

SAUDI FIRST: HOW HYPER-NATIONALISM IS TRANSFORMING SAUDI ARABIA

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SUMMARY

- Saudi Arabia is embracing a new nationalism that is transforming domestic politics and the country's foreign policy.
- The state is actively nurturing this nationalism, and has radically reduced the influence of the long-dominant religious establishment.
- A core purpose of the new nationalism is to speed the rise of the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and back his reform agenda.
- Social media and traditional outlets have swung forcefully in behind this, spreading 'lines to take' and exalting the state and its leadership above all else.
- But the leadership may have created a Trojan horse: already nationalists appear to be training their ferocity back on the state that created them.

Introduction

Nationalism is on the rise, enjoying a global resurgence that has made it the political ideology of the age. This is as true for Saudi Arabia as anywhere else; indeed, it is particularly the case there. For decades, nationalism as an ideology was incompatible with the Kingdom's dominant religious identity. This identity cemented a sense of unity for the country while legitimising the government through a narrative in which clerics emphasised adherence to the ruler. Previous rulers feared that promoting nationalism would open up the risk of questions about wider responsibilities and political representation – the antithesis of the Kingdom's absolute monarchy form of governance.

Today, however, the tables have turned and it is this religious identity that has become incompatible with the current leadership's vision. The state has carefully mobilised a new nationalism aimed at guaranteeing the rise to power of a younger leadership and bolstering an accompanying programme of radical reform. The discourse of nationalism is one of the weapons the government has deployed to reduce the influence of the religious establishment. In doing so, the new leadership has also sought to secure the support of young Saudis, who do not relate to the long-dominant religious atmosphere.

So far, mobilising nationalism in this way has proved successful for the leadership in consolidating its power. However, it has also unleashed an aggressive narrative that demands the loyalty of the population, introducing a new form of obedience that replaces the old social contract. It also gives a harder nationalist edge to Saudi actions in the tense environment of the Middle East region. Crucially, the story of the rise of the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is told in language that puts the Saudi state and leadership at its heart.

This paper sets out the ways in which this nationalism is shaping Saudi policy and actions. For Europeans seeking to follow the enormous changes under way in the Kingdom, it is critical to understand the nature of this new approach. Doing so will also enable European policymakers to understand where the state is coming from across different files. It will help them engage with Saudi Arabia on issues ranging from domestic reforms to the regional context.

State, religion, and nationalism: A new balance

Saudi Arabia is a vast country, home to a diverse population of tribal, sectarian, ethnic, and regional groups. These groups' differing identities have always posed a challenge to central government attempts to form a unified sense of national belonging. In the past, the leadership has sought to use religion to this end. In 1744 the founder of the first Saudi state, Mohammed Ibn Saud, and religious leader Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab agreed on an alliance that effectively gave the political sphere to the ruler while the latter maintained his influence over religious issues (and, subsequently, his offspring's influence too). This pact remained more or less in place until, and following, the founding of the third Saudi state in 1932. Before the oil boom that boosted Saudi Arabia to global prominence, religion remained important to the Saudi population, although various interpretations existed along regional and sectarian lines. Oil revenues brought better school systems, helping forge a more coherent religious identity that began to flourish in the 1970s and 1980s with both the rise of the Sahwa (Islamic Awakening) movement and the blessing of the state. As a result, religion moulded an overarching identity that also served to legitimise the ruling family. Islam was the identity of the population, strengthened by the importance of Saudi Arabia as the birthplace of the religion and the host of its two most holy sites.

Importantly, the religious establishment served as something of a buffer for the political establishment: it was formally responsible for some of the constraints in the country. Over time, therefore, Saudis became used to the idea that the state was in charge of the politics and the religious establishment took care of the culture, society, and religion. This shielded the state, which was able to point to the religious establishment to explain the lack of reforms.

Still, with a growing diversity of views within the Saudi population in recent decades, this stance became increasingly challenging to maintain. The Saudi leadership sought to strike a balance between conservatives on the one hand and liberal calls for social reform on the other. This also allowed it to monitor both sides while occasionally tilting in favour of one or the other. What the political establishment did provide to the population was embodied by the social contract, which acted as an implicit but powerful reference point for the responsibilities of the state to Saudi citizens, and vice versa. There was a strong economic element to this. Under the social contract, citizens accessed privileges such as subsidised water, energy, and other services, while the state levied no personal income tax on them. In exchange, citizens would be loyal to the state and refrain from requesting political representation.

