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OLGA BIBIKOVA. RESTRUCTURING IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Olga Bibikova,
PhD(History),
Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS

Abstract. Saudi Arabia has announced a program of reforms aimed at abandoning oil production as the only source of income

and creating a modern economy. Measures are also being taken to modernize the image of the Kingdom.

In the spring of 2016, Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Salman al-Saud (known in the Western press as MBS) presented to the Saudi public the Strategy "VISION 2030," which included a program of economic diversification, the purpose of which was to abandon oil as an exclusive source of the state income. Oil dependence is expected to be eliminated by 2020, and revenues from alternative industries should be increased 6-fold and reach \$ 267 billion. The program includes 80 economic projects in the areas not related to oil production and refining in the amount of \$ 23.7 billion. It also provides for foundation of a fund worth \$ 2 trillion on the condition that the money will be invested in foreign companies. It is announced that by 2030 the Kingdom should become the owner of 3% of world property. It is also expected to privatize some state-owned companies, in particular, the largest oil Corporation Aramco.

Attention is drawn to the project of construction of a high-tech city called Neom (neo - new and mustakbal - future / Arab /), which should become an analogue of the American Silicon valley. The city of Neom is to appear on the border with Egypt and Jordan near the Gulf of Aqaba. It should use only solar and wind energy and become a technological hub for neighboring countries. In addition, there will also be a luxury resort and an amusement park. The implementation of the project will cost \$ 500 billion.

The projects proposed under the VISION 2030 strategy show that the Kingdom can no longer rely on oil as a source of income. After oil prices plummeted in 2014, Riyadh had to take tough economic measures, including cuts to public officers' salaries, subsidies for gasoline and electricity, and adoption of value-added tax. Moreover, since 2014, the Kingdom has been losing lost 11% of its reserves annually. And the state budget of the Kingdom for 2015 was set with the largest deficit in the

history of the country. It is obvious that the authors of the Strategy are aware that it is necessary to hurry over the implementation of these ambitious projects until alternative energy does not deprive Saudi Arabia of its traditional revenues. But for the implementation of the declared projects it is required to find significant funds.

As part of the Strategy, 14 agreements between the Kingdom and the Russian Federation were signed in Moscow on October 5, 2017. The list of signed documents includes an agreement on cooperation in the field of health care. Unfortunately, we do not have the text of the agreement at our disposal, but it can be assumed that we are talking about eradication of a number of diseases most common in the Kingdom.

Due to adherence to the tradition of closely related marriages, hereditary diseases are common in the country. There is recorded a high prevalence of type 2 diabetes (T2DM), which poses a certain risk to the country's economy. The world economic forum noted chronic diseases as one of the 6 main global risks for the countries of the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. Moreover, in 2010, Saudi Arabia ranked third (!) in the list of countries with the highest prevalence of diabetes (prevalence 16.8%). Another trouble of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula is cardiovascular diseases, risk factors of which, in addition to diabetes, are obesity, physical inertia. In particular, in the Arabian countries, "obesity among the female population ranges from 29 to 45.7%, which is one of the highest rates worldwide, due to physical inactivity ranging from 45 to 98.7%." In the course of analyzing the state of health of society in the Kingdom, one can't help but wonder what people will carry out the planned changes.

Rejection of foreign workers

In the summer of 2017, the Kingdom introduced a tax on the use of foreign labor. The reason was the budget deficit, as

well as the government's desire to reduce the number of foreigners working in the country, which should encourage unemployed Saudis to take their places. Indeed, foreign workers make up almost a third of the country's population. Most of the workers are from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the Philippines. Attempts to abandon foreign labor have been made before. Today, many foreigners began to leave the Kingdom. The reason is the recession in the economy, the rise in the cost of living. Each foreign worker is required to pay a tax of \$ 27 per month for each member of his family. There are rumors that this amount will be increased, which will logically lead to the departure of family members of foreigners and an overall reduction in the number of foreign labor in the country.

Guest workers work mainly in private campaigns. They are employed in construction, service, women work as paramedics and domestic workers. Foreign businessmen living in the Kingdom note that the Saudis prefer to hire foreigners, despite the fact that there are a sufficient number of local workers.

