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# ULAMA AND VISION 2030: SAUDI ARABIA GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGIES TO NAVIGATE A SUCCESSFUL ECONOMIC REFORM

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## ABSTRAK

*Visi 2030 Arab Saudi berupaya mendiversifikasi ekonominya yang bergantung pada minyak, tetapi skeptisisme tetap ada karena kegagalan reformasi masa lalu, terutama dalam kebijakan fiskal dan pasar tenaga kerja. Ulama, sebagai tokoh kunci dalam "kontrak sosial" Saudi, memainkan peran penting dalam melegitimasi kebijakan pemerintah, terutama pada masalah sosial dan agama. Namun, reformasi yang mendorong pertumbuhan sektor swasta dan liberalisasi sosial telah menimbulkan kekhawatiran di antara para ulama konservatif atas potensi ancaman terhadap nilai-nilai Islam. Untuk mengatasi hal ini, pemerintah di bawah kepemimpinan Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) menggunakan strategi memisahkan narasi ekonomi dan agama sambil menggunakan pendekatan "wortel dan tongkat" untuk mengelola oposisi klerikal. Pendekatan ini sejalan dengan teori realisme, yang menekankan kekuatan ekonomi untuk stabilitas nasional, dan teori legitimasi Weber, menyoroti peran penting dukungan ulama. Tanpa dukungan ulama sebagai otoritas keagamaan, perlawanan masyarakat dapat merusak reformasi Visi 2030.*
**Kata kunci:** *ulama, Arab Saudi, modernisasi, Visi 2030, reformasi ekonomi*

## ABSTRACT

*Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 seeks to diversify its oil-dependent economy, but scepticism persists due to past reform failures, particularly in fiscal policy and labour markets. Ulama, as key figures in the Saudi "social contract," play a vital role in legitimising government policies, especially on social and religious matters. However, reforms promoting private sector growth and social liberalisation have raised concerns among conservative ulama over potential threats to Islamic values. To address this, the government under Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) employs a strategy of separating economic and religious narratives while using a "carrot and stick" approach to manage ulama opposition. This approach aligns with realism theory, emphasising economic power for national stability, and Weber's legitimacy theory, highlighting the critical role of ulama support. Without the support of religious elites (ulama), societal resistance could undermine Vision 2030's reforms.*
**Keywords:** *ulama, Saudi Arabia, modernisation, Vision 2030, economic reform*

## *INTRODUCTION*

In the summer of 2014, Saudi Arabia encountered one of its most significant economic challenges in modern history due to a sharp decline in global oil prices (Nuruzzaman, 2018). This situation highlighted a pressing issue for both policymakers and citizens: the nation's heavy reliance on oil as a primary economic driver is unsustainable in the long term. Recognising the need for change, King Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al-Saud, who assumed the throne in 2015, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud (widely known as MBS) initiated an ambitious economic and social reform agenda. This plan, known as Vision 2030, was launched in 2016 to strategically reduce Saudi Arabia's dependency on oil and pave the way for a more diversified and resilient economy (Grand & Wolff, 2020) by developing public service sectors, including health, education, infrastructure, relations and tourism that will diversify the economy (Nurhaliza, 2024). Unlike similar diversification efforts in other GCC countries, Vision 2030 combines economic reform with ambitious social transformation, such as curtailing the powers of religious institutions, promoting entertainment, and empowering women in the workforce. While the UAE emphasises market liberalism and global branding, Saudi Arabia's approach is more centralised, with the state directly leading mega-projects like NEOM and reshaping the socio-religious landscape to secure domestic legitimacy (Hertog, 2021). This ambitious blueprint led by MBS is intended to reform Saudi Arabia's economic landscape by encouraging innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development (Nurunnabi, 2020, in Nurhaliza, 2024).

Alongside economic reforms, rapid social transformation has become necessary since the launch of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (Winarni & Permana, 2022). Saudi Arabia, a country previously known for banning women from driving and having religious police who enforce dress codes and monitor public morality, has undergone significant changes. The music and entertainment industry in the country has rapidly expanded, with an increasing number of concerts and social events being held regularly to attract large audiences. This liberalisation effort has been widely publicised both within and outside of Saudi Arabia. A few years ago, it was hard to imagine that these changes would occur in Saudi Arabia (Ismail, 2023). The alliance between the Al-Saud family and the Wahhabi ulama family is well-known for its significant role in providing religious legitimacy to the ruling family. This partnership has utilised religion as both a tool of power and a source of legitimacy, particularly through organisations such as the religious police and Sharia courts (Stenslie, 2018) to ensure that political decisions remain within the control

of the royal family, even as they confront challenges presented by ulama, this reflects a continued reliance on religious authority for political legitimacy (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019).

