



# The Role of Foreign Influence on Saudi Arabia's Undergoing Liberalization and the Areas that It Affects

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**Abstract.** The liberalization of heavily conservative and autocratic nations is a popular issue of concern to the world today. Ever since Saudi Arabia lifted the ban on female drivers, researchers have looked for the connection between Saudi Arabia's transformation and its own political changes, focusing on the change that occurred due to MSB's Vision 2030 plan. There is still a research gap on external causes of the liberalization and the areas in which the liberalization took effect. This study examines the role of foreign pressure and economic modernization in Saudi Arabia's liberalizing process. The research method of this paper is as follows: Saudi Arabia's transformation index will be collected from other scholars' studies and a correlative analysis between the index and the causes of Saudi Arabia's transformation will be made. Afterward, it is found that foreign influence on Saudi Arabia's liberalizing transformation far outweighs the role of its national political change. The area of liberalization is mostly economics, then society, and least politics. The result indicates that the same strategy of liberalization could be applied in other autocratic nations when countries apply diplomatic pressure, which could better warrant against the violation of human rights and bring forth economic modernization on a global scale.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia · Foreign Pressure · Liberalizing socio-economic transformation · U.S. government

## 1 Introduction

In the age of the internet, citizens living in conservative societies have gained more knowledge about the progressive world, and the Enlightenment principles that western liberal democracies were built. More citizens, following the Arab Spring's uproar, are injecting pressure against their autocratic rulers to change their societies' backward economy and social norms. How socio-economic transformation could occur in religiously conservative, autocratic societies particularly in the Middle East is a significant question for both researchers and the leaders of countries when considering their foreign policies [1, 2]. Among conservative societies that partially transformed their socio-economic policies, Saudi Arabia has achieved comparatively significant progress after the 2017 lift of the ban on female drivers [3].

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B. Majoul et al. (Eds.): ICLAHD 2022, ASSEHR 726, pp. 1298–1304, 2023.

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8\\_166](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-97-8_166)

Today, mainstream research has investigated domestic pressures applied upon Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia who brought momentum to policies targeting unprogressive social norms [4–6]. Moreover, many researchers have also concluded that internal pressure, such as citizen protests, spurs this transformation. These are all inconclusive since there was no consideration of foreign pressure, most notably the actions taken by the United States in accordance with events occurring within Saudi Arabia [7].

There is a lack of introspection on the significance of foreign pressure and the major change in economic structure among the current studies on Saudi Arabia's transformation. This study analyses the role that foreign pressure played in Saudi Arabia's transformation by correlating exiting bilateral policies to the cause of Saudi Arabia's change.

## 2 Reflections on Foreign Pressures

Foreign pressure had a greater degree of influence on Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation than domestic influence such as the political changes. Before the discussion of what caused the transformation, it is important to first note how Saudi Arabia has changed. Saudi Arabia has adopted liberal social reforms such as the anti-corruption purge and the lifting of the ban on female drivers. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has also instituted a vision 30 plan that aims to reform its economy and vitalize its technological, entertainment, and tourist industries. These changes provide the foundation of the discussion in this paper.

The bulk of foreign pressure applied to Saudi Arabia is diplomatic, such as the West's condemnations of Saudi Arabia's government on the murder of Khashoggi and the United States' foreign interventions. The economic sanctions placed by the West on important government officials and media reports of human rights abuse are the other forms of foreign pressure that incentivize Saudi Arabia to transform [8]. This paper will examine the major form of foreign pressure, which is the pressure applied by three generations of the United States government, and how each left a deep impact on Saudi Arabia's transformation.

