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## The Saudi Trillions

Malise Ruthven  
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It made perfect sense that the first port of call on President Trump's first foreign trip, in May, was Riyadh. Saudi Arabia – the world's second largest oil producer (after Russia), the world's biggest military spender as a proportion of GDP, the main sponsor of Islamist fighting groups across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria and Iraq, the leader of a coalition in a devastating war against Yemeni rebels now in its third year – is a country one can do business with, even as the most ardent Kremlinologists in the West struggle to understand it. It is a place often defined by its contradictions, in which tribal codes of desert and oasis – puritanical, patriarchal, frugal and austere – co-exist and frequently clash with lavish displays of wealth and such emblems of modernity as air-conditioned shopping malls, designer boutiques and six-lane highways flashing with supercharged vehicles exclusively driven by men. Trump returned from his visit with a promise – he claimed – of \$350 billion in Saudi spending on American armaments over the next ten years, with \$110 billion right away, of benefit particularly to Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon. The State Department celebrated the deal as supporting 'the long-term security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region in the face of malign Iranian influence and Iranian-related threats'.

But the last few months have seen a series of changes in the kingdom that make its future more unpredictable than ever. At the beginning of June, Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with its neighbour Qatar, demanding that its al-Jazeera network be shut down for broadcasting propaganda and launching a regional stand-off that is far from being resolved. Then, two weeks

later, there was what appeared to be a palace coup. Since the death in 1953 of the modern kingdom's founder, Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (generally known as Ibn Saud), succession has passed down the line of his sons. The present king, Salman, reportedly Ibn Saud's 25th son, inherited the throne in 2015 on the death of his half-brother Abdullah and is close to being the last of his generation. At 81 Salman is in fragile health: he has had two strokes and suffers from Alzheimer's. On 21 June the doting king promoted his favourite son, the 31-year-old Prince Mohammed bin Salman (widely known by the initials MBS), to the position of crown prince, putting him in line to be the first of the third generation – Ibn Saud's grandsons – to occupy the throne. According to the *New York Times*, MBS's elevation at the expense of his older cousin, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (known as MBN), was the result of a well-executed plot. MBN had been highly regarded by the US and its allies: as head of the interior ministry and chief of Saudi intelligence he presided over operations against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); he had attended training sessions with the FBI and was a powerful advocate of continued close relations with the Americans. In February the CIA honoured him with the George Tenet medal, in recognition of his 'excellent intelligence performance in the domain of counterterrorism and his unbounded contribution to realise world security and peace'.

On the night of 20 June, the eve of the Eid al-Fitr festival that ends the holy month of Ramadan, MBN was summoned along with other senior princes for an audience with the king. Shortly before midnight courtiers answering to MBS – who was already chief of the royal court as well as the world's youngest minister of defence – removed his phones and pressured him to relinquish his posts. MBN at first refused but eventually gave in and is now said to be under palace arrest. Afterwards clips of MBN paying allegiance to his younger cousin were shown on Saudi media, to demonstrate a smooth transition, and it was put about – this time by US as well as Saudi officials – that MBN had been suffering from the effects of the 'arsehole bomb' attack in 2009, when an al-Qaida operative masquerading as a petitioner approached him and blew himself up with an IED hidden in his rectum. MBN survived the attack but was said to have become addicted to medication he had been taking to mitigate the effects of the trauma. Members of the Allegiance Council, a body of 34 senior princes established by King Abdullah in 2006 to resolve disputes by approving changes in the line of succession, were told that MBN had a drug problem and was unfit to be king. Despite private reservations, the council deferred to King Salman and rubber-stamped its approval, in a vote of 31 to three.

While not dismissing the claims about his health, at least one foreign diplomat and a well-placed Saudi source suggested that MBN had opposed the Saudi-led embargo on Qatar, and that this was the real reason for his fall. As in early modern Europe, palace politics in Arabia and the Gulf are not driven just by private ambitions but reflect wider geopolitical struggles. MBS is said to be close to his mentor Muhammad bin Zayed, crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy commander of the armed forces of the United Arab Emirates, the region's most effective – and most interventionist – military power. Recent Emirati successes include taking the ports of Mukalla and Shihr in southern Yemen from AQAP, as well as two strategic islands in the Bab al-Mandab strait between Arabia and Africa, through which tankers carrying four million barrels of oil pass each day. Bin Zayed is thought to be the driving force behind the UAE-Saudi rivalry with Qatar which MBN was resisting. As one commentator tweeted after the coup, 'bin Zayed has become the real ruler of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the two largest Arab countries. Congratulations to the people of these two countries ...'

