

*To mark the approaching first year anniversary of King Salman's governance of Saudi Arabia, I have decided to write a series of shorter pieces that will examine topics related to recent developments in the Kingdom and throughout the Middle East, and particularly how the Saudi leadership team is confronting these challenges. The intention of the series is not to be exhaustive on any topic – the issues are too complex to cover in short essays – but instead to provide information, observation, and critique on the dynamic, sometimes frustrating, events and coverage of the region. In this first paper, I discuss general Saudi perceptions of the Kingdom's current status, both domestically and on the international stage, and conclude that Saudi Arabia is, for the most part, misunderstood and misjudged by allies and critics alike. At several instances throughout this brief editorial I reference issues, topics, and events that will be the subject of future papers, and I welcome suggestions to further develop or explain any points that merit further attention.*

### **Forging a New Path, but Still Seeking Companions**

Saudi Arabia on the First Anniversary of King Salman's Reign

#### *Looking Back, Looking Forward*

If asked one year ago what the greatest challenges facing Saudi Arabia in the beginning of 2016 would be, few would have foreseen the current landscape. Indeed, across the Middle East, and I believe for the Kingdom in particular, 2015 was a watershed year, with uncertainty and change being the dominant themes. An international deal with Iran over its nuclear program and ambitions has come to fruition. ISIS (Daesh) has expanded the reach of its terror across the globe, and the market for oil has plunged, resulting in a decline that threatens economies around the world. In Saudi Arabia, the beginning of the Western year (January 2015) was marked by the arrival of a new leader, King Salman, who made it clear from the beginning that he would not be satisfied with the status quo and who installed a leadership team determined to forge a new path for the country. Expectations both at home and abroad were great, and there can be no doubt that the King and his team were determined to establish their own identity, characterized by an activist, assertive, and interventionist foreign policy, and a domestic policy focused in internal security and state sovereignty.

Under King Salman, Saudi Arabia quickly exhibited all the qualities of a mature and confident nation, ready to take action against threats when necessary and to express its opinion and exert its influence freely according to its own best interest. Indeed, with the arrival of King Salman and his refreshingly “young” government, Saudi Arabia in many respects has “grown up” over the past year, is finally ready to exercise its own independence and, for better or worse, fashion its own foreign and domestic policies in response to what the leadership team believes

are the overriding priorities of the time. This of course suggests that Saudi Arabia is at a turning point, and that the exigencies of the times have led the government to act in ways that several years ago may have been unthinkable. As a result, Saudi Arabia over the past twelve-months has undergone a silent revolution of sorts, with the Kingdom positioning itself to remain a key player in the international arena for the decades to come, *with or without oil*. Thus, while it is still too early to know what the King Salman era will look like, or what his legacy will be, if his first year in office is any indication, his rule as Saudi Arabia's seventh monarch has the potential to be profound and very far-reaching. Those of us who are witnessing these changes from within the Kingdom are both excited and unnerved, but for the most part we are in agreement that these are the right steps for our country's future, as well as our own individual security and prosperity. The problem, however, is that the majority of the Western world seems determined to disagree, and Saudi Arabia continues to garner negative attention that ranges from mild censure to outright denunciation. In [Western](#) popular opinion, the Kingdom can do no right.

But just what has Saudi Arabia done to deserve the general international condemnation that it continues to receive on an almost daily basis? The list at times feels endless, with some criticisms always rising to the forefront and others emerging according to the mood of the day. It is alleged that the Kingdom is both the lifeblood of ISIS/Daesh and a supporter of its ideology of terror and death. Saudi Arabia is accused of oppressing Shiites, stoking hostilities against Iran, committing war crimes in Yemen, and using its influence to destabilize the region. Saudis ignore Syrian refugees, deliberately bomb civilians, and neglect the millions of pilgrims who come each year to practice the most holy *Hajj*. Saudis like to execute and exclude, and export terror around the globe. Name a crime, and Saudis are most likely guilty of commission, omission, or encouragement. And when all else fails, critics never tire of pointing to the fact that women are "forbidden" to drive, which, without any further effort to explore the issue, is used as proof positive that life for women in Saudi Arabia is miserable. The egregiousness of this crime against Saudi women cannot be understated, it seems, and the Saudi leadership is wholly to blame. Indeed, although more women than men attend college in Saudi Arabia, and although thousands of Saudi teens – both male and female – travel freely to the United States each year to study, the fact that women are not allowed to sit behind the wheel in Riyadh traffic for hours per day seems to trump all discussion. As portrayed by the Western media, and even several

