

T.C.

MARMARA UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (ENG)

**MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN'S REFORMS IN SAUDI ARABIA AND THEIR
RELATIONS WITH WAHHABISM**

Master's Thesis

YUSUF KAZIM BUYRUK

ISTANBUL, 2025

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Istanbul, (2025)

ÖZET

SUUDİ ARABİSTAN'DA MUHAMMED BİN SELMAN REFORMLARI VE VEHHABİLİKLE İLİŞKİSİ

Bu tez Suudi Arabistan'da MBS liderliğinde gerçekleşen reform sürecini ülkenin kurucu ideolojisi olan Vehhabilikle ilişkisi bağlamında ele almaktadır. Bu açıdan tezde cevaplanmaya çalışılan iki soru bulunmaktadır. 1-) MBS reformları Vehhabilikten bir kopuşu mu simgelemektedir? 2-) Eğer böyleyse bu kopuşun sebebi nedir? Bu çalışmada MBS reformlarının Vehhabilikten keskin bir kopuşu simgelediği iddia edilmektedir. Sonrasında ise bu kopuş sürecinin sebepleri açıklanmaya çalışılmaktadır. Literatürde önce çıkan iki temel argüman bulunmaktadır. Bu argümanlar güç konsolidasyonu ve rejim bekasıdır. Tez, güç konsolidasyonu argümanını geçerli bulur ancak tüm reform sürecini açıklamakta yetersiz kaldığını ve rejimin karşı karşıya kaldığı beka sorunlarını göz ardı ettiğini savunur. Dolayısıyla MBS'in kısa vadede gücünü konsolide ettiği kabul edilse de reformların arkasındaki asıl motivasyonun rejimin bekası olduğu iddia edilir. Rejim bekasını savunan argüman ise Vehhabiliği sorunun bir parçası olarak ele almaktadır ancak bu çalışma bu argümanı yeniden inşa ederek Vehhabilik merkezinde bir rejim bekası anlatısı oluşturmaktadır. Rejimin bekasını tehdit eden ve Suud'da kısa vadede varoluşsal sorunlara sebep olabilecek üç temel sorun tespit edilmiştir. İlk sorun geleceği belirsiz olan petrole dayalı ekonomik model. İkincisi toplumda özellikle genç nesil ve kadınlar arasında var olan sosyal huzursuzluk. Üçüncü problem ise Suudi Arabistan'ın özellikle 2001 sonrası ciddi derecede uluslararası baskı görmesine sebep olan müfredat ve kadın hakları konusudur. Bu sorunların çözümü ise Vehhabiliğin terkine bağlıdır. Sonuç olarak, MBS liderliğinde Suudi Arabistan daha otokratik bir devlet haline gelirken aynı zamanda beka problemi olan sorunları çözmektedir. Bu sorunların çözümü ve rejimin bekası ise Vehhabi ideolojinin terkine bağlıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Muhammed bin Selman (MBS), Vehhabilik, Reform, Rejim Bekası, Güç Konsolidasyonu

ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the reform process led by MBS in Saudi Arabia in the context of its relationship with Wahhabism, the country's founding ideology. In this regard, the thesis attempts to answer two questions. 1-) Do MBS reforms symbolize a break with Wahhabism? 2-) If so, what is the reason for this break? This study argues that MBS reforms symbolize a sharp break with Wahhabism. Subsequently, the reasons for this break are explained. There are two main arguments that emerge in literature. These arguments are power consolidation and regime survival. The thesis finds the power consolidation argument valid but argues that it is insufficient to explain the entire reform process and ignores the survival issues facing the regime. Therefore, while it is accepted that MBS consolidated his power in the short term, it is argued that the real motivation behind the reforms is the survival of the regime. The argument defending the regime's survival considers Wahhabism as part of the problem, but this study reconstructs this argument and creates a narrative of regime survival centered on Wahhabism. Three fundamental problems that threaten the regime's survival and could cause existential problems for Saudi Arabia in the short term have been identified. The first is the uncertain future of the oil-based economic model. The second is social unrest, particularly among the younger generation and women. The third problem is the curriculum and women's rights, which have caused Saudi Arabia to face serious international pressure, especially since 2001. The solution to these problems lies in abandoning Wahhabism. In brief, under the leadership of MBS, Saudi Arabia is becoming a more autocratic state while also resolving issues that threaten its survival. The resolution of these issues and the survival of the regime depend on the abandonment of Wahhabism.

Keywords: Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Wahhabism, Reform, Regime Survival, Power Consolidation

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Mohammed bin Salman	(MBS)
International Monetary Fund	(IMF)
Gross Domestic Product	(GDP)
The Arabian American Oil Company	(ARAMCO)



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1. INTRODUCTION

Various ideological views have emerged in the Middle East at various times and then disappeared from the historical stage. In Egypt, there was Nasserism; in Syria, there was Assadism, a personalized form of Baathism; in Iraq, there was Baathism shaped around the figure of Saddam Hussein, etc. While these ideologies provided serious legitimacy to their leaders at the time, their legitimacy eroded as their influence waned. In Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism has been the ideology that has provided this legitimacy for Saudi dynasty since 1744.

Since its establishment, Wahhabism, the official ideology of the Saudi state, has influenced many areas, from education to social life, women's rights, and relations with other states. However, since Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince in 2017, the future of this ideology has been debated. Women, who were not allowed to drive until 2017, can now attend Justin Bieber concerts in their own cars and enjoy themselves in mixed-gender environments without much interference regarding their clothes. They can also leave, and watch matches at the stadium to follow the women's football league.

However, on the other hand, activists defending women's right to drive are being arrested, and the royal family is being held in a hotel, effectively imprisoned. Worst of all, Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist critical of the regime, was brutally murdered in an official building such as a consulate, and his body was dismembered and removed from the consulate. This makes it difficult to understand what is happening in Saudi Arabia. On one side, there are activities that have not been carried out for years and a lack of flexibility, while on the other side, there is oppression and authoritarianism.

This complicated situation makes it difficult to understand what is happening in Saudi Arabia. For this reason, one of the main objectives of this thesis is to understand and explain this situation. Therefore, there are several fundamental questions to be answered in this thesis. 1-) Is the Saudi Arabian state abandoning Wahhabism, the official ideology it has embraced since its founding? The answer to this question forms the starting point of this thesis, and the short answer is yes. After answering yes to this question, a more complicated question arises: Why is Saudi Arabia abandoning Wahhabism, which has provided it with legitimacy for many years and represents one of the two swords in the country's emblem? The answer to this question will be answered after a brief evaluation of the existing literature. However, it would not be wrong to say that these two questions form the basis of this thesis.

1.1. Overview of Literature

Before examining the literature on MBS reforms in Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to look at the general theoretical framework to better understand ideological change. The general theoretical

framework has examined a number of cases to identify the causes of ideological transformations. The examination of these cases has revealed three distinct groups. In other words, states or leaders have changed their ideology or compromised on their existing ideology for three reasons.

A group of countries are experiencing economic crises and are undergoing ideological changes as a solution to these crises. The goal of these countries is to end the economic crisis as quickly as possible. These countries are generally former Soviet's bloc countries and have implemented economic liberalization. For example, during the Gorbachev era, Russia implemented economic liberalization by compromising on and partially changing its strict Soviet ideology due to economic problems. Poland also faced similar economic difficulties and crises, and the state underwent an ideological transformation to resolve them. The example of Hungary is like the others, and economic liberalization was also implemented there. As a final example, China compromised its strict Maoist ideology and attempted to resolve a major economic crisis accompanied by famine. In short, due to the economic crises they faced, these countries revised and changed the ideologies they had embraced for many years.

In the second group, leaders have generally undergone ideological transformations with the aim of consolidating their personal power. The example of Anwar Sadat in Egypt is a good illustration of this. Anwar Sadat changed the existing Nasserist ideology and consolidated his power by creating an elite loyal to him through the reforms he implemented. A similar situation occurred in Syria during the time of Bashar al-Assad. He also revised the strict ideology implemented by his father and, in doing so, consolidated his power by creating an elite loyal to him. In Iraq, Saddam revised the Baath ideology and underwent a partial ideological transformation to repair his damaged image and consolidate his power. In short, the ideological change in this group was carried out to strengthen the personal power and authority of the leaders.

In the third group, the main motivation for ideological change is the survival of the regime. Especially in countries with a monarchical system, the regime can make such ideological transformations to protect itself in the long term. Jordan is a good example of this. Economic problems and oppressive rule in Jordan led to various protests, and King Hussein implemented liberalization reforms in the 1990s. These reforms led to ideological change in Jordan, albeit partially. The reason for these reforms is clearly the survival of the regime.

All three arguments can be found in the literature on reform activities in Saudi Arabia, but although the economy-based argument is mentioned in all studies, there is no work in the literature that attributes the purpose of these reforms and ideological change solely to the economy. Additionally, while countries that undergo ideological change due to an economic crisis already have an existing crisis, Saudi Arabia

currently does not face an economic crisis, though certain problems are anticipated in the future. For this reason, the Saudi case differs from previous cases in terms of an economy-centered explanation.

On the other hand, two different arguments have emerged to explain the ideological transformation in Saudi Arabia. According to the first group, Mohammed bin Salman is pursuing reform and repression simultaneously, and despite various social openings, MBS is becoming the absolute leader of the country from a political perspective. MBS's reforms are merely cosmetic and serve as a mask for his rising power and authority. (Al-Rasheed, 2021; Stenslie, 2018) Mohammed bin Salman is using the reforms to consolidate his power and establish an absolute sultanate.(Davidson, 2021)

According to the second group, MBS is currently consolidating his power, but the regime has long-term plans. These authors argue that there are stress points that have been building up in the Saudi regime for many years. For example, unemployment is rising among the younger generation, women are deprived of many social rights, and the irregularity of oil revenues is affecting citizens' welfare, etc. These and similar problems are waiting to be resolved in Saudi Arabia. MBS reforms, on the other hand, have been developed as a solution to these problems and are designed to fix the worn-out system. (Inan, 2023; Willner, 2022) This group explains the reforms more from a regime survival perspective.

In short, there are three main arguments in the general theoretical framework for ideological change. These are economic liberalization, which is generally applied as a solution to economic crises and problems; power consolidation reforms carried out to increase the existing power of leaders or to strengthen their damaged authority; and finally, ideological change for the survival of the regime when its survival is threatened. In addition, the arguments explaining the reforms in Saudi Arabia are generally evaluated in two groups. According to the first group, MBS reforms are cosmetic in nature and serve to consolidate power behind the scenes. The other group acknowledges that the regime has strengthened its power but claims that its long-term strategy is to solve existing problems.

When evaluating studies on Saudi Arabia in the literature, certain shortcomings are apparent. The power consolidation argument treats reforms as a mere symbolic process and focuses on the increase in political power. This approach does not say much about why an official ideology such as Wahhabism, which had been applied for many years, changed. For this reason, this argument is insufficient in explaining why Wahhabism was abandoned. The regime survival argument, on the other hand, treats Wahhabism as part of the problem, but other issues take precedence over Wahhabism in this argument as well. For these reasons, there are no works in the literature that focus on Wahhabism. I will focus on Wahhabism and argue that the new solution being constructed under the charisma of MBS requires abandoning Wahhabism.

1.2. The Argument in Brief

Most of Mohammed bin Salman's reforms are related to Wahhabism and are reforms against it. He had already signaled such reforms. In 2017, we are moving towards moderate Islam and cannot spend another 30 years dealing with extreme ideas. Here, the reference to 30 years refers to the period after 1979, and MBS claims that Saudi Arabia already had a moderate Islam ideology before 1979. This claim is not very consistent, but MBS's declaration of breaking away from strict Wahhabism is significant, and as will be shown in this study, the Saudi state has seriously abandoned Wahhabism, which was its official ideology. This is the first argument of the thesis.

Secondly, the question of why MBS abandoned Wahhabism has come to the fore. Mohammed bin Salman has constructed a vision and modernization program based on his own image and persona. While it is true that MBS has been consolidating his power day by day, the question of why he abandoned Wahhabism or why he continues to insist on reforms despite consolidating his power remains unaddressed in this argument. In my opinion, MBS's goal is regime survival through his own image, and since the regime is intertwined with his person, this also means survival for MBS. In other words, MBS's survival is also dependent on the success of reforms. Therefore, the primary motivation for reforms is regime survival, and Wahhabism gains significance at this point. The solution to Saudi Arabia's existing problems lies in abandoning Wahhabism.

The reason why Wahhabism must be abandoned lies in the solution to existing problems. There are three fundamental problems and stress points that need to be resolved in Saudi Arabia. The first is economic dependence on oil. The second is social unrest, and the third is issues related to education and women's rights, which are under pressure from the international arena. Economic solutions require diversification, including increased employment for women, improving the country's image on the international stage, and opening new tourist areas and sectors, among other things. The solutions to these issues, which will be explained in detail later, depend on abandoning Wahhabism. Social unrest is generally found among the younger generation and women. The solutions to these issues also depend on abandoning Wahhabism. Almost all the problems with the curriculum and women's rights stem from Wahhabism, so the solution to these problems also depends on abandoning Wahhabism.

In short, the Wahhabi ideology is worn out and has created stress points in the Saudi state for many years. The solution to these problems, i.e., regime survival, depends on abandoning Wahhabism. Since MBS has structured regime survival around himself, for example by not opting for a more participatory political path, MBS's survival is also dependent on the abandonment of the official ideology.

1.3. Methodology

The main research country of this thesis is Saudi Arabia and the transformation of the official ideology in this country. For this reason, this is a case study. The transformation of the official ideology in the case of Saudi Arabia is examined. To see the transformation, it is undoubtedly necessary to see the influence and power of the official ideology, namely Wahhabism, within the historical course. For this reason, the historical trajectory of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia has been explained. This will allow us to benefit from a strong aspect of case analysis and enable detailed study within the case itself rather than generalizations. As a result, the power and influence of Wahhabism have been examined in detail and across different layers throughout Saudi history.

In addition, we have taken advantage of other opportunities provided by the case study. Turning points in Saudi history, particularly the 1979 seizure of the Kaaba and the September 11 attacks in 2001, have been examined in detail, revealing the causal mechanisms behind these events. Furthermore, decrees issued after 2017, statements by MBS, interviews, reports prepared by civil society organizations, and academic literature were examined to concretely demonstrate the transformation of the official ideology.

In addition to case analysis, the process tracing method will be used to better illustrate the causal mechanisms of the event and to view it holistically. From a historical perspective, we consider the process tracing method appropriate for our study to examine how Wahhabism gained a foothold in the country's administration, how the state acted during turning points such as 1979 and 2001, and how Wahhabism was affected by these events. The process tracing method also provides us with positive opportunities to see how reforms developed after MBS, not only from a historical perspective, but also how Wahhabi ideology was abandoned so abruptly. Thanks to this method, the transformation of the official ideology will emerge holistically, especially in conjunction with moments of rupture. Additionally, the causal mechanisms between events will be revealed, making the ideological transformation in Saudi Arabia more detailed and evident.

1.4. Overview of the Chapters

The thesis basically consists of four chapters. The first chapter is a literature review. This chapter begins with a section that shows the reasons for ideological transformations and forms the general theoretical framework. Following this general theoretical framework, the literature on reforms in Saudi Arabia is evaluated and explained in categories. This is the literature review section.