In this scenario MBS – now abetted by Trump – appears as the useful idiot. As defence minister, he was in charge of launching the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, which has been responsible

for the killing of thousands of civilians in airstrikes and the displacement of more than three million people. According to the UN, 80 per cent of Yemen's population is now in need of humanitarian aid that can't reach the country thanks to the Saudi blockade; the lack of food and clean water has led to widespread malnutrition and at least 500,000 cases of cholera. Meanwhile, the Saudis' military targets, the Houthi rebels who oppose the president they have protected in office, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, show no signs of giving up. Saudi Arabia has consistently accused the Houthis of being Iranian proxies, a charge that was once untrue but which effectively had the force of a prediction, since as the war has ground on Iran has stepped up its military aid to the rebels, partly to prevent total devastation.

The diplomatic and economic campaign against Qatar, too, can be seen as an expansionist move, part of a Saudi-UAE effort to counter what they present as Iranian influence. As Richard Sokolsky and Aaron David Miller put it in an article for *Politico*,

The crown prince engineered this dispute not to punish Qatar for its financing of terrorism (a hypocritical comment coming from the Saudis, whose own citizens have provided funding to radical extremists over the years), but rather to end Qatar's independent foreign policy and especially its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its ties with Iran. Simply put, the Saudis want to turn Qatar into a vassal state – as they have done with Bahrain – as part of their plan to establish Saudi hegemony over the entire Persian Gulf.

But Qatar has its reasons to co-operate with Iran – not least the fact that the countries share ownership of the world's largest natural gas field – and, partly through the offices of al-Jazeera, the only measurably independent news organisation in the region, it has shown itself more tolerant than any of its neighbours of the dissenting political movements whose fortunes improved with the Arab Spring. For the Saudi princes, the Muslim Brotherhood et al are an internal threat not to be countenanced. In this sense, the Saudi offensives against Yemen and Qatar seem less part of a plan for regional domination than a defensive operation designed to stoke up anti-Iranian and anti-Shia feeling at home – even when the Iranian influence is largely invented. 'We are a primary target for the Iranian regime,' MBS said in May, shortly before Trump's visit, accusing the Iranians of seeking to take over Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia. 'We won't wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia. Instead, we'll work so that the battle is for them in Iran.' Chauvinism can be a useful asset for a ruler.

And Saudi chauvinism is far from being unpopular, even though half the population is 25 or younger. Tweets such as 'I pledge allegiance to my Lord, his Royal Highness the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to listen and to obey,' though recirculated by Saudi media, may reflect reality in a country where more than 90 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds are avid internet users: there is less noise to the contrary. But then again, obtrusively not obeying rarely ends well. And there is another reason the rise of MBS has been widely applauded by younger people: he has promised social and economic change, as well as an end to the filial gerontocracy that has endured for more than half a century. In a country where 40 per cent of people between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed, where 40 per cent of Saudis live in relative poverty and at least 60 per cent can't afford to buy homes because of the princely grip on real estate, prospects for reform under a dynamic new leader who could rule for decades are enticing.

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Last year MBS – by then already in charge of economic policy – announced plans to implement 'Vision 2030', a formidable project aimed at weaning the kingdom off hydrocarbons at a time

when the price of oil hovers at less than \$50 a barrel, driven down by the fracking revolution in the US and the falling off in global demand. Oil won't sustain the Saudi economy for ever, and MBS's programme – developed with considerable input from McKinsey – is aimed at curbing public spending and diversifying the economy. The plans include investing in Islamic tourism and in a revamped financial district in Riyadh, as well as expanding revenue streams generally and increasing job opportunities for young Saudis. Blue-collar foreign workers are to be replaced by Saudi nationals in areas such as mobile phone technology and engineering. As the *Economist* noted, though, Saudis tend to lack the technical skills needed for such a programme: 'Schools stuff young heads with religion, but neglect more practical subjects such as maths and science.'

