

Why America Must Go All-In on Saudi Arabia's High-Stakes Transformation

By Raphael Benaroya

The “Vision 2030” plan of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is a bold, ambitious, courageous transformation of Saudi government, business, and culture. The plan represents a revolutionary change in Saudi Arabia's national posture, foreign relations, economics, social values, and way of life—and could serve as a model for Islamic societies across the globe. As the U.S grapples with rising Russian and Chinese influence in the region and Iran's persistent aggression and support of rogue actors, supporting MBS and Vision 2030 is more than just wise for America; it is a strategic necessity. The U.S. must take this opportunity to help transform the Middle East and the world.

The Saudi's \$650 billion Public Investment Fund aims to turn the Kingdom into a global financial hub (including the booming Tadawul stock exchange) and injecting capital into diverse industries—from alternative energy, mining, logistics, and advanced manufacturing to sports and tourism. In this leading petrostate, oil now contributes less than half of Gross Domestic Product. Across this wealthy society, unemployment has dropped from 20% to just 7%. And even more remarkable, for a country that has strictly limited the role of women under ultraconservative Wahhabi law, women now account for 36% of the Saudi workforce, and men and women can work side-by-side. Women can now also drive legally, get an education, and dress more liberally in public than they were permitted under strict Wahhabism.

In just eight years, MBS has made remarkable progress in modernizing and liberalizing daily Saudi life. This profound cultural shift is broadly visible in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, where art festivals, concerts, and restaurants are thriving. During a recent visit to Riyadh, a senior U.S. official stated that “the reforms have made Saudi Arabia more energetic and a happier place.” These aren't merely cosmetic changes—they are deep, structural shifts moving Saudi society closer to free-world values in business and personal opportunity.

The good news is that MBS's reforms are popular in the Kingdom. Some 90% of all Saudis approve of Vision 2030, with the strongest support coming from the youngest generations, a critical demographic. Approximately 63% of the Saudi population is under age 30.

But MBS's courageous plan is not without political, social, and economic risks.

The Saudi reforms may ruffle the feathers of conservative Islamic clergy, who see the changes as a submission to Western culture. And businessmen who previously profited from birthright privileges are wary of the shifting allocation of national resources, based on meritocracy.

The economic ambitions of Vision 2030 also face complications. Trying to build up Riyadh as the Middle East's financial center, surpassing the established markets in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, will be challenging. And some economic development projects—most notably the NEOM “city of the future” megaproject—have suffered delays and cost overruns and caused concern among investors. Pessimists point to similar megaprojects in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which did not meet their goals, as cautionary tales. If an ambitious project like NEOM—an iconic symbol of the Saudi transformation—suffers further setbacks, it could be interpreted as a failure of the entire reform plan. But these skeptics should keep in mind that Qatar and the UAE have become shining economic stars in the region.

Israel's wars against Iran and its proxies also present precarious political challenges for MBS. On one hand, Israel has done the region a tremendous favor by gutting Iran's power and influence—effectively redrawing the map of the Middle East. This gives Saudi Arabia a unique opportunity to assert itself even more as a bastion of stability, cooperation, and peace in the region. The ground might even be laid for the Saudis, at some point, to forge a formal relationship with Israel.

On the other hand, Israel's ascendance as the Middle East's military superpower may concern Arab countries, and the Palestinian dilemma looms over any Saudi thoughts of normalizing relations with Israel. MBS must tread carefully to avoid turning other Muslim nations and his domestic constituencies—particularly Saudi youth—against him.

But all these challenges faced by Vision 2030 make it even more important for the U.S. to support MBS's ambitions. Vision 2030 represents an extraordinary chance for the U.S. to help MBS transform a deeply conservative, tribal, Islamist culture into a more open, dynamic, progressive, peaceful society.

The U.S. must recognize that MBS's push for modernization dovetails with American interests and mirrors what we ask of our closest allies: opening markets, tempering ideological extremism, empowering women, building a stable middle class, opening or expanding markets for U.S. products and services, and attracting investments in the U.S.