Some perceive MBS as a religious reformer who can transition conservative Saudi Arabia into a more moderate country. However, the historical relationship between the Al-Saud family and religious institutions demonstrates a pattern of leveraging religious authority to uphold political control rather than fostering genuine reform (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019). The new social contract in the Kingdom requires the endorsement of a prominent religious institution, which serves as a fundamental pillar of authority within Saudi Arabia's conservative societal framework (Kéchichian, 2019). The Al-Saud family possesses the capacity to influence senior ulama to endorse their decisions; however, they strategically refrain from imposing their authority directly on religious institutions. Rather, they employ a more nuanced approach that involves persuading ulama, thereby encouraging them to accept and advocate for their decisions. This method reflects a preference for indirect influence over overt control within the religious sphere (Kéchichian, 1986).

The role of ulama, integral to Saudi Arabia's "social contract," is pivotal in facilitating the successful implementation of economic reforms outlined in Vision 2030. Their influence on societal norms and values significantly shapes public acceptance and support for these reforms, thereby affecting the overall effectiveness of the national developmental strategy. Although the main goal of Vision 2030 seeks to reduce dependence on oil and expand the private sector, conservative ulama often view some aspects of modernisation, especially those related to social liberalisation, as a threat to Islamic values (Kinninmont, 2017).

The role of ulama as custodians of conservative values in Saudi society is recognised as significant; however, many studies tend only to emphasise the economic dimensions and modernisation initiatives of Vision 2030. Yet, the religious and economic reforms are deeply intertwined. Vision 2030's strategy to reduce oil dependency entails a broader transformation of Saudi society, including shifts in religious authority (Kinninmont, 2017). As the state promotes a model of "moderate Islam" compatible with global economic engagement, it has sought to reconfigure the role of the ulama. Institutions that once exercised wide moral and social influence, such as the religious police, have seen their powers curtailed. As Steffen Hertog (2021) observes, "traditional elites like tribal leaders, ulama and urban notables have been similarly co-opted or side-

lined by the Saudi rentier state through targeted patronage" (p. 13–14). This indicates that, rather than being eliminated, the religious establishment was strategically absorbed into the state structure to ensure regime stability and control over religious discourse, especially amid economic restructuring under Vision 2030 (Hertog, 2021).

Consequently, the economic reform agenda not only alters material conditions but also, indirectly, challenges the traditional religious sector by centralising interpretive authority under state control and redefining the public role of religion in post-oil Saudi Arabia. While several articles assert that the Saudi government employs various persuasive strategies to secure the support of ulama, there is a lack of comprehensive analysis regarding the specific navigational efforts implemented, their efficacy, and the long-term ramifications of these efforts on the ulama community in relation to the sustainability of the reforms. This study explores how ulama can contribute positively to reform or become significant obstacles remains a subject in need of further research.

This study examines the complex relationship between the Saudi government and conservative ulama in the context of national transformation under Vision 2030. It explores the challenges the state encounters in mobilising support from conservative religious scholars for the economic reforms outlined in the vision, including the socio-religious factors that contribute to resistance and the dynamics of communication between both actors. The article also investigates the strategies employed by the Saudi government to reconcile the demands of economic reform with the traditional values upheld by the ulama, emphasising how policy initiatives, institutional adjustments, and narrative framing are used to bridge this gap. Furthermore, the study analyses the long-term implications of the government's efforts to navigate its relationship with the ulama community, assessing how these interactions may reshape the religious landscape, influence state–religion relations, and impact the sustainability of reform agendas in the years ahead. To fulfill the research objectives conceived above, this study will systematically analyse various topics through the subsequent sub-discussion arrangements: The evolution of the relationship between the government and ulama in Saudi Arabia, resistance to Vision 2030, the dilemma of traditional values and the demands of modernisation, the carrot and stick approach to the ulama, religious narratives and economic reforms and the long-term impact of MBS navigation strategies.

***ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK***

This analysis utilises Max Weber's theory of power legitimacy and the realism approach in international relations to examine the topic. According to Weber, power is the capacity of an individual to enforce their will, even in the face of opposition. He categorised legitimacy into three forms: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. This framework is particularly relevant to understanding how the Saudi government sustains traditional legitimacy through its alliance with conservative ulama while concurrently advancing the economic rationality integral to Vision 2030 (Haboddin, 2017). Weber's perspective complements the realism approach, which emphasises the importance of a nation's strength, both economic and military, as essential for its survival and security (Rosyidin, 2023). As Morgenthau (1949) asserts, "the concept of interest defined in terms of power" serves as the core of realist theory. From this perspective, the Saudi regime's engagement with ulama under Vision 2030 can be seen as a strategic calculation to preserve domestic stability, not as a normative or ideological alignment.

The realism framework sheds light on the power dynamics between the Saudi government and the ulama, highlighting the necessity of compromise to ensure political stability. As Morgenthau (1949) asserts, "the bargaining of diplomatic negotiations, issuing in political compromise... is organically connected with the balance of power". In a realist framework, compromise is not merely tolerated but recognised as a strategic tool, particularly when both actors accept the existing distribution of power. Thus, the strategic cooptation of the ulama by the Saudi regime reflects realist logic: the preservation of regime stability through internal balancing mechanisms. This form of domestic alliance-building becomes even more comprehensible when considered alongside Walt's (1990) emphasis on legitimacy as a driver of alliance formation. As Walt (1990) argues, "the tendency for states with similar domestic systems to form effective alliances is greatest when they are fairly secure... or when a rival movement creates a powerful threat to legitimacy". Taken together, these insights highlight that even within a realist framework, internal political cooperation, such as the Saudi state's partnership with the ulama, can emerge as a response not only to material threats but also to challenges to ideological authority and regime legitimacy. This cooperative relationship is pivotal in enabling the smooth implementation of economic reforms, minimising the risk of significant disruptions.