All this investment will require significant resources, and a central part of the plan is to sell off 5 per cent of Saudi Aramco, the world's largest corporation, worth possibly \$2 trillion, dwarfing Apple, Google, Amazon or ExxonMobil, and listing it on a foreign stock exchange in the world's biggest ever IPO: Hong Kong, Singapore and London are among the contenders for the listing. Oil revenue – until recently Aramco's profits were taxed at 85 per cent by the Saudi government – will be replaced by a vast sovereign wealth fund, to be invested in property and businesses abroad as well as at home, much as Qatar already does; the as yet relatively small Saudi fund began its overseas adventures last year with a \$3.5 billion investment in Uber. But getting hold of the hundreds of billions that would be generated by an IPO means acceding to transparency rules that a company still 95 per cent owned by the Saudi state would find it hard to comply with. The London Stock Exchange, in its desperation for the prize, has shown that it is perfectly prepared to bend the rules in Aramco's favour. Even so, a public listing – at the level Saudi Arabia expects – depends on the price of oil rising or at least not falling further; it also depends on the Saudis' oil reserves being quite as large as they claim. In the face of all this uncertainty, Nick Butler, an ex-BP executive, recently suggested in the *Financial Times* that Saudi Arabia's best option may be a private sale to China.

The kingdom has more trivial money worries too. The Al Saud are a royal family like no other: there are thousands of them, descending from the 22 wives Ibn Saud had while technically observing the Sharia requirement of four wives – max – at any one time. He was 'father to the nation' in more than a metaphorical sense. In the context of a tribal society, these prudential intermarriages had the benefit of binding together a number of different groups at a time when Ibn Saud was merely the head of a coalition of tribes who founded the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 after he invaded the Hejaz, with its holy cities, Mecca and Medina. The trouble, presently, is that his descendants all expect their emoluments. The scale of this burden can be gauged from a classified cable sent by Wyche Fowler, then US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, to his government in November 1996, exposed by WikiLeaks, in which he reports that members of the Al Saud family receive stipends ranging from \$270,000 a month for more senior princes to \$8000 'for the lowliest member of the most remote branch of the family'. The system is calibrated by generation, with surviving sons and daughters of Ibn Saud receiving between \$200,000 and \$270,000, grandchildren around \$27,000, great-grandchildren around \$13,000 and great-great-grandchildren the minimum \$8000 per month. According to the US embassy's calculations, in 1996 the budget for around sixty surviving sons and daughters, 420 grandchildren, 2900 great-grandchildren and 'probably only about 2000 great-great-grandchildren at this point' amounted to more than \$2 billion, with the stipends providing 'a substantial incentive for royals to procreate' since – in addition to bonuses received on marriage for palace construction – a royal stipend begins at birth. One minor prince, according to a Saudi source, had persuaded a community college in the state of Oregon to enrol him even though he

had no intention of attending classes: his principal goal in life was to have more children so he could increase his monthly allowance.

In addition to the stipends, senior princes enriched themselves via ‘off budget’ programmes that ‘are widely viewed as sources of royal rake-offs’. The largest of these, according to the cable, was thought to relate to the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina – around \$5 billion annually – and the Ministry of Defence’s strategic storage project, worth around \$1 billion. Both were highly secretive and ‘widely believed to be a source of substantial revenues for the king’ – at that time King Fahd – ‘and a few of his full brothers’. Other ways the princes obtained money included borrowing from banks without paying them back (Saudi banks have been reluctant to lend to royals unless they have proven repayment records) and using princely ‘clout to confiscate land from commoners, especially if it is known to be the site for an upcoming project and can be quickly sold to the government for a profit’. King Abdullah, whose ten-year rule between 2005 and 2015 was seen as a period of modest reform, curbed some of these excesses by stopping handouts to family members going on holiday and discouraging them from using the national airline as a ‘private jet service’. As Karen Elliott House writes in *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Faultlines – and Future* (2012), probably the best account of the country written so far by a Western observer (as a woman she had access to the half of the population that is off-limits to male reporters), ‘this plethora of princes is so large and so diverse that little if anything links them except some Al Saud genes ... Collectively, they increasingly are viewed by the rest of Saudi society as a burdensome privileged caste.’ Though, thanks to another aspect of tribalism, even being an Al Saud doesn’t guarantee great privilege: sons and grandsons of Ibn Saud whose mothers don’t belong to elite Arabian lineages are considered ineligible for the throne. And as a recent BBC investigation showed, a number of dissident princes have recently vanished, or been disappeared.