The second chapter provides a historical background for the thesis. This chapter summarizes the establishment and history of Saudi Arabia. In addition to political history, this historical background examines the relationship between the state and Wahhabism, which is particularly important for the thesis. Events where political administration and Wahhabism came into conflict are also addressed. This reveals how Wahhabism established itself within the state system and to what extent it influenced people's lives.

The third chapter focuses entirely on the reforms carried out by Mohammed bin Salman after he became crown prince. This chapter shows how Wahhabism was eliminated and how the state broke away from this ideology. In this chapter, the reforms are discussed under four main headings. The first heading covers women's rights and their place in social life. The second heading outlines reforms in social and cultural areas. The third heading addresses the power of Wahhabi institutions and legal reforms, and the fourth heading covers reforms in education and the curriculum. This section seeks to explain the extent to which the reforms of the MBS era have led to a break with Wahhabism.

The last chapter explains the reasons behind the reforms, namely the break with Wahhabism. The existing literature is evaluated and the shortcomings of the arguments presented in this literature are pointed out. Subsequently, using both arguments, and particularly by reconstructing the regime survival argument, an attempt is made to show the reasons behind the break with Wahhabism. In doing so, two time periods have been identified. The first is the period before MBS and the period after MBS. The period before MBS is the period up to 2017. The period after MBS began in 2017, when MBS became crown prince, and is still ongoing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Causes of Regime-Level Ideological Change

In order to make sense of ideological change in Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to establish a general theoretical framework of ideological transformation. In this way, it will be better understood where the transformation in Saudi Arabia is positioned in the general literature. However, a problem arises in this regard: In the world, ideological transformation is understood as the transformation of mainstream ideologies. For example, the transition of some of the post-Soviet countries from communism to liberal democracy is of this kind. In other words, when ideological transformation is mentioned in literature, the first ideologies that come to mind are communism, liberalism, socialism or fascism and etc.

However, these are not the only ideologies that dominate countries. Baathism, which was effective in many Arab countries at certain periods, can also be mentioned as an ideology. Nasserism in Egypt, Kemalism in Turkey and Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia are also ideologies. Therefore, the ideologies that are effective in countries do not necessarily consist of ideologies such as liberalism and communism, but other ideologies can also be effective. For this reason, such a problem arises for us in terms of creating a general theoretical framework.

To overcome this problem in literature, ideological transformations in different parts of the world have been analyzed. In other words, the ideological transformations taking place in different countries around the world were identified and categorized. After this analysis, three different reasons explaining ideological transformations emerged. In other words, states have generally changed their ideologies for three different reasons.

First, a group of countries implemented economic liberalization due to economic problems and changed their ideology in this context. Second, another group of countries, leaders changed their ideology to consolidate and protect their personal power. Finally, some countries have changed their ideology to protect the survival of the regime and the state. These reasons are not completely independent of each other, for example, a country may have undergone ideological transformation to improve its economy and to protect the survival of the regime, but the main point here is to find the main motivation and the main reason for ideological transformations, so these reasons are separated from each other.

We mention that one of the reasons for ideological change is economic liberalization. In fact, political liberalization is also applied to some extent in this transformation, but since the main goal of these countries is to improve the economy, the main change takes place in the economic sphere and

limited political liberalization is used to support this economic change. After this brief explanation, it would be appropriate to explain what economic liberalization means and what role it plays in ideological transformations. In countries where economic liberalization has taken place, it is obvious that the economy is under state control because liberalization is done in the absence of liberality. Therefore, in countries where economic liberalization is carried out, a statist attitude prevails in the economy, although the scale varies.

2.1.1. Ideological Change to Fix the Economy

State control of the economy is generally seen in countries with socialist and derivative ideologies. In such countries, the state has a say in many areas, including the economy. In other words, the state has all kinds of authority in the economy and manages this area. In such countries, issues such as the formation of a competitive market and foreign investors investing in the country are largely absent. In addition, such countries do not benefit from the share of global trade sufficiently. For these and similar reasons, such countries faced serious economic crises, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

As a solution to these crises, some countries adopted and implemented the principle of economic liberalization, usually with limited political liberalization. According to this principle, countries flexed the state-controlled economy and aimed to overcome economic problems by liberalizing strict state control in this field. In other words, states have made concessions from the ideologies of socialism and its derivatives, which they have adopted and implemented, and have changed these ideologies to a certain extent. Examples of these countries are the Soviet Union, Poland, Hungary and China. When the ideological transformation in these countries is examined, economic liberalization emerges as a common point. In other words, economic liberalization is the first category that emerges when creating the general theoretical framework. To see this more clearly, the ideological transformation of these countries will be briefly explained respectively.

By the 1980s, the Soviet Union was facing serious problems, especially in economic terms. While these problems were showing their effect day by day, Gorbachev became the head of the Communist Party in 1985. Gorbachev, who was different from the Soviet leaders of the past, was aware of the economic downturn and his main goal was to fix the economy. (Lapidus, 1987) For this reason, Soviet people started to see two words in the media. These words were Perestroika and Glasnost. “*Perestroika*” literally meant restructuring while “*Glasnost*” meant openness. (Russia - Perestroika, Glasnost, Reforms | Britannica, 2025) With this strategy Gorbachev tried to overcome the deep economic crisis of the Soviet Union. It would be useful to analyze these concepts a little deeper.

“Perestroika”, as the name suggests, is a restructuring of the economy. When Gorbachev first came to office, he believed that the economy would improve with small changes, but as time passed, the poor state of the economy led him to change his strategy, and he realized that he needed to make broader changes. *“Perestroika”* is essentially aimed at reducing state control of the economy and a partial transition to a market economy. (*Russia - Perestroika, Glasnost, Reforms* | *Britannica*, 2025) Therefore, the first step was to drastically reduce state intervention in the economy. In addition, various privatization activities were carried out to attract foreign investment. In other words, the economy was partially liberalized. However, it was not an easy task to liberalize an economy that had been rigidly state-centered for many years, and various problems were encountered. Considering the collapse of the Soviet Union, it can be said that this policy did not achieve the desired success at that time.

The second concept was *“Glasnost”*. This can be partly considered as a step towards democratization. The Soviet Union had a statist identity in the economy as well as a controlling identity in other areas of life. For this reason, Gorbachev wanted the economic reforms to be successful by reforming this area as well. In the reforms made in this field, first, the pressure on the media was tried to be reduced. In this way, it was tried to ensure that political issues and problems could be discussed openly. (*Russia - Perestroika, Glasnost, Reforms* | *Britannica*, 2025) These and similar partial democratization steps were taken, and the reforms were aimed at being successful. However, as with perestroika, these reforms did not work very well, and the Soviet Union collapsed. *“Glasnost”* can be briefly summarized in this way.

When the Soviet Union is analyzed in this way, it cannot be denied that it had an ideological transformation. The Soviet Union, which had been ruled by the communist party with communist principles for many years, was in a sense forced to reform under Gorbachev. When the conditions under which these reforms emerged and the content of the reforms are analyzed, it can be said that the main reason for these reforms was to improve the economy. In other words, while the Soviet Union was experiencing a serious economic crisis, it was thought that the way to solve it was to partially liberalize the economy and partially democratize the political system. Gorbachev implemented these reforms, but the economic crisis could not be solved and the Soviet Union collapsed.

Another country with a seriously troubled economy was Poland. Poland was ruled by a communist regime as the People's Republic. Located in the Soviet bloc, the state had similar characteristics to the Soviet Union. By the 1970s and 1980s, Poland began to experience serious economic problems. Per capita income had fallen, inflation had soared, and foreign debt had skyrocketed. In addition, jobs were scarce, and unemployment was high. There were also problems with the supply of basic consumer goods. Public access to these goods was extremely limited. In other words, by the end of the 1980s Poland was in a serious economic crisis. In response, the Balcerowicz economic policy was

introduced,(Sachs & Lipton, 1990) although democratization had begun in the country the year before. These processes show that Poland experienced an ideological transformation.

Having abandoned communist ideology, Poland has also moved away from strict state control of the economy and towards liberalization. The main objective of this plan was to transition to a market economy. For this reason, various steps were taken. First, the state's control over the economy was abandoned. Then, privatization of institutions was started as a requirement of the market economy. liberal policies were followed in the economy. In addition, agreements were signed with institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, and various aids were received from them.(Oyrzanowski & Paleczny-Zapp, 1993; Sachs & Lipton, 1990) Foreign investors were also allowed to enter the country. These policies shook the Polish economy severely at first, but then the economy started to progress and develop. Poland's economy recovered and Poland became a democratic country after leaving the communist ideology.

As can be seen, Poland has experienced an ideological transformation from communist ideology to democracy. There may be political, social, cultural, etc. reasons for this change. However, when the economic situation of Poland before the change is analyzed, it is seen that the economy also played a significant role in this change. Considering the long years of economic crises, it can be understood that the main motive for the change in Poland was the economy. In this case, Poland, our second example, also underwent an ideological transformation and tried to liberalize the economy and politics. Unlike the Soviet Union, the reforms were successful here and Poland continued its existence with a new ideology.

Hungary is another country that made an ideological change due to economic problems. In the bipolar world, Hungary was on the side of the Soviet Union in the Eastern Bloc and shared the communist ideology with the Soviet Union. This ideology, as it is known, had various principles, from politics to economy and from economy to social life. The economy was mostly state-controlled and economic problems emerged in many Eastern Bloc countries. Hungary was one of these countries and went through difficult times economically. Especially towards the end of the 1960s, the economy had deteriorated and there was a need to reform the economy. Therefore, in 1968 the Hungarian government decided to reform the economy. This reform was called the "*New Economic Mechanism*".(Bartlett, 2011)

The new economic plan had several key objectives. The first objective was to loosen and reduce the state's rigid control over the economy. The ruling cadre of the state thought that the state having so much control over the economy had a bad effect on the economy and therefore tried to reduce it. As a result, businesses were given more initiative in decision-making processes. Partial autonomy was also given to

enterprises in foreign trade, thus reducing state control in this area.(Bauer, 1990) In short, the state tried to transition to a partial market economy by making concessions to communist ideology. However, this transition was partial and could perhaps be called a socialist market economy because certain principles of socialism continued to be practiced. In this way, a volatile program was followed and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hungary became a democracy and adopted the market economy system.

As can be seen, the Hungarian state was a state that adopted the communist ideology in the administration of the country and adopted these principles in many areas of state administration.(*History of Hungary - Hungary in the Soviet Orbit* | *Britannica*, n.d.) However, the economic problems pushed the state to take some measures, and the state tried to overcome this problem by trying to implement a partial market economy. In this case there is clearly an ideological shift. The main reason for this shift is the state's attempt to fix the economy.

As a final example, it would be appropriate to mention the People's Republic of China under this heading. The Chinese state had adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology under the leadership of Mao and was governed under the principles of this ideology.(*Mao Zedong - Chinese Revolution, Communism, Chairman* | *Britannica*, 2025) As time passed, the eponymous Maoist ideology developed and survived as a variant of Marxism. (*What Is Maoism?*, n.d.)Mao ruled the country from 1949 until his death in 1976. During this time, he carried out various reforms in line with his ideology and adopted certain principles in state administration.

In terms of our subject, it would be appropriate to examine the principles related to the economy. Mao adopted the principle of self-reliance in China and set the goal of growth without the influence of foreign powers. In addition, as a requirement of communism, he kept the economy under his control as in many other fields. He also tried to develop heavy industry and development plans were prepared. In addition to this, he implemented the great leap forward plan.(Li & Yang, 2005) All these projects largely failed. Finally, in the 1960s, he launched the Cultural Revolution.

If we evaluate Mao's activities briefly, Mao's activities, especially his economic activities, were largely unsuccessful. As a result of his great leap forward, one of the biggest famines in human history broke out and more than 30 million people died in the country.(Li & Yang, 2005) There were also serious crises after the Cultural Revolution, and the economy was in a bad state. In short, Mao and his ideology went into crisis. Deng Xiaoping, who took office 2 years after his death, started to make serious reforms, especially in the field of economy. Unlike Mao, he opened to the outside and the West, thus attracting the attention of foreign investors to the country. He loosened the state's strict control over the economy. By reducing state control in the field of agriculture, he provided farmers with serious independence. In

other words, it integrated into the capitalist economic system to a certain extent.(Chow, 2018) This shows that Deng achieved a serious ideological transformation, especially in economic terms.

As a result of economic reforms, China has made significant progress and is now one of the world's best economies. The post-Mao reforms have seen the transformation of the Maoist ideology and the complete abandonment of its principles, especially in the field of economy. In other words, China has undergone a significant ideological transformation in the post-Mao period. It can be said that the main reason for this change was the major crises in the economy. Famine is one of the biggest indicators of this. For this reason, it can be said that the main motivation for China's ideological transformation was to fix the economy.

2.1.2. Ideological Change for Consolidation of Power

The second reason cited for ideological transformations is the leaders reinforce and consolidation of personal power. In other words, political leaders transform the prevailing ideology in the country by making some changes and through this they aim to consolidate their power. Here, too, there is a transformation through political and economic liberalization, but it is not economic problems or crises that trigger the transformation. Although economic problems play a role to a certain extent, the general reason for such changes is the consolidation of the leader's power. Anwar Sadat in Egypt, Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Saddam in Iraq are examples. In this section, the examples will be explained in more detail and this argument will be better understood.

Anwar Sadat took over in 1970 after the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had a significant influence in the Arab world and kind a heroic leader.(Cooper, 2013) Gamal Abdel Nasser had a serious impact on the Arab world as well as on his own country, Egypt, and bequeathed the ideology of Nasserism, which became synonymous with his name, to the next generations. In order to better see and make sense of the existing ideological transformation, it would be appropriate to briefly mention the ideology of Nasserism.

One of the prominent features of Nasserism is the ideology of Arab nationalism. Arab identity must come before any other identity, and an Arab Union must be built on this. Based on this idea, a united Arab Republic was established with Syria in 1958, but it did not last long. Another characteristic of the Nasserist ideology is its adoption of a statist economic perspective.(Mansfield, 1973) In this type of government, there is serious state control of the economy. In addition, Nasserist ideology developed an anti-imperial method and tried to act separately from powers such as the US and the Soviets. Lastly, Nasserism is secular and distant from religious ideologies. In short, this is the ideological outlook of Egypt when Anwar Sadat came to power.

Anwar Sadat's first blow to Nasserist ideology came from the economic sphere. When Sadat came to power, Egypt was not doing well economically, and the state-controlled economy was not working. Sadat implemented various liberalization policies and significantly loosened state control over the economy. In the process, the elites close to Sadat became economically powerful and Sadat created an elite group loyal to him. On the other hand, Anwar Sadat became closer to the West and tried to establish good relations with it. (R. A. Hinnebusch, 1981) This symbolizes a certain degree of break with Nasserist ideology. In addition to economic liberalization, a certain degree of political liberalization was also implemented. While the leftist opposition was suppressed, members of the Ikhwan were supported to a certain extent. As can be seen, Anwar Sadat symbolizes a break with Nasserist ideology and an ideological change. The main purpose of this reform rhetoric was for Sadat to consolidate his power.