In this period, the state also abstained from direct involvement in confrontations in the Middle East, maintaining a similar middle-ground stance in dealing with neighbours and foreign partners. This balancing approach further minimised domestic unrest and regional risks, ensuring stability and continuity for the Saudi state both at home and abroad. The country was an important regional player, but fairly passively so at times. Its focus was on fostering Islamic identity and emphasising the importance of Arab unity.

The new nationalism that has arisen in Saudi Arabia today did not spring from nowhere: the era of King Abdullah (2005–2015) provided the foundation on which the ideology flourished. He implemented policies that the current leadership has strengthened. For instance, in an attempt to ease some social restrictions and limit the dominant religious influence, King Abdullah made the national day a public holiday in 2005, in the face of opposition from religious figures who considered such celebration to be alien to Islamic traditions. At the same time, limited social reforms slowly progressed, which increased the power struggle between conservatives and liberals. The state still played its established role of balancing the two: it curbed some of the religious police's powers while also briefly detaining women who campaigned to lift the ban on driving. In addition, the state initiated a crackdown on reformers and critics, took up the fight against the Muslim Brotherhood, and embarked on early confrontations with Yemen and Qatar. King Abdullah's actions were an early herald of today's nationalist approach. But he was

also careful to maintain the long-standing nature of the social contract, facilitated by an increase in oil prices in the final years of his reign.

In this respect, in the wake of the Arab uprisings, [King Abdullah identified \\$37 billion in benefits to hand out](#), giving the social contract system a further boost to prevent domestic unrest. But the uprisings forced the government to re-examine its sustaining narrative: as their fallout continued across the Arab world, the state worried about the potential power of transnational Islamic networks in Syria and Iraq. A strengthened Saudi nationalism was, in part, an antidote to these new conditions. Moreover, as oil prices began to fall, the state reassessed the viability of the social contract and the country's wider economic model. As a result, since 2015, the new leadership has promoted a more overt form of nationalism to address its regional worries and to help justify economic measures designed to end the draining rentier social contract system.

One interesting aspect of the current nationalist mobilisation is its striking similarity to the state-sponsored religious mobilisation of the 1980s, which eventually backfired. In those days, the population became sandwiched between a top-down religious narrative sponsored by the official religious establishment and a grassroots mobilisation that the state allowed to flourish under the supervision of Sahwa leaders. But the process of allowing the Sahwa to gain prominence became difficult to maintain, as it created a religious counter-narrative that was more appealing to the population than the official religious establishment's benign discourse. The establishment's approach did not answer citizens' persistent and timely questions about political and cultural changes. Given that the period was difficult for Saudis because it saw the first austerity measures since the oil boom of the 1970s, the mobilisation and strengthening of religious forces may have been an attempt to prevent the population from expressing frustration – by pressing religion upon them instead.

The same cycle risks repeating itself now: Saudi Arabia is experiencing a top-down nationalist mobilisation alongside the rapid growth of grassroots nationalism, both permitted by the state during a period of austerity. This could strengthen nationalists when they encounter policies they do not approve of, even those promoted by the newly nationalist state. In a similar fashion, Sahwa leaders confronted the state when it allowed American troops to deploy on Saudi soil

following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

To understand the potential impact of these changes, it is important to comprehend the purpose of them and the form they take. The core purpose of the nationalist drive is to corral support around Mohammed bin Salman; the form it takes is a heightened demand for adherence to the Saudi state over any religious affiliation.

A young country: The purpose and form of the new nationalism

In 2015 King Salman took the throne. From that point onwards, the newly minted nationalist narrative accelerated the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, promoting him from an unknown son of the new king to the most well-known royal figure. In April 2016, support for him reached its pinnacle when he unveiled his cornerstone strategy for economic diversification, Vision 2030. This became the symbol of Mohammed bin Salman's domestic ambitions and his bid to address young people's concerns about the sustainability of an oil-dependent economy. Indeed, in implementing the vision, he has made sure to [constantly underline the importance of young people, identifying them as the real vehicle for change](#). Overall, the leadership has broken from the old social contract by emphasising that Saudi Arabia has now entered a new era in which citizens must contribute to the good of the country, as opposed to simply receiving benefits as their forebears did.