The faith tradition that holds the Saudi system together – for now – is Wahhabi Islam, the iconoclastic creed of the 18th-century Islamic reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose pact with the Al Saud family led to the creation of the modern kingdom in 1932. Al-Wahhab’s stormtroopers, the Ikhwan, enabled Ibn Saud’s rise to power. They killed unarmed villagers regarded as apostates, thought nothing of slaughtering women and children, and routinely slit the throats of male captives. Contemporary accounts describe the horrors afflicted on the city of Taif in 1924, when the Ikhwan murdered hundreds of civilians, in a massacre similar to the violence committed by Islamic State or al-Qaida today. As an Arab witness wrote, Ibn Saud’s forces ‘normally give no quarter, sparing neither boys nor old men, veritable messengers of death from whose grasp no one escapes’. Some 400,000 people are reported to have been massacred by the Ikhwan during the early days of the Saudi state. The Wahhabi understanding of *tawhid*, the theology of monotheism or divine unicity, which forbids the veneration of any person or object other than Allah, is still used today to justify the ban on all forms of non-Muslim public worship in the kingdom, as well as the confiscation of non-Wahhabi textual sources such as Quranic commentaries brought in by pilgrims from South Asia, who have had them removed by the religious police while attending the Hajj. But *tawhid*, a theology that claims to be fundamentally opposed to polytheism, has an unexpected consequence. It mines the Islamic discourse to sustain a totalitarian outlook whose actual purpose is the preservation and enrichment of the tribal dynasty that owns and governs this enormous country in its exclusive interest.

Al-Wahhab’s views on the veneration of Muslim holy men – exemplified by his destruction of the tomb of Zayd ibn al-Khattab, brother of Umar, the most revered of the early caliphs and a companion of the Prophet – are now used to legitimise the orgy of cultural vandalism inflicted on



Mecca and Medina, over which the king claims religious guardianship as custodian of the Two Holy Shrines, a status that is quasi-caliphal (the Al Saud lack the lineage formally to declare themselves caliphs). The centre of Mecca, the sacred hub of Islam, now resembles Las Vegas, with hotels such as the Raffles Makkah Palace and the Makkah Hilton towering over the Kaaba, the cube-shaped temple to which Muslims everywhere bow in the direction of prayer. Beyond the sacred mosque is the Mekkah Clock Royal Tower, a kitsch rendition of Big Ben around five times as high – one of the world’s tallest buildings. Wealthy Gulf pilgrims are expected to pay premium prices for rooms and apartments in these buildings, as part of the effort to make up for the decline in oil prices. Even the Prophet Muhammad himself is not immune from the corrosive effects of Wahhabi iconoclasm, on the grounds that the veneration of the Prophet (as distinct from the worship of God) constitutes forbidden idolatry. The Prophet’s *mawlid* or birthday festival – widely observed with processions and family gatherings in other Muslim countries – is banned in the Saudi kingdom, while the name ‘Muhammad’ is often used disparagingly, as a catch-all for despised Muslim immigrants working as menials. The site of Muhammad’s first wife’s house, where it is believed he received his first revelations and where five of his children were born, is now occupied by a row of public toilets.

In the kingdom at large, Wahhabi doctrine is enforced by the five thousand-strong religious police force – known as the *mutawaeen* – controlled by the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. These religious thugs, institutional descendants of the Ikhwan stormtroopers, patrol cities in expensive white SUVs enforcing prayer times and dress codes, as well as bans on music, sexual mingling and non-Wahhabi forms of religious worship. Even the international opprobrium heaped on the *mutawaeen* after 2002 – when they prevented 15 schoolgirls from leaving a blazing building, causing them to be burned alive – didn’t lead to their disbandment, though MBS has promised to curtail their powers. According to foreigners who have lived outside the privileged enclaves of expat colonies such as the Aramco-run city of Dhahran – known as Little America, with its manicured golf courses, where men and women mix freely and women are permitted to drive within the fenced-in corporate compound – the sense of fear is ubiquitous.