Another example took place in Syria under Bashar al-Assad. Bashar al-Assad took over power from his father Hafez al-Assad. Hafez al-Assad adopted the Baathist ideology as his ideology. In order to see the transformation here, it is necessary to briefly mention the Ba'ath ideology. Baathism is an ideology developed in the 1940s by Michel Aflaq and Saladin Bitar. (*Ba'ath Party | History, Ideology, Iraq, Syria, & Movement | Britannica*, 2025) The two most important stops of this ideology, which was influential in the Arab world, were Iraq under Saddam and Syria under Hafez al-Assad. This ideology has some basic features. Baathist ideology also defends the idea of Arab nationalism and Arab unity. (Devlin, 1991) There is a statist system in the economy. The state dominates not only the economy but also many other areas. Hafez al-Assad, who implemented the Baathist ideology in Syria, had these characteristics in the state administration and this was the legacy he left behind when he died.

When Bashar al-Assad took office, the economy was not in good shape, just like in Egypt, and Syria's image in the West was seriously bad. Assad therefore embarked on various reforms. In addition to partial economic privatization, he also tried to improve relations with the West. In 2005, the Baathist cadres were purged, and the door was opened to a new era. (R. Hinnebusch, 2012) Such reforms did not last long, but Assad's implementation of such reforms led to a transformation in Baathist ideology. With these reforms, Baathist ideology weakened and flexed. Assad's motivation behind these reforms was to consolidate his personal power. (Becker, 2005) like Anwar Sadat. Assad thus created a new elite group loyal to him and consolidated his power. As can be seen, the ideological transformation in Syria is driven by the leader's desire to consolidate his personal power.

Another example of ideological transformation to consolidate personal power is the Saddam era in Iraq. Saddam, like Hafez al-Assad, was a leader who adopted the Baathist ideology and implemented it in his country. (*Ba'ath Party | History, Ideology, Iraq, Syria, & Movement | Britannica*, 2025) Therefore, there were manifestations of this ideology in many areas of state administration. For example, the economy was strictly under the control of the state. The principle of secularism was fundamental in

governance, and the role of religion was severely limited and under control. However, Saddam undertook some reforms and there was a certain degree of break with Baathist ideology.

The first of Saddam's reforms was in the economic sphere. In 1979, a kind of privatization was carried out in the field of agriculture. Public control was loosened to a certain extent, and a certain degree of market liberalization was attempted. In the years that followed, the Iraqi economy was severely damaged by the protracted war with Iran. To counter this damage, economic liberalization was achieved, albeit limited, but the state did not relinquish too much control. It tried to fix the economy and tried to ensure the loyalty of the people through this. (Springborg, 1986) It also started to use an Islamic rhetoric. In Iraq, which normally had a secular government, Islamic activities were under strict control, and this control was eased a little bit. Saddam's government also provided support to some tribes and gained their loyalty. (Sassoon, 2012)

All the points mentioned are in fact contradictory to Baathist ideology. The privatization of the economy is a concession to the state-controlled Baathist ideology, the liberalization of Islamic activities to a certain extent and Saddam's use of this rhetoric is similarly a concession to Baathist ideology. The support of some tribal groups is a concession to anti-tribal Arab nationalism. For these reasons, Saddam can be said to have carried out an ideological transformation in Iraq, but the main purpose of all of this was to repair his tarnished image and consolidate his personal power.

2.1.3. Ideological Change for Protecting the State and Survival of the Regime

First of all, it is necessary to briefly explain what it means to save the regime and the state. The survival of the state in a country can be jeopardized in times of crisis. For example, with the dissolution of the empires in the First World War, different states emerged, which threatened the existence of the states in the centers of the empire. Turkey can be given as a suitable example. Having lost a large part of its territory after the First World War, Turkey had to wage a national struggle within itself. The activities carried out here, congresses, etc. were all carried out for the survival of the state. Protecting the survival of the regime is a similar example, where the goal may be to protect the survival of the existing regime along with the survival of the state.

As a matter of fact, the case of Turkey can be given as an example. When the diary of the first parliament opened in Ankara in the 1920s is analyzed, it can be argued that the main goal was to save the sultanate and the caliphate in Istanbul. In other words, the activities carried out were to save the monarchy regime along with the survival of the state. This situation will change in the following dates, but this is not important for our subject. In fact, the example of Turkey is not an example of a change in

ideology, but what we want to show here is what it means to protect the survival of the state and the regime.

Another point worth noting in this section is the link between preserving the survival of the regime and consolidating personal power. At first glance, one might think that the two are very similar and interconnected. I argue, there are various connections between them, but it is necessary to explain how protecting the survival of the regime differs from consolidating personal power. First of all, there is a difference in the main motivation for ideological change. For a leader who wants to consolidate his personal power, the main goal is to establish a cult of personality and to manage the state in this way. There may be crises and problems here, but not to the extent that they threaten the survival of the state. For example, the example of Saddam in Iraq was given. As seen in that example, Saddam's main goal was to consolidate his personal power through his personal cult, and the state did not have any kind of survival problem. However, in protecting the survival of the state, the crises and problems are a bit deeper, and the leader seeks to save the regime or the state before his personal power. In other words, the main motivation for ideological change is to protect the state against existing problems.

In short, in the case of protecting personal power, the crises are more superficial, the state does not have a survival problem, and the main motivation of the leader is his own power. In the other, the problems and crises are deeper, the survival of the regime is at stake and the leader's goal is primarily to solve this problem. Having explained the differences in this way, we will briefly explain what it means to make ideological changes for the survival of the state and then move on to examples.

In order to protect the survival of the country, as mentioned earlier, the state needs to have serious crises or problems. These crises can take place in areas such as economy, politics, sociology, etc. The apparatus that governs the state can make changes in its ideology to solve these crises or at least to eliminate the existing danger. As a result of this change, the leader may have consolidated his personal power or increased his popularity, but as mentioned earlier, this does not give us the main reason for the ideological change of that leader. In this respect, such ideological shifts can be confused with ideological transformations motivated by the consolidation of personal power, which is why examples will provide a better understanding of this topic.

We found it appropriate to mention the Jordanian example under this heading. Jordan gained its independence in 1946 and clarified its name as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1949. (Ryan, 2002, p. 5) Therefore, the country is ruled by a clan belonging to the Hashemite family. Therefore, it can be said that there is a monarchy regime in the country. The country faced serious economic crises in the 1980s. Unemployment rose significantly, and the welfare level of the people dropped significantly. Looking at the figures, the issue can be put forward more clearly. The unemployment rate, which was

5.4 percent in 1984, reached around 9 percent in 1988. (*Jordan Unemployment Rate, 1980-2017 - Knoema.Com*, n.d.) GDP per capita ratios can also be given as an example in this respect. In 1980, Jordan's GDP per capita was around 1750 dollars, while this figure dropped to 1290 dollars in 1989. (*Gross Domestic Product (Gdp) Per Capita Jordan*, 2025) These figures reveal the gravity of the economic situation in Jordan at that time.

These crises had a serious impact on society and led to popular uprisings. These uprisings and the crisis undoubtedly threatened the royal regime, so the king had to change something. Under international pressure, King Hussein accepted the liberalization program and put it into effect. With these liberalization movements, elections were held, and Islamists gained serious dynamism. 22 members of the 80-seat parliament were composed of Islamists in 1993 election. (Ryan, 2002, p. 37) In 1993, a law on the press was enacted, and the press was left relatively free. (Ryan, 2002, p. 120) However, this law was not a law that left the press completely on its own. All kinds of insulting and degrading statements against the royal family are prohibited. This is an attitude that shows that the regime is in control. Jordan has tried to achieve relative liberalization in different areas.

In Jordan, which signed various liberalization policies and wanted to protect the survival of the monarchy regime, the public started to react due to economic problems after the IMF's advisory rules, and the king started to reinstate the liberalization policies. (Ryan, 2002) Since then, the country has oscillated between liberalization and authoritarianism. The Jordanian example can be mentioned as a compromise of ideology rather than a long-term ideological transformation. However, it should be acknowledged that these concessions have led to some gains for democratization in the country in the long run. As seen in this transformation, the aim of the administration is to preserve the monarchy and the royal regime.

In fact, this example can be given as an example of both economic liberalization and the preservation of personal power. However, it was important to identify the main motivation for the reforms. For example, in Poland or Hungary, where economic liberalization was given as an example, the survival of the regime or the state was not at the forefront. Or in Jordan, as in Saddam's Iraq, King Hussein did not undertake these reforms to consolidate his personal power; his primary goal was to stabilize the existing regime rather than to consolidate his personal power. For this reason, we have mentioned the Jordanian example under this heading.

2.2. The Causes of Saudi Reforms

Mohammed bin Salman became Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in 2017. Since he began his reforms after this date, the Saudi reforms are a very recent development. For this reason, there are very few

academic works written on the subject. However, in addition to certain academic books, there are also some master's theses written in this field. Furthermore, international media outlets have published analytical articles in prominent newspapers. In other words, although the case is very recent, there is a body of work sufficient to establish a theoretical framework.

When examining works written on Saudi Arabia and MBS reforms, three different arguments can be identified. Some have assessed MBS reforms as personal power consolidation and explained the reforms in this context. According to others, these reforms were carried out to protect the regime's survival and ensure its sustainability. According to the final claim, these reforms are being implemented for economic reasons. In the following sections, works that address these arguments will be evaluated in turn.

2.2.1. Reforms for Consolidation of Power

One of the most important works evaluating Mohammed bin Salman's reforms is by Madawi Al-Rasheed. Her book, *"The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia"* was published by Oxford University Press in 2021. The main subject of the book is to understand the reform activities of Mohammed bin Salman, who came to power in 2017.

According to the author, Mohammed bin Salman has a dual structure in his activities and innovations in Saudi Arabia. This dual structure is reform and oppression, as mentioned in the title of the book. For example, while the crown prince grants new rights to women on the one hand, he arrests women's rights activists on the other. While young people are being given access to socialization spaces such as concerts and cinemas, the scholarships of young people who criticize the regime are being cut. While women are becoming more visible in the media and some women are being appointed to important political positions, women who demand their rights from the regime are being imprisoned. (Al-Rasheed, 2021) During the MBS era in Saudi Arabia, many such paradoxical situations are taking place. This raises questions about the purpose of the reforms and what they serve.

According to the author, the reforms in Saudi Arabia are not real reforms. MBS is implementing these reforms to improve his image abroad and gain PR. In fact, the author uses a very apt term in another newspaper article to describe these reforms as cosmetic reforms.(al-Rasheed, 2017) Furthermore, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi has revealed the true face of the regime. This and many other forms of oppression and persecution are taking place in the background while reforms are being carried out in the foreground. In the Ritz Carlton hotel incident, MBS eliminated his potential rivals and became the sole absolute power. In short, while MBS is acting with a rhetoric of reform in the

foreground, he has actually become an oppressive state that has consolidated its power in the background.

Another work that addresses Mohammed bin Salman's reforms is *"From Sheiks to Sultanism: Statecraft and Authority in Saudi Arabia and UAE"*, written by Christopher M. Davidson in 2021. In this book, the author examines the political administrations and activities of Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), leader of the United Arab Emirates, and Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), de facto leader of Saudi Arabia. This book, which compares the two countries, also evaluates MBS's reforms.

It was mentioned that the book compares both Mohammed bin Salman and Mohammed bin Zayed. Since Mohammed bin Salman is important in terms of the subject of this thesis, Mohammed bin Zayed will not be discussed in this section. The author discusses the case of Mohammed bin Salman within a conceptual framework such as sultanism and sheiksm. In short, the sheiksm system involves internal dynastic balances, and family negotiations are important in state administration. However, in the sultanism system, this balance disappears, and the balance of power is shifted in favor of a single individual. The author analyzes these concepts using the examples of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

According to the author, the system based on family consensus in Saudi Arabia has been abolished and an advanced sultanism regime based on absolute authority under the leadership of MBS has been established. In this new system, the previously existing mechanisms of consultation and balance have been eliminated. MBS has consolidated his power in many areas and has made the Saudi regime even more autocratic. While this book demonstrates the argument of power consolidation, it also occasionally hints at the regime survival argument. For example, one passage states that public policies, including the fight against Islamic extremism, have been implemented to mitigate regime threats and facilitate economic diversification. (Davidson, 2021, p. 199)

In addition, the reforms have both eliminated political rivals and gained social support from the younger generation. (Davidson, 2021) Although the arguments in this book are close to both power consolidation and regime survival, the book clearly emphasizes that MBS has consolidated his power to a significant degree. Furthermore, the reforms are seen as pragmatic steps taken toward certain goals. However, no systematic argument is presented from the perspective of regime survival. For this reason, we have also evaluated this book under the heading of power consolidation.

Our third study addressing this argument is a relatively early article. Written by Stig Stenslie in 2018, the article is titled *"The End of Elite Unity and the Stability of Saudi Arabia."* According to the article, there are four pillars that ensure Saudi Arabia's stability. These four pillars are the Saud dynasty, Wahhabism, the oil economy, and the alliance with the US.

According to the author, Mohammed bin Salman has shaken three of the fundamental pillars of Saudi Arabia. The elite consensus in political governance has been disrupted, there has been a shift away from Wahhabi Islam, and the rentier system has entered a crisis. For this reason, according to the author, MBS has shaken these fundamental pillars, leaving the future of Saudi Arabia in question.(Stenslie, 2018) The author's argument stands in direct opposition to the regime survival argument. According to him, the reforms have created instability rather than solving problems and have endangered the future of the Saudi dynasty. The breakdown of elite unity, on the other hand, supports the power consolidation argument.

In addition to academic works written in this field, there are also some semi-academic works written by journalists. It would be appropriate to briefly explain the arguments of those works as well. The title of the work written by Ben Hubbard in 2020 is “*MBS: The Rise of the Power of Muhammed bin Selman*”. Although not academic, the book can be considered a kind of field study. Ben Hubbard conducted observations and interviews in Saudi Arabia, which ultimately led to the publication of this book. The book evaluates MBS's rise to power and his reforms. According to him, MBS has implemented serious reforms in the country. However, these reforms are being carried out under pressure, and MBS has significantly increased his authority and pressure in the country. In this context, the reforms are examined alongside the underlying pressures, revealing a paradoxical picture. According to him, MBS is consolidating his power behind these reforms.(Hubbard, 2020)

Another work worth mentioning in this field is “*Mohammed bin Selman: The Icarus of Saudi Arabia*”, written by David B. Ottoway in 2021. Ottoway earned his PhD at Columbia University but continued his career as a journalist rather than an academic. Upon examination, the book cannot be considered purely academic work, so we classify it as a semi-academic work. In this work, Ottoway discusses Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power and how he changed the balance of power within the royal family during this process. He also points to the repressive nature of the regime alongside the reforms. The author compares Mohammed bin Salman to historical figures such as Atatürk and Nasser. According to the author, MBS has destroyed the family-based consensus system that ensured stability in the country and has increased autocracy. (Ottoway, 2021, p. 31) This is a dangerous and uncertain path for the future of the country.

The author's use of the Icarus metaphor in this context is also important and provides a mythological perspective on the event. According to mythology, Icarus and his father Daedalus are imprisoned in a tower. Daedalus makes wings out of wax and feathers for his son but warns him not to fly too close to the sun. However, driven by youthful enthusiasm and the thrill of ascending, he flies too close to the sun, and his wings melt. He falls into the sea and loses his life. In the Saudi Arabian example, Daedalus is King Salman, who has paved the way for his son to the throne. MBS, on the other hand, is flying high

with youthful enthusiasm and ambition, according to the author, though he has not yet fallen, he is already losing altitude.