The government requires that entrepreneurs increase the number of employed compatriots. In response to this, there appeared the practice of fictitious hiring of Saudis, who at a symbolic salary actually stay at home. It turned out that this phenomenon is already quite common and was even called "saudization." It is definitely a problem that requires efforts to re-educate both employers and the Saudis themselves. It is known that Saudi youth prefer only leadership positions...

It is obvious that the scale of deportations of foreign workers (almost 800 thousand foreigners were dismissed in 2017) is not compatible with the planned construction. And while the VISION-30 economic development program considers deportations as part of the country's recovery program, the complete abandonment of foreign labor is virtually impossible. Many Saudis prefer to hire foreigners, for the latter, for fear of losing their residence permit, will work overtime without having the right to complain or demand to pay overtime.

It is characteristic that Arabs from other countries speak negatively about Saudi employers, considering them cruel and not complying with the terms of the employment contract. In our opinion, the complete abandonment of foreign labor in such large-scale projects is practically impossible. But then the question of the reasonable use of foreign labor must not only be supplemented by a study of the exact needs of the market, but also by a change in the nature of the relationship between employer and employee.

Reducing gender segregation

In 2000, Saudi Arabia ratified the international Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, which entered into force as far back as 1981. It contained a reservation that in the event the principles of the Convention conflict with Sharia law, the Kingdom will continue to adhere to Sharia law.

In September 2017, king Salman allowed women to drive. The lack of this right has already led to protests. Now, the right to drive a car (including a truck) can only be obtained by women with a diploma of higher education. The first to drive were those ladies who had driving licenses obtained in other countries. They also created the social movement Women2drive. But before getting behind the wheel, a woman must get permission from her father or husband. It should be noted that disobedience to the father is severely punished. In summer 2018 it became known that the most active Saudi women called for abolition of the system of "mahrams," i.e., custody of women. Granting Saudi women the right to drive logically suggests that other bans will be lifted, but it is clear that society is not ready for this yet. Women are now also allowed to attend sporting events. Most recently, in 2012, under pressure from the International Olympic Committee, Saudi women were granted the right to represent the country at the Olympic Games. Before that, the Kingdom was the

only country in the world that forbade women to participate in competitions. The first women in the Olympic history of Saudi Arabia were track and field athlete Sarah Attar and judoka Wodjan Shaherkani, who participated in the 2012 Olympics (London).

In its plans to reformat the Kingdom, MBS intends to increase the percentage of female employment from 22% to 30%, which should significantly reduce the presence of foreign female workers in the labor market of the Kingdom. In February 2018, it was announced that Saudi women could serve in the army. This opportunity was given to the women aged 25–35 with a higher education diploma and living in a family with a male guardian. In addition, the Prosecutor General's Office announced a competition for the positions of investigator for women with University education. In February 2019 amid the Kingdom's condemnation over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the appointment of a woman as Ambassador to the United States was announced. Princess Rima bint Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdelaziz al-Saud is the daughter of the Kingdom's former Ambassador to Washington.

Thus, all measures to introduce female Saudi citizens to public life are addressed to educated women, representatives of the wealthy segments of the population. According to official data, despite the fact that the percentage of women with higher education is higher than among the male population, the share of Saudi women in the labor market is 17%. In general, the Saudi Kingdom ranks 129th among 134 countries for gender equality.

Tourism as a new source of income for the kingdom

In 2017–2018, an unprecedented number of pilgrims (more than 2 million people) made the Hajj and Umrah (small Hajj) to the Holy cities of Islam – Mecca and Medina. Naturally, such a large quantity of pilgrims was accompanied by an influx of funds that the Moslems left in the Kingdom. In search of sources of

income, alternative to oil, the authorities decided to open part of the Kingdom for tourism. In this regard, it was decided to use the Islands of Farasan in the Red Sea, Tarut, Karan and al-Arabiya in the Persian Gulf, as well as Sanafir and Tiran for the organization of a tourist zone. The designated tourism zone is located on the Red Sea coast near the Jordanian border opposite Egypt.

