cooperation.⁷⁶Along with the sales of arms to Saudi Arabia, United States has also appointed military personnel in Saudi Arabia. According to Department of defense manpower data center (DMDC), a total of 555 US military personnel has been reported to be appointed in Saudi Arabia in September 2019, which raised to a total of 3000 US personnel to enhance the security of the kingdom.⁷⁷

The United States plays a significant role in Yemen war, against the Houthis, launched in 2015 by MBS. The Yemen war is declared to be one of the worst humanitarian crises, which has apparently been enabled by the United States as Saudi Arabia remained to be one of the largest

⁷³ Neuhauser, Alan. "Saudi Arabia's Pivot to Asia." *U.S. News & World Report*, U.S. News & World Report, 23 Aug. 2019, www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2019-08-23/saudi-arabia-longtime-us-ally-builds-ties-with-china.

⁷⁴ "U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia - United States Department of State." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, 15 Jan. 2021, www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-saudi-arabia/.

⁷⁵ ibd

⁷⁶ "Fact Sheet: Intended Sales to Saudi Arabia via Foreign Military Sales." *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, www.dsca.mil/news-media/news-archive/fact-sheet-intended-sales-saudi-arabia-foreign-military-sales

⁷⁷ "Saudi Arabia: Background and US Relations." *Congressional Research Service*, 18 Feb. 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>

arms importers from 2015 to 2019, the initial five years of Yemen war, and a total of 73% of Saudi arms imports came from the United States.⁷⁸ Between the years, 2015 to 2020, United States agreed to sell a total of \$64.1 billion worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia.⁷⁹ During President Trumps administration, it was evident that United States wanted the war to continue as Saudi's victory would be a defeat to not only the Houthis but also Iran, as both backed up on each other as the war progressed. President Trump also used his presidential veto for the second time on a bill passed by Congress to bring a halt to the support for the Saudi led war in Yemen and later after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, there was an increased opposition in congress and an international outcry to Trumps policy on Yemen war.⁸⁰ United States, under President Trumps administration did not out rightly condemn the Khashoggi killing while President Biden has defended the inaction against MBS in killing of Jamal Khashoggi and announced a push back against governments that heinously attack perceived dissidents. In this regard, Biden administration introduced a 'Khashoggi ban', which imposes visa restrictions on those who are believed to be acting on behalf of a foreign government or engaged in any crime. To initiate this ban, United States department of state has imposed visa restriction on 76 Saudis who have been engaged in threatening dissidents overseas, including the Khashoggi killing.⁸¹ Saudi Arabia's approach towards the overseas dissidents does not limit to the country itself but is an issue which involves both the countries.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been in prolonged feud struggling for regional dominance and have engaged in a variety of proxy wars. Iran is a common foe of both Saudi Arabia and United States, contributing as another factor strengthening the strategic alliance between both the countries. The Joint Comprehensive plan of action, the Iran nuclear agreement was signed in 2015 between Iran and other powerful countries including united states. According to this deal, Iran agreed to put a halt to much of its nuclear program in exchange of relief from the sanctions, but President Trump

⁷⁸ Riedel, Bruce. "It's Time to Stop US Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia." *Brookings*, Brookings, 4 Feb. 2021, www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/02/04/its-time-to-stop-us-arms-sales-to-saudi-arabia/.

⁷⁹ Riedel, Bruce

⁸⁰ "Yemen War: Trump Vetoes Bill to End US Support for Saudi-Led Coalition." *BBC News*, BBC, 17 Apr. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47958014

⁸¹ "Accountability for the Murder of Jamal Khashoggi - United States Department of State." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, 12 Apr. 2021, www.state.gov/accountability-for-the-murder-of-jamal-khashoggi/.

withdrew from this deal in 2020 which caused the resumption of Iranian nuclear activities. As Trump revoked the deal Obama made, the US- Iran relationship was heavily affected while Saudi and Israel mutually benefitted from this withdrawal.⁸² On the other hand, Biden administration indicates formation of a new treaty, to revive the previously laid down conditions under the JCPOA which could be a challenge for Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion:

While some in Congress have become critical of MBS' repressive internal policies and the foreign policy of US towards the kingdom, MBS has enjoyed the impunity by President Trump on several instances. Yasmine Farouk, a visiting fellow at the Middle East Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said, referring to Saudi Arabia, "What they are going to lose is complete immunity that Trump has given them and the personal access".⁸³ Issues such as violations of human rights, brazen acts in the internal administration of MBS such as the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, crackdown on dissent, waging a war in Yemen leading to a humanitarian catastrophe, diplomatic dispute with Qatar are some major factors that indicate the notion of regional hegemony under MBS' rule.

Through the perspective of United States and its rivalry with other global powers like China and Russia, it is evident that the new Biden administration carefully adapts strategies to engage with Saudi Arabia and deal with MBS in future. While United States to a certain extent can aggressively influence Saudi Arabia, based on the kingdom's dependence on US for technology, military, arms and ammunition and intelligence, any sort of coercive or threatening treatment towards the kingdom can cause them to backfire and shift their attention towards powerful countries.

The relationship between both the countries has always been intricate but especially now, in the light of the current stance of Biden administration on US-Saudi relationship. With Biden taking the office, it is apparent that the relationship between both the countries will transform to be comprehensive in nature and will limit to state-to-state transactions only. During Trumps era the foreign policy of US towards Saudi Arabia seemed to be restricted and biased, but the divergent

⁸²"What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal.

⁸³ Smith, Saphora, and Dan De Luce. "U.S.-Saudi Ties Were Especially Close under Trump. Under Biden, That Looks Likely to Change." *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 14 Nov. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/news/world/less-privileged-personal-how-u-s-saudi-ties-may-soon-n1247439.

policy of Biden administration, will serve as a significant factor to increase the challenges for MBS and the Saudi government. In the US-Saudi relationship it is evident to strike a balance between the ideals of human rights and morals and the American economic and strategic interest associated with the position of the kingdom. Another factor that contributes to the US Saudi relationship is the influence of social media. The inflexible differences between both the countries and the hegemonic design put forward by MBS' government are now globally acknowledged and the power of public pressure is a significant factor which will in future too, hold President Bidens administration accountable regarding maintaining the standards of international human rights and its observance by MBS.

The huge economic and religious clout of Saudi Arabia on the world stage has always defended the Kingdom from regional grouping against the actions of MBS. No evident action has been taken against the Kingdoms administration when any bellicose action in opposition to the international standard of human rights was committed, as Saudi Arabia had political immunity under the support of President Trump. As the new administration takes over the United States, it is apparent that the kingdom will receive a less favorable treatment in comparison to the past, hence in case of any conflict aggravates, Saudi will have apprehensions regarding US support now.

The transition in the nature of the relationship between United States and Saudi Arabia is a significant change that comes forward with the new Biden administration. It is unlikely that the new administration will deteriorate relationship with Saudi Arabia but only with the crown prince, MBS. It is significant that the new administration finds a neutral way to strike balance between implementation of human rights values, while also safeguarding country's economic interests. A combination of pragmatism, acknowledgment of both country's interests, and conditional relations will provide a basis for a solid foundation between both the countries.

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