

The US Assistance, Domestic Political Demands and Trajectory of Reforms in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

In recent decades, Saudi Arabia has experienced a relatively rapid pace of change. This article endeavors to analyze several fundamental aspects of the reforms introduced in the country during the twenty-first century, particularly in response to the events of September 11 and the Arab uprisings. The study adopts a qualitative approach and explores reforms in the realms of politics, culture, and religion. The article poses questions, such as how the American public and private sectors facilitated the reform process in Saudi Arabia following the September 11 attacks, how did the Arab revolts of 2011 impact Saudi state and society, and how did the government respond to the increasing demands for reform. Over the past two and a half decades, a diverse array of reforms has been implemented across various sectors, including politics, education, human rights, and the economy.

Keywords: American democracy, political demands, Reforms in Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabian politics, Saudi society.

Introduction

Organized administratively into thirteen provinces, Saudi Arabia occupies a disproportionately large territory in the region, comprising 86 percent of the total area of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This vast expanse, when compared to the other five GCC states, underpins the nation's significance in various domains, including population and economic output. Historically, Saudi Arabia has been recognized for its conservative nature and does not possess a formal constitution. However, in recent decades, the country has experienced a relatively rapid pace of change.

This article aims to analyze several fundamental aspects of the reforms introduced in Saudi Arabia during the twenty-first century, particularly in response to the events of September 11 and the Arab revolts in Tunisia and Libya. The discussion encompasses reforms in the areas of politics, culture, and religion. The article poses critical questions, such as how the American public and private sectors facilitated the reform process in Saudi Arabia following the September 11 attacks, how did the 2011

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Arab revolts impact the Saudi state and society, and how did the government respond to the increasing demands for reform.

Subsequent to this introduction, the second section provides a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature. The third section examines the American assistance provided to Saudi Arabia in the pursuit of democratic reforms. The fourth section focuses on the emergence of Saudi civil society and the character of the growing demands, petitions, protests, and demonstrations observed in the country in recent decades. The fifth section examines the reforms enacted by the Government of Saudi Arabia across multiple sectors. The article concludes with a final section summarizing the key findings.

Literature Review

The Ibn Khaldun Centre for Development Studies published the 2008 Annual Report titled “Civil Society and Democratisation in the Arab World,” in which Saudi Arabia is classified as an “absolute monarchy” (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā’iyah, 2008, pp. 27–28). In his memoir *The Sheltered Quarter*, Bogari (1991 cited in Elmusa 1997, 348) noted that the early twentieth century presented a more accommodating environment in the holy city of Mecca. Furthermore, Carmen, the Swiss wife of Osama bin Laden’s brother, and Kurpershoek, a former Dutch ambassador to Saudi Arabia, offer comparisons between Saudi Arabia and both the Netherlands and Geneva. Kurpershoek described Saudi Arabia as the polar opposite of the Netherlands, a society that places a premium on experimentation and individual expression above all else. Carmen remarked that her experience in Saudi Arabia made Geneva feel like a millennium away (Kurpershoek, 2001, p. 265; Ladin, 2005, p. 43).

According to the Ibn Khaldun Centre, Saudi Arabia possesses the least independent judiciary and the most unequal legal system among the countries in the region. The judiciary has no authority over matters related to the constitution (N. J. Brown, 1998; Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, n.d.). In fact, the judiciary is significantly influenced by the political establishment (Seznec, 2002).

American aid aimed at promoting democracy in Saudi Arabia represented a relatively new development. Bronson observed that prior to the events of September 11, it was nearly impossible to initiate U.S. foreign aid in the kingdom (Bronson, 2006, p. 258). In assessing the political openings in Saudi Arabia, Hamzawy argued that both international and domestic demands for reform had introduced new elements of dynamism and openness into the political landscape of the country (Hamzawy, 2007). He contended that the Saudi regime undertook reform measures primarily out of concern for jeopardizing its strategic relationship with the United States (Hamzawy, 2006, p. 19).