In addition, it was decided to restore Saudi antiquities, as well as create new museums (including the Museum of Islam). According to the agreement signed with France, Paris received the exclusive right to carry out cultural projects. It is characteristic, that the idea was first proposed by the Crown Prince in November 2017, and in May 2018 an agreement on cooperation in the field of culture and tourism for a period of 10 years was signed. The idea of opening part of the province of Medina (where the Holy cities of Islam are located) to tourists is also under consideration. We are talking about the city of al-Ula in the North-West of Saudi Arabia, with picturesque canyons located nearby, as well as the archaeological complex Madain-Salih, which in 2008 was included in the UNESCO world heritage list. According to the announced intentions, the authorities of the Kingdom want to restore other antiquities located in the territory of the Kingdom, despite their pagan origin. It is also expected to allow tourists without visas to visit a number of areas of the country. In addition, conditions will be created to increase the flow of pilgrims by 2030: up to 30 million people a year! The latter project looks unrealistic, because it is comparable to the current population of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is opening itself to the world

One example of the Kingdom's turn to openness was the rapid chess tournament (rapid and blitz), held in the Kingdom at the end of December 2017. The paradox is that recently, in 2015, the Saudi ulama released a fatwa banning chess, since the game supposedly took time and could lead to hostility between

players. However, the history of chess indicates that it is the Arabs that chess owes its popularity in the world. Many medieval Arab authors wrote about the game invented in the V-VI centuries in India. The Indian name *chaturanga* in the Arab world has turned into a *shatrange*. Chess came to Europe in the 7th century through Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula, ruled at that time by Arabs.

The tournament in Saudi Arabia was dedicated to King Salman. Having received the right to host the tournament from the International Chess Federation, Riyadh set its conditions. Players from Israel, Iran and Qatar wishing to participate were denied. However, among 240 players there were women from 70 countries who were offered a special dress code: dark trousers and sweaters that covered the neck.

In April 2018, a public film screening was held at the King Abdullah Financial Center in Riyadh. It was attended by the cream of the Saudi society on special invitations. This was the first film show over the past 40 years. It was announced that by 2030 two thousand movie theaters would be built in the country. Ahead of criticism from the clergy, the Ministry of Information and Culture of the Kingdom issued a statement stating that all films would be screened for compliance with Sharia law and the moral values of Saudi society. However, the supreme mufti of the Kingdom, Sheikh Abdel Aziz ibn Abdullah al-Sheikh, criticized the plan of the construction of cinemas and the issuance of licenses for organizing concerts, believing that in film screenings and concerts "there is nothing good, they are morally corrupting, they strike a blow at values and give rise to mixing floors. "

Fashion Week, which was attended by fashion designers from 14 countries, was no less criticized. The events held in the Kingdom indicate that the fact that film screenings and fashion shows have already been held several times in neighboring countries has not passed unnoticed for the ruling elite. It is interesting to note that only women attended the show in Riyadh. The men accompanying them were in the next room.

Abandon radical tendencies in Islam

As you know, Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Wahhabi movement in Islam. In the 1980s in response to the Islamic revolution in Iran, the measures that influenced liberal trends in the Moslem world were taken there. It was then that cinemas were closed in the Kingdom, etc. Somewhat earlier, with great difficulty, television broadcasting was organized in the Kingdom. Naturally, the first program (1965) was devoted to reading the Quran. For many years, Wahhabi clerics opposed television, for they consider the depiction of people immoral. You can imagine their current attitude to cinema, fashion shows, women driving and all the innovations that the Crown Prince offers in order to rid the Kingdom of the image of the dense Middle Ages.

Obviously, starting his reforms, MBS understood that Wahhabi Islam would become a brake to implementation of his projects. At the investment forum in Riyadh (10.24.2017), he announced the need to abandon religious radicalism. "We will return to what was before – to moderate Islam, open to the world and all religions ... We will not wait 30 years, but we will immediately strike at extremist ideology," the prince said. MBS was certainly cunning, for Wahhabism has never been moderate. However, the rejection of its radical form is included in the plan to change the image of the country. Moreover, Wahhabism is not limited to the territory of the Kingdom. In 2007, 2 billion were spent on the promotion of this doctrine, and in 2015 even 40 billion. In addition, if the Kingdom fulfills its ambitious plans, then conflict with the sheikhs already opposed to the reforms cannot be avoided.