The nationalist narrative constitutes a rupture with the past and the emergence of a [“new Saudi Arabia”](#) to justify new measures and policies. It has provided the umbrella for popular moves such as stripping key responsibilities from the religious police, in April 2016. Shortly after unveiling Vision 2030, the government announced the creation of the General Entertainment Authority. This has taken on responsibility for setting up entertainment venues and events, including cinemas and concerts. All this is important to maintaining support for a new framework that actually withdraws benefits from the young: unlike their parents, some of the ways in which young Saudis now “contribute” is by accepting both the introduction of value-added tax and increased prices of services that previously received subsidies. This could yet pose a challenge to the current leadership, as it

terminates the social contract system while narrowing the space for critiquing domestic policies and providing no new political freedoms. For now, the state views the dissemination of nationalism through various outlets, including the entertainment sector, as central to rallying support from young people.

Underpinning this new nationalism is a strong emphasis on the founding father of the third Saudi state – Mohammed bin Salman’s grandfather, King Abdulaziz. This can manifest in unsubtle ways: for instance, a [short video](#) showing an old photo of King Abdulaziz fading into the image of Mohammed bin Salman circulated widely after the latter became deputy crown prince. Nationalist Twitter accounts regularly share content displaying the similarities between the two. This emphasis on comparisons between grandfather and grandson is absolutely vital because it signals: the opening of a new era, combined with a sense of continuity with the past; a reassertion of the centrality of the state and the monarchy, rather than of religion; and a justification for a new economic model, one that takes the country back to the future by encouraging a move ‘beyond oil’. In response to a journalist inquiring whether the new changes constitute the birth of the “fourth Saudi state”, Mohammed bin Salman [answered that the third Saudi state remains intact](#). And, [according to the crown prince](#), King Abdulaziz “unified the Kingdom without the help of oil”. Reaching back to the foundational past is, therefore, central to building the new present.

Some of the ways in which Mohammed bin Salman attempts to instil a sense of pride in being Saudi are highly visual. For example, he makes a point of visiting remote and picturesque sites in the Kingdom, and of making direct links to the core constituencies he is cultivating. In October last year, he drew a direct comparison between young Saudis and the Tuwaiq Mountains, an 800-kilometre escarpment that runs across the country. His intention was to demonstrate the importance of these sites to the country while encouraging the young targets of his message to aspire to resemble the [strength and resilience found in their country’s natural landscape](#). Emphasis on the country’s geography is an increasingly favoured theme: in December last year, a visit to the north-western region of Tabuk – where NEOM, a semi-autonomous futuristic city, is set to be built – were illustrated by [images](#) of Mohammed bin Salman and government ministers standing on the summit of Al-Lawz Mountain. And, this year, the crown prince launched “Al-Ula Vision” in a [grand ceremony](#) to lay the foundation for

megaprojects including a nature reserve and a resort designed by French architect Jean Nouvel. Al-Ula is another site of national importance and international interest. The undertaking not only generated funds but also directed the population to examine their potential and capabilities, all with the aim of promoting a sense of pride – and loyalty to the state and the country.

Initially, the ascent of a young leader on the succession ladder generated genuine support on a grassroots level among young Saudis who were enthusiastic about change. However, due to the state's gradual and increased influence over different platforms, this support soon dissipated. In 2017 an updated counter-terrorism law came into force; its effect was to deter public criticism of the country's new direction. This created a climate of uncertainty and apprehension, helping create room in the public sphere for the nationalist narrative to flood into.

By 2017, the nationalist narrative had become hyper-nationalist and widely arrayed, reaching an all-time high with the steady emergence of a [unified and strong group of voices pushing it via social media](#). In Saudi Arabia, an estimated 60 percent of the population is under the age of 30, so Twitter has a very high penetration rate. As a result, this platform is a vital arena for the new nationalist approach. Just like the traditional *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) through which citizens affirm their loyalty to the new king, Twitter is now an arena for the encouragement and display of nationalism: “emoji allegiance” has emerged in increasing use of the Saudi flag alongside images of the crown prince.