The analyses conducted by Hertog, Bronson, Hamzawy, and Kendall in 2006 further highlighted the positive correlation between the US pressure and the reforms undertaken by Saudi Arabia. Hertog noted that the desire to engage with an

international audience likely influenced the establishment of the National Human Rights Association (NHRA), the bar association, and nascent efforts at labor organization. These developments emerged in response to specific phases of international criticism. Furthermore, the frequent reference to international norms marked a departure from the traditionally insular nature of Saudi politics (Hertog, 2006, pp. 261–262). Kendall assessed the reforms in Saudi Arabia, observing that from a European perspective, progress appeared to be exceedingly slow; however, from a Saudi viewpoint, a significant shift had indeed occurred (Kendall, 2006).

In her examination of the intricate legal and feminist discussions across various Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, following the Arab Spring, Jihan Zakarriya (2024) highlights evidence of sustained women’s activism, public influence, and political significance. According to Craner, the strategy had already begun to yield results. He remarked that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain had made substantial progress toward democratic development. Craner contends that there is no doubt about the effectiveness of Washington’s pressure (2006, pp. 3–10). Gause further explores the relationship, asserting that these factors are intricately linked (Gause III, 2009).

The Political System

The Al-Saud family governs Saudi Arabia, with the only *male* heirs to the Saudi throne being those descended from King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud (Khalaf, 2006, pp. 46–48). King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz served as the head of state from 2005 until 2015, after which Salman bin Abdul Aziz ascended to the throne in 2015. In terms of conservatism, Saudi Arabia is often characterized as an exemplary authoritarian state (Seznec, 2002, p. 33), described as politically archaic and tyrannical (Longrigg, 1970, p. 85), and identified as ultraconservative (Allam, 2009). The kingdom is recognized for possessing one of the most insular political systems globally. Throughout the final decades of the twentieth century, both conservatism and intolerance in Saudi Arabia intensified. The influx of petrodollars reinforced the regime’s grip on power, leading to the emergence of a repressive state in place of a previously existing degree of pluralism (Hamzawy, 2007). The country is often criticized for its policies regarding public gatherings and demonstrations.

Although the country has established representative institutions, these bodies lack genuine power. The Majlis al-Shura (Advisory Council) consists of 150 members. The “global freedom status” of a country, assessed by the U.S.-based nonprofit organization Freedom House, employs a scoring system ranging from one to one hundred. In 2021, it classified Saudi Arabia with a score of 7, categorizing it as “not free” (T. Brown, 2022). The kingdom prohibits all political organizations and only permits limited political participation at the local level (Ottaway, 2021).

Foreign workers typically reside in Saudi Arabia only for the duration of their services (*The Economist*, 2023). There is considerable evidence of trafficking, evidenced by practices such as the confiscation of passports, delayed or unpaid wages,

and coerced alterations to employment contracts. Furthermore, occupational safety remains a significant concern (Khan, 2023, pp. 819–820).

US Assistance for Reforms

Following the attacks of September 11, the United States began to focus more intently on democracy in the Arab world, with Saudi Arabia receiving greater attention than any other state in the region. The Saudi regime increasingly faced scrutiny, as the Bush Administration frequently designated it as a “Country of Particular Concern.” In 2008, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter traveled to Saudi Arabia and conveyed his support for the nation’s political reforms. The United States collaborated with local civil society organizations to sponsor events featuring American speakers, aiming to promote the development of civil society (Youngs, 2005, p. 38). Bilateral international organizations, such as the Saudi-U.S. Forum (SAF) and the U.S.-Saudi Arabian Strategic Dialogue (SUSRIS), offer resources and information that foster mutual understanding.

The Saudi Arabian Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR), based in Washington and established in 2004, engages in research on a range of topics, including women’s empowerment, religious tolerance, and human rights. The Centre provides insightful analyses and interpretations of current events while also formulating and implementing policies relevant to Saudi Arabia. In addition to advocating for improved human rights within the kingdom, the CDHR is primarily dedicated to promoting democratic transformation. As part of its initiative, the Centre has published guiding principles for a proposed transnational Saudi Arabian democratic constitution. These guiding principles encompass limited terms for public office, restricted mandates, universal suffrage, equitable political representation, and the conduct of free and fair elections.