2.2.2. Reforms for Regime Survival and Sustainability

There is a thesis published by Muhammed Yakup Inan at Qatar University in 2023. The thesis is titled "*The Transformation of the Social Contract in Saudi Arabia from Rentierism to Nationalism.*"

First, it should be noted that even writers who view these reforms as essential for the regime's survival acknowledge that MBS has consolidated his power, but that this is not enough to explain the reforms. For this reason, the reforms are being evaluated by taking different layers into account. According to Yakup Inan, the social contract on which Saudi Arabia was founded has become severely weakened and dysfunctional. There are several reasons for this. First, oil has become unreliable in the long term in terms of sustainability. State subsidies are negatively affecting the economy, the population is growing, and the youth population is increasing. In addition, the unemployment rate is rising. Furthermore, there is an expectation of social change within society.

For these reasons, the Saudi state wants to change the social contract based on the rentier system. It is doing so through reforms. The basis of the new contract is popular nationalism linked to Saudi nationalism. When this argument is evaluated, it is understood that the regime wants to ensure its survival in the long term, if not in the short term. Because the ineffectiveness of the old social contract is an element that threatens the regime's survival. (Inan, 2023)

The second work is Samuel Willner's article, published in 2023, is titled "*The Saudi Arabia of Mohammed bin Salman: Adapting to the Changing World and Preserving the Monarchy.*" According to the author, the reforms carried out in the country, foreign policy moves, and even MBS becoming crown prince are aimed at preserving the continuity of the Saudi regime. The Saudi regime faces various threats both within the country and in foreign policy. For example, there is a growing threat from Iran, and Washington's changing Middle East policies are sometimes unsettling Saudi Arabia. For these reasons, MBS has evolved into a proactive foreign policy.(Willner, 2022, p. 371) Similarly, the relaxation of Wahhabism is also for the long-term continuity of the Saudi monarchy. In other words, the purpose of the reforms is to ensure the continuity of the Saudi monarchy.

The third work is "*The Saudi Succession and the Sociocultural-Religious Reforms of Mohammed bin Salman*" written by Ali Shihabi. According to the author, two major revolutions have taken place in Saudi Arabia with MBS. The first is the bloodless and successful succession in the dynasty. The second is the breaking of the power of the ulema.(Shihabi, n.d.) As a result, new entertainment venues were created for young people in the social sphere, women gained new rights, and educational textbooks were

revised and softened. The author supports MBS's reforms with these and similar arguments, even emphasizing in another article that the reforms are dangerous but necessary. He argues that those who wish to preserve Saudi Arabia as a stable force in the Middle East should support MBS's reforms. ("Saudi Reform Essential but Perilous," 2018)

2.2.3. Reforms for Economic Reasons

The third claim regarding the fundamental motivation and goal of Mohammed bin Salman's reforms is more economically centered. Indeed, Mohammed bin Salman has expressed this in his speeches. According to him, The economy's dependence on oil will cause changes in the standard of living that Saudi society has enjoyed for approximately 50 years due to population growth over the next 20 years, and this is one of the problems. (Al Arabiya English, 2021) For this reason, MBS has embarked on reform activities by implementing the "*Vision 2030*" program. Indeed, there are three main themes on the Vision 2030 website, which are the fundamental goals that Saudi Arabia has designed for the future. One of these is a "*thriving economy*". (Saudi Vision 2030, n.d.) It is also well known that many reforms are being made in terms of economic diversification, tourism, and social issues.

The relationship between reforms and the economy is not only the argument used by the regime for reforms, but also a factor that has found its place in almost every study written on this subject. However, the a forementioned studies have also addressed other dimensions of the reforms and emphasized that the main motivation behind them is power consolidation or regime survival. Nevertheless, both the regime's presentation of the reforms to the media and the public and the fact that the reforms have serious economic objectives have made it necessary for us to address this issue separately. For this reason, rather than evaluating the articles written here one by one, we will explain the main arguments put forward on this issue.

The sharp drop in oil prices during the pandemic and their subsequent low levels have significantly affected oil-dependent countries such as Saudi Arabia. The future of fossil fuels also raises questions for countries regarding their future. For this reason, Saudi Arabia, whose economy is entirely dependent on oil, is striving to diversify its economic resources and has announced its Vision 2030 project. This is a strategy to move away from rentier state status, as explained in the previous section. The strategy of financing public expenditures and providing welfare to the people through oil revenues no longer works, prompting the Saudi government to turn to reforms.

For this reason, the Saudi Arabian government is introducing new taxes and cutting subsidies to the public. In addition, it undoubtedly needs foreign investors to revive the economy. Efforts are being made to attract these investors to the country through various strategies. For example, cities of the future are

being planned beyond mega projects. NEOM is perhaps the most comprehensive and largest of these projects. Projects such as “*Sindalah*” and “*Oxagon*” within “*NEOM*” also fall under this category. Such projects will attract foreign investors to the country by establishing future-oriented cities and creating tourist destinations.

Luxury projects have also been developed outside these cities for tourist centers. “*Diriyah*” and “*Al-Ula*” are two such projects. With these and similar projects, efforts are being made to create future-oriented cities and entertainment centers. This is part of the effort to diversify and transform the Saudi Arabian economy. With new tourist centers, different types of tourism concepts are being developed beyond Hajj and Umrah to make the country more attractive from a tourist perspective. Both through foreign investment in the country and through economic diversification, Saudi Arabia will integrate into the global financial system.

The common points of articles discussing Saudi Arabia's reforms from an economic perspective are as summarized above. As mentioned, we did not find any articles that addressed the purpose of the reforms solely as economic diversification, but these arguments have been used by MBS and mentioned in the works cited above. For this reason, we deemed it appropriate to include the economy under a separate heading.

The general theoretical framework for ideological change also identifies three fundamental reasons for ideological change. In other words, states change their ideology for three reasons. The first is economic problems and crises; the second is the consolidation of the leader's personal power, and the third is the salvation and stabilization of the regime. When we look at the literature on Saudi Arabia, we can say that these three reasons are mentioned. However, there are also some notable differences from the general theoretical framework. For example, the cases we mentioned in the first section in the economic field are cases facing economic crises. However, there is no such economic crisis in Saudi Arabia in the short term. Comments on the Saudi economy are generally future-oriented. Similarly, the claims regarding the salvation of the regime are also future-oriented claims about Saudi Arabia.

When examining the literature on MBS reforms, two arguments dominate: power consolidation and regime survival. Although economic reasons are emphasized in many studies and the regime itself highlights them, there is no literature claiming that economic problems are the main motivation. For this reason, we will not focus on this argument, but we will touch on regime survival.

When literature is examined holistically, certain shortcomings are apparent. For example, the argument of power consolidation is a strong one, but some authors have placed this argument at the center of their work and described the reforms as cosmetic.(Al-Rasheed, 2021) Some authors have also referred to the pragmatic function of the reforms and focused on regime change.(Davidson, 2021)

Overall, the power consolidation argument has either ignored or downplayed the stress points that exist in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, our study will attempt to address this gap by presenting the regime survival argument in the long term.

Those who defend the regime survival argument have either treated Wahhabism as part of the problem or failed to adequately explain how abandoning Wahhabism would benefit regime survival. Therefore, existing regime survival arguments are unsystematic and do not sufficiently focus on Wahhabism. This thesis aims to fill this gap. The power consolidation argument is correct but insufficient to explain the case. Regime survival must be reconceptualized with Wahhabism at its center. The aim of this thesis is to fill this gap. Therefore, I argue that MBS has consolidated his power in the short term, but his long-term goal is regime survival, and achieving this depends on his abandonment of Wahhabism.



3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STATE OF SAUD AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH WAHHABISM

For a better understanding of the issue, this section will provide a background information on the history of Saudi Arabia and its relationship with Wahhabism. The purpose of this section is to examine Saudi Arabia's relationship with Wahhabism from its inception to the present day. Therefore, not every detail or every political event has been covered. In addition, since the main purpose of the subject is the Wahhabi ideology, issues such as foreign policy are not discussed much. In this section, the course of Wahhabi ideology in Saudi Arabia will be discussed, especially the tensions between the ulema and the political administration and the reforms made. And we will do this through chronological order, and we will go through the reigns of the kings.

3.1. Establishment of the First Saudi State

The current Saudi state is the third Saudi state, in other words, two previous Saudi states were established and destroyed. In order to understand the relevance of the state of Saud to Wahhabism, it is necessary to mention the first established state of Saud in 1744. Muhammad ibn Saud, one of the tribal leaders in the region, was the founder of the first Saudi state. The first Saudi state was established in 1744 with the agreement between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, who is considered the founder of Wahhabism.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 48) This agreement is called Dir'iyah.

Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab set out with a new and strict interpretation of Islam. He needed political power to spread his ideas more easily. Muhammad ibn Saud, on the other hand, identified this interpretation of Islam as a source of legitimacy and allied himself with Abdul Wahhab in his mission to spread Wahhabism. This alliance is vital for the history of Saud. With this alliance, Muhammad ibn. Saud gained serious prestige. Wahhabism brought him both religious and political gains. With this alliance, it became easier to conquer other places in the region. (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 18) With the facilitation of the conquest of the regions, the first state of Saud made important conquests in the region and increased its power.

After the death of Muhammad ibn. Saud, his son Abdulaziz, took over the state. Under the leadership of Abdulaziz, the state began to capture new territories in the region. In 1792, Riyadh Kharj and Qasim were captured.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 20) The Wahhabi doctrine was influencing the people, and the power of the state was increasing day by day. The increasingly powerful state raided Karbala on May 13, 1802. At that time, the area was inhabited by Shiite population, and they were celebrating the so-

called Ghadir Khumm. In the raid that coincided with this ceremony, more than two thousand Shiites were killed, and considerable booty was obtained. The gold and silver objects from Hussein's tomb were stolen and taken to Dir'iyyah.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 49)

The advances of the First Saudi State were not limited to these; Taif was captured in 1802, Mecca in 1803 and Medina in 1804. As can be seen, the Saudis began to make serious gains and expanded significantly in the region. Having captured the holy cities, the Wahhabi forces plundered the famous shrines and tombs in the region. Houses believed to have belonged to the Prophet's wife Khadijah and prominent Companions were destroyed. (Büyükkara, 2020, p. 50) King Abdul Aziz, the leader of the Saudis, handed Mecca over to his men and moved to Jeddah, where the sheriff of Mecca regained control of the region and Abdul Aziz was assassinated by a Shiite that same year. Abdul Aziz was succeeded by his son Saud, who captured Medina in 1805 and Mecca the following year. Similarly, shrines and famous tombs were looted and pillaged.

The seizure of the holy places and the destructive activities mobilized the Ottoman Empire, which intervened in the region. In 1818, Dir'iyyah was captured, and Abdullah b. Saud was captured. He was executed in Istanbul. Thus, the first Saud state in history was destroyed. Before describing the second Saud state and its aftermath, it is necessary to make some evaluations especially about Wahhabism. Because even though the first Saudi state collapsed, the Wahhabi understanding continued in subsequent states and affected many activities of the state.

3.2. Wahhabism

As mentioned, Wahhabism is a strict interpretation of Islam put forward by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab and is named after its founder. In fact, Abdul Wahhab objected to the name Wahhabism, claiming that he did not produce anything new and that he was a Sunni Hanbali and they called themselves ahl al-tawhid or muwahhidun.(Habib, 1978, p. 3) However, an examination of Abdul Wahhab's ideas shows that this was not the case, and his ideas is considered as a new sect in Islam namely Wahhabism.(Fırlalı, 2001)

Abdul Wahhab, the founder of the sect, was born in 1703 in the town of Uyaynah and studied Islamic sciences in his childhood. He then developed his own doctrine. He wrote various treatises and explained his ideas in them. "*Kitab al-Tawhid*" is one of his most important works in which he wrote and expressed his ideas. An examination of Abdul Wahhab's works reveals many aspects related to Wahhabism. First, an examination of Abdul Wahhab's Kitab al-Tawhid reveals the following situation. In the book, Qur'anic verses are given first and then hadiths related to the same subject are mentioned. Then Abdul Wahhab briefly mentions the lessons to be learned from these verses and hadiths. (Abdülvehhab)

In fact, this is closely in line with Abdul Wahhab's methodology. Abd al-Wahhab leaves little room for any evidence other than the Qur'an and the hadith, which calls for a literalist approach to sacred texts. In this sense, it can be said that he was influenced by the Hanbali sect.(Büyükkara, 2020) However, Abdul Wahhab did not go into much detail and took refuge in only a narrow meaning of the words. This is why his ideas are more rigid and different from previous ideas than ever before in Islamic history.

The most fundamental principle of Wahhabism can be associated with the concept of Tawhid, which must be why Abdul Wahhab named his book Tawhid. According to him, Tawhid is the most important principle that Muslims must follow and anyone who does not follow it is considered an infidel. However, Abdul Wahhab adds another part to Tawhid that is not included in Sunni thought, and that is deeds. According to him, deeds are also a part of faith. (Fırlalı, 2001) Therefore, people should ask Allah for whatever they want and always turn to Him without intermediaries. For these reasons, it is not permissible to ask Allah for anything through anyone, including the Prophet, and if you do, it is blasphemy. Abdul Wahhab considered the Sufis of his time and all those who chose a murshid as part of this shirk. In fact, according to him, the polytheists of his time were more severe infidels than the polytheists of the Jahiliyya period.(Fırlalı, 2001)

According to this understanding, sacrificing in the name of someone else, visiting shrines, visiting graves, making amulets, and painting pictures are all considered shirk in Wahhabism and are directly related to the belief in Tawhid. Another important concept of Wahhabism is the concept of bid'ah. This is a concept that would lead to various debates, as will be explained in the later Saudi states. Ulema and political rulers would experience various tensions because of this. In short, the concept encompasses almost everything that emerged outside of what Allah and His prophet said.(Yörükan, 1953) Therefore, activities such as building shrines to graves are considered bid'ah and therefore shirk.

One of the central concepts of Wahhabism is promotion of virtues and prevention of vice. According to this concept, the Wahhabis have taken it upon themselves to explain and live Islam. This issue, which will be discussed in the future among the practices of the Saudi state, is rooted in Wahhabism. In the future, police officers called Mutawwa'in will be appointed in the state of Saud, and they will check whether the people are following the Islamic commandments or not.

In the early days, the state of Saud centered on this concept and took it upon itself to fight against communities that were identified as being in shirk. According to them, Shi'ites and Muslims who follow bid'ah are in Shirk and it is permissible to fight them. This is most evident in the statements of the Saud after they took over Madinah. When they captured Madinah, they claimed that the true Islam had reached the people there and that their ancestors who died there had died in shirk.(Fırlalı, 2001) In this way, accusing everyone who was not one of them of disbelief was also a justification for fighting them. In

short, Wahhabism played an important role in the establishment of the Saudi state. The Saudi dynasty and state owe their existence to Wahhabism.(Al-Rasheed, 2007, p. 4) The emergence of Wahhabism and its main arguments are summarized. After that, historical background information will continue to be given in the context of the relationship between the state of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism from the Second Saudi State to the present day.