Some nationalist accounts operate under fake names whereas others use ones that appear to be real. [They consider themselves to be fierce defenders of the state](#) and they [usually celebrate government decisions](#). The accounts ride on the back of this rising nationalism and issue calls for action such as the prosecution of anyone they consider to have offended Saudi Arabia's leadership, culture, and values. A core part of their activity is to attack those they deem hostile to the state, including by telling other Saudis not to travel to certain countries or condemning them if criticise the Kingdom.

That said, while most of these nationalists agree with the leadership on regional policy, a division between them on domestic issues is becoming visible. Some nationalists can be viewed as former liberals who once belonged to a small but

loud faction of society that demanded social and political reforms. Now, these former liberals attack their fellow citizens who do not fall in line with their newly adopted nationalist views, contradicting the very liberal values they once advocated. Other nationalists have begun to show their conservative side by expressing the need to filter entertainment and media content to preserve Saudi culture and identity. Yet they do not use religion to justify their objections; indeed, religion and culture are now so intertwined in what it means to be Saudi that it is hard to separate the two. These developments show that nationalists are not a homogeneous group – and that they might become a challenge for the state, as they camouflage their views with nationalist concerns.

It is not only social media that has felt the reach of the new nationalism. In recent years, traditional media has also lost many of its critical voices and now mirrors the narrative found on social media, with outlets sometimes even [relying on tweets as a story instead of providing original analytical content](#). The launch of new television channels in 2018 targeted young people with several programmes that celebrate the country's national story. All this was accompanied by a narrowing of the permitted bounds of debate. Surprising as it may seem to non-Saudis, talk shows were once a platform for genuine intellectual conversation. But they no longer host guests who are willing to debate social and political views. One popular talk show, *Fi Alsamim*, used to host intellectuals and religious figures, but was taken off the air in 2015. Several of its guests eventually found themselves caught up in arrests that took place in 2017; and the programme did return in 2018 but has since only invited on guests who reaffirm the nationalist narrative. For instance, during his appearance on the show [Abdullah Al-Fawzan](#), secretary general of King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, [declared](#) that citizens who do not defend the nation and remain quiet should be labelled as “traitors”.

New forums enabling the nationalist drive are emerging all the time. Technology is an important part of this expansion. For example, the app *Kulluna Amn* (which means “we are all security [personnel]”) [encourages citizens and residents to become active law enforcers](#). One of the features of the app allows individuals to report on those they consider to have offended or criticised the state. And nationalism is present in other places, including entertainment: it has become common for artists to play nationalist music during performances. For example,

during a Formula E concert in December last year, French DJ David Guetta mixed nationalist music that celebrates King Salman.

A new Trojan horse? Domestic implications of the nationalist turn

The evolving consolidation of domestic power since 2015 required the elimination of voices that might question – or take credit for – the changes taking place in the Kingdom. As a result, the idea of the “traitor”, as deployed by Al-Fawzan, has become an increasingly important weapon in the nationalist armoury. This manifested in the reasons given for the waves of arrests that have taken place in this period of change. The authorities have labelled detained individuals as “threats to national security”. Meanwhile, online nationalist accounts rush to denounce the arrested as “embassy agents” (in particular, to target women’s rights activists) or “Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] sympathisers” (as the state now considers any criticism of it on religious grounds to be a direct challenge to its authority).

Critics targeted in the wide-ranging clampdown that began in September 2017 share similar traits: many are well-known figures who are active on social media, outspoken about domestic and regional issues, and allegedly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Sahwa. That said, this first wave of arrests did not target a homogeneous group, and intellectuals and media personalities were also caught up in it. Nor was it solely about targeting Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers: among the arrested were both pioneers of the Sahwa movement and its critics. In fact, the purpose of the first wave was to send a message to religious figures, even those within the official establishment who rarely voice open criticism of government decisions. As a consequence, religious figures have almost entirely refrained from making critical remarks, as they have realised that the state will not shy away from targeting them. In March last year, the Shura Council [called on the religious establishment](#) to remove outdated fatwas from its [website](#) – a striking testament to the new-found toothlessness of official religious scholars and their establishment.