## *RESEARCH METHOD*

This article employs a qualitative method utilising a discourse analysis approach. A qualitative framework is appropriate because the study aims to interpret meanings, perceptions, and contested narratives rather than quantify behaviors or establish causal relationships, As Creswell (2014) explains, qualitative research seeks to "explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem," making it suitable for investigating how state and religious actors in Saudi Arabia construct and contest narratives around Vision 2030.

Discourse analysis is particularly well-suited to explore how power is negotiated through language and symbolic expression between the Saudi government and religious ulama, drawing from Teun van Dijk's (1997) framework, which emphasises the critical examination of how political power and resistance are produced, reproduced, and negotiated through language. Given the study's focus on ulama and governmental narratives surrounding Vision 2030, discourse analysis enables an in-depth understanding of the symbolic construction of legitimacy, authority, and ideological alignment. As van Dijk (1997) argues, political discourse must be analysed not only as a textual form but also as a political action embedded in specific social and institutional contexts.

This article explores the perspectives of international relations scholars on the evolving dynamics between Saudi ulama and the government. It delves into the shifting authority of religious leaders and political rulers in shaping both domestic and international policies. Additionally, it examines how ulama have responded to Saudi social initiatives, including advancements in women's rights, modernisation, and globalisation. The study aims to provide insights into how the Saudi government addresses resistance from conservative ulama by framing its Vision 2030 economic reforms in alignment with Islamic values. The analysis incorporates government statements, ulama remarks, and media coverage to uncover how these narratives are crafted and perceived by the public.

## *DISCUSSION*

### The Evolution of the Relationship between Government and Ulama in Saudi Arabia

Every political regime exhibits fundamental strengths in the elements that contribute to its stability and sustainability. These elements may encompass ideologies, economic forces, and alliances with diverse ethnic, social, commercial, and religious groups within society. Analysing these elements is essential for understanding the dynamics that

underpin political stability and the capacity of regimes to endure over time (Sulaib, 2020). The interplay between political and religious elements has emerged as a critical factor, if not the most pivotal, in maintaining the stability of the Al-Saud dynasty. The historical relationship between the monarchy and religious authorities dates back to the 18th century, when Mohammed bin Saud established an alliance with Mohammed bin Abd Al-Wahhab, the founder of the Wahhabi Islamic movement.

This partnership stipulates that the Saudi government will protect and spread Wahhabi teachings (Kanie, 2012), while Wahhabi ulama will provide religious legitimacy to the kingdom, which has fundamentally shaped the governance and sociopolitical landscape of the nation (Sulaib, 2020). The relationship between the monarchy and religious authorities was significantly reinforced in the 20th century with the establishment of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by Abd al-Aziz Al-Saud in 1932. The ulama maintain a crucial role in providing political legitimacy to the kingdom, particularly through their oversight of religious institutions and the implementation of sharia law. Their influence is fundamental to the interconnection between religious doctrines and state governance within the kingdom (Al-Atawneh, 2009).

Saudi ulama play a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and enforcing social regulations through the issuance of fatwas. For instance, in 1991, Sheikh Abd Al-Aziz bin Baz, a leading ulama in Saudi Arabia, issued a fatwa prohibiting women from driving, citing the importance of safeguarding public morality and maintaining adherence to Islamic traditions (Bin Baz 1990; Harun et al., 2019). Similarly, in 1979, a collective fatwa led by senior ulama, including Bin Baz, sanctioned the use of military force to suppress rebel groups during the Grand Mosque siege, emphasising the need to protect both national and religious security (Kéchichian, 1986). These fatwas demonstrate the significant role of ulama in shaping social and political policies in Saudi Arabia, particularly in preserving traditional values amidst modernisations.

The alliance between the Al-Saud and the Al-Wahhab family has undergone significant evolution over time. During King Abdullah's reign from 2005 to 2015, several reform initiatives were launched to enhance women's participation in the public sphere and promote their contributions to the economy. A landmark moment in this effort occurred in 2009 when King Abdullah appointed Norah Al Faiz as deputy minister of education, making her the first Saudi woman to hold a ministerial position (Karolak, 2023); allowing female athletes to participate in the 2012 Olympics (Ismail, 2023); Then in 2013 it appointed a woman to serve in majlis Al-shura (Consultative Assembly)

(Karolak, 2023). These decisions faced initial opposition from the ulama, including Sheikh Saad bin Nasser Al Shathri. He criticised King Abdullah's decision to allow male and female researchers to collaborate at universities, contending that such gender mixing constituted a serious sin that could divert them from their primary objective: education (Burke, 2011).

