

MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN'S SAUDI ARABIA: A CLOSER LOOK



March 2018

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his father, King Salman, have pursued some important modernization measures since 2015:

Women were **permitted** to attend sporting events as of January 2018 and will be legally **allowed** to drive beginning in June 2018.



The religious police have been **stripped** of their authority to conduct street surveillance and arrests, but can continue arrests based on online surveillance.



Commercial movie theaters are again **permitted**, reversing a 35-year ban.



The Crown Prince announced the **Vision 2030** plan, which aims to diversify the Kingdom's economy and modernize sectors including infrastructure, health, education, and tourism.

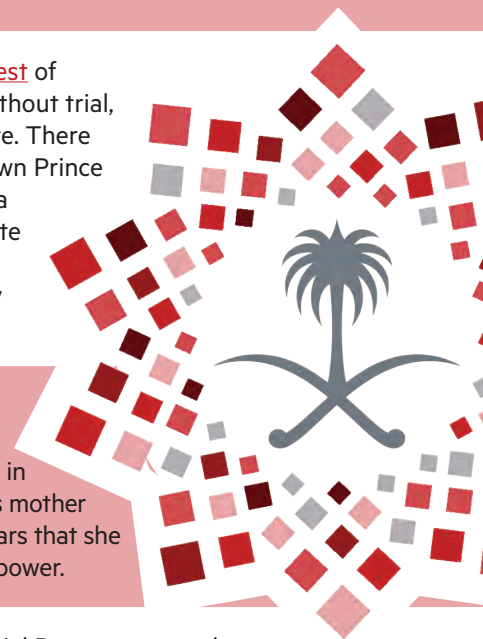
However, there have also been numerous troubling developments since Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince in June 2017:

- **Execution of dissidents and political opponents** – Soon after Mohammed bin Salman was named Crown Prince, many dissidents were **executed**, including for offenses such as attending demonstrations and anti-government protests. Shi'a Muslims have been especially **targeted**, including by executions and death **sentences**.

- **"Anti-corruption" shakedowns** – In November 2017, Mohammed bin Salman ordered the **arrest** of dozens of members of the royal family and Saudi elite, froze their assets, and **detained** them without trial, refusing to release them until they handed over personal assets to the state. There are credible **reports** of torture and even death during what the Crown Prince calls an "anti-corruption campaign," but which critics describe as a brutal extrajudicial shakedown of wealth and inheritance. Despite Mohammed bin Salman's anti-corruption rhetoric, journalist **Saleh al-Shehi** was **sentenced** to five years in prison in February 2018 for describing corruption within the royal court.

- **Unprecedented steps to consolidate power** – The former crown prince and interior minister, U.S. ally Mohammed bin Nayef, was placed under **house arrest** and removed of both titles in June 2017. Mohammed bin Salman also has reportedly **hidden** his mother from her husband King Salman for more than two years out of fears that she could use her influence to prevent the Crown Prince's seizure of power.

- **Persecution of peaceful activists** – Five UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights have **criticized** the Saudi government for **carrying out** a "wave of arrests" beginning in September 2017 of "more than 60 prominent religious figures, writers, **journalists**, academics and civic **activists**," adding to the many others already imprisoned. In addition, a November 2017 **terrorism law** defines terrorism so broadly that it includes referring to the king or the crown prince in a manner that "brings religion or justice into disrepute."



In January 2018, human rights activists and co-founders of the Union for Human Rights **Mohammed al-Otaibi** and **Abdullah al-Attawi** have been **sentenced** to 14 and seven years in prison, respectively, for "forming an unlicensed organization." Both were tried in the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC), which tries terrorism cases.

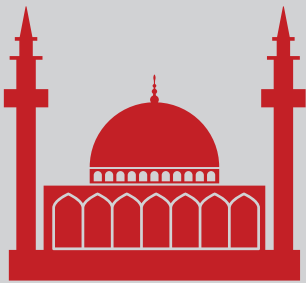


Community activist **Issa al-Nukhaifi** was **sentenced** in February 2018 to six years in prison and a six-year travel ban on **charges** of insulting the authorities and inciting opposition to the state under the Anti-Cyber Crimes Law. Al-Nukhaifi tweeted his opposition to the war in Yemen and advocated for the release of people associated with banned NGOs. He was tried by the SCC.

- **An absolute monarchy ruled by the al Saud family.** Rulers are male heirs of Abdulaziz bin Saud and **derive** their authority “from the Book of God and the Sunna,” not from the people. Elections are held only at the local level, for municipal bodies with almost no authority.

- **Among the nine most politically repressive governments in the world.** Political rights and civil liberties have **decreased** as a result of the government’s moves to narrow the already-minuscule political space and its efforts to suppress members of the Shi’a minority.

- **One of three countries (along with China and Iran) carrying out the most executions, including for nonviolent offenses.** Crimes punishable by death—primarily through public beheadings or stoning—**include** blasphemy; atheism; sexual misconduct; homosexuality; the possession, use, or sale of alcohol/drugs; as well as terrorism, which is defined vaguely to include nonviolent political criticism and dissent.



- **Marked by strict religious intolerance.** It is **illegal** to “cast doubt on the fundamentals of Islam” and to openly practice non-Islamic religions, including for the roughly 10 million foreign residents in the Kingdom, many of whom follow other religions. Shi’a Muslims are subjected to severe discrimination and abuse, such as in August 2017 when authorities **demolished** much of Awamiya, a city that is home to 30,000 Shi’a residents.

- **The only country requiring women to live under supervision of a male guardian.** Despite a loosening of guardianship laws in February 2018, the Saudi state still requires a woman to **obtain** permission from her guardian to travel, marry, and even access some medical, legal, and residential services. Women are barred from job sectors deemed too hazardous, such as construction and energy.

Women who have tried to flee repressive circumstances have been detained and forcibly returned to their families.

Activist **Maryam al-Otaibi** was **detained** for more than 100 days in 2017 after her family reported her to authorities for disobedience because she was not at home. She was eventually released based on a lack of evidence.

Dina Ali Lasloom tried to **escape** a forced marriage in April 2017, but was stopped at the airport in Manila and forcibly returned to Saudi Arabia for violating guardianship laws. She has not been seen or heard from since, and authorities will not say if she is in jail or back with her family, who she told witnesses at the airport would kill her if she was returned.