commentators from the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is backwards, barbaric and bellicose; the Kingdom is, it would seem, a country ripe to fail for all the right reasons.

On the ground in Riyadh, however, the reality is different and far less bleak among the educated and political elite, as well as the Saudi working class and Saudi youth. Without a doubt, the Kingdom now faces a number of unforeseen and dangerous pressures: oil is cheap and will likely remain so for years to come, thus straining the country's ambitious plans for development and generous social welfare system; unemployment among Saudis remains high and the need for private sector job growth is great; Iran is emboldened by its nuclear deal and eager to exert its influence in areas of instability; and [ISIS](#) terrorists have targeted the Kingdom as their ultimate prize in their effort to exert their radical, distorted interpretation of Islam throughout the Muslim world. All Saudis are aware of these challenges facing our country, but we also realize that there are no easy solutions and that sacrifices will have to be made in order to respond to the demands of this new economic and political environment. We are, however, confident that the government is not standing idly by as these events unfold, nor is the Kingdom relying solely upon its allies to provide direction and support in these times of uncertainty and increasing threats. Instead, King Salman and his leadership team have committed the country to a path that relies not only on old allies and entrenched policies (both domestic and foreign), but also on opportunities for new alliances, expressions of independence, and an adherence to the social and cultural values that have made our country strong. Many of these policies are untested and uncertain, and some may even fail, but the fact that the new government is willing to think out of the box and to take risks has earned the respect of those who appreciate the strength of social and political forces that are resistant to change in the Kingdom. For the vast majority of Saudis, then, the future is uncertain, but not dire, and radical, violent Islam is as unappealing today as it was a year ago. As we meet in shopping malls and share over social media, we are confident that change will come, on our *own* terms, and that the Kingdom will continue lead the Muslim world in the decades to come.

This conflict between [foreign](#) perceptions of life in Saudi Arabia and the realities for those actually living in the country reveals that the Kingdom suffers from an image problem, and that efforts need to be made both internally and externally to set the record straight. Saudi Arabia is not a country without fault – many of our traditions and laws fail to live up to Western standards – but we are no more imperfect than our peers and many other countries eager to

condemn us. As leaders of the Islamic world, Saudis face a unique set of duties and pressures, and it is expected that we will be criticized for policies and views that are a product of this role; we realize that our position is such that we are, and should be, held to a high standard. At the same time, the Saudi government has a duty to protect the interests of its own people and to set an agenda that it believes keeps them secure and provides opportunity. King Salman and his leadership team are committed to meeting this challenge, which they know will require change, and in the past year they have exhibited a level of energy and determination that has been welcomed throughout the country. Anxious but excited for the future, the majority of Saudis are ready to move forward in the years to come. The world's image of the Kingdom, however, is out of focus, and it is both our duty and world's to make the image right.

### *Why Saudi-U.S. Ties Still Make Sense*

Much has been written lately about the changing dynamic in U.S.–Saudi relations, and by and large the prognosis has not been good. Indeed, if one were to believe the mainstream Western media, it would appear that Saudi Arabia has given up on America and, to an equal extent, the U.S. is at best befuddled by, and more likely exasperated with, the new Saudi regime. Once again, a decades old friendship is being tested. Many appear to believe that relations are so strained and our interests are so divergent that the decades-old U.S.- Saudi alliance cannot recover. On both sides of the Atlantic, commentators are asking, is this the moment of truth?