In 2002, the United States-Saudi Arabia Business Council (USSABC) and the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) facilitated a trade mission to Virginia, during which Saudi business delegates were welcomed. In 2003, *The News Republic*, a weekly magazine published in the United States, organized a panel discussion focusing on political reforms in Saudi Arabia. That same year, the Rockefeller Foundation hosted a symposium dedicated to Saudi-American relations, featuring discussions among approximately twenty participants. The Saudi representation at the event comprised several officials. Furthermore, King Saud University sent four delegates, each representing the departments of political science, sociology, education, and social studies (Chanin & Gause III, 2004). An attorney, and representatives from Johns Hopkins University and four other American institutions represented the US. The symposium also included participation from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and Yale Law School. This event signified the commencement of a series of conferences, the next of which was scheduled to take place in 2004.

In 2005, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) organized a conference aimed at assisting Saudis in modernizing their political system. During the same year, then Crown Prince Abdullah reportedly assured Condoleezza Rice that he would implement reforms potentially leading to an elected government within a decade or fifteen years, as noted by Nicholas Kralev of the *Washington Times* (Kralev 2005 cited in Kapiszewski 2006, 99). The Crown Prince likely believed that by that time, American interest in promoting democracy in the Gulf region would have diminished. In 2008, King Abdullah reaffirmed his commitment to the reform process, emphasizing the importance of transparency, openness, and the acceptance of criticism (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 43).

Funding was allocated for election training programs aimed at encouraging women's participation in politics. In 2007, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) arranged for a group of Saudi municipal councilors to visit Spain to study Spanish municipal governance structure. The Human Rights Commission and the National Society for Human Rights collaborated with American ambassadors in Saudi Arabia, where the Saudi military received training on international human rights standards. In 2008, the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) facilitated the participation of representatives from the Saudi government and civil society in seminars across the United States, addressing topics such as participatory democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. American academic George E. Edwards engaged with key individuals and government officials on the legal aspects of human rights, also providing insights into American legal education throughout his tour in 2008. The Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR) has consistently highlighted human rights violations in Saudi Arabia and has offered critical assessments of the prevailing conditions.

In March 2008, a media exchange program was initiated involving Saudi television and radio talk show hosts, aimed at enhancing professional skills while promoting democratic principles. Under the auspices of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a group of Saudi journalists traveled to the United States, where they interacted with American reporters. During their visit, the journalists received training in media ethics and political reporting. Additionally, they conversed with U.S. non-governmental organizations about the state of free speech in Saudi Arabia. The Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR) advocated for unrestricted access to information for Saudi citizens.

The U.S.-Saudi Arabian Business Council (USSABC) actively facilitated international business and economic exchanges. In March 2007, it organized a six-day Business Development Mission to Saudi Arabia, which saw the participation of thirty companies from twelve states, represented by forty delegates, including the Director General and Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Hernandez. The delegation toured the Eastern Province, Jeddah, and Riyadh (*U.S.-Saudi Business Council*, n.d.). That same year, a four-day business development visit was organized

in partnership with the Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP), during which seven companies from Virginia visited Dammam, Riyadh, and Jeddah. These missions provided a platform for business leaders from both nations to engage with one another, explore the business and economic landscape, and assess investment opportunities in Saudi Arabia (*U.S.-Saudi Business Council*, n.d.). Such initiatives offered valuable networking opportunities for all participants.

Initiatives have been undertaken in recent years also to promote democratic transformation in the region. For example, a conference focused on the democratization of Saudi Arabia took place in May 2024 in Maryland, USA (Farooq, 2024). The organization and implementation of public affairs initiatives, events, and activities related to this effort are overseen by a committee based in Washington DC, with the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations (NCUSAR) acting as its secretariat (Koruzhde & Cox, 2023, p. 82). American observers have acknowledged Saudi Arabia's substantial progress in advancing Vision 2030 and achieving significant social and economic reforms. To foster cooperation, both nations have expressed a commitment to establishing bilateral working groups, including one dedicated to education and cultural collaboration ("Joint Statement of the U.S.-Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue," 2020).