Two weeks after the September 2017 arrests, a royal decree lifted the ban on women driving. This was a long-awaited development that constituted the

pinnacle of social reform at the time. The historic announcement won praise globally and played an important role in promoting Vision 2030 to prospective international investors. During the Future Investment Initiative (FII) conference in October 2017, Mohammed bin Salman unveiled the NEOM project, [promising](#) the population that other regions in Saudi Arabia would experience similar transformations. At the same conference, he [said](#) that “we will not waste another 30 years combating extremist thoughts”, referring to the Sahwa years and promising to return to “moderate Islam”. In light of the first wave of the arrests, such remarks were interpreted as an affirmation of the leadership’s firm stance against religious influence. Such messages have subsequently appeared elsewhere: Sahwa leader Sheikh Aidh Al-Qarni [tweeted](#) in support of NEOM and praised Mohammed bin Salman’s vision. Gradually, more scholars began using the phrase “moderate Islam” to promote social reforms without clarifying the parameters of what constitutes this new version of the religion.

The second wave of arrests targeted the wealthy elite. It took place shortly after the FII conference and just hours after a royal decree on the creation of an anti-corruption committee headed by Mohammed bin Salman. The detention of hundreds of royals and businessmen in the same venue that the conference was held in allowed the government to further consolidate its power, demonstrating its ultimate control of the country. Saudis have been frustrated at corruption for decades, so they gave these arrests a positive reception. Upon the eventual release of those held, questions about the transparency of the clampdown were raised – especially when one former detainee resumed his role as minister shortly afterwards.

Then, in May 2018, a few weeks before the driving ban for women ended, a third wave of arrests targeted women’s rights activists. A defamation campaign on social media and in newspapers following the arrests drew down strongly on the nationalist narrative. [Headlines](#) such as “there is no place for traitors among us” on the front pages of national newspapers had been a rare sight in recent Saudi history but were now unremarkable. In one newspaper, a well-known Saudi columnist and novelist [wrote a column entitled “espionage is not an opinion”](#), arguing that: “speaking to other states about your nation cannot be considered an expression of one’s views but siding against one’s nation”.

The September 2017 arrests did not send a negative message to Saudi activists, many of whom anticipated that the government would target those who might resist reforms. Nor did the second clampdown, which activists assumed was targeted at elites. Although these first two waves were indeed drastic, Saudis rationalised them as an inevitable step on the journey to change.

But the third wave of arrests signified that the state is firmly against any form of mobilisation or grassroots demands for reform. Social activism, especially that related to the position of women, began as early as the 1990s, but the state did not consider it to be a threat to its position or interests. On the contrary, for decades, the dominant religious discourse presented women's rights activists as tools used by foreign powers to break up the family unit, and they emphasised the need to maintain the role of women within the domestic sphere. However, the third wave of arrests demonstrated how the state was assuming responsibility for providing social reforms – based on its own assessment of what to do and when to take action. This was a departure from the previous leadership, which balanced competing demands, sometimes fulfilling those of activists and sometimes standing with the conservatives. Now, change comes from the top. And those at the top have made clear that grassroots activists are not to request or demand change.

The new nationalism is about the state – not about society.

The third wave of arrests became associated with Saudis who spoke to Western media outlets or foreign diplomats – and the state's rejection of such activity. This deterred citizens from speaking publicly about their views on domestic issues. One of the hashtags that began trending following the arrest of women's rights activists was “embassy agents”. This hashtag had previously appeared in 2012, when religious figures and conservatives deployed it to criticise Saudi liberals who met with foreign diplomats, [arguing that such actions constituted an attempt to Westernise Saudi society](#). The online nationalist front appears to include the same voices that belonged to conservative factions and attacked calls for greater mobilisation for women in 2012. The defamation campaign in 2018 allowed these nationalist accounts to resume their attacks on women's rights activists, but they used the nationalist term “traitor” rather than religiously inspired accusations such

as “Westernisation”.

This year, nationalist voices on social media have set about attacking the state for its seemingly lenient attitude towards discussions of social issues on television programme *The Dawood Show*, calling such debates a threat to national security. The talk show began airing in early 2019 and its first episode addressed the growing problem of Saudi women fleeing the country. Contesting such topics on air caused a backlash which resulted in suspending the program for one week. At the time it was not clear what was happening – many Saudis thought it a stunt by the state, perhaps to increase viewer numbers. In reality, it was a sign of the growing power of the nationalists. In addition, online accounts are also pushing back against entertainment events and government bodies such as the Ministry of Media, arguing that people are being stripped of their values in a manner that weakens their loyalty to the leadership.

