

Saudi Reform and Security Through a Gulf Lens

by [Lori Plotkin Boghardt \(/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt\)](/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt)

Jun 19, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alahlah-walamn-fy-alswdyt-mn-wjht-nzr-dwl-alkhlyj\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alahlah-walamn-fy-alswdyt-mn-wjht-nzr-dwl-alkhlyj)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Lori Plotkin Boghardt \(/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt\)](/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt)

Lori Plotkin Boghardt was a senior fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute from 2013-2018.



Articles & Testimony

Encouraging more liberal policies remains difficult when America's Gulf partners believe certain reforms run counter to their security interests.

The arrest of several of the kingdom's most prominent women's rights activists six weeks before the date when women would be allowed to drive came as a shock to everyone. After news of the detentions spread through informal channels, an official announcement on May 19 referred ambiguously to the detention of individuals seeking "to undermine the security and stability of the kingdom" and erode "national unity" through various activities. Local news outlets quickly vilified the activists – some well-known abroad as peaceful advocates – and branded them "traitors."

For Americans and Europeans, the detentions came on the heels of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud's whirlwind tour of their own countries to promote his "Vision 2030" economic and social reform agenda. During a *60 Minutes* interview aired immediately prior to his U.S. visit, the prince agreed that women were equal to men ("We are all human beings and there is no difference"), and maintained that "Saudi women still have not received their full rights" stipulated in Islam, but were now closer to doing so.

Much of the discussion about the arrests has focused on the paradox between what the crown prince has been promoting as part of his reform agenda and the detention of the activists. This picture is complicated by the fact that Mohammed bin Salman has enabled discernable albeit limited advances in the position and role of Saudi women – in the labor force, at entertainment venues, and vis-a-vis new regulations surrounding such things as divorce and child custody. Furthermore, few are predicting that the promise of women's legal entitlement to drive on June 24 will be withdrawn, despite some controversy over the issue in the kingdom.

Riyadh's commitment to both state-driven social progress and crackdowns on popular activism encouraging such progress can be best understood as forming two pillars of a broader government security strategy. The Saudi

leadership's economic and social reform campaign above all represents part of an overarching security agenda designed to overcome threatening national and regional circumstances. Punishing (and deterring other) independent activists and potential critics represents a parallel tactic -- not a conflicting one -- to the campaign, from the leadership's perspective. The crown prince's reform package was never about political reform as Americans understand the term, nor does Riyadh have plans to move in that direction. The essence of the kingdom's security strategy is not uniquely Saudi, and shared security concerns and reform efforts in other Gulf monarchies help inform what is happening in Saudi Arabia and where the kingdom is headed.

The latest Gulf reform projects by and large form part of a response to three fundamental concerns in recent years. One is the drop in the price of oil since 2014 that has ravaged Gulf budgets dependent on oil income. Most importantly, lower revenues carry implications for governments' capacity to cement ruler-citizen ties with generous subsidies and social welfare benefits. Fewer financial resources mean that governments must find supplementary or even alternative approaches to nourishing public support.

A second concern regards the governments' inherent vulnerability to the kind of popular protests, revolutions, and civil wars emerging from the Arab Spring. The tumultuous events during the first years of the so-called spring shattered any existing sense of security in the Gulf. The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt represented a particular source of anxiety for the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Continuing deadly intrastate conflict serves as a regular, unnerving reminder of Gulf states' potential susceptibility to unrest.

These two fundamental issues -- one rooted in economics and the other in politics -- interact and overlap with each other to create a third challenge. That challenge is how to respond to the Gulf's burgeoning youth population. Many of the Gulf's youth are seeking out opportunities to participate in political discourse, have access to unlimited information about local and regional developments and government performance via social media, unlike generations before them, and are searching for good state jobs when many governments hope that they will join the private sector.

Finally, exacerbating all three concerns are Arab Gulf perceptions of Iran's destabilizing gains in the region, including in the Gulf peninsula itself, and private questions about the current U.S. commitment to Arab Gulf security.