During his reform efforts, King Abdullah occasionally garnered support from Saudi religious institutions. However, there were also instances when he chose to disregard the opinions of certain ulama. Notably, critics of Al-Shathri were ultimately expelled from the Saudi Arabian Council of Senior Ulama in 2010 (Burke, 2011) or attempted to gain approval from the ulama through extensive negotiations over several weeks (Ismail, 2023). Historically, the Saudi monarchy's legitimacy has been rooted in its alliance with the Wahhabi religious establishment, a form of traditional authority in Max Weber's terms, grounded in religious customs and the ulama's role in upholding Islamic norms. From the first Saudi state to the present kingdom, the Wahhabi ulama have supported the regime during crises by invoking *taʿat wali al-amr*, a principle central to Wahhabism, articulated by Mohammed bin Abd Al-Wahhab, which mandates obedience to rulers and forbids dissent or uprisings (Bin Abd Al-Wahhab 1978; Sulaib, 2020).

While Saudi ulama possess a significant role in legitimising the policies of the ruling authorities, they should not be viewed as autonomous centres of power on par with the rulers themselves. In the context of its absolute monarchy, Saudi Arabia invests the king with the authority to determine state policy unilaterally. This includes the discretion to either heed the counsel of ulama or to opt to dismiss their opinions altogether (Ismail, 2023). This is also seen as a consequence of their interpretation of the *ta'at wali al-amr* concept, where the paramount importance of allegiance to both the nation and the ruling family is emphasised (Duwaji, 2024). Al-Yassini in Al Atawneh (2017) states that the ulama in Saudi Arabia have "lost their traditional function and are now acting as a pressure group that only exerts influence on government activities and policies, but has never acted as an autonomous center of power.", continued by Othman Al-Rawaf's statement, "the ulama have exercised very little, or no influence, over major foreign policies, internal security, economic development, oil production and prices, wealth distribution and regional allocation, or political participation" (Al Atawneh, 2017). This limited scope of influence can be traced to the ulama's original mandate within the Saudi state structure. Historically, their primary role has been to propagate the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and provide religious legitimacy to the monarchy, rather than to

act as independent political actors (Kéchichian, 2019). This symbiotic relationship, in which the monarchy governs and the ulama endorse, inherently positions the religious establishment as a legitimating institution, not a policy-making one.

Under Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) leadership, particularly through the Vision 2030 initiative, the scope of religious authority has been significantly reduced. The religious police (mutaween) were stripped of their enforcement powers in 2016, ending their decades-long practice of making arrests since their founding in 1976 to regulate markets and uphold public morality. The ulama's role has shifted from autonomous policymaking to largely symbolic endorsement, reflecting a deliberate structural transformation aimed at curbing their influence in Saudi Arabia's social and economic spheres and advancing the state's modernisation agenda (Grabowski, 2021).

This Weberian shift aligns with political realism, which views state actions as driven by the need to preserve survival and power. The marginalisation of the ulama and reshaping of Islamic discourse are thus strategic, not merely cultural. Facing declining oil revenues, youth unemployment, and global economic change, MBS has redirected legitimacy from traditional religious authority to economic performance and controlled cultural openness, incorporating the ulama selectively to endorse a state-defined, modernised vision of Islam (Ismail, 2023; Hertog, 2021). This shift has considerably diminished their role. Moreover, several ulama who opposed this decision faced arrest (Grabowski, 2021). Second, the limitations of independent legal reasoning and of the courts' control, as by reform of the legal system. Third, the removal of Mohammed bin Abd Al-Wahhab from the narrative of the country's founding with the establishment of a new "Founding Day" in 2022 (Diwan, 2022). From public life and the courts to the nation's history, everything shows a rapid transition to an era called Diwan (2022) as post-Wahhabi. However, rather than a total break, this shift may be better understood as a strategic recasting of Wahhabi symbolism to serve new state objectives. While traditional Wahhabi doctrines no longer dominate public life or legal discourse, selective elements persist under state control, suggesting not the end of Wahhabism per se, but its redefinition within the parameters of a modernising, centralised monarchy (Ismail, 2023). In Weberian terms, this signals a transition away from traditional authority toward legal-rational legitimacy, where power is vested in bureaucratic institutions and codified law.

Furthermore, a phenomenal shift has occurred in the role of prominent ulama in issuing fatwas in support of government policies. A significant illustration of this transformation is the 2018 revocation of the fatwa that prohibited women from driving.

Initially, the fatwa received strong support from senior ulama on the grounds that allowing women to drive could lead to "moral deviations" (Harun et al., 2019). Even in 2013, Sheikh Saleh Al-Loheidan claimed that women should not drive cars because it could negatively affect their reproductive health (Wheeler, 2020). However, amid mounting pressure for reform, the Council of Senior Ulama, headed by Grand Mufti Abd Al-Aziz Al-Sheikh, stated that there is no specific prohibition in Islamic law against women driving (Ismail, 2023). The council highlighted that the earlier restrictions were shaped by social and political customs rather than religious beliefs (Ismail, 2023), making this policy change a legitimate political matter aligned with the state's interests. According to Zainab Fattah (2018) of Bloomberg Economics, the decision to permit women to drive in Saudi Arabia is expected to enhance female employment opportunities significantly. This policy change could contribute nearly $90 billion to the country's economic output by 2030 (Al-Ghalib et al., 2018).