MBS also offers the U.S. an invaluable partnership in reshaping the global order. As Iran's hegemonic aspirations evaporate, Saudi Arabia is uniquely positioned to foster stable alliances and peace in the Middle East—including a path for a resolution to the Palestinian issue. At the junction of Asia and Africa, the Kingdom can also promote U.S. interests and limit Russian and Chinese influence in this geopolitically strategic region. And as a religious center of Islam, Saudi Arabia can extend its new, progressive influence across the entire Muslim world.

Washington cannot afford to be a passive observer. The stakes are too high, and the potential benefits are too great. So what strategy should the U.S. execute to support MBS and Saudi Arabia?

1. Assert a clear, strong security commitment to the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. The Saudis still face threats from Iran and the Houthis that should not be taken lightly. Like Israel, the Kingdom needs advanced missile defense infrastructure and other military capabilities, so the U.S. should expand arms sales to the Saudis. Even more, the U.S. must make greater assurances, in both words and actions, that it will be Saudi Arabia's trusted security partner. The Saudis and other states in the region have concerns about how firm the U.S. commitment to regional security is, due to America's past force reductions and lack of response to past hostile actions by Iran and its proxies. The U.S. needs to lead an integrated, collaborative security initiative among Middle Eastern nations to deter and defend against common risks. The U.S. should also recognize the Saudis' central, strategic role in the region—and throughout the Islamic world—and work with the Kingdom to limit Chinese and Russian influence, locally and globally.

2. Encourage and lead other nations in supporting MBS across every aspect of Vision 2020's reforms, especially in trade and investments. President Trump already set the tone during his May 2017 visit to the Kingdom, announcing mutual investments valued at \$600 billion.

3. Tie investments to governance, not ideology. U.S. private investment should flow across all sectors of the Saudi economy—from infrastructure and energy to manufacturing and tourism—with clear benchmarks for transparency in corporate governance, under the rule of law, with accountability. But while such investments should reflect American practices and values, they should not depend wholly on them. Saudi Arabia is making strides, and targeted support will help accelerate the process.

4. Support Saudi Arabia through social and cultural diplomacy. Americans need to see what Saudi Arabia is becoming—not what it was. The U.S. needs more public diplomacy, business delegations, and even student exchange programs to reshape perceptions of the Saudis and promote goodwill. The U.S. must also be patient, letting Saudi social reforms—including in human rights—mature at their own pace, without nagging about American values. The Kingdom still has limited freedoms. Dissenters cannot speak openly against the government, for example, and women are still barred from certain careers, but some deeply ingrained cultural attributes cannot change overnight.

5. Encourage regional stability through Saudi strength. From the Red Sea to Syria, Saudi Arabia is increasingly the Middle East's stabilizing anchor. MBS has scaled back foreign interventions and focused on pragmatic diplomacy, including quiet coordination with Israel, support for Syria's new government, and a dialogue with Iran. A stable, modernized Saudi Arabia acts as a wall against Iranian expansionism and radical Islam.

6. Back Israeli-Saudi normalization. A normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia would greatly enhance stability in the Middle East and represent a historic triumph for U.S. diplomacy. To that end, the U.S. must help Israel articulate a credible post-Gaza strategy. Israel must be sensitive to

Riyadh's demand for a path to a Palestinian state, and the U.S should provide Riyadh with the security assurances it seeks as a precondition for peace.

Critics might argue that MBS is authoritarian, and he is. But so are other leaders with whom the U.S. has partnered to serve its national interests. And, frankly, MBS *needs* to be an authoritarian to enable him to implement his reforms. Iran, China, and Russia are working—often in tandem—to upend the U.S.-led global order. Supporting a reform-minded Saudi Arabia is not just smart—it's essential. America needs to back leaders like MBS who challenge entrenched norms in pursuit of liberty, prosperity, and peace.

MBS's strategy is bold and courageous, with a narrow margin for error. But history rewards the bold, and MBS's success will reshape not just Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, but also the entire world. Betting on MBS and Vision 2030 has high risks and high-rewards, but it's a bet America must place.

Let's not miss the moment.

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