3.3. Establishment of the Second Saudi State

In 1818, Egyptian military forces led by the Ottomans brought the first Saudi state to an end and King Abdullah bin Saud was captured and executed. At that time, Turki bin Abdullah, one of King Abdullah's uncles, survived the battle of Dir'iyahh. For this reason, he started working again to establish dominance in the region. In 1822, he captured Riyadh. While this was going on, Turki was assassinated from within the family and was dead in 1834. By the time of his death, he had expanded his territory and strengthened his control. Upon Turki's death, his son Faisal came to the region and took over the leadership. During this time, he clashed with the Egyptian army and was defeated. In 1837, Faisal was captured and exiled to Cairo.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 23)

In the resulting power vacuum, Egyptian rulers appointed Khalid from the Saud family. Meanwhile, the turmoil continued. Abdullah bin Thunayan rebelled against Khalid and seized power. While all this was going on, Egypt had to withdraw from Saudi Arabia as it was dealing with its own internal affairs, and Faisal, taking advantage of the opportunity, returned to Riyadh in 1843 and took over the government by killing Abdullah. Faisal's administration continued to struggle with internal turmoil and weakened and then started a struggle with the Rashidis and the Rashidis took over in 1891.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 53) Thus, the second Saudi state in history disappeared.

3.4. Establishment of the Third Saudi State

In 1891, Abdurrahman b. Faisal (Faisal's son) had to leave Riyadh with his family when the Rashidis took over Riyadh. The Saudi family then returned to Najid in 1902. It was in this exile that Abdul Aziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia, who would lead the state until his death in 1953. He did not want to accept the situation of the Saud family, which had been going through hard times for a long time, so he gathered men and wanted to move to Najid. According to rumors, he took 40 or 60 people with him and started the operation. But things didn't go as he wanted, and he couldn't capture Najid. So, in a life and death struggle, he raided Riyadh. Surprisingly, he captured Riyadh in 1902.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 38) This raid marked the beginning of a new era, and the foundations of the third Saudi state were laid. This state would last until the present day.

After capturing Riyadh in 1902, Abdul Aziz consolidated his power and took control of other regions. Since then, there have been conflicts between the Rashid family and Saud. The Ottomans mostly favored the Rashid family. Ibn Sa'ud, on the other hand, was in contact with Britain. As the conflicts continued, in 1906 Ibn Saud killed Ibn Rashid. In this way, the Rashidis, another power center in the region, were eliminated and Saud consolidated his power. He continued his conquests and took control of many places in the region. Meanwhile, an important issue for our thesis is Ibn Saud's relationship with the Sheikh family. As mentioned earlier, Wahhabism provided Saud with a serious power during the establishment phase of the state and the state's commitment to this ideology continued even as time passed.

One of the most important indicators of this is Ibn Saud's coronation ceremony in Riyadh. In this ceremony, he entrusted the city's duty of promotion of virtue and prevention of vice, in other words, the duty of *hisba*, in its classical name, to Abdulaziz b. Abdullatif from the sheikh family. Ibn Sa'ud also married the daughter of a member of the sheikh family, reinforcing this alliance. (Büyükkara, 2020, p. 62) By expanding the territories under his control in this way, Ibn Saud made significant progress in a short time and managed to take many tribes under his control. However, some internal problems persisted.

First, it was not easy to secure the loyalty of the tribes because Bedouin people were used to living in comfort and it was difficult for them to be subject to any control mechanism. Another problem was that the Bedouin tribes had different laws and practices. Knowing that it would be difficult to maintain control and authority in such an environment, Ibn Saud had to develop a strategy and decide to create *Hijras*. In this way, both the Bedouin population would be settled, and social unity would be ensured through the teachings of Wahhabism.

Within the framework of Abdul Aziz's strategy, the first settlements were established, and Bedouin tribes began to settle there. From here, as will be explained later, the *Ikhwan* movement was born. *Ikhwan* means brothers and should not be confused with the *Ikhwan* movement that emerged in Egypt. After the settlements were established and the nomadic tribes were settled in them, a method of education was applied to them. The Wahhabi faith was reinforced, especially within the framework of Abdul Wahhab's treatises. The reasons for the establishment of these *hijras* are many, but it would be appropriate to mention a few. First, Abdul Aziz wanted to consolidate his power and expand his borders in the regions he controlled. This was possible with a centralized state and a loyal society. The tribes, on the other hand, were in a constant state of conflict and had weaknesses in terms of loyalty to an authority. Abdul Aziz consolidated his authority by subjecting these tribes to settlement. (Büyükkara, 2020, p. 69) He also educated them in the ideology of Wahhabism and developed the idea of brotherhood and *jihad* against non-Muslims.

In this way, he succeeded in establishing a centralized authority, strengthened social ties and created a strong militia force for his military activities. From this point of view, the Ikhwan project was a major breaking point for Saud in a positive sense. Settled nomads began to live in newly established settlements. Here they did their daily work and received religious education. This generation, raised with Wahhabi beliefs, had a serious sense of jihad. This is closely related to the exclusionary attitude of Wahhabism. As mentioned earlier, the concept of shirk is important in Wahhabism and many activities are considered as shirk. Therefore, in the eyes of the Wahhabis, Shiites or Muslims who build shrines or visit graves are infidels. Since these people were infidels, it was necessary to fight against them. For the members of the Ikhwan, who started out with this mentality, it was essential to wage jihad, especially in their region, since almost everyone else was infidel except themselves. On the other hand, these jihads led to the capture of spoils and increased the welfare of the state and society. Especially for Saud, which was in the desert in the pre-oil era and did not have fertile lands, military campaigns were an important source of income.

Abdul Aziz, backed by a power like the Ikhwan, continued his conquests in the region. Especially after 1915, Ikhwan turned into the most important military force for Saud. Before the Ikhwan came into play, Riyadh, some local areas and parts of Najid had already been captured. After Ikhwan's involvement, the targets expanded even further. Hail was first conquered in 1921. This was easier than expected because the Ottoman state, which had supported the Rashidis, had been defeated in the First World War. The Saudis also had close relations with and support from the British. With the capture of Hail, Abdul Aziz's territories under his control expanded considerably. After these conquests, Abdul Aziz was declared sultan of Najid. In 1922, when the Ikhwan troops began to carry out attacks that disturbed the British, an agreement was signed between Britain and Saud in 1922, and the borders were determined. This led to tensions between the Ikhwan and Abdul Aziz. One of the breaking points for Saud and the Ikhwan was the capture of the Hejaz. Abdul Aziz, who marched forward with the power behind him, captured Mecca in 1924 and Medina in 1925.

The capture of the Hejaz by Abdul Aziz was an important turning point as was mentioned. Not only was the Muslim holy land captured, but also the pilgrimage and trade revenues provided a new and important economic source for Saud. In this way, Abdul Aziz gained both prestige and economic resources. Later, the Ikhwan and Abdul Aziz would clash on some issues, and this would be the end of the Ikhwan. As mentioned, Abdul Aziz had signed a border agreement with Britain, and he respected it. However, some members of the Ikhwan believed jihad should continue.

Various attacks were launched on this occasion, but they were defeated in Iraq. Another group of Ikhwan was defeated in Kuwait. This time they attacked a Bedouin tribe loyal to Saud. This gave Abdul Aziz a serious trump card, because it was no longer a jihad against non-Muslims, but a rebellion against

the legitimate government. By 1929, the Ikhwan movement had been defeated.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 66) This movement, which had been instrumental in the establishment and expansion of the state, later posed a threat to the survival of the state, and it was its own undoing. A brief evaluation of the Ikhwan, which is an important movement in the context of the relationship between Wahhabism and Saud, will be useful in showing the course of this religion-politics relationship.

The Ikhwan movement in Saudi Arabia represents a critical threshold in terms of the course of Wahhabism in state governance. The Ikhwan movement combines the fanaticism of Wahhabism with strong tribal loyalties. This has resulted in a group that is firmly committed to Wahhabi ideology. Although some of the problems that this group had with Abdul Aziz was political and authority problems, some serious differences of opinion emerged on the issue of whether to implement Wahhabism. They have a serious reaction to the use of technological devices. In this tension, which stems from Wahhabism's understanding of bid'ah, members of the Ikhwan believe that technological devices are infidel inventions and bid'ah. It is even reported that a truck was sent to the area where the Ikhwan lived, and it was burned.(Vasil'ev, 2000, p. 545) Especially during the Faisal era, there would be such debates over the introduction of television into the country.

In Wahhabism, substances such as tobacco and hookah are considered haram. For this reason, there were various tensions between the Ikhwan and the King during the conquest of Hejaz. Hejaz was an important and cosmopolitan place in terms of trade. In addition, the value of the tobacco stock in the city was around £100,000, so Ibn Saud did not interfere with the trade, although he banned smoking tobacco.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 118) The issue of the place of women in society was also important among the Ikhwan. Where the Ikhwan lived, women were forbidden to go out. Women were isolated from social life and if a woman called out to another woman, she would not raise her voice but would clap her hands together. Even as late as 1968, it is reported that it was forbidden for a woman to shop in the market in Al-Artawiyya.(Habib, 1978, p. 55)

To summarize, it can be said that the first tension between religion and politics in Wahhabism arose between Ibn Saud and the Ikhwan. Political power emerged victoriously from this tension and purged the more fanatical Ikhwan. He also received the support of the ulema in his own country, namely the sheikh family. Such tensions would continue under subsequent kings.

Ibn Saud, who captured Najid, Hejaz and Ahsa with the Ikhwan forces, united these lands and established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. One of the two swords on the emblem of the Saudi kingdom represents the Saud family and the other sword represents Wahhabi religious authority. This means that Saudi Arabia will continue to be associated with Wahhabism.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 153) However, this does not mean that the political will accept everything the ulema say. Most of the time,

the political will did what it wanted, but sometimes it had to make concessions. For example, in 1950, they wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the conquest of Riyadh. For this, preparations were made, invitations were given to the representations in foreign countries and organizations were planned. However, the Grand Mufti of Riyadh issued a fatwa stating that there are two holidays in Islam, and it is not right to celebrate anything else. (Büyükkara, 2020, p. 156)

On other issues where the king and the ulema have clashed, the political will has prevailed. For example, many men whom the ulema did not want were appointed to state positions, including Fuad Hamza, a bureaucrat of Druze origin, and Philby, whose religion is controversial.(Al-Rasheed, 2010) In addition, despite the ulema's neutral stance during the Second World War, they supported the British. By 1938, oil was discovered, a major turning point for Saudi Arabia. The discovery of oil significantly increased state revenues. After the Second World War, oil started to be extracted seriously, and the country's revenues increased very rapidly. For example, Saudi revenues, which were 13.5 million dollars in 1946, increased to 212 million dollars only 6 years later, in 1952.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 90) This means that Saud revenues increased 15-16 times in just 6 years.

With this rise in the economy, there will be various reforms in the country. Before moving on to these reforms, it will be important to explain a few events during the reign of King Abdul Aziz to show the relationship between religion and politics. One of the first events was the radio and telegraph incident in the 1930s. While King Abdul Aziz wanted radio and telegraph to enter the country, the ulema strongly opposed these inventions by calling them bid'ah. However, a compromise was reached when the king guaranteed that only religious broadcasts and the Koran would be read on the radio.(Bligh, 1985, p. 41) Another example is the ulema's reaction to the granting of oil concessions to foreign companies. In 1944, the Wahhabi sheikh heavily criticized Ibn Saud for giving the oil business to foreigners. Ibn Saud, on the other hand, argued that this was not contrary to Sharia law and declared that those working there were under his command. The ulema were convinced by this answer. Another issue is the education of women and their participation in social life. According to Ibn Saud, women's education was not forbidden by religion, but it was not in accordance with the nature of women. Despite this, Ibn Saud opened the first Islamic girls' school in Hejaz.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 177) There has been no change in the visibility of women in social life. Abdul Aziz, who carried out these activities and founded the state, died in 1953 and was succeeded by his son Saud.

3.5. The Era of King Saud (1953-1964)

Oil revenues fluctuated under Saud, who took over the state after the death of the founding king Abdulaziz. In the king's first year, oil revenues amounted to 236 million dollars, rising to 340 million in 1954. In 1956, it dropped to 290 million dollars, and prices continued this way for a while. Even though

oil revenues were relatively good, expenditure increased, and the state's borrowing was also high. The king's construction of luxurious palaces also had a negative impact on the economy in this respect. (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 103) During this period, various institutions were established to institutionalize the state, such as the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Hajj and Endowments.

One of the most important events of this period was the emergence of the Free Princes movement with Prince Talal and his fellow princes. Economic problems and political power struggles continued during the Saud period. In this environment, a movement emerged under the leadership of Prince Talal, and they started to create an agenda for various reforms in the country. The main goal of the group was to establish a constitutional monarchy in the country. (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 106) However, this movement was not successful. Their demands for reform were mostly rejected. During the Saud period, various activities were also carried out in the field of education. First, the Ministry of National Education was established in 1954. The curriculum of the schools was dominated by religious education and technical sciences such as mathematics and physics came later. King Saud advocated sending students abroad to improve the quality of education but faced the reaction of the ulema. Nevertheless, the King sent students abroad.

In 1957, around 600 students were sent to study in the United States, Egypt, Syria and Western Europe. Another important development during the reign of King Saud was the establishment of a university in Riyadh in 1957. Most of the teaching staff at this University, which bears the King's own name, came from abroad. (Vasil'ev, 2000, p. 893) Apart from these activities, the period of Saud, who made some breakthroughs, was characterized by economic problems and political conflicts. As a result of these conflicts, when King Saud left the country for medical treatment, Faisal formed a new cabinet and seized the throne. When the Ulema issued a fatwa on this issue, King Saud abdicated, and Faisal took the throne. (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 110) There were no conflicts with the ulama during the reign of King Saud, except for some reforms, and a member of the sheikh family was appointed as the head of the Ministry of Education. Moreover, the ulema's fatwa on the overthrow of King Saud legitimized Faisal's accession to the throne.

3.6. The Era of King Faisal (1964-1975)

Under King Saud, internal unrest and luxury spending destabilized the country. However, Faisal's rise to power had a positive impact on Saudi Arabia. Oil revenues increased significantly under Faisal. In 1965, Saudi Arabia's income from oil exports was 22.2 billion Saudi riyals, which increased steadily to 146.5 billion Saudi riyals in 1971. (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 116) This increase in oil revenues strengthened Faisal's hand-in-state administration and provided funds for the reforms to be carried out.

The first crisis of Faisal's reign and the first tension between him and the ulema was the attempt to bring television into the country. The ulama and the radical part of the population, who did not find the television and its broadcasts in line with Wahhabi principles, organized protests it. Khalid Ibn Musaid, the king's nephew, was even killed during these protests in 1965.(Vasil'ev, 2000, p. 810) It can be said that this attitude of the ulema stems from the strict concept of bid'ah in the Wahhabi ideology. In order to soften the harsh protests, the king devoted a lot of space on television to religious broadcasts, and the ulama also appeared on television.