The Civil Society and Demands for Reforms

Throughout the early twenty-first century, the country prohibited the establishment of any civil society organizations (Salhi, 2024, p. 251). In January 2003, the Saudi Journalists' Association was granted a license, marking the establishment of the country's first officially recognized civic association. Following this development, numerous other civil society organizations, including the Saudi Pharmacist Society, received official licenses. In the same year, the Ministry of Justice approved the formation of a Saudi association of lawyers (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah 2008, 162; Arab News cited in Hertog 2006, 248).

The Saudi Journalists' Association was officially established in 2004, following the issuance of a license in 2003. The association is comprised of a chairman and a board of nine members, all of whom are directly elected by Saudi journalists (Parolin, 2006, p. 77). In its inaugural election, held in 2004, three hundred journalists participated in the voting process. A significant milestone occurred when a female Saudi newsreader made her debut on Al-Ikhbariya, marking an unprecedented development in Kuwait at that time (Sakr, 2006, pp. 144, 146).

In December 2006, the Shura Council amended the initial draft law aimed at diminishing the regime's control over non-governmental organizations in Saudi Arabia (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008, p. 162). Subsequently, in December 2007, the Council approved the proposed legislation, which led to the establishment of the National Authority for Civil Society Organizations (Saudi Press Agency cited in *Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009* 2009, 43). The enactment of this law signified the opening of new avenues for public participation (Hamzawy, 2007).

Nonetheless, the reform program devoted relatively limited attention to student unions. Saudi Arabia conducted its first student union elections in May 2006 (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008, p. 159).

Organizations dedicated to the promotion and protection of rights have been established in Saudi Arabia. The public has gradually been permitted to organize demonstrations, conduct protests, and assert their rights. In 2005, the Saudi Human Rights Agency was established. A significant development occurred in 2007 when the government-supported National Society for Human Rights publicly criticized the actions of the religious police, known as the *mutawwa'in*, in its inaugural report (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008, pp. 160, 201).

Individuals increasingly found the courage to organize protests, engage in strikes, and submit petitions advocating for reform (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008). Among these individuals, democracy activists demonstrated remarkable resolve, frequently presenting petitions calling for political changes. A significant number of petitions were put forward. One such petition received an immediate and favorable response; the Crown Prince convened a meeting with forty of its signatories.

The petitions outlined a broad range of reform demands. One of them highlighted that the persistent resistance to reform and the exclusion of popular participation in decision-making processes were significant factors contributing to the precarious situation in which Saudi Arabia found itself. The petition also asserted that combating terrorism cannot be accomplished solely through security measures; it requires a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes. It was noted that a burgeoning opposition from enlightened religious figures and liberal dissidents was beginning to challenge the existing regime in Saudi Arabia (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah, 2008).

Political, social, and economic reforms constituted the primary demands of the Arab uprisings. However, within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), significant discord emerged regarding the appropriate response to these movements. Demonstrations occurred in Saudi Arabia, which further internationalized the situation when the kingdom deployed forces to Bahrain through the causeway connecting Bahrain to Saudi Arabia to restore order and avert potential Iranian influence. In this context, Saudi Arabia aimed to preserve the existing order (Zweiri & Suleiman, 2022, pp. 161–162).

As demonstrations gained momentum and garnered international support, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) endeavored to adapt to the rapid changes occurring in the region. The Arab uprisings also exerted an internal influence on Saudi Arabia, which experienced episodes of political unrest and an increased awareness of potential instability, especially in the Eastern Province. In response to these challenges, there emerged calls for reform and transformation, accompanied by internal movements advocating for change within the kingdom (Zweiri & Suleiman, 2022, pp. 164–165).

In a bid to maintain the status quo, Saudi Arabia resisted many of these developments. Furthermore, execution of certain political figures also occurred in the aftermath of the Arab revolts (Zaccara & Battaloglu, 2023, pp. 115–116).