This shift in religious opinion suggests not only a change in legal interpretation but also a broader transformation in the relationship between political authority and religious legitimacy. By attributing the previous restrictions on women driving to socio-political customs rather than core Islamic tenets, the Council of Senior Ulama implicitly acknowledges that many traditional norms were historically constructed and preserved for political purposes. These changes demonstrate how ulama can adapt their interpretations to support the state’s reform policies, particularly under Vision 2030 (Ismail, 2023). Their reversal under Vision 2030 shows that these customs have lost authority in the face of leadership-driven reform. Meanwhile, the Council’s backing highlights the role of moderate ulama in shaping the reform narrative, now legitimising policies religiously to provide ideological cover and ease public acceptance.

These changes mark a recalibration of power between the monarchy and the religious establishment. Once bound by interdependence, the monarchy ruling and the ulama legitimising, reforms now reflect a hierarchy where the state reshapes religion to fit its modernising agenda. The ulama have lost their autonomous political influence, serving instead as a subordinate moral authority to endorse state policy. This shift replaces Saudi Arabia’s dual power structure with a centralised model in which the monarchy holds unilateral control and religion functions as a state-aligned narrative.

This change in social context rules also reflects an adjustment to the law based on interpretations of Wahhabism, effectively reducing the influence of Wahhabi ulama (Chara, 2018). In an effort to mitigate potential resistance to reforms, King Salman

appointed more “moderate” ulama to the Council of Senior Ulama in 2016. This council plays a pivotal role in endorsing gradual social liberalisation initiatives, including those outlined in Vision 2030. Furthermore, the council issued a fatwa supporting Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s diplomatic policies toward Qatar and Canada (Grabowski, 2021).

In an interview with The World (Duwaji, 2024), Raihan Ismail, Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford, notes that while ulama have not entirely lost influence under MBS, many who once spoke freely on social issues now avoid commenting, especially on Vision 2030 reforms. This stems mainly from the imprisonment or exile of dissenting clerics. Rather than signalling their disappearance, it reflects a redefined role: ulama are expected to support the state’s modernisation agenda and legitimacy, with political pressure on those who resist and space for those who conform within state-approved religious discourse.

**Resistance to Vision 2030**

Since the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the division of power between the Saudi royal family and the ulama institution has granted the ulama the prerogative to oversee matters related to mosques, culture, and education (The New Arab, 2017). The launch of Vision 2030 by MBS, aimed at attracting more tourists and talent, drew significant criticism, with concerns that these reforms could introduce Western influences that conflict with Saudi Arabia's religious identity (Duwaji, 2024). Conservative ulama, in particular, including Salman Al-Awda and Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki, have openly criticised these reforms, such as easing social restrictions on women's roles, opening cinemas, and promoting the entertainment sector, devoid of religious safeguards, risks undermining the central role of Islam in the daily lives of Saudi society (Coogle, 2019). MBS's personal leadership style reflects Weber’s notion of charismatic authority. Rather than relying solely on dynastic tradition, MBS constructs his legitimacy through a transformative national vision, rebranding Islam as moderate and framing modernisation as a moral and national imperative.

Despite opposition from certain ulama factions, MBS pursued the reforms with the firm conviction that they were essential to addressing future challenges. MBS underscored the necessity of these reforms as a proactive measure to prevent economic decline and create opportunities for the younger generation (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019). In an interview with The Guardian in October 2017 (Chulov, 2017), MBS stated:

> *"What happened in the last 30 years is not Saudi Arabia. What happened in the region in the last 30 years is not the Middle East. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, people sought to adopt this model in other countries, including Saudi Arabia. We didn't know how to deal with it. And the problem spread all over the world. Now is the time to get rid of it; We are simply reverting to what we followed – a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions. 70% of the Saudis are younger than 30, honestly, we won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts, we will destroy them now and immediately."*

In this statement, MBS not only signals his ideological stance but also highlights a crucial demographic fact: Saudi Arabia is a youthful nation, with a majority of its population under 30. This youth bulge represents a social force that demands employment opportunities, cultural openness, and economic mobility, needs that traditional religious structures may not meet. The fact that MBS himself is part of this younger generation further amplifies the legitimacy of his modernisation agenda, allowing him to position himself as a reformist leader who reflects the aspirations of Saudi youth. However, MBS has explicitly stated his intention to take decisive measures against the ulama's perspectives opposing his reform agenda. This stance has been reinforced through the implementation of an anti-terrorism law, designed to aid in combating extremist ideologies and controlling forms of expression deemed potentially harmful (Mabon, 2018). Sheikh Salman Al-Awda and Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki have faced allegations of inciting public unrest and expressing dissent against government policies. Al-Awda, in particular, has been charged with maintaining connections to organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, Al-Maliki has been critical of the religious interpretations espoused by the ulama council, going so far as to label certain members as extremists (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019).