## 3 Former Governments of the United States and Their Influences

The Obama Administration began its intervention in the Middle East early on, particularly applying foreign pressure on Saudi Arabia. President Barack Obama was seen as hawkish, confronting many nations for their human rights abuses and taking an extremely hard stance on terrorism. In terms of his stance on foreign policy, Obama was frequently labeled as a "liberal-realist". He used a combination of diplomacy and military interventions [9]. Surprisingly, the Obama administration used diplomacy as an active tool to form bonds with historic enemies of the U.S. while he used interventions in scenarios that people would normally not expect. It is easy to see that Obama was deeply involved in the Middle East. He had urged countries like Egypt and Tunisia to uphold fair elections. He called the Egyptian president to step down during the Arab Spring and facilitated a pan-democratic mass movement in the Middle East. U.S. involvement

in the Arab Spring deepened Saudi Arabia's worries of an American-backed political crisis within their own country since the autocratic nation was known to have brutally crushed down several protests and yielded little rights to females within the country. The consequences of American secret aid to the domestic protestors could go out of control and eventually lead to the fall of the Al Saud government. Even more notably, Obama heavily emphasized the war on terror and held a firm stance on forceful interrogations of affiliated terrorists. The U.S. government under Obama condemned Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism, the form of Islam that inspired the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As the U.S.-Saudi relationship was quickly going out of hand, the Obama administration vetoed the law enabling 9/11 victims to sue Saudi Arabia for damages and denounced the justifications that the terrorists were all Saudi nationalists. Since then, Obama changed the facet of American foreign pressure on Saudi Arabia by pressuring its geopolitical situation. Obama greatly improved the U.S.-Iran relationship and actively advanced the negotiations of nuclear disarmament. There was no pressure or time limit for Iran's nuclear disarmament, which meant that Saudi Arabia faced a severe geopolitical threat that could explode at any moment. The geopolitical pressure grew greater when the U.S. decided to not stage a strike against Syria when Bashar Assad used chemical weapons on his own people. Since Syria and Saudi Arabia were also long-term rivals, the set of U.S. foreign policies under Obama enlarged the security concerns faced by Saudi Arabia.

Obama was criticized by his successor, Donald Trump, for being weak in his foreign policy. Trump stated that Obama had bailed Iran out of trouble as opposed to establishing a good environment for peace talks. Trump criticized Obama's negotiation of the Iran nuclear deal. Though it seemed that Trump's statements were in the interests of Saudi Arabia, Trump's set of foreign policies yielded benefits and more foreign pressure on Saudi Arabia.

Transitioning into the Trump administration after the 2016 election, the United States initiated its long-lasting isolationist foreign policies. John Quincy Adams, back on July 4th, 1821, spoke to the U.S. House of Representatives on Foreign policy and introduced the stance of early neo-isolationism. Influenced by the speech, neo-isolationists typically believe that the U.S. needs not to uphold the standard of freedom and independence abroad, but should only care for their own internal affairs. They believed that not only would foreign interventions create distress for every party involved, but it would also transition the U.S. image to one that upholds force instead of liberty. During Trump's presidency, the U.S. government pulled out of conflicts and even cut off its cooperation with international organizations. For instance, under Trump's regime, the U.S. government was already starting to withdraw from Afghanistan. This move further led to the later Biden administration bearing the full consequences of such a withdrawal. As a firm neo-isolationist, Trump executed his "American First" slogan and de-prioritized values like liberty. It is arguable that pulling out from the globalization trend in international affairs damages the U.S. economically and politically. For instance, fighting a trade war with China did not produce more jobs for Americans as Trump claimed, but rather created more distress for small business owners in both countries. Despite all that, Trump still stood his ground as a neo-isolationist. This helps Saudi Arabia lift tremendous amounts of foreign pressure from the West since the U.S. never actively intervened in human rights abuses committed by Saudi Arabia during this period. The Trump administration

approved nuclear technology transfers and resumed sales of precision-guided bombs to Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, he also covered up MSB's involvement in the murder of Khashoggi by claiming that the U.S. needs Saudi Arabia as a strategic partner in the oil and armory trades. The Biden administration later attempted to resume the strict scrutiny of Saudi Arabia's internal politics and especially MBS, the crown prince.