To address these challenges, most of the Arab Gulf monarchies are pursuing two major tracks of reform: economic reform that focuses on expanding national economies beyond oil, and social reform that involves developing recreational, cultural, entertainment and other opportunities for residents to experience fulfilling lives and in order to contribute to national economic growth. To be sure, Gulf monarchies have harbored similar development plans for years, however, new security challenges have made these efforts more pressing. Likewise, the new push for economic and social reform has been accompanied by a more restrictive political environment.

Saudi Arabia's own blueprint for the future is its Vision 2030 plan. Vision 2030's central objective is to diversify the economy, with the crown prince comprehending the financial (and political) urgency in transitioning the economy away from oil dependency. In an al-Arabiya television interview coordinated with the unveiling of Vision 2030, Mohammed bin Salman bemoaned the kingdom's "addiction to oil." "It is as if it were our constitution: the Quran, the Sunnah and then the oil," he stated.

According to one of Vision 2030's Saudi drafters, the national roadmap also embraces the imagination of young Saudis and their interest in such issues as education, career, and quality of life—not that of older officials hoping to seal their legacy. In this regard, the crown prince has enabled tightly controlled societal openings, while curbing the power of the religious police. Certain observable changes in society have occurred so rapidly that some worry the pace is politically risky. According to a Saudi official, a key challenge is balancing how fast the kingdom needs to change to survive economically, with how much change will be tolerated by society.

Likewise, a common Saudi narrative is that in order for the leadership to push through progressive social reform without a disruptive backlash from ultraconservatives, a tightly controlled political environment is necessary. This account can be heard both from Saudi elite actively supporting the crown prince as well as from common Saudi citizens. It is interesting that this narrative is also heard in neighboring UAE. There, many view the Emirati leadership as a bulwark against political Islamists, who it is believed would bring about regressive economic and social policies if not checked. More generally, some in the Gulf feel antagonistic toward the idea of any political activity that is understood to put “national stability” at risk.

At the same time, what is clear is that in the wake of the Arab spring’s revolutions and civil wars, the rise of political Islamist groups, the rapid growth of ISIS, Iran’s regional gains and support for partners and proxies in the Arab world, and an uncertain security commitment from the Americans, most Gulf governments are squeezing independent actors no matter their religious, political, or other orientation. The debate is likely to continue on whether balancing various domestic constituencies plays into Saudi decision-making about whom to arrest and when, but eliminating actual or potential critics on issues of sensitive national and regional policy remains an independent security goal. This may be increasingly difficult to achieve due to Gulf citizens’ propensity for turning to social media to express their opinions, though Gulf capitals are exerting great effort to try to control this space as well.

As for U.S. policy, it’s in America’s interest to provide political and business support to Saudi Arabia’s economic and social reform efforts. Saudi achievements in moving toward a more sustainable future would be a success for U.S. interests too. At the same time, the women’s rights arrests are another reminder of the perennial challenge of balancing strategic interests with political and other values when it comes to international partners. From an American perspective, the peaceful women’s rights activists should be natural allies in a country’s rapid social reform campaign.

Encouraging more liberal policies toward political reform in the Gulf remains difficult when America’s Gulf partners understand them to run counter to their own security interests. On issues across the board, a close working relationship at the leadership level is one dynamic that’s understood to enhance U.S. influence in the Gulf. There continue to be questions about the extent of U.S. leverage in the region. However, one can learn from the tumultuous events of the past year that the position of American leaders on the kingdom and its closest allies is much more influential on their policies than many have thought. ❖

Caravan

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

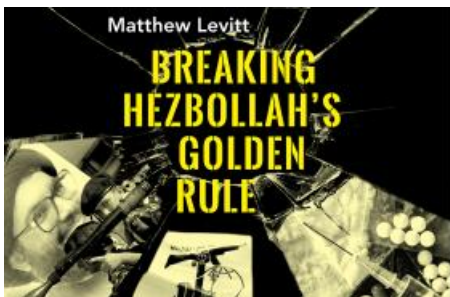
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)