In fall 2017, Sheikh Salman Al-Awda, Awad Al-Qarni, and Ali Al-Omari were arrested under a law allowing the government to label any speech as "terrorism." While officially tied to their calls for democratic representation, their real offence was challenging MBS's control over official Islamic discourse. Al-Awda's 14 million Twitter followers amplified his influence, and his prayer for resolving the Gulf crisis, a politically sensitive issue, prompted authorities to seek his execution, along with Qarni and Omari, on charges including "mocking the government's accomplishments" (Brumberg, 2020). The silencing represented a deliberate effort to suppress dissenting voices, culminating in the tragic death of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019). This development underscores Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) overarching ambition to centralise authority by consolidating absolute power and dismantling any alternative

structures or entities that might challenge his leadership (Hoffman, 2022). Despite resistance from some ulama, MBS pushed ahead with reforms, viewing them as vital for the future. Through Max Weber's lens, the ulama's traditional authority, rooted in custom and Islamic interpretation has been challenged by MBS's charismatic leadership and the state's rational-legal system. By presenting Vision 2030 as a national imperative tied to "moderate Islam," he shifted legitimacy from traditional to a blend of charismatic and legal-rational authority. The use of anti-terrorism laws and media control reflects the rationalisation and centralisation of power. At the same time, the repression of figures like Salman al-Awda signals a broader transformation in the structure of legitimacy in Saudi governance.

**The Dilemma of Traditional Values with Modernisation Demands**

In the 1950s, Saudi Arabia experienced a surge in oil revenues. Hertog in El-Sissi (2018) explained, linking the oil boom to Saudi Arabia's bureaucratisation, using rentier state theory to show how reliance on natural resources modernised the state but hindered the development of legitimate, efficient institutions. Abundant capital fuelled uncontrolled spending and inefficiency, while oil revenues enabled global economic engagement. Yet, as a finite resource, oil makes the rentier system unsustainable, risking isolation as the world shifts from fossil fuels. Vision 2030 seeks to reduce dependence on petrodollars by diversifying into tourism, renewable energy, and digital technology, an economic and generational transformation aimed at fostering a knowledge-based, globally connected future for young Saudis (El-Sissi, 2018).

Saudi Arabia is currently navigating significant economic challenges that necessitate transformative changes (Young, 2016). The nation's heavy reliance on oil revenues has exposed it to vulnerabilities, particularly amid fluctuating oil prices. As a result, Saudi Arabia is contending with four critical issues in the early 21st century: declining oil prices, rising unemployment, increasing national debt, and the persistent threat of terrorism (Al-Rasheed, 2018). In contrast to many Western nations, Saudi Arabia has a predominantly youthful population. Approximately 70% of its citizens are under 30. However, among individuals aged 16 to 29, the unemployment rate stands at 29% (Cochrane, 2020). The low quality of education offered, the absence of a clear educational vision to provide innovation and encourage the improvement of analytical skills among Saudi students, as well as the burdensome bureaucracy, play a significant role in the high number of unemployment, corruption, and lack of innovation in Saudi educational

institutions (Al Naimi, 2022). Although Saudi citizens do not pay taxes and benefit from free education, which accounts for 25% of the national budget, as well as free healthcare and subsidies covering most living expenses, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 aims to drive transformative investments.

These transformative investments refer to large-scale, multi-sectoral state-led initiatives aimed at restructuring the economy, reducing oil dependency, and generating sustainable revenue through diversified industries. Notable examples include NEOM, a $500 billion smart megacity integrating technology, tourism, and green energy; Qiddiya, a cultural and entertainment hub intended to rival international leisure destinations; and the Red Sea Project, which positions Saudi Arabia as a global eco-tourism player (Alayed et al., 2025). These projects are not only economic engines but also serve as instruments of social transformation, introducing new values of productivity, consumerism, and openness that mark a departure from traditional state-subsidy and religious conservatism models (Ismail, 2023). Underlying these investments is the reorientation of national identity away from rentier dependence toward a modern, diversified, and globally integrated economy. These investments aim to enhance educational systems and cultivate a new generation of Saudi leaders (Bak, 2018).

Through the initiation of Vision 2030, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has pledged comprehensive reforms spanning economic, social, and religious domains to tackle prevailing challenges (Kinninmont, 2017). Economically, the initiative has introduced policies to phase out certain state-subsidised benefits traditionally funded by oil revenues. Notable measures include reducing subsidies on water and petroleum and introducing a 5% value-added tax (VAT). While these policies have faced public scepticism, they underscore the government's commitment to alleviating the state's financial burden and advancing economic diversification (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019). MBS's economic reform and modernisation efforts through Vision 2030 aim to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil and encourage growth in sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and technology (Derendinger, 2023).