However, by following neo-isolationism, Trump does not keep his hands away from all issues. After abandoning armed interventions in areas of the world, Trump used other means to get involved. It was widely known that Trump was very pro-Israel, a long-time rival of Saudi Arabia. Trump criticized Obama for abstaining from a U.N. vote about condemning Israeli settlements in Pakistan, claiming that Obama's actions put Israelis in an unfair position. Historically, Israel and Saudi Arabia maintained poor relationships due to the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflicts. Thus, Trump's criticisms of Obama reflected the dilemma that Saudi Arabia faced—one of its largest allies was also a supporter of one of its largest rivals. Under the partnership with the U.S., Saudi Arabia could not make moves against Israel and faced multiple tradeoffs. Trump was a man of action. The bilateral agreement facilitated during Trump's administration, the Abraham Accord, puts up an end to the long-lasting conflict between Israel and Arabian states like UAE and Bahrain. This agreement forces Saudi Arabia to choose among trade-offs and gives it under tremendous foreign pressure. In the status quo, Saudi Arabia is not involved in the agreement and faces a tradeoff: either, Saudi Arabia could pull itself closer to the western camp to earn the trust of the American and Israeli governments, which provide the foundation for future economic cooperation. The risk involved in this choice is potential revolts driven by the dominant group of Arabs residing in Saudi Arabia. This hatred is fueled by historic and ongoing cultural and ethnic conflicts. Or, it could follow the other predominantly Arab nations' footsteps and accuse the accord of a betrayal of the Muslim world. If Saudi Arabia chooses to do this, it would lose opportunities for reconciliation with Israel and further economic cooperation with the West. Till today, Saudi Arabia has still not signed the Abraham Accord. The West could use this to further leverage Saudi Arabia since they could increase energy demand in other Arabian states that have signed the Abraham Accord. Saudi Arabia may lose its dominance in the oil market and thus suffer huge economic repercussions.

Although the Trump administration made it clear that they had no interest in investigating Saudi Arabia's involvement immediately after the murder of Khashoggi, NGOs imposed pressure on Saudi Arabia. Other than interventions imposed on Saudi Arabia by the U.S. government, NGOs have also played a significant role in Saudi Arabia's social transformation. Many have credited the lifting of the ban on female drivers to MBS (Mohammed Bin Salman) and his liberalizing attempts on the traditional Al Saud pillars. However, on May 31st, 2018, before the policy change, MBS privately ordered a crackdown on female protestors who were protesting the country's driving ban. This partially discredits popular theories of how Saudi Arabia has politically transformed into a populist monarchy since it shows that any discontent toward the government is still perceived as a threat to the ruling aristocrats' reigning stability. On the contrary, non-governmental organizations like Human Rights Watch urged an unconditional release of the protestors and even reached governments around the world to aid in the process. They have called out Saudi Arabia for concealing its human rights abuse behind the

"reputation laundering" of hosting G20 and demanded an immediate release of the prisoners. Unable to bear the overwhelming pressure and heavy international scrutiny, Saudi Arabia ultimately released the protestors who were jailed for several years.

#### 4 The Biden Government

After the 2020 presidential election, the Biden administration also generated tremendous foreign pressure against Saudi Arabia on human rights and energy issues [10]. For instance, in his visit to Saudi Arabia, president Biden nominated the crown prince, MBS, as the direct killer of Khashoggi. Although his claim was denied by the Saudi Minister of State, Adel al-Jubeir, Biden claimed that the foreign minister was not telling the truth. It is not hard to tell that Biden holds an extremely stern attitude on upholding human rights even at the cost of losing Saudi autocrats' support. Biden's foreign policy inherits a large part of Trump's legacy, but he views the spread of democracy on a global level as the main priority and denounces autocrats. It is worthwhile to note that Biden is trying to push Saudi Arabia to heavily westernize. Not only does Biden pressure Saudi Arabia on human rights issues, but he also aims to knock down the Abraham accords with Saudi Arabia to pull it closer to the western world. So far, Saudi Arabia has already opened its airspace to Israeli civilian aircraft. This probably means that Saudi Arabia will put down the 006Dore historic grudge in the future and lay more foundation for cooperation with the West. Another part of Biden's plan is to isolate Russia and re-vitalize NATO. He has claimed that the U.S. shall not move away and leave vacuums for Russia, China, and Iran to come in to dominate the Middle East. Biden's strategy forces a dilemma upon Saudi Arabia. Russia works closely with Saudi Arabia, yet the U.S. attempts to alienate Russia and does not want its partners to aid Russia economically. It is unclear how Saudi Arabia will deal with Russia but is undeniable that cooperation between the two autocratic nations is unstable and contains a high possibility of termination once the U.S. sends a strong enough message in the future.