In 1967, Saudi woman who was showing children program began broadcasting, but she was dismissed after a strong backlash.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 197) It would not be until 2018, after Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince, that the first female anchor appeared on official channels.(*First Saudi Woman Presents Main News Bulletin on Saudia Tv*, 2018) An important part of the reforms of the Faisal era was in the field of education. He paid particular attention to the neglected education of girls. New educational institutions and schools were opened for girls. In addition to this, universities were also opened, and the Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975 with the advice of American education experts.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 118)

While these developments in the field of education continued, the power of the ulema over education was to be maintained. For example, in 1975, a member of the Sheikh family was appointed to the Ministry of Higher Education.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 178) In addition, a separate ministry of education was established for the education of girls, separate from that of boys, and this was also placed under the control of the ulema.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 120)

One of the important innovations of the Faisal era was the bureaucratization of the ulema. In 1970, the Ministry of Justice was established. With the establishment of this ministry, the ulema became part of the state function. The powers of the Mutawwas were also reduced. Despite all these developments, Faisal did not establish the consultative council he had promised when he took office. He also broke most of his promises in the field of law.(Büyükkara, 2020) This did not pave the way for political reforms. The king's untimely assassination may also have played a role in his failure to fulfill these promises. However, if we consider that the king took office in 1964, ruled for an average of 11 years and was assassinated in 1975, ten years would have been sufficient for such reforms.

In short, the Faisal era was characterized by social reforms and occasional tensions with the ulama. Nevertheless, due to the international conjuncture, Faisal's use of Islamist rhetoric softened the ulama. From King Abdul Aziz to King Faisal, including Faisal's reign, Faisal made the most innovations, but even he emphasized Wahhabism and did not lose the support of the ulama and ulama did not lose control on the justice system.(Layish, 1984, p. 33) Amid all this, Faisal was assassinated in 1975 and replaced

by King Khalid. There are various reasons for Faisal's assassination, but we will not go into detail as they are not directly relevant to our topic.

3.7. The Era of King Khalid (1975-1982)

A great deal awaited King Khalid in his relatively short quest for the throne. One of them was the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Another was the Grand Mosque siege that took place in the same year. These were serious events that marked the history of Saudi Arabia. There is not a long period of time between the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Grand Mosque siege, but the Grand Mosque siege is more closely related to domestic developments than the Shiite revolution, as will be explained. Already Juhayman, the protagonist of the Grand Mosque siege, considered the Shiites as infidels. It is even unacceptable for the Saudi government to collect zakat from Shiites.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 216) Since the Grand Mosque siege has no connection with the revolution, at least in terms of ideas, the Grand Mosque siege will be briefly explained first, and then the effects of the Iranian revolution and the Shiite uprising as a result of it will be mentioned.

The team that carried out the Grand Mosque siege was led by Juhayman al-Uthaybi. Due to his radical ideas, Juhayman and his team were based on secrecy and continued their education and training activities secretly. Because this team, which received education in Medina, was threatened and disturbed by the Saudi security units due to their radical ideas. Juhayman has very negative opinions about the Saudi state and the ulama. According to him, the Saudi state is not a Sharia-based state. The ulama of the state of Saud are not an ulama that defends the truth, but rather a team that follows whatever the rulers of the state say and even cannot interfere in the non-Shariah affairs of the rulers of the state. With the increase in oil revenues, Saudi Arabia embarked on reforms, adopted the western lifestyle and moved away from Sharia. In addition, Juhayman and his team were psychologically influenced by the Messianic movement and clung to this idea. (Büyükkara, 2020)

After all this, the Great Grand Mosque siege was launched on November 20, 1979. This group entered the Kaaba after the morning prayers and started the revolt, and the speaker, Juhayman, declared Abullah al-Qahtani, who was with him, as the Mahdi. After declaring Juhayman Qahtani as the Mahdi, he also made several statements. According to him, the Saudi government was not a Sharia government. Therefore, rebellion against it was permissible.(Büyükkara, 2020) Meanwhile, respect for the leader, ulul amr, must be ensured under almost all circumstances. Except in one case, when the leader is clearly in blasphemy. Any rebellion outside of this situation is considered within the scope of disobedience to the ulul amr.(Çakmaktaş, 2024, p. 91) Therefore, it can be said that in Wahhabi thought, as long as the political leader appears to be a Muslim, he enjoys considerable legitimacy.

Returning to our topic, Juhayman also considered the government as infidel to legitimize his rebellion. In the future, Osama bin Laden will take a similar stance. In his speech, Juhayman stated that the government is not in line with Islam and that the society has been corrupted by adopting Western values. Therefore, the House of Saud must be overthrown and replaced by a new government that will defend Islamic values, and society must be restored to its original values. With these ideas in mind, Juhayman and his team seized the Grand Mosque and began a serious resistance there. Four days after the beginning of the incident, on November 24, the ulama signed a fatwa. According to the fatwa, the rebels were to be asked to surrender first, and if they did not, any intervention there would be considered a rightful intervention according to Sharia law. The state of Saud intervened, but the resistance continued with determination. The king of Saud then asked France for help.(Büyükkara, 2020, p. 237) While non-Muslims were forbidden to enter the Haram area, French soldiers entered the Kaaba and ended the rebellion. Fearing the reaction of Muslims, the Saudi government tried to hide this situation, but it was later revealed.

The Grand Mosque siege was an important turning point in the history of Saudi Arabia in terms of showing the state's relationship with Wahhabism. The Saudi government, which had previously been criticized by the Ikhwan, did not face any concrete problems during the period from the liquidation of the Ikhwan to the Grand Mosque siege, but Juhayman's raid was a warning to the Saudi government. In addition, those who participated in the raid have various connections to the Ikhwan movement. For example, the grandfathers of two of the death row inmates were among those who fought against Saud in the ranks of the Ikhwan years ago.(Büyükkara, 2020) Moreover, an examination of Juhayman's ideas and the activities of his team reveals several similarities with the Ikhwan movement.

Around the same time as the Grand Mosque siege, Shiite riots broke out in Ahsa. The Shiites started an uprising against their social, economic and political conditions. One of the reasons for this uprising was the exclusionist attitude of Wahhabism towards them. Wahhabism has a rigid and exclusionist approach.(Çakmaktaş, 2024) In fact, it has already been mentioned that Shiites are often considered infidels in Wahhabi thought. When these reasons came together, the Shiites rebelled, probably influenced by the Iranian Revolution. The Saudi government, on the other hand, granted new rights to Shiites in economic and social areas and was able to suppress the revolt.

Moreover, the Saudi government, having learned from these events, has also made various innovations. For example, the dress control of women has become stricter. Regulations that existed in Sharia law but had been neglected in practice were again strictly enforced. In addition, in the early 1980s, more women's participation in the labor force was on the agenda, but this was not realized. Mutawwas, whose powers were reduced in theory, were effective in practice. The breaking of live mannequins in stores and increased inspections by mutawwas were also a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia

in the 1980s.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, pp. 147–148) After these events, King Khalid died in 1982, and Fahd took the throne.

3.8. The Era of King Fahd (1982-2005)

King Fahd's reign also witnessed important events both for Saudi Arabia and for world history. The establishment of Al-Qaeda, the Sahwa, the American invasion of Kuwait and the September 11 attacks are some of these events. First, it would be appropriate to mention about the Sahwa Movement since it is closely related to our subject. Sahwa means “awakening” in Arabic(Team, n.d.) and its founding fathers are Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali. Before mentioning about the Sahwa Movement, the events that paved the way for the emergence of Sahwa will be briefly mentioned.

As is well known, Gamal Abd al-Nasir, who came to power in Egypt, adopted the Baathist ideology and clashed with the Ikhwan movement in the country (this is the Ikhwan Muslimin, a movement different from the Ikhwan in Saudi Arabia). The members of the Ikhwan, who were persecuted there, moved to Saudi Arabia. In addition, when similar developments took place in Syria and Iraq, the Ikhwan movement was also repressed there and moved to Saudi Arabia. The Ikhwan's Muslim movement that moved to Saudi Arabia created an ideological ground for the Sahwa movement. In the light of these developments, it is possible to say that the Sahwa movement was formed, but it was not until the 1990s that the Sahwa became a visible movement.

What mobilized the Sahwa movement, which began to appear as an opposition to the Saudi government, was the American operation to liberate Kuwait. As it is known, the Iraqi state led by Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990. Upon this invasion, many countries came together under the leadership of the United States and launched Operation Desert Shield in 1991 and expelled Iraq from Kuwait. (*Persian Gulf War | Summary, Dates, Combatants, Casualties, Syndrome, Map, & Facts | Britannica*, 2025) It was precisely here that the issue that triggered the Sahwa emerged.(Lacroix, 2011) Because during this operation, American soldiers were stationed in Saudi Arabia. Later, the Saudi ulama (Ibn Baz) issued a fatwa to legitimize this situation.(*The Rise of Jihadis Extremism in the West*, 2010, p. 194) Sahwa, on the other hand, reacted to this situation and started a vocal opposition in the country.

I argue that this is the event that caused the Sahwa to become visible, otherwise, as mentioned, the roots of the Sahwa are much older and the points it criticizes are points that have been criticized in Saud for many years. The Sahwa movement did not limit its opposition to rhetoric but also acted. First, in 1991, 52 people from different groups such as academics, ulema and former politicians prepared a “*Letter of Demands*” to King Fahd. The main purpose of this letter was to urge the Saudi government to reform various areas. For example, they called for the establishment of a shura council to ensure that

the state is governed by Sharia, or to make the state more accountable.(Lacroix, 2011, p. 179) However, King Fahd did not attach much importance to this letter and did not fulfill these demands.

A year later, in 1992, a “*Memorandum of Advice*” was presented to Ibn Baz, the head of the Supreme Council of Ulema. Here, the demands can be listed as follows: The state should pursue an Islamic foreign policy, the corrupt institutions of the state should be reformed, and the power of the ulema, whose role in politics had diminished, should be increased.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, pp. 165–166) Although King Fahd did not pay much attention to these recommendations, he did introduce various reforms to reduce political opposition. An advisory council of 60 members was established, all of whom were appointed by the king. The governing law emphasized that the country was a monarchy and that the House of Saud retained the right to rule the state. The Local Government Law divided the country into 13 administrative units. In this way, the existing opposition was tried to be suppressed.

Moreover, the fatwa issued by Ibn Baz in 1993 legitimized the idea of normalizing relations with Israel and making peace.(*Abd Al-Aziz Ibn Baz*, n.d.) Sahwa's reaction to this was harsh. Due to the continuation of such reactions, Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali were arrested and imprisoned in 1994. Before the 2000s, Sahwa was not the only group opposing the government in Saudi Arabia. In 1993, a group with the acronym CDLR was formed. The name of this group stands for: “*Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights*.” This group was first established with the signatures of six people, and later two names gained importance in this group: Abdullah al-Mashari and Sa'ad Al-Faqih. The group used Islamic references and claimed that they were not a political party, contrary to media reports. The group has been banned by the Saudi Arabian government and the Supreme Ulema Council has declared it illegitimate according to Islamic principles. Abdullah Mashari was then briefly arrested and released. Later, Mashari and Al-Faqih emerged in London and continued their activities there.(Al-Rasheed, 2010)

This team has severely criticized the ulema, especially in Saudi Arabia, and is important in the context of this thesis. According to Mashari and Al-Faqih, the Saudi ulema had fallen into a passive position and had become defenders of the state. In fact, Mashari uses the following description for the Ulema of Saud: “*Sa’udi Arabia has become Ulama’s cemetery*”.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 174) While in London, disagreements arose between the two, especially over the methodology to be followed, and as a result Faqih left and founded a group called Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) in 1996. For Faqih, a political order without the Saud dynasty was not possible in Saudi Arabia, at least in the short term. Therefore, Sa'ad Al-Faqih wants the ulema to increase their power and participate more in political and social processes.(Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 177)

In short, these groups emerged in the 1990s as opponents of the Saudi regime within the Islamic rhetoric. They demanded various reforms from the government and felt that the declining power of the ulema should be increased. It can be said that these movements were not as effective as the Sahwa, and their influence has significantly diminished over time. According to Madawi Al Rasheed, Saudi Arabia entered the new century with three major challenges: The first challenge is the fragmented state which is led by a sick king. The second one is economic problems caused by low oil revenues. The third is terrorism. (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 211) Terrorism is the most important one for our purposes. Because Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, who carried out the September 11 attacks, originated from Saudi Arabia, and the main reasons that led to this formation were the state of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and the policies of the political administration.

Before moving on to the events of 9/11, a brief introduction to al-Qaeda will help us to better understand the events. Founded in 1998 in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation. Its leader is Osama bin Laden. Although al-Qaeda was first established against the Soviet occupation, it later started to spread the idea of global jihad. Al-Qaeda has organized bomb attacks on several occasions and has been the main actor in many incidents. However, the most important of these attacks was undoubtedly the attack on the Twin Towers in the United States on September 11, 2001. This attack is also important in terms of its relationship with Saudi Arabia. The attack was carried out with multiple airplanes and targeting different buildings. (*September 11 Attacks | History, Summary, Location, Timeline, Casualties, & Facts | Britannica*, 2025) The fact that 15 of the 19 people who carried out this attack were Saudi Arabians put Saudi Arabia in a crisis. Saudi Arabia, which has been on good terms with the United States until now and has therefore become the target of some ulema and activists, has now confronted the United States.

In the aftermath of the attack, US President Bush refrained from making statements targeting Saudi Arabia, but the American media did not behave in the same way and published seriously incriminating articles against Saudi Arabia. The media argued that terrorism stemmed from the Saudi-backed Wahhabi ideology, and that Wahhabism gave rise to radicalism. In response, Saudi Arabia's Interior Minister Prince Nayef stated that it was wrong to blame Wahhabism and that the ideologies of the Muslim Brotherhood and Sayyid Qutb, who came to Saudi Arabia from Egypt, were responsible for these incidents. (Al-Rasheed, 2010, p. 227) Osama bin Laden's attacks have also targeted Saudi Arabia at times. These attacks stem from Osama bin Laden's view of Saudi Arabia. According to him, Arab regimes use scholars and the institutions headed by them for their own security, in addition to the army and intelligence. In Saudi Arabia, Ibn Baz holds important positions because he is easily used by the regime. For example, the rapprochement with Israel was given a fatwa by the ulema, or the entry of the crusaders into the Holy Land was legitimized by the fatwa of the ulema.

According to Bin Laden, Saudi Arabia was founded based on Sharia, but it has lost this characteristic by falling under the control of the US.(Büyükkara, 2004, p. 218) As can be seen, Bin Laden's criticism is the weakening of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and the political administration's control over the ulema. As a result of these events, the National Dialog forum was established in 2003. It was decided to organize this forum every year. The main goal of the forum is to discuss extremism in Saudi Arabia, women's rights, social problems, etc. and to plan reforms.(*King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue*, 2024) In 2005, it was decided to hold municipal elections, according to which the king will appoint half of the members, and the people will elect the other half. However, the turnout was low, and it was also revealed that these elections were for show, because according to some reports, the elected members did not meet even after months, and some members became disillusioned and resigned within a year or two.(Al-Rasheed, 2010) In 2005, King Fahd died and was succeeded by King Abdullah, the crown prince.

3.9. The Era of King Abdullah (2005-2015)

Although the crown prince became king in 2005, the previous king suffered a stroke in 1995, and Abdullah has been the de facto ruler since then. Therefore, King Abdullah's influence on the activities since then has been strong. However, since he officially became king in 2005, we have considered the activities prior to that date under the King Fahd era. King Abdullah's reign also witnessed serious reforms, and some concessions were made to the Wahhabi ideology.