These reforms, as previously noted, encompass more progressive social policies, such as promoting women's empowerment and loosening cultural restrictions. Nevertheless, these initiatives present a significant challenge as they conflict with the deeply rooted conservative and religious values that characterise Saudi society (Elbanna, 2023). Beyond domestic transformation, Vision 2030 also positions Saudi Arabia as an emerging player in global development by actively attracting foreign investment and

forging economic partnerships, notably with China. Strategic cooperation with Beijing includes joint ventures in infrastructure, digital technologies, and renewable energy. These collaborations enable Saudi Arabia to import capital, technological expertise, and market access, reinforcing its ambition to diversify its economy while enhancing its geopolitical influence in a multipolar global order (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Joseph Nevo (El-Sissi, 2018) argued that religion has shaped Saudi national identity, with the state historically blending modernity and religious traditionalism. Suppose religion itself is not the main barrier to reform. In that case, rather than political culture and social norms being framed as religious mandates, MBS's agenda can be seen as an effort to separate faith from cultural conservatism. Religious institutions are being restructured, not eliminated, but aligned with a depoliticised, state-controlled Islam. By promoting "moderate Islam" and silencing dissenting clerics, the state strips religious bodies of their role as moral arbiters, recasting them as cultural legitimisers of policy. Through bureaucratisation, selective appointment of "moderate" ulama, and reframing issues like entertainment, gender roles, and economic reform as public, not religious, matters, the government narrows religion's operational scope without abandoning it.

As Saudi Arabia seeks to modernise, the relationship between the modernising state and religious institutions has become increasingly complex (El-Sissi, 2018). MBS's religious reforms highlight the delicate balance between preserving traditional Wahhabi values and advancing modernisation initiatives under Vision 2030. Notable examples of these modernising efforts include granting women the right to drive and enlist in the military, expanding employment opportunities for women and youth in particular, by introducing cultural venues such as cinemas, theatres, and concert halls (Thompson, 2021). These measures aim to transform Saudi Arabia into a "normal country" aligned with the progressive standards of its Gulf neighbours (Al-Rasheed, 2018). MBS has sought to implement moderation and social reforms in Saudi Arabia. However, criticism has highlighted that these efforts remain confined within an authoritarian framework, lacking the broader public participation that is fundamental to achieving genuine modernity (Fadel, 2021).

**The "Carrot and Stick" Approach towards Ulama**

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has systematically suppressed traditional sources of criticism, including the ulama establishment, which has historically served as a bulwark against social reform and modernisation in Saudi Arabia. Positioned as a

transformative leader, MBS has been portrayed as someone who acts decisively to propel the nation into the 21st century. This portrayal has bolstered his reputation as a forward-thinking modernist, further enhancing his popularity by marginalising traditionalist opposition (Al-Rasheed, 2018). Basically, MBS is still doing the old way to be able to win support from religious institutions; he relies on the "carrot and stick" method, a motivational approach that combines positive reinforcement, such as rewards or incentives for compliance, with punitive measures to address dissent. This approach has been a longstanding tactic within the Kingdom to maintain political allegiance and public support.

MBS's discourse on "moderate Islam" serves as a central component of his broader strategy, wherein he strategically endorses religious leaders who align with his reformist agenda while systematically marginalising dissenting voices through measures such as imprisonment or enforced silence. For instance, in 2017, conservative ulama Salman al-Awda, known for his criticism of MBS's reforms, was detained in alignment with this approach (Brumberg, 2020). MBS advances a narrative centred on loyalty to the state, strategically endorsing religious figures who align with his vision. Simultaneously, he diminishes the influence of dissenting ulama by branding them as "extremists" or associating their views with "terrorism." (Duwaji, 2024). He actively sought the involvement of influential Salafi ulama, including Aaidh Al-Qarni, to depict opposition leaders, such as Salman Al-Awda, as radical extremists. This strategic move aimed to influence public perception and garner broader support for the proposed reforms (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019).

Among the elevated religious elite, Mohammed Al-Issa stands out as a prominent figure. Serving as the Secretary General of the Muslim World League (MWL), he is widely regarded as a leading advocate and representative of "moderate Islam”. Dr Mohammed Al-Issa, who previously served as Minister of Justice in Saudi Arabia from 2009 to 2015, was appointed to the Muslim World League (MWL) in 2016. He also served on the Council of Senior Ulama, the Kingdom's highest religious authority, historically associated with pan-Islamic activism. Under Al-Issa's leadership, the MWL has redirected its efforts toward promoting interfaith dialogue and has emphasised the importance of Muslims residing in Western countries adhering to local laws and respecting the prevailing cultural norms of their host societies (Diwan, 2022). Alongside Al-Issa, several prominent ulama have garnered significant support, including Dr. Sulaiman Abu Al-Khail, the rector of Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University;

Adel al-Kalbani, the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca; and Dr. Walid bin Mohammed Al-Samaani, the Minister of Justice. As noted by Diwan (2022), these ulamas are strategically elevated during critical junctures or within domains deemed instrumental to advancing leadership objectives and initiatives.