The E.U.'s relationship with Saudi Arabia, though not institutionalized, is also slowly progressing for the better. The E.U.'s main area of cooperation with Saudi Arabia is in terms of economics since the E.U. hold a high demand for Saudi Arabia's oil. It could push for Saudi Arabia's economic modernization as more business interactions occur between the two sides, and incentivize the further implementation of Vision30, Saudi Arabia's plan for economic development through technological improvements. This could further push Saudi Arabia to abandon its over-reliance on energy by advancing toward technological innovation and the rise of its entertainment services.

Saudi Arabia's economic transformation is also driven mainly by foreign pressure. The first layer of foreign pressure is foreign direct investments. Between its announcements of having constructed palm islands as tourist attractions and its increased funding of technological programs, Saudi Arabia has received the peaked foreign direct investment while this index was previously poor-performing. Saudi Arabia's oil resource is no longer capable of sustaining its entire economy without other industries. To start with, the world economy is slowly transitioning into one that pivots around modernized technology, artificial intelligence, and green energy inventions. Furthermore, the West has threatened to cut off its ties with the Saudi Arabia oil trade as their relationships intensified after the 9/11 incident. Thus, the prospect of Saudi Arabia's oil market is unstable

and it must resort to alternatives. The second layer of foreign pressure is its subordination to the Western narrative of clean energy and sustainable development. The U.S. has even threatened to cut off its weapon supply to Saudi Arabia if there is an increasing amount of oil supply in the future. Moreover, there is an increasing trend to use renewable energy in western liberal democracies, replacing their demand for oil and natural gas with the rise of solar and wind energy. The third layer of foreign pressure is the bilateral framework on clean energy, technology, and space exploration cooperation with the west. By far, the Biden administration has achieved the most in terms of expanding the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The relationship will certainly diversify in cross-technological shares and bilateral energy innovation in the future. Due to political and economic foreign pressure, Saudi Arabia has no alternative but to transform its economic structure.

Saudi Arabia's liberalization process establishes it as an important bridge to the western world in the Middle East region, and this process is driven heavily by the West's foreign pressure. This mutual relationship helps build strategic partnerships in the U.S. spread democracy within and outside of Saudi Arabia, generate energy interdependence by advancing toward zero-carbon green energy alternatives, and in shaping Gulf and regional security. In each of these categories, foreign pressure, mainly coming from the U.S. government, has driven Saudi Arabia to change its stance on issues like human rights, energy use, trade partners, and even political structure. Combined, the multiple levels of foreign pressure greatly outweigh Saudi Arabia's internal sources and motivations for its socio-economic transformation.

## 5 Conclusion

This study analyzed the role of political foreign pressure on Saudi Arabia's liberalizing socio-economic transformation by discussing the foreign policies taken by the three generations of the U.S. government and the pressure point exerted by humanitarian NGOs. Moreover, this study also analyzed the economic foreign pressure that incentivized an economic transformation into clean energy and technological innovations. In this study, there is no use of quantitative data since it is hard to measure the consequences of foreign pressure using numbers and indexes. In the future, in-depth research on this topic could be facilitated under the test of objective data and could rank the extent of influence that each foreign policy has on Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation. In this way, it is easier for policy-makers to decide what foreign policy to use in other similar circumstances and therefore make the anti-autocrat liberalization trend spread more effectively to help more people gain their human rights.

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