The king first established the “*Allegiance Commission*” in 2007.(*Abdullah of Saudi Arabia | Biography, History, & Facts | Britannica*, n.d.) This committee was composed of Abdul Aziz's descendants. The purpose of this committee was to minimize the problems and controversies that might arise during the dynastic reshuffle. In fact, it was a kind of balance of power within the dynasty. This was a move that could reduce absolutism in the government, but the power and decisions of the institution were always questioned, and although the institution solved some of the problems in the succession process, it was never able to create a major impact or change.

Apart from this, King Abdullah had several reforms in education and women's rights. First, King Abdullah established a new university. This university, known as KAUST, is the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. One of the most notable features of the University is that a large part of its curriculum consists of science and technical subjects. Another feature is that it is the first mixed male-female university in Saudi Arabia. This is an important turning point in the history of Saudi Arabia because it is a surprising decision in a country like Saudi Arabia, which is strictly Wahhabi.

There were other changes in women's rights and women's participation in social life during this period. For example, the Shura Council, established in 1993, had all male members, but under King

Abdullah, female members were appointed. In total, thirty women were appointed to the Shura, which consists of 150 members, meaning that twenty percent of the Shura is composed of women.(Ottaway, 2015) In addition, another important breakthrough took place at the ministerial level. Norah al Faiz was appointed as the deputy minister for Women's Education in 2009. This appointment is also a first in history.(Borger, 2009) Despite these reforms, it was not possible for women to participate in municipal elections. In the 2011 elections, women could not participate. King Abdullah announced that women will participate in the elections to be held in 2015.(Ottaway, 2015)

In addition, despite various protests during this period, women's right to obtain a driver's license was not accepted. Women's visibility in the media has also remained limited. Therefore, although King Abdullah's era was characterized by reforms, apart from a few drastic reforms, there was no sharp break with the Wahhabi ideology. In addition, the September 11 attacks in 2001 also played a role in these reforms. Fearing the world's intense reaction, Saudi Arabia has embarked on several reforms. After the death of King Abdullah in 2015, he was succeeded by King Salman, and in 2017 Mohammed bin Salman became the crown prince and de facto ruler.

Since the reforms of the Mohammed bin Salman era constitute the main subject of this thesis, they will not be explained in this section but will be explained in detail in the next chapter. Looking at the historical background, Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi ideology have continued to the present day, albeit with occasional tensions. Even though the most intense reform movements were conducted during the reign of King Abdullah, even he did not achieve a sharp break with Wahhabism. However, as will be seen in the following chapters, a sharp break with Wahhabi ideology will take place under Mohammed Bin Salman.

4. DRAMATIC SHIFT DURING THE REIGN OF MUHAMMED BIN SELMAN

4.1. Introduction

In 2017, Mohammed bin Salman, who was appointed crown prince, made an interesting statement at a summit held in Riyadh that same year. Mohammed bin Salman said that Saudi Arabia would return to moderate Islam and increase its tolerance towards all religions. Not stopping there, he also made the following statement: “We are returning to what we were before – a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world.” (*Saudi Crown Prince Promises ‘Return to Moderate Islam,’* n.d.) According to this statement, Saudi Arabia was already quite moderate before, but later became a country dominated by such extreme ideas.

In other speeches, he gives the year 1979 as the date when Saudi Arabia entered this situation. In fact, what MBS is trying to do is a kind of historical rewriting. By creating a historical narrative in this way, he will establish a kind of legitimacy framework for the reforms he intends to implement. Considering that a large part of the Saudi population is young, this is a very smart strategy. An example of this historical construction is the Saudi series *Al-Asouf*. Released in 2018, the series takes place in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 1980s. (*Nasser Al-Qasabi to Asharq Al-Awsat*, n.d.; *Why the Fight Against ‘Al Asouf’?*, 2018) The series dramatizes the conditions of that era, family relationships, and social life in a manner consistent with MBS's statements. In other words, the series portrays that period as a time when moderate Islam was dominant. Through such initiatives, MBS is essentially conveying that his country is not radical or extreme, that such tendencies began after 1979, and that his reforms are not about moving away from tradition but rather about returning to the true Saudi tradition.

It is important to position the reforms of Mohammed bin Salman, who legitimizes his reforms with such statements. Various reform activities have been carried out in the history of Saudi Arabia, which are briefly mentioned in the historical background section. However, I argue that the reforms after MBS mark a much sharper turn in terms of scope, content, and diversity compared to previous ones. This section will examine the reforms of the MBS era to demonstrate this sharp transformation.

In this context, four main topics have been identified, which will be explained in various subheadings. These topics are briefly women's appearance and rights in social life, reforms in the social and cultural sphere, legal reforms and the powers of Wahhabi Institutions and education reforms. The reason for choosing these areas is that Wahhabism is particularly dominant in these areas. Therefore, the

weakening of Wahhabism in these areas signifies a significant weakening of Wahhabism in the country. For this reason, this section will provide an in-depth analysis of the reforms in these areas.

4.2. Women's Appearance and Rights in Social Life

The issue of women's appearance and rights in the social sphere has been a subject of debate almost since the founding of Saudi Arabia. Whether the limited social presence and rights of women stem from Wahhabi ideology or from the tribal social structure is a separate matter of debate. The main point we seek to make in this section of the thesis is that MBS has implemented reforms that will lead to a sharp break with Wahhabism. For this reason, while the tribal social structure may play a role in the issue of women's rights, we argue that Wahhabism is the primary factor.

We also have various examples to support our claim. First of all, as mentioned in the previous sections of the thesis, the most important representatives and practitioners of the Wahhabi movement were the Ikhwan group, and this group had special settlements. This group was strictly committed to Wahhabi ideology. It is reported that women rarely went out in the areas where this group lived and even tapped their hands together to communicate with each other. In fact, John S. Habib, who visited one of these settlements in the late 1960s, emphasized that the situation of women remained the same. (Habib, 1978)

Secondly, the institution that has always restricted or controlled women's rights is the Wahhabi institution. This institution has determined women's social rights and status through the knowledge of the ulema and the fatwas they have issued. For example, the ban on women driving was officially prohibited in 1991 through a fatwa issued by Ibn Baz and al-Uthaymin, prominent Wahhabi scholars of the time. (Al-Rasheed, 2013) Although it may be thought that driving was not prohibited before this date, it was effectively and socially prohibited from that point onward. In 1991, it was formalized. There are many other fatwas that restrict women's rights. Additionally, there were religious police known as the Mutawwi who enforced these rules, and women were socially controlled. These and similar examples clearly demonstrate the influence of Wahhabi institutions in restricting women's roles.

Thirdly and finally, we believe that Wahhabism plays a greater role than tribalism in restricting women's rights. If tribalism were the fundamental factor restricting women's rights, we would see similar practices to those in Saudi Arabia in other countries where tribalism exists. However, despite the tribal structure in Kuwait and Oman, we can say that women do not have as few rights as they do in Saudi Arabia. In other words, even if the tribal structure has a negative impact on the position of women, it can be said that the main factor lowering the position of women in Saudi Arabia is Wahhabism, which

has evolved into religious nationalism. For this reason, it can also be said that any reform that increases women's visibility and rights is a blow to Wahhabism.

Following Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power, many restrictions on women have been lifted. For example, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, women were prohibited from driving in Saudi Arabia for many years, and this ban was lifted in 2017. The first driver's licenses were issued to women in 2018. The ban on driving was one of the most significant restrictions in Saudi Arabia. It was believed that allowing women to drive would lead to fitna (sedition), and this ban remained in place for a long time. Even during the reign of King Abdullah, who implemented perhaps the most reforms before MBS, this ban was not lifted. In this context, MBS's emphasis on women's rights is even more important. In a report prepared by the General Authority for Statistics in Saudi Arabia in 2022, he mentions the need to empower women and young people for sustainable development. (*Saudi Women' Report*, 2022)

The Crown Prince has lifted many restrictions along with the car ban. One of these is the restrictions on women's appearance in public life and their ability to enter male-only environments. In this context, the ban on women attending sports competitions was lifted in 2017. Two years later, another revolutionary development took place for a country like Saudi Arabia: a women's football league was established. (*Saudi Arabia Launches Women's Football League*, 2020) Additionally, women can now play in football teams without wearing a headscarf. Alongside these revolutionary developments in sports, it is also worth noting that there have been revolutionary advancements in the fields of art and space exploration regarding women.

MBS, which has made various breakthroughs in the field of art, supports the participation of women in this field. For example, Haifaa al-Mansour, the first female director from Saudi Arabia, was invited by the General Culture Committee of the Saudi government in 2018 and engaged in a series of discussions. (*Three Saudi Women Appointed in Newly Formed General Authority for Culture*, 2018) Following this meeting, the Saudi government decided to offer various scholarships to young women interested in art and film. In addition to the arts, the Saudi government has also made another first in the field of space exploration. Rayyanah Barnawi became the first Saudi woman to travel to a space station. (*Axiom Space Astronaut*, n.d.) Considering the incident during the reign of King Faisal when a female news anchor was removed from her position due to public backlash, the emergence of such a women astronaut represents a revolutionary step forward in every sense.

Along with the increased visibility of women in various fields, important appointments have also been made for women in public office. Reema bint Bandar is undoubtedly one of the most notable examples of these appointments. Reema is the first female ambassador appointed to the United States in Saudi Arabian history, and she is also the first female ambassador in Saudi history. (*The Ambassador*

| *the Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, n.d.) The appointment of the first female ambassador to such an important country is another noteworthy development. Another notable appointment in this field is that of Haifa Bint Muhammed Al-Saud. She was appointed Deputy Minister of Tourism for Strategy and Investment in 2022. (*Haifa Bint Mohammed Al Saud*, 2025) Finally, Shihana Alazzaz was appointed advisor to the Royal Court, becoming the first woman to hold this position. (*Who's Who*, 2024) These and other public appointments are important steps forward for women's rights and the visibility of women.

One of the most debated issues regarding women's rights in Saudi Arabia is the guardianship system. In fact, it can be said that the two most debated issues regarding women's rights in Saudi Arabia in the 2000s were driving and guardianship. In fact, women's rights activists have organized campaigns under the slogan “I am My Own Guardian.” (Al-Rasheed, 2021, p. 233) While this system has been significantly relaxed during the MBS era, it is important to briefly explain what the system entails to understand the changes. In the guardianship system, women's ability to perform certain tasks is contingent upon the permission of their male guardians, who are typically their husbands or fathers. For example, if a woman wanted to apply for a passport, she needed her guardian's permission. Similarly, if she wanted to marry, her guardian's permission was required. In such areas, women had no right to speak or act independently.

Significant changes that relaxed this system were made by MBS in 2019. Women over the age of 21 were granted the right to obtain passports and travel abroad without the permission of their guardians. Additionally, women gained the freedom to register events such as marriage, birth, and death with official institutions without the consent of a male guardian. Furthermore, women now have the right to conduct official transactions in their own names. (correspondent, 2019) Despite these changes, the guardianship system continues to exist in certain areas, such as marriage. However, as noted, the system has been significantly relaxed.

Another issue we can discuss in relation to women's rights is their participation in economic life. This is because women's participation in economic life inevitably increases their social visibility. This conflicts with ideologies such as Wahhabism, which consider women's visibility in social life to be a source of discord. In other words, the increased visibility of women in the economic sphere is in direct conflict with Wahhabism. Here, looking at the figures will help us understand this better. While the rate of women's participation in the workforce was around 20% in 2014, this figure nearly doubled to around 34% in 2021. (“The Spectacular Surge of the Saudi Female Labor Force,” n.d.)

The visibility of women in the media has also increased significantly. Following the dismissal of a female children's program presenter during the reign of Faisal, there were no female figures in this field

for a long time. It was not until 2018 that a female news anchor appeared on Saudi state television. That year, as part of the MBS reforms, the first female news anchor was appointed to Saudi state television. Waem al-Dakheel made history in this field in Saudi Arabia. (*Up Close and Personal with Weam Al-Dakheel, the First Woman to Anchor the Main News Bulletin in Saudi Arabia*, 2018) As part of these reforms, the visibility of women in the media has also increased significantly. In fact, in 2024, a separate development took place, and six women were appointed to the Saudi Journalists Association, which has 13 members. Similar examples can be multiplied. However, one thing is certain: during the MBS era, women have gained increased media visibility in addition to other rights and have also secured employment opportunities in these fields.

In short, the restrictions faced by women in Saudi Arabia are mostly rooted in Wahhabi ideology. Mohammed bin Salman has introduced reforms in these areas that are unprecedented in Saudi history. These reforms could not even be implemented during the reign of King Abdullah, which is considered the most reformist period in the country's history. Women have gained the right to drive, access sports facilities, and a women's soccer league has been established. In addition, pioneering Saudi women have emerged in the arts and space exploration. Women have been appointed to important public institutions, and the highly controversial guardianship system has been relaxed. Women's participation in the workforce and their visibility in the media have also significantly increased. In summary, MBS has granted women new rights through unprecedented reforms in Saudi history and made concessions to the Wahhabi ideology.

4.3. Reforms in the Social and Cultural Sphere

After explaining the reforms made for women, we will explain the reforms made in social and cultural areas. The social sphere is one of the most important places where the implementation of an ideology becomes apparent. For example, in Syria during the time of Hafiz Assad, under the authoritarian rule of the Baath Party, it was difficult for people to gather and talk because of the state's intelligence network. It was easy to see the manifestations of this regime's ideology in the social sphere. The state's ideological stance could also be seen in what women wore or whether social spaces were mixed or separate for men and women. In short, one of the important areas where Wahhabi ideology is visible in Saudi Arabia is the social and cultural sphere. The influence of Wahhabi scholars was strong in these areas. According to them, mixed-gender environments were problematic or concerts and cinemas that were Western-oriented were also considered inappropriate. The strict application of Wahhabism in such areas is a well-known feature of Saudi history.

The dominance of Wahhabism in social circles has not deterred MBS from reforming these areas. As outlined in his 2030 vision, one of the three goals he aims to achieve is to create a vibrant

society.(*Saudi Vision 2030*, n.d.) For this reason, unprecedented reforms in Saudi history have been implemented in social areas. One of these reforms is the reopening of cinemas and theaters after 35-40 years. This historic move has generated considerable excitement among the Saudi Arabian people, especially the younger generation. It should also be emphasized that cinemas are mixed rather than segregated by gender. This historic decision was taken in 2017. One point that may raise questions is the fact that cinemas were already open before 1980. In other words, as MBS claims, Saudi society was not as strictly Wahhabi before 1980 but rather more moderate, and it became more Wahhabi later.

It has been mentioned that Selman's theory is an attempt to construct a new history. This theory is not based on solid ground, and as explained in the historical background section of the thesis, the Saudi state has been a state dominated by Wahhabi ideology. For this reason, the cinema and theaters that existed before 1980 should not be given much value. They were mostly owned by wealthy people. They did not appeal to all segments of the population and did not allow mixed audiences. They were also frequently used by non-Saudi employees of Western companies such as ARAMCO. For these reasons, the cinemas that existed before 1980 differ from today's cinemas in many ways. In other words, this has little to do with the argument we are trying to make in this section.