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Simon Valentine, a British academic who spent four years in the kingdom teaching English, says that ‘meeting and talking with Saudis one soon perceives the fear that lurks behind the smiles, the sense that people are constantly aware of being watched, censored and condemned.’ Pascal Menoret, an anthropologist who formed close relationships with the young male tearaways he describes in his brilliant ethnographic essay *Joyriding in Riyadh* (2014), reports that

surveillance, repression and eventually torture are realities that shape everyday life and deeply modify people’s interactions with each other – and with the anthropologist or field worker ... This is a country where 12,000 to 30,000 political prisoners and prisoners of opinion rot in overcrowded, violent jails; a country where repression is organised by security forces that report to a handful of senior princes, out of the reach of an abrupt, arbitrary judicial system; a country where physical punishment, torture and the threat thereof, in the absence of transparent and fair procedures, are the alpha and omega of the judiciary and the ultima ratio of political acquiescence.

Saudi Arabia has no written constitution or written penal code, claiming that its laws are based only on the Quran and the Sunna (the teachings and practice of the Prophet). Those accused of political offences are often sentenced by the Specialised Criminal Court (SCC), set up to try terrorism-related cases, which routinely denies defendants the most basic fair trial guarantees,

including the right to a lawyer, and passes sentences in closed proceedings. Authorities continue to hold prominent rights activists in prolonged incommunicado detention, completely cut off from their families and the outside world. According to the now disbanded Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, one in every six hundred Saudis is in jail because of their opinions or political activities. Since the whole judicial system is based on confessions extracted under torture or the threat of torture, it is physical violence, not the Quran, that is the 'true foundation of the law'.

Viewed through any kind of lens, social, cultural or economic, Saudi Arabia is one of the world's most repressive polities. On the rankings devised by Freedom House, a US-funded NGO, America's leading ally in the Arab world occupies the bottom percentile (5.8 per cent) in terms of political rights and civil liberties, belonging with Syria, North Korea, Somalia and the Central African Republic in the category designated 'the worst of the worst'. Executions are conducted in public, and are not infrequent, with sickening examples circulating on YouTube. Last year the kingdom executed 149 people, including a mass execution of 47 men on 2 January 2016; 43 of them were reported to have been associated with al-Qaida attacks in the 2000s, but four were members of the country's Shia minority, including the prominent cleric Nimr al-Nimr, an outspoken critic of the regime, certainly, but no terrorist. Recent protests in Sheikh Nimr's home town of Awamiya have led to a siege by the Saudi authorities, with tensions flaring over plans to demolish the historic district, which the government claims is being used by armed insurgents. At least a dozen people are said to have been killed, while 15 Shia citizens are now on death row, awaiting a Supreme Court decision on their execution.

The kingdom's defenders, including Philip Hammond, who as British foreign secretary at the time of Nimr's execution said, 'Let us be clear, first of all, that these people were convicted terrorists,' like to point out Saudi Arabia doesn't execute as many people as Iran – in 2014, there were more than 750 executions in the Islamic Republic. But then again, Iran, unlike Saudi Arabia, doesn't impose the death penalty medieval-style, with beheading by scimitar as a public spectacle, a technique adapted by Islamic State to great effect. The British government's defence of its ally has been unwavering over the years: on her visit to the kingdom in April, Theresa May celebrated the value of Saudi intelligence-sharing, with a spokesman for Number Ten explaining that the 'security relationship' between the UK and Saudi Arabia had saved 'many lives'. It doesn't hurt that another part of that security relationship involves the Saudis being the UK's best customer for armaments by a factor of at least four; in July, despite pressure from campaigners, who questioned the legality of selling British weapons to a country that was using them against Yemeni civilians, the UK high court ruled that the world's second biggest arms exporter could happily continue its sales to Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi strategy towards the Shia minority – around three million people in the oil-bearing Eastern Province and 250,000 in the southwest region of Najran – has been carefully calculated over the years, as Toby Matthiesen explains in *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (2014). When Ibn Saud took over the Eastern Province in 1913 its Shia inhabitants, mostly sedentary people engaged in agriculture, trade, fishing and pearl diving, who had enjoyed relative autonomy for centuries under Ottoman rule, became 'subjects of a political entity that does not treat Shia Muslims as equal citizens'. The Ikhwan demanded that the Shia 'deviants' convert, which a number of notables did, pledging that they would hold their religious rituals in accordance with Wahhabi practice. Those co-opted by the government were given a degree of control over their own affairs, being allowed to run their own courts and legal system. From then