Reforms in Contemporary Saudi Arabia

The government has implemented reforms across political, economic, cultural, and religious domains. In 2003, the King of Saudi Arabia established local councils, intending for the public to elect fifty percent of their municipal members (Parolin, 2006, p. 82). The administration held its inaugural elections for 178 municipal councils in 2005, which were characterized by considerable competition. For example, in Riyadh, 646 candidates competed for seven available seats. These municipal elections garnered considerable public attention and have fostered ongoing discussions about reform within the public sphere. They set a precedent for pluralistic contestation within the existing consultative bodies (Hamzawy, 2007). Observers indicate that the decision to conduct municipal elections in 2005 was influenced by the favorable electoral experiences of neighboring countries, such as Bahrain and Qatar (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 94).

Before November 2003, the Saudi Consultative Council functioned solely as an advisory body. However, a royal decree later expanded its role by granting it limited legislative authority, enabling members to propose new legislation (Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 96–97). In 2005, the Council's powers were further enhanced. A revision to Article 23 of the regulatory framework granted Council members additional legislative authority (Hamzawy, 2007). Since 2005, it can question cabinet members, participate in discussions regarding the national budget, and access information related to state revenue. In 2003, the Saudi government announced plans to broadcast Consultative Council meetings on public television, marking the first instance in Saudi Arabian history of such a decision to air the Council's weekly sessions (Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 96–97).

In the wake of the U.S. government's announcement of a policy aimed at promoting democracy in the Middle East following the events of September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia held elections for the first time in 2005. Significantly, two-thirds of the new appointments were drawn from among distinguished experts in economics and education (*Jordan Times* cited in Stracke 2006, 26). This expansion of membership resulted in a broadened mandate and a more diverse composition, thereby enhancing the Council's prominence in Saudi Arabian politics. In 2005, members of the Saudi Consultative Council participated in discussions regarding women's rights to drive, illustrating their growing influence within the legislative framework (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 92). This evolution underscored the Council's significance and contributed to a substantial expansion of the legislative landscape (Hertog, 2006, p. 241). Amr Hamzawy noted that while these developments may not appear as momentous as political changes in other Arab nations, they represented a significant shift within the authoritarian political landscape of Saudi Arabia (Hamzawy, 2007).

In the altered landscape, the Saudi government revised its strategy, favoring the co-option of opposition rather than its suppression (Cordesman, 2003, p. 132). King Abdullah implemented a pivotal change by replacing conservative judges in the Saudi judiciary with those more inclined towards reform (Allam, 2009). In February 2009, the King dismissed Luhaydan who had gained notoriety for his controversial rulings, which included a declaration endorsing the killing of television network owners perceived to promote “immorality” (“Senior Saudi Calls for Political Reforms,” 2009).

The Saudi society has begun to embrace the concept of religious pluralism. Following King Abdullah’s establishment of the National Dialogue, Wahhabi scholars engaged in discussions with Shiites for the first time. In 2004, representatives from both Shiite and Sufi communities were invited to participate in this dialogue. In 2007, Saudi Arabia prepared a bill aimed at combating human trafficking, prompted by considerable pressure from the United States. *The Economist* (2009) speculated that following King Abdullah’s reforms in February 2009, the council would likely choose a successor to Abdullah. However, this scenario did not come to fruition.

King Abdullah’s governmental reorganization in February 2009 garnered significant attention, with *Al-Hayat* newspaper characterizing it as a “Bold Reform” following the dismissal of two prominent conservative religious figures. *The Saudi Gazette* hailed the reorganization as a progressive advancement toward reform (“Saudis Welcome Government Shakeup as ‘Bold Reform,’” 2009). *The Economist* remarked that the new appointments displayed a notable diversity, incorporating representatives from all four Sunni Islamic schools within the 21-member council of senior scholars responsible for issuing official religious rulings (*fatwas*). This development signified the end of the Hanbali School’s exclusive control over religious authority in the kingdom (The Economist, 2009).

In May 2006, a directive issued by the Interior Ministry limited the powers of the Public Decency Police, or *mutawwa’in*, who were once infamous for patrolling the streets and punishing individuals for infractions of Islamic customs and laws. The decree specified that their authority would cease once offenders were apprehended and transferred to the regular police (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā’īyah, 2008, p. 165). The religious police has been effectively marginalized. Their functions have largely been assumed by the state police, which now performs comparable duties (Bilan, 2024, p. 20).