**Religious Narrative and Economic Reform**

In addition to employing a carrot-and-stick strategy, MBS has devised an alternative approach to curtail the influence of religious institutions resistant to his modernisation agenda. Central to this strategy is reframing his economic reforms, articulated within the Vision 2030 framework, as issues that transcend religious concerns (Fadel, 2021). MBS underscores the urgent need for economic diversification, particularly reducing Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil, as vital to the nation's long-term stability. This approach is framed to resonate widely, appealing to youth seeking modern career opportunities and to women, who are increasingly integrated into the workforce and public life as central contributors to the economy. Although less explicitly stated, it also appears intended to promote a more inclusive national identity, though the benefits for religious or ethnic minorities remain uncertain. By framing modernisation as an economic necessity, the strategy seeks to defuse ideological opposition and present reform as a national imperative rather than a religious or cultural issue (Ismail, 2023). By associating the success of these reforms with patriotism, MBS effectively limits the ulama's capacity to challenge the economic agenda. This approach prioritises loyalty to the state over traditional religious authority, thereby shifting the discourse from a religious framework to one centred on nationalism (Alhussein, 2019).

Inevitably, not all members of Saudi Arabia's religious institution fully align with the narrative propagated by MBS to separate the discourse of reform from religious principles. For instance, several members of the Council of Senior Ulama have expressed criticisms of specific aspects of the Vision 2030 program. Notably, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abd Al-Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh, has publicly opposed initiatives such as the opening of cinemas and the hosting of concerts, citing concerns that these activities could promote the intermingling of men and women in shared spaces (Reuters, 2017). The actions of these ulamas can be more accurately described as an endeavour to adhere to the principle of ta'at wali al-amr, the obligation of obedience to the ruler, while prioritising private counsel as their preferred means of offering guidance (Diwan, 2022).

**The Long-Term Impact of MBS's Navigation Efforts**

MBS attributes Saudi Arabia's social restrictions to the influence of ulama institutions, which he considers an obstacle to the country's social progress. This view drives his efforts to diminish their authority, signalling his intention to reform this powerful sector of society. However, he remains either unwilling or unable to completely end the state's dependence on the ulama's legitimacy. His top-down reform strategy carries the risk of unsettling Saudi Arabia's established governance framework. It could ultimately dissolve the historic alliance between the Saud family and the Wahhabi ulama, concentrating power solely within the royal family (Karatas, 2023).

This approach raises a critical question: has the relationship between the Kingdom and its ulamas undergone a permanent transformation, or are these changes merely temporary, contingent upon the tenure of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS)? Additionally, it raises the possibility that MBS himself may have altered his stance. At its core, Saudi society continues to regard Islam as a fundamental aspect of its collective identity (Duwaji, 2024). It is imperative for the Kingdom to recognise and appropriately value the influence of religious institutions within Saudi society, as underestimating their significance could have adverse implications (Karatas, 2023).

Over the next decade, Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) primary challenge lies in determining the success or failure of Vision 2030 and the broader transformation of Saudi Arabia's economy. Should he successfully deliver on his economic commitments, his public support is likely to solidify, strengthening his position against internal opposition. However, failure to achieve these goals may foster public dissatisfaction, potentially creating opportunities for elite groups, including religious institutions, to contest his authority (Ghafar, 2017).

## *CONCLUSION*

From the above discussion, several conclusions can be drawn. Historically, the Saudi ulama have played a central role in granting political legitimacy to the kingdom, a function they maintained for centuries. Under Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), however, their influence within the political structure has sharply declined, especially amid the far-reaching social and economic reforms of Vision 2030. While the ulama still serve as an important source of legitimacy, their authority is now largely limited to traditional religious affairs, with political and economic control firmly consolidated within the Al-Saud family.

Vision 2030, often seen as a double-edged sword, has brought sweeping changes alongside significant challenges, particularly resistance from conservative ulama to social modernisation. Early reforms, such as allowing women to drive and reopening cinemas, initially faced strong opposition for clashing with Saudi cultural norms. Over time, these tensions eased as the government separated economic reforms from religious matters and secured the backing of more moderate ulama. Although some argue these reforms lack depth, MBS's approach, marginalising dissenting clerics while elevating those aligned with state policy. demonstrates an effective "carrot and stick" strategy for managing religious opposition and advancing his agenda.

The ulama's ability to adapt their stance on reforms has further diminished their historic role as guardians of public morality. By emphasising nationalism and economic stability, MBS has shifted the reform narrative away from religion toward economic and social priorities. This reframing has enabled major changes while reducing resistance from both religious leaders and the wider public, at least in the short term.

Overall, these shifts combine Weberian and realist perspectives: Vision 2030 marks a transformation from a shared religious-political power arrangement to a centralised, bureaucratic, and charismatic regime, showing how legitimacy can be deliberately restructured to ensure political survival. Religion remains, but it is repurposed to serve state priorities rather than challenge them, making Vision 2030 both a plan for economic diversification and a strategic reconfiguration of political authority.

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