As a Saudi who recently spent four years as an undergraduate student at an American university and now works within the government, I am often tempted to ask the same question, largely due to the misconceptions about the Kingdom outlined above, which have led to a lot of undeserved criticism. Even for Saudis, who are accustomed to viewing America as an ally and Americans as friends, it seems increasingly easy to wonder whether this close relationship is worth trying to maintain. After all, American foreign policy in the region created a number of challenges for Saudi Arabia over the past year, and at times it has appeared that the U.S. is *tolerating* rather than *supporting* the Kingdom's efforts maintain a leadership role in the region and to provide for its own security. These perceived slights make it easy to be pessimistic and to believe that our differences are simply too great to bridge amidst increasingly shifting sands. Having spent a number of months back home and after visiting the U.S. as part of King Salman's official delegation during his visit last July, however, I know that this gloomy diagnosis for U.S.- Saudi relations is both unwise and uncalled for, and that Saudi Arabia remains dedicated and

determined to continue its friendship with America. Indeed, far from being on its last legs, our relationship has the potential to grow only stronger as members of my generation – the millions of educated Saudis who are currently under 30 – enter the picture. We are Saudi Arabia's future, so it's worth learning who we are, what we believe, and why our vision for the Middle East matters.

First and foremost, it's important to understand that younger Saudis like me don't view America as an enemy of Islam, nor do we seek a future where our will or beliefs triumph over the freedom and values of others. We are, to say the least, just as appalled and threatened by the atrocities of ISIS (Daesh) as Westerners are, and we lament the fact that so much of the Middle East is in turmoil. Like our counterparts around the globe, we like technology, love our phones, and our addiction to social media is just as strong. We live in a desert Kingdom that is fueled by a petro-economy and the home to one of the world's largest religions. As we enter adulthood, we want opportunities to work and contribute to society, access to healthcare and housing, and a safe environment where we can start and raise families of our own. If all that sounds familiar, then I have succeeded in making my point. Today's young Saudis are difficult to distinguish from their Western counterparts, and that's why we are so excited about what is happening at home, despite the fact that our country is facing unprecedented challenges and pressures. We know we are imperfect. We know that some of what we have taken for granted is no longer guaranteed and that more will be expected of us. The demands of the time call for a new direction, which is precisely what our new leadership is trying to achieve. It's important to remember, however, that a boat turned too quickly is prone to capsize, so the changes that need to occur cannot happen all at once. Indeed, if Saudi Arabia is to steer a new course, most of us agree that it's far better to change by degrees to avoid sinking the ship.

But what does this mean for U.S.-Saudi relations? For the thousands of young people like myself who received at least part of our education in America, a world without close ties between our two countries is unacceptable, no matter how divergent some of our views and values. We know that our country has changed over the past year and will continue to change in the future, and we are encouraged by the boldness of the government's new, young leadership team. We are also encouraged by the fact that King Salman made a visit to Washington one of his first official trips abroad, which, along with John Kerry's continued interest in and support of the Kingdom's initiatives, suggests that ties remain between our countries. At the same time,

however, it is tempting to consider America's "disenchantment" with the Middle East as a whole over the past several years as a signal that U.S. engagement with the region is waning. This, coupled with the near continuous onslaught of negative coverage on the Kingdom, is discouraging. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's willingness to partner with America – economically, militarily, and politically – is unlikely to diminish as my generation moves to the forefront. In fact, the contrary is almost certain to occur. As allies, we share many common objectives: the desire to check Iranian aggression, the determination to end the civil war in Syria through the removal of Bashar al-Assad, the goal of finding a viable resolution to the plight of Palestinians, and, most pressingly, the will to defeat terrorism in our region and around the world. These are the aims of the Kingdom and of my generation. Our time is coming, we know, and we would prefer not to go it alone; now more than ever before, the moment is right to strengthen the U.S.-Saudi relationship.