The state has been happy to see the growth of nationalist sentiment, welcoming expressions of ultimate support for it. Similarly, following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, accusations of “treason” ran wild – even prompting one prince to [speak out against them](#), arguing that such labels are more alarming than Western media attacks on the Kingdom. Nationalism in this increasingly strident form could eventually become a Trojan horse that undermines the state; one of the ways in which it could do this is already manifest in its increased involvement in debates on political issues, which could spur wider interest in political participation. Just as in the 1980s, when the state was content to oversee a religious mobilisation that eventually threatened its own position, the nationalist explosion today risks harming the entity that created and encouraged it.

“Saudi First”: The Kingdom’s new foreign policy

Saudi Arabia’s new nationalism is also visible in the country’s increasingly assertive foreign policy. This policy aims both to further cement the new leadership’s domestic position and to advance its bid to reshape the region in accordance with perceived Saudi interests. As with the appearance on social media of repeated ‘lines to take’ to attack domestic opponents, nationalist accounts’ increasing use of the “Saudi first” hashtag emphasises the primacy of Saudi Arabia’s interests over its traditional caretaker role in relation to other Arab and Muslim nations.

Interestingly, the hashtag appears to have become more common since the election of Donald Trump as US president, suggesting some interplay between nationalisms across the globe. This new direction emphasises the state's interests over the region's. It is even opening the door for discussion on the possibility, and benefits, of normalising relations with Israel, with the latter a potential ally in countering Iran.

There is a strong foreign policy aspect to Mohammed bin Salman's own activities. The March 2015 Saudi-led invasion of Yemen boosted him, given his position as minister of defence, and prompted the now-traditional outburst of praise for him on social and traditional media. State outlets [depicted him](#) as the "architect" of the campaign and the man in charge of "difficult missions". Moreover, the name of the military campaign, "Decisive Storm", was inspired by a quote from none other than King Abdulaziz. Indeed, just one month after the war in Yemen began, Mohammed bin Salman officially joined the succession ladder with his appointment as deputy crown prince after a second royal shake-up. And Khalid bin Salman, one of his younger brothers, was one of the first to launch airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen.

At the time, prominent cleric Salman Al-Odah [tweeted](#) that the war was a "courageous and timely move". He was to become one of the most well-known figures to be caught up in the first wave of arrests, in September 2017. But this initial alignment of media, political, and religious establishments helped transform the crown prince into an emerging royal star, including on regional matters.

Many Saudis expected a short, decisive victory and did not anticipate that the campaign might continue for years. Regional tensions with Iran grew under the new leadership, especially following the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran after the execution of Nimr Al-Nimr in 2016 – a prominent Shia cleric from the Eastern Province who took part in demonstrations and mobilisation prompted by the 2011 Arab uprisings. This tension was accompanied by an intensification of the long-standing conflict with neighbouring Qatar, which was placed under an intense Saudi- and Emirati-led blockade in June 2017.

With the "Saudi First" foreign policy in full swing, these developments drove the government to pour further fuel on the nationalist fire. For instance, Awwad Al-

Awwad, minister of media at the time, [declared](#) that no person should remain neutral in their media coverage. He was referring to the coverage of the ongoing war in Yemen, but this rhetoric quickly became common currency for the multiple regional and international issues the Kingdom found itself drawn into. Social media accounts now frequently publish hashtags condemning “neutrality”. This nationalist narrative is more than just a celebration of domestic reforms and regional assertiveness – it has also increasingly become an inorganic, top-down narrative laden with hostile tendencies and scepticism directed at regional actors and other international opponents. It aims to embed the nationalist narrative at the grassroots level by urging citizens to voice their support for these top-level aims.

This army of online outriders was particularly active after the death of Khashoggi. This event put Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Yemen under the spotlight internationally. At home, denying responsibility for his disappearance to the Saudi public was initially easy, achieved by redirecting blame to regional rivals, with the message dutifully spread on the internet. But the population’s lingering doubts over state involvement, growing international pressure, and threats of economic sanctions sparked aggressive pushback. This prompted the nationalist narrative to become even more hostile. Traditional media outlets played a role in the escalation by printing on their first pages “don’t test our patience” in both Arabic and English, [arguing](#) that Saudi Arabia would retaliate against threats of economic sanctions and political pressure.