In his speaking tours abroad, the prince, as an excuse, said that the Kingdom supported Wahhabism "during the Cold War era at the request of the Allies" in order to impede the influence of the Soviet Union in Moslem countries. He keeps repeating that one should abandon radical tendencies and "return to the

religion of moderation and tolerance." Nevertheless, we must not forget that the MBS's plans are essentially a challenge to the ash-Sheikh clan, headed by the supreme mufti, who is backed by the descendants of Muhammad al-Wahhab. This clan today occupies an exclusive position in the Kingdom.

However, the first steps in terms of restricting the power of the sheikhs have already been taken: at first, the religious police were forbidden to arrest people, and then it was disbanded and reassigned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Anti-corruption campaign: its goals and results

In November 2017, an anti-corruption committee was created in the Kingdom for the first time, the heir to the throne became the initiator of its creation, as well as its head. On the night of November 5, 11 princes were arrested (including the richest of them, Walid bin Talal), 4 current ministers, dozens of former heads of various departments and large businessmen. The day before that the head of the National Guard, Prince Mutaib ibn Abdallah, as well the Minister of Economy and Planning and Fleet Commander were removed from their offices. Later, the French agency Boulevard Voltaire reported that 1300 people were arrested within 48 hours. Prince Abdul Aziz ibn Fahd, who put up resistance, was killed on arrest. The ground for the arrests – corruption and embezzlement of state funds – was announced by the king himself on national television. The bank assets of the arrested were frozen. The airport was closed to private flights. The arrested were placed in the Ritz Carlton hotel, previously freed from lodging. The princes were forced to sleep on mattresses on floor for several people in the room.

Earlier, in August 2017, in Saudi Arabia, mass dismissals and even detention of religious figures, imams and theologians began. In September, information appeared about the arrest of three famous theologians – Salman al-Ouda, Avad al-Karni and Ali al-Omari, as well as the author of the book "Moslems and

Western Civilization“ al-Hawali. It is assumed that the prince wanted to reform the Ulema Council in order to reduce its political importance.

These events generated a lot of rumors. The prevailing opinion was that the king acted that way in favor of the new heir to the throne, appointed only in the summer of 2017, trying to concentrate practically all the levers of power in his hands. It became known that all those arrested were charged with economic charges (using one's official position for the purpose of generating income, extorting bribes, money laundering, etc.). In particular, Prince Mutaib ibn Abdallah, the former head of the Ministry of National Guard, was accused of embezzlement, hiring fictitious employees and fraud with state contracts for the purchase of walkie-talkies and bulletproof vests; Prince Turki, the former governor of Riyadh, was accused of stealing in the process of construction of the metro, etc.

Analyzing the prerequisites for the arrests, the French agency Voltaire Boulevard recalled that literally on the eve of the events described, the son-in-law of the American President Jared Kushner paid an unofficial visit to the Kingdom. Kushner spent three days in close contact with the crown prince. Observers believe that the pretext – allegations of corruption and the very fact of such a hasty creation of an anti-corruption committee – is precisely Kushner's idea. Later it became known that Kushner proposed using the employees of PMC Academy (formerly Blackwater) as jailers. Thierry Meyssan, the editor-in-chief of Voltaire Boulevard, in his article “Jared Kushner Rebuilds the Middle East,” directly points to the backstage role of the American president's son-in-law in the events in Saudi Arabia.

We recall also that in the summer of 2017, when the candidacy of Muhammad ibn Salman was discussed by the Oath Council, 31 of the 34 members of the Council voted for him. Naturally, behind each of the members of the Council there are whole clans, whose attitude towards the prince can become a hindrance to the implementation of his ambitious projects.

Obviously, it was on the advice of his American friend that MBS decided, under the pretext of combating corruption, to ease the wallets of his relatives, whose funds he was going to assign to implementation of the planned projects.