The Crown Prince also launched Vision 2030, an initiative designed to enhance the country’s international standing and improve various standards (Bilan, 2024, p. 28). Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, progress continued to be made in the economic and social transformation agenda outlined in Vision 2030. The implementation of judicial reforms led to a significant reduction in the application of the death penalty (Brown, 2022). In recent years, Saudi Arabia has

undergone notable changes, increasingly opening itself to the global community and relaxing numerous societal constraints (The Economist, 2023).

Mohammed bin Salman is promoting a new vision of a “moderate, balanced” Saudi Islam, which seeks to diminish the influence of religious institutions that have traditionally been integral to the kingdom’s identity (Adetunji, 2023). The clerical establishment, which historically wielded significant influence over religious and social affairs in exchange for political acquiescence, has seen a decline in its power under his leadership. He has limited the authority of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, the Islamic police that once rigorously enforced dress codes and behavioral norms. At the same time, he has embraced various forms of entertainment, such as concerts and sporting events, which had previously been opposed by religious authorities (Ottaway, 2021).

Cinemas, which faced prohibition in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s, have now reopened, and the kingdom frequently hosts raves and concerts (The Economist, 2023). Saudi Arabia has made substantial investments in high-profile sports and entertainment organizations, celebrities, and events (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Over a span of just two years, the kingdom allocated \$6.3 billion to sports contracts (Bilan, 2024, p. 22). By 2023, mixed-gender gatherings and musical performances had become commonplace, becoming seamlessly integrated into the cultural landscape. These developments have resonated particularly well with the nation’s youth (Ottaway, 2021).

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 initiative has been widely perceived as successful by foreign experts and officials. The country has achieved notable progress across various sectors. For instance, following the comprehensive healthcare reforms implemented in 2021, Saudi Arabia’s medical system has experienced significant advancements. Moreover, the nation has emerged as a leader in digital bureaucratic reform, introducing initiatives designed to streamline online bureaucratic processes for non-professionals. Vision 2030 has undoubtedly posed challenges to the long-standing social, cultural, political, and economic norms of the kingdom (Bilan, 2024, p. 2).

Concerns have emerged from various quarters regarding the current changes. One of the primary apprehensions, especially articulated by Western observers, is that increased transparency may incite a conservative backlash. These fears have been further amplified by the self-interested narratives of certain Gulf diplomats. Proponents of Prince Muhammad have similarly invoked the specter of religious conservatism to rationalize his political crackdowns. However, such concerns may be exaggerated, as the younger generation in the Gulf appears to exhibit greater tolerance than their predecessors. Additionally, some critics contend that recent reforms disproportionately favor foreigners. For instance, civil marriage is exclusively available to non-citizens, and while naturalized individuals generally face restrictions

on dual citizenship, newly naturalized citizens are exempt from this prohibition (*The Economist*, 2023).

Foreign workers continue to face substantial challenges in Saudi Arabia. The 3.6 million migrant workers, primarily consisting of domestic workers and agricultural laborers, remain among the most vulnerable and least protected segments of the population. This precarious situation persists despite recent measures aimed at easing restrictions on migrant laborers (Khan, 2023, p. 819). The Saudi Crown Prince's Vision 2030 initiative aims to enhance the nation's international standing and reform certain regulations; however, it may not sufficiently address issues that are deeply intertwined with the existing political system (Bilan, 2024, p. 28).

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, there was a concerted call from the American public and government for Arab regimes, particularly the Saudi government, to implement democratic reforms. The United States, both at the state and societal levels, undertook initiatives to support the reform process within the region. American assistance was extended to Saudi civil society and its citizens. Similarly, the Arab uprisings of 2011 intensified pressure on the Saudi government to accelerate the pace of reforms. These factors likely contributed significantly to Muhammad bin Salman's emphasis on modernizing Saudi state and society, as well as the development of his Vision 2030 initiative. Over the past two and a half decades, a range of reforms has been introduced across various domains, including politics, education, human rights, and the economy.

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