on, Shia leaders found themselves in a see-saw predicament, with their degree of autonomy determined by the regime's feeling of security. Late in 1979, after the Iranian revolution brought political Islam to the fore, a group of militants protesting against the corruption of the Al Saud took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca; with the help of French and Pakistani special forces the Saudis recaptured it after a two-week siege. Even though the militants had been devout Sunnis from the same tribe as the former Ikhwan, the regime and its American backers responded to the incident by cracking down on the Shia, especially those working in the oil industry. After 1979, Matthiesen writes, there was an unwritten rule that Shia – who constituted a quarter of the workforce – ‘should not be hired in security or any other key sector in the oil industry’ and that if they were employed at all, it would be as ‘drivers, clerks, gardeners, or in storehouses, food and community services’.

Since the 1980s, it has been difficult for anyone in the Shia opposition to find solidarity across sectarian boundaries. Radical opposition activists such as Sheikh Abdullah ibn Jibrin, who with others founded the London-based Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights, issued fatwas denouncing Shia as infidels deserving death; in the 1990s, Safar al-Hawali, former dean of Islamic Studies at the Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca and a leading critic of the Al Saud, circulated audio cassettes denouncing Shias as deviants. Loyalist Wahhabi scholars operating under the regime's protective umbrella ensure that boundaries are maintained, issuing fatwas forbidding intermarriage between Sunnis and Shias, and forbidding Sunnis from eating meat slaughtered by Shia butchers. All this appears to have been part of a deliberate government strategy to persuade the Shia that, as Matthiesen puts it, ‘they would fare even worse under Islamists than they would under the royal family.’ Madawi al-Rasheed, a leading historian of the kingdom, writes that ‘the regime sees the perverse benefit of attacks on Shia worshippers by radical Sunni groups’: such attacks allow it to present itself ‘as the best protector of the Shia’, since the only alternative ‘would be radical jihadists’.

But the state has a simpler means of keeping the majority population in check. As an oil-rich monarchy Saudi Arabia, like other Gulf principalities, is a rentier state: there is no general taxation, which means that there is no basic social contract between people and their rulers. As the UN Arab Human Development Report put it in 2004, taxation makes a government ‘subject to questioning about how it allocates state resources. In a rentier mode of production, however, the government can act as a generous provider that demands no taxes or duties in return. The hand that gives can also take away, and the government is therefore entitled to require loyalty from its citizens invoking the mentality of the clan.’ The culture of dependency in Saudi Arabia, as elsewhere in the Gulf, relies above all on individual patronage. Pascal Menoret's young interlocutors, most of them members of the kingdom's displaced Bedouin tribes, found that Riyadh ‘had little to offer if one was not closely connected to the royal family’ or part of the oil-rent distribution networks controlled by them. They saw the Saudi capital as a ‘selective El Dorado where only a handful became rich, while the majority of residents, parsimoniously financed by the state or their employer, struggled to cover astronomic housing, transport and living costs’. For all the brazen affluence of princely palaces, the low-income areas of Riyadh ‘match the ghettos, banlieues, *problemområde* and *favelas* of other cities and testify to the fact that, in liberal societies as in those systems that are described as “authoritarian”, political power is equally based on economic violence’.

Menoret shows the way an atomised society is perpetuated by the control of public space:

Riyadh was a gigantic suburb where families and individuals lived scattered in individual houses and small apartment buildings, far away from each other but under the surveillance of the state



... Saudi Arabia was one of the rare Muslim majority countries where, for fear of political mobilisation, mosques were closed outside of prayer times. Malls were not more welcoming, and private security companies filtered out and chased bachelors and members of the lower classes. Even streets were repulsive and pedestrian-unfriendly; large and busy, deprived of shade, difficult to cross, their asphalt nearly melting under a scorching sun, they were abandoned to cars, trucks and taxis.

In this sexually segregated society, where marriage is seen as a calming influence, unmarried men are 'feared as unruly and disruptive' but, as House points out, most of the 40 per cent of unemployed Saudi men under the age of 24 who would like to marry can't afford the bride price.

