

In Saudi Arabia, a Revolution Disguised as Reform

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The United States has a stake in supporting Riyadh's efforts to demonstrate that an Arab government can remake its society from within while avoiding terrible upheaval.

Today, it's hard to be optimistic about anything in the Middle East. And yet having just visited Saudi Arabia, in which I led a small bipartisan group of former national security officials, I came away feeling hopeful about the kingdom's future. That may seem paradoxical when some portray the Saudis as both "[arsonists and firefighters](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html>)" in the struggle with radical Islamists. While Saudi funding of madrassas internationally has contributed to the spread of a highly intolerant strain of Islam, I wonder whether a lag effect is causing the Saudis to be singled out for behaviors their leadership no longer embraces. In any case, that is certainly not the Saudi Arabia I just encountered.

In fact, the Saudi Arabia I just visited seemed like a different country from the one I've been visiting since 1991. There is an awakening underway in Saudi Arabia, but it is being led from the top. As one Saudi told us, there is "a revolution here disguised as economic reform." While political change may not be in the offing, transformation is nonetheless taking place. Stylistically, one sees it in the candor of the conversations with Saudi officials -- not the hallmark of previous interactions -- as well as a new work ethic, with several ministers telling us 80-hour workweeks are now the norm. When we asked how those in the bureaucracy were reacting to the new demands, we heard that not everyone is happy but that younger, junior officials now feel they are part of something important and have embraced the new reality. Symbolically, the presence of women was notable in our meeting with the foreign minister and our visit to the College of Entrepreneurship, where half of the group we met were women...

[Read the full article on the Washington Post website. \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/in-saudi-arabia-a-revolution-disguised-as-reform/2016/09/08/979f03f6-7526-11e6-b786-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/in-saudi-arabia-a-revolution-disguised-as-reform/2016/09/08/979f03f6-7526-11e6-b786-)

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