Information about the princes' "imprisonment" was minimal. It is known that Prince Mutaib ibn Abdullah, was under arrest for 3 weeks. But it was he who, more than any other prince, had the right to the status of crown prince ... Surprise was caused by the arrest of Prince Valid ibn Talal, since the latter, a well-known liberal, a supporter of the participation of Saudi women in various spheres of the Kingdom's life, repeatedly publicly supported the crown prince in his endeavors. However, as a result, the arrested princes agreed to transfer part of their funds to the treasury. Some sources reported that the means collected amounted to \$ 100 billion. The MBS himself said that most of those suspected of corruption agreed to a pre-trial settlement with the nationalization of part of their fortunes. Later it became known that Prince al-Walid ibn Talal paid \$ 6 billion for his release.

Colin Kal, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East at the Obama administration, assessing the events in Riyadh, said: "It looks like the final step towards consolidating the powers of Muhammad ibn Salman by eliminating possible pretenders." In fact, the arrest of the princes was only a link in a chain of a series of measures taken to prevent coup attempts in the Kingdom. The journalists who had the imprudence to speak out against appointing MBS as the heir to the throne, were also arrested because the plans he announced testified that radical changes awaited the Kingdom.

Nevertheless, observers noted that the situation remained uncertain, primarily for foreign investors, which the Kingdom needs at present. Christian K. Ulrichsen, a Middle East expert at Rice University (Houston), believes that "cleansing some of the world's most recognized businessmen is likely to increase

the political risk of doing business in Saudi Arabia and lower the confidence of international investors.”

It is also logical to suppose stirring up of the opposition to the new course, primarily within the royal family, as well as among the clergy, dissatisfied with the prince's intentions to modernize the country. The prince was already accused of ill-conceived intervention in the civil war in Yemen, tightening the anti-Iranian position and worsening relations with Qatar.

Conclusion

The population of the Kingdom perceived the reforms in two ways. The fact is that more than 60% of the country's population is young people under 30 years old. The fertility boom that began in the 1960s increased the country's population by more than 6 times. Moreover, as we have already noted, a third of young people are affected by unemployment. Until now, much attention has been paid to the study of religion in the field of education (almost half of the study time). Young people choose theology and culturology, the exact sciences do not attract young Saudis. This indicates stereotypes rooted in Saudi society when foreigners were brought to engineering and other specialties that require special training. Youth perceived the arrests of the princes as a sign of change, while older Saudis fear a loss of stability in the state. Almost half of the population still lives in accordance with Bedouin customs and Wahhabi principles.

The members of the royal family also hold different views. Most members of the royal family live by Western standards. They have long and widely used Western technologies, many have received education in Europe and the USA, regularly travel abroad, and some women from their families set the tone for social events in Europe. There are also dissidents - some princes living in Europe. In particular, Prince Khalid ibn Farhan, who has lived in Germany since 2013, whose father Prince Talal ibn Abdul Aziz As-Saud, known as the “Red Prince” because of his calls to

establish a constitutional monarchy in the Kingdom, said that the current situation in the Kingdom is fraught with a coup d'etat that could turn the Kingdom into a center of global terrorism. According to him, "if Saudi Arabia plunges into chaos, global chaos will arise and it will affect not only the Middle East region, but also Europe." "The prince believes that the reason lies in the loss of "intra-Saudi unity." He also negatively assessed the consequences of anti-corruption actions of Prince Muhammad: "It was a shock for the whole family, for key family members were detained, thereby suffering general humiliation. The royal family today is experiencing undermining their authority in the eyes of their people. This move of the Crown Prince undermines the legitimacy of the government ... It also undermines the attitude of the people towards the ruling family."

There is practically no information about the mood among ordinary Saudis. Observers note that it is now important to maintain stability among the ruling class, leaders of family clans and tribes that form the general mood in the country.

Summing up the analysis of the proposed reforms in the Kingdom, let us turn to the opinion of the Saudi researcher al-Bassam B.A., who described the reforms carried out under the previous Saudi monarchs as "desperate attempts of the regime to save the country from sliding into the abyss of anarchy." Assessing all attempts to reform the state system (until 2012 - O. B.), the author notes that "reforms were undertaken with the aim of promoting the concentration of political power in the hands of the royal family and not by no means increase the participation of the population in making important political decisions ...". Obviously, this conclusion is also relevant today.

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