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Menoret witnessed the consequences, spending many hours with frustrated young men whose idea of fun was to drive cars at 150 mph, 'drifting' into high-speed arabesques in parking lots and highways, or slaloming through traffic using a skilful combination of handbrake and steering wheel. Car drifting, imported from Japan, is now an official sport in Dubai and the Saudi kingdom, with Red Bull as a sponsor, but the illicit version is strictly forbidden, with fines of 10,000 riyals (more than £2000) and two months' jail for offenders. The newly asphalted roads of Riyadh's expanding grid – a city that has grown from a population of 300,000 in 1970 to six million today – provide perfect spaces for drifters as they wait for the urban expansion that will enrich their owners in the course of time. Like the monarchs of early modern Europe, the Saudi kings have bought loyalty, or rewarded their courtiers and members of his family, by giving out grants of land for future development. The Al Saud family was given the nickname Al Subuk – 'the fences' – for the hundreds of miles of wire they planted in the desert to keep intruders out of their properties, while waiting for the city's sprawl to reach them. As Menoret found, there was an improbable community of interest between developers and drifters, with developers constructing 'miles of straight asphalt that the drifters used as a playground, far away from people's eyes'. Whenever the builders arrived and constructed new boulevards of suburban villas along with speed bumps and police stations, the drifters would move on to the next undeveloped site.

Among his community of outsiders, Menoret saw signs that the flouting of Wahhabi strictures isn't confined to billionaire princes with their holiday compounds in Marbella, Tangier or Aspen. Escaping 'the strict behavioral and spatial order promoted by the state', 'boys and girls and boys and boys flirted from car to car on select avenues' in outlying parts of Riyadh, 'throwing their phone number to each other on scraps of paper, texting each other or following the other's car'. Alcohol was easy to find, 'provided that you had the right contact and a car to get there'. A colourless local hooch made from dates, known as *al-kuhul al-watani* or 'national alcohol', was widely available, and when kept in water bottles was undetectable to visual inspection. After picking it up from your dealer 'you would mix the alcohol with non-alcoholic beer and quickly reach inebriation. As Saudis would say, what's prohibited is highly desirable.' The pressure against religious control may be building.

This could be to MBS's advantage as he seeks to update the Saudi economy. Most of Menoret's tearaways are likely to remain among those left behind, but for others there are opportunities: 200,000 young Saudis are now studying on scholarships overseas, and 45,000 students have now graduated from the world's largest all-female university. Saudi religious textbooks – which as recently as 2014 were imported into Mosul by Islamic State for use in schools, thanks to their hard line on infidels and dissidents – are now being modified to acknowledge examples of the Prophet Muhammad's kindness to Jews. But whatever superficial modernisation ensues, the

Saudi state still depends for its legitimacy on its long-standing accommodation with the Wahhabi faith. It is largely because of Saudi-funded evangelism that the violently anti-Shia Salafist movements inspired by Wahhabi ideology – from Islamic State to the al-Qaida affiliate formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra – are still spreading through the world today.

On his visit to the kingdom in May, Trump commended MBS's Vision 2030 as 'an important and encouraging statement of tolerance, respect, empowering women and economic development'. But most of his speech, given in the presence of fifty leaders of Muslim-majority states, was devoted to condemning extremism. In rhetoric worthy of any village imam or mullah, he proclaimed: 'A better future is only possible if your nations drive out the terrorists and extremists. Drive. Them. Out. Drive them out of your places of worship. Drive them out of your communities. Drive them out of your holy land, and drive them out of this earth.' Trump's hosts no doubt found it pleasing that he bracketed Iran and Hizbullah – two Shia-based entities – with Islamic State and al-Qaida as the primary causes of extremism in the region. He made no reference to the fact that during the course of his visit to one of the world's most tyrannical and theocratic states – the first country to be so honoured by his administration – Iranians were going to the polls in a general election that would have been unthinkable in the Saudi kingdom. The outcome saw Hassan Rouhani, a moderate leader keen to ease the Islamic Republic's isolation, chosen to serve a second term as president. Rather than reinforcing the anti-Shia dynamic with multi-billion-dollar arms packages, the West should be using its power to counter the force of reactionary Sunni sectarianism that is the curse of modern Islam and the real source of extremism in the region.