The recently increased jingoism often expresses hostility to the West, even though Saudi Arabia is dependent on Western investors and states for its economic diversification programme, trade, and military capabilities. Any Western criticism of Saudi Arabia’s domestic and regional policies is met with an aggressive response, as demonstrated by the diplomatic spat with Germany that began in 2017. When Germany’s then minister of foreign affairs, Sigmar Gabriel, described Saudi Arabia’s regional policies as “adventurism”, [Riyadh reacted by freezing out German companies operating in the Kingdom and withdrawing its ambassador to Berlin](#). In 2018 Gabriel’s successor, Heiko Maas, announced during the United Nations General Assembly in New York that Germany regretted the misunderstanding between the two nations: cue trending hashtags celebrating his statement as online nationalists took this as evidence of Saudi Arabia’s ability to bring Germany

to its knees.

The purpose of that spat was to show the world Saudi Arabia's intolerance of criticism of its regional policies. The Saudi government is also willing to push back internationally on any external interference in its domestic issues. In August 2018, the Canadian embassy in Riyadh tweeted a call in Arabic urging Saudi Arabia to release women's rights activists. The Kingdom retaliated, expelling the Canadian ambassador, calling Saudi students home from Canadian universities, stopping flights between the countries, and freezing trade. At home, the nationalist narrative celebrated the Kingdom's fast and resolute action. Adel Al-Jubeir, former Saudi foreign minister and current minister of state for foreign affairs, declared that Saudi Arabia was not to be treated as a "banana republic". The episode sent a message to other nations, with Canadian interests becoming [collateral damage](#) in this.

In the international arena as at home, the state and its media outriders increasingly bear down on criticism, with nationalist tools providing the means to do so. For Saudis, regional escalation and diplomatic spats are a reaffirmation of the demands of the new domestic political system – albeit with the state's expectations extending beyond them to foreign actors and partners as well.

Conclusion

The current situation in Saudi Arabia poses challenges for Europe, but it presents opportunities too. Saudi Arabia is taking significant steps to implement its plans to diversify the economy and change society. The country is opening up more rapidly than it has under any previous leadership. Young people are its key vehicle and nationalism its driver. All this has allowed for greater social relaxation, which is important for Saudi Arabia's stability and prosperity in the coming years, given its youthful population. The current leadership certainly appears to be serious about changing the country's economic structure: it has taken significant steps towards achieving its goals, and Vision 2030 will likely prove to be a transformative project.

Nationalism today is a means to an end; it unites the population around the new leadership creates legitimacy for significant domestic reforms and regional confrontations that, in turn, further consolidate the power of the new system. But

in its new, aggressive guise, the nationalist approach may not be sustainable in the long run, especially if the leadership fails to fulfil its economic promises. The religious establishment has lost much of its credibility, in part due to the actions of the state. But, in the absence of the old religious establishment buffer, the state will now be more accountable for its credibility, and potentially much more exposed. As the nationalism it unleashed takes on an increasingly hyper-nationalist tone and form, the state will need to find ways to ensure that no one uses its weapon of choice against it.

It is also clear that the new nationalist approach will not translate into political freedom or increased space for intellectual debate. Nor will it make Saudi Arabia an easier partner to work with internationally. The clampdowns of the last few years reveal a lack of tolerance for domestic activism that has now become normalised; and a fourth wave of arrests, which took place in April this year, was only briefly covered by international news outlets. Meanwhile, the escalating nationalist narrative celebrates the Kingdom's might and influence in a way that risks exacerbating tensions with regional rivals and, at times, deepening fault-lines with Western allies.

The combination of these challenges and opportunities creates considerable uncertainty and dilemmas for European states as they think through the nature of their engagement with the Kingdom and their response to the ideology championed by the new Saudi leadership. But Europeans should not see the uncertainty of the situation as an obstacle. They must instead seek to become even more active partners with the Kingdom, albeit cautiously so, working around the new reality of Saudi Arabia's policies. The country's national project needs to succeed in its transformational aspirations, while also moderating its worst tendencies. This is a dual track that Europe can play an active role in supporting. Above all, understanding the new nationalism will provide Europeans with the right lens for considering how best to engage with Saudi Arabia.

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