It can be said that cinema and opera were banned in Saudi Arabia after the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque due to the increase in Wahhabism. For this reason, this field was already opposed by the ulema. We saw this situation when television was introduced to the country. The Wahhabi ulema had serious and intense objections, but their reaction was mitigated by saying that there would be religious content in the broadcasts. Cinema and theater were also not considered acceptable activities in the eyes of the ulema. Indeed, when the decision to reopen cinemas was made in 2017, Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, who was the Grand Mufti at the time and is still in office, expressed his opposition to this decision. (Shoard, 2017)

According to the Grand Mufti, cinema is something that harms the values of society and is generally imported from foreign countries. It also contains atheistic and indecent elements. Concerts are similar and undermine the values of Saudi Arabia. Such elements that undermine the values of Saudi society are incorrect and should not exist in the social sphere.(MyIslamiTV 2024, الإسلامي) For this reason, Sheikh Abdulaziz requested that this decision be reviewed.(Shoard, 2017) However, the Saudi Arabian Council criticized the Grand Mufti's stance and requested that he should review his fatwa. ("Saudi Shura Council Calls on Authority to Review Fatwas," 2018) Since then, the widespread opening of cinemas and theaters and the resumption of their activities demonstrate that the decision is not that of the sheikh but of the Saudi Arabian government. This is significant as a step against Wahhabism.

The reopening of cinemas, theaters, and similar venues is problematic not only in terms of content but also in terms of the mixing of men and women. Men and women cannot be together unless they are related, such as husband and wife or father and mother. This rule has been prevalent in Saudi Arabia for many years, originating from Wahhabi ideology. However, this rule has been relaxed, and mixed-gender venues are now permitted. As a result, women and men who are not related by blood or marriage can now be in the same space together. This is clearly contrary to Wahhabism. In fact, a fatwa issued by Abdullah Ibn Baz, the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, can be cited as an example in this regard.

Ibn Baz states here that it is wrong for women to enter a male-dominated environment and work. He first considers it contrary to Sharia law for women to leave their household duties and go out and then discusses the problems of men and women working together. According to him, such an environment is not religiously correct and leads to the breakdown of families. He also uses another expression that is important in terms of our topic. He argues that the presence of unrelated men and women together constitutes a negative situation that undermines societal values and morality. (*Danger of Women Joining Men in Their Workplace – Shaykh Ibn Baaz (Rahimahullaah) – Abdurrahman.Org*, n.d.) Such fatwas can be found in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, implementing such reforms clearly signifies a sharp break from Wahhabism.

Similar reforms have been implemented to revitalize tourism. For example, new tourist destinations have been created to generate new sources of income for the country beyond Hajj and Umrah. Examples of these new tourist destinations include Al Ula and Shebara Resort on the Red Sea. In these and similar places, there is little interference with women's dress. In fact, following the restriction of the powers of religious police, there is a sense of relaxation within the country. These and similar areas, particularly Al Ula, frequently make headlines for hosting concerts and mixed-gender entertainment events.

The city of Al Ula is significant from another perspective. Al Ula and Medain Salih are places where pre-Islamic societies lived. The tombs of those people are in these places. Therefore, such places contain elements of polytheism and have remained from the days of ignorance to the present day. Additionally, the activities conducted there, such as the mixing of men and women and the inappropriate clothes of women, are highly problematic from a Wahhabi perspective. Furthermore, this region is where the people of Thamud were subjected to divine punishment. Entering and spending time in such regions has been prohibited by the Prophet Muhammad. (*Semūd*, n.d.) Indeed, there is a fatwa by Ibn Baz on this matter. (navedz, 2016) When all these reasons are considered together, opening such a region for tourism and conducting the activities mentioned there is clearly contrary to Wahhabi ideology.

Finally, concerts must also be mentioned among the reforms carried out in the social and cultural spheres. Concert activities have been evaluated in the same way as cinema and have been described by

the current Grand Mufti as activities that degenerate morality. In addition, concerts involve the mixing of men and women, which can lead to inappropriate situations. For these reasons, concerts have been evaluated alongside cinema and theater and found to be contrary to Wahhabi ideology. However, as is the case in many other areas, Wahhabi ideology has not been taken very seriously in this domain either, or concert activities have been permitted.

Following the lifting of the ban, the Saudi state organized concerts for singers who were famous both locally and internationally. In 2017, the year the ban was lifted, Lebanese female artist Hiba Tawaji became the first female artist to perform in Saudi Arabia. The concert was held in the previously mentioned Al Ula region. (*Interview*, 2021) Additionally, Mariah Carey became the first Western female artist to perform in Saudi Arabia. (*Mariah Carey Wows Fans in Saudi Arabia with Her First Concert in the Kingdom*, 2019) Mariah's 2019 concert in Saudi Arabia also contributed positively to the country's new image on the international stage. Hundreds of women and men attended the concert and enjoyed the event.

The Saudi government, which considers concerts important for its international image, has also invited world-famous singers to perform in Saudi Arabia. In 2021, world-renowned singer Justin Bieber performed at the Saudi Arabian Formula 1 Grand Prix. (*Justin Bieber in Saudi Arabia*, 2021) This concert, which was important for Saudi Arabia's image, saw a high turnout. Another guest performer at the same event was the world-renowned David Guetta, who also performed at the concert. Additionally, he delivered a musical performance accompanied by an amazing visual spectacle in the Al Ula region of Saudi Arabia in 2023. (David Guetta, 2024)

Another world star who performed in Saudi Arabia is Jennifer Lopez. Jennifer Lopez performed in Saudi Arabia again in 2025 as part of the Formula One event. The concert took place near Mecca, a holy site in Islam, which drew criticism from the Muslim community. (The New Arab, 2025b) Despite this, the concert went ahead and reached a wide audience. It is anticipated that similar concerts will continue to take place in Saudi Arabia.

While examining the reforms carried out during the MBS era in Saudi Arabia, we tried to look at the reforms MBS made in the social and cultural fields as the second heading. MBS opened cinemas after many years, created mixed-gender spaces, and launched new tourist areas on a national and international scale. Additionally, numerous concerts have been held in Saudi Arabia. Many of these reforms are in direct conflict with Wahhabi ideology, as we previously noted through fatwas and the opinions of scholars. Therefore, we can say that the reforms in the social and cultural spheres, like those in women's rights, signify a sharp break from Wahhabism.

4.4. Legal Reforms and the Powers of Wahhabi Institutions

This section will evaluate whether the authority of Wahhabi institutions has decreased or not. Changes in the authority and power of these institutions have been achieved through both political and legal reforms. For this reason, although the main focus of this section is the authority of Wahhabi institutions, these areas will be evaluated together as they are intertwined with legal reforms and influence each other.

One of the biggest reforms made by Mohammed bin Salman to reduce the influence of Wahhabi institutions was to reduce the power of the Mutawwi, who can be described as the religious police. The word Mutawwi literally means volunteer. These individuals, who had significant influence during the establishment of the state, held several different roles. These religiously educated individuals assisted judges in small settlements. They also explained the Wahhabi interpretation of religion to nomads. Additionally, they were responsible for collecting zakat. In short, they played important roles in the spread and control of Wahhabi ideology in the Saudi state.

The Mutawwi were individuals in the Saudi state who monitored and had a say in general moral conduct. They were responsible for matters such as women's attire, interactions between men and women in public spaces, and whether shopkeepers closed their stores during prayer times. These individuals had the authority to make arrests and were influential figures whose power was widely recognized within society. This institution played a significant role in the strict enforcement of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, making it an important institution from a Wahhabi perspective.

However, by 2016, the powers of this institution had been severely curtailed. (*Saudi Religious Police Ordered to Be "Kind and Gentle,"* n.d.) Their powers to arrest were taken away, and they were left with no concrete power mechanism. In addition, their reputation and influence in society began to decline. In other words, an institution that was the concrete controller and enforcer of Wahhabi ideology was weakened. The weakening of this institution and the reduction of its influence clearly represent a break with Wahhabism.

In addition to reducing the powers of the Mutawwiya, who could be considered religious police, some legal reforms were also implemented to limit the scope of Wahhabism. It would be appropriate to illustrate this reduction through the legal sphere. This is because Wahhabism's ideological influence in Saudi Arabia was based on its dominance in two areas: education and law. As mentioned earlier, the Ministry of National Education, established in 1953, was headed by a member of the sheikh family. Similarly, the Presidency of Higher Education, established in 1975, was also headed by a member of the sheikh family. (Büyükkara, 2020) In the legal sphere, as is well known, legal practices and penalties

were based on Wahhabi ideology. Additionally, judges were granted broad discretionary authority in many areas, and they acted in accordance with Wahhabi principles.

Consequently, Wahhabism was influential and powerful in the fields of education and law. However, Mohammed bin Salman also undertook reform activities in these areas. Legislation activities began in the field of law. These legislative activities dealt a blow to Wahhabism in several ways. First, as mentioned earlier, these legislative activities restricted the discretionary powers of judges, which had previously strengthened Wahhabism. Additionally, laws contrary to classical Wahhabism were enacted, and it would be appropriate to explain a few of these laws.

In 2022, a new royal decree on family law was issued in Saudi Arabia. According to Article 9 of this decree, couples getting married must be at least 18 years old. (*Royal Decree No. M/73 March 9 2022 Family Law*, 2022) While exceptions may be made in certain special cases, the general rule remains as stated. Looking back a bit further, we see that in 2019, Saudi Arabia banned marriages involving individuals under the age of 15. However, if we go back even further, we see that there was no such prohibition. In fact, in 2009, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, stated that individuals aged 10 or 12 could marry. (*Top Saudi Cleric: Ok for Young Girls to Wed - Cnn.Com*, n.d.)

This statement by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia reflects the Wahhabi approach to the age of marriage. However, this situation was changed by a decree issued in 2022. Waiting until the age of 18 to marry is not contrary to Wahhabism. However, prohibiting marriage before the age of 18 is contrary to Wahhabism because the views of Wahhabi scholars on this matter and Saudi Arabia's practice up until 2019 are well-established. For these reasons, this change can also be interpreted as a departure from Wahhabism.

In addition, Article 20 also addresses an important issue. Under the Saudi system, the guardianship system was strong, and a woman's marriage was subject to her guardian's permission, and she could not marry without his consent. However, Article 20 revises this issue. It is stated that if the guardian does not consent to the woman's marriage, the court may consider the woman's request and grant permission for the marriage. (*Royal Decree No. M/73 March 9 2022 Family Law*, 2022) This constitutes a legal reform that weakens the guardianship system, enhances the status of women, and is contrary to Wahhabism.

The decline in the power of Wahhabi institutions has also led to a decline in the influence of Wahhabi scholars. As we mentioned in the historical background section, during the reign of King Faisal, the issue of whether to allow television into the country was a matter of debate. When many people, including Wahhabi scholars, opposed this, the government of the time suppressed the opposition by stating that only religious broadcasts would be allowed. Similar examples exist in Saudi history.

However, despite the implementation of reforms that seriously contradict Wahhabism during the reign of Mohammed bin Salman, it is also a fact that the voice of the ulema has not been heard very much. In this situation, the official or unofficial ulema, which can be seen as the Wahhabi institution, has silenced its voice, and scholars such as Salman al-Awda, who are affiliated with the Sahwa movement, have been imprisoned for a tweet they posted.

4.5. Education Reforms

Another area that should be mentioned in the reforms of Mohammed bin Salman's era in Saudi Arabia is education. The education sector is critical for an ideology because ideologies are transmitted to younger generations through education, with the aim of making them loyal to that ideology. In this way, the state transmits its official ideology to students through school textbooks and curricula, making them loyal to the regime. This is what has happened in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the fields of education and law have been placed under the control of the ulema. The ulema have shaped both school textbooks and the curriculum according to Wahhabi ideology.

This section will examine the changes in Saudi Arabia's textbooks under specific headings. First, our examination covers the period after 2000 because partial changes in education began especially after September 11. However, as we argue in our thesis, the real change took place after the reign of Mohammed bin Salman. For this reason, to highlight the sharp contrast, the period before and after MBS will be examined in a comparative manner. This examination will be conducted through various themes. Examples of these themes include approach to Christianity and Judaism, approach to Zionism and Israel and gender issues.

One of the points that should be mentioned in this context is that reforms in the field of education have been slower than in other areas because changing dozens of textbooks and the education curriculum is a complex and lengthy process. For this reason, it can be said that the spark for radical change in education in Saudi Arabia was lit in 2018. In that year, the Saudi Ministry of Education announced that the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and extremist ideas would be removed from school textbooks and curricula. (*Ksa Revamping Education to Combat 'Extremist Ideologies,'* n.d.) Since then, Saudi textbooks and curricula have continued to be updated slowly but effectively.

4.5.1. Approach to the Christianity and Judaism

Wahhabism takes a harsh stance against other Muslims within Islam and accuses many of them of shirk, which is associating partners with Allah. For this reason, it is an exclusionary ideology. A similar attitude is also present toward people of other religions, as they are also considered to be within the scope of shirk. For this reason, Saudi state books related to Christianity and Judaism have a harsh and

sharp tone. For example, according to a 2008 report, a ninth-grade hadith book in Saudi Arabia states that Christians and Jews are the enemies of Muslims and that Muslims must always be cautious toward them. It also states that Muslims should not be friends with them, and if they do, they will stray from the right path. (*The West, Christians, Israel and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks*, 2008, p. 6)

In the 2019 edition, harsh statements about Christians were softened and some terms were removed. For example, the phrase “Christianity in its present form is a heretical and invalid religion” was removed in the 2019 edition. In addition, the terms “Christians” and ‘Jews’ were removed and replaced with a broad phrase such as “enemies of Islam,” the meaning of which is unclear. In 2021, the books continued to be updated. For example, a hadith was quoted in the book, and it was stated that this hadith was a response to Jews and Christians. The first claim was that Jews killed Jesus. The second is that Christians consider Jesus to be God. These statements were removed in the 2021 edition. In other words, negative depictions of Jews and Christians have been removed from the book. (Pardo, 2022, p. 16)

Similarly, some changes continued to be made after 2022. For example, the 2022 edition of the commentary states that some Jews and Christians are not arrogant and seek the truth. In other words, it is understood that most Jews and Christians are arrogant. For this reason, this statement regarding Jews and Christians was also removed in the 2023 edition. Similarly, while previous editions stated that the Bible and the Old Testament had been altered by Christians and Jews, these statements were also removed in the 2023 edition. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 13)

There is another interesting example related to Christians. Before 2021, there was a hadith in a book on Islamic sciences. In this hadith, Muhammad (P.B.U.H) condemns Abyssinian Christians who built places of worship over the graves of saints and hung their portraits. This hadith was removed from the book in later editions. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 202) This example is significant in the context of removing or softening statements that criticize Christians, but it gains even greater importance from another perspective. As previously mentioned, in Wahhabism, visiting cemeteries and tombs was considered shirk, and those who did so were deemed outside the fold of Islam. Given that Wahhabism was so strict on this issue even toward Muslims, the removal of this hadith related to Christians symbolizes a significant shift in Wahhabi ideology.

As can be seen from the examples given, especially in 2020 and thereafter, many harsh statements related to Christianity and Judaism have been either removed or softened in Saudi Arabia's textbooks. This situation indicates that Wahhabi ideology has weakened in school textbooks, as previously mentioned, because in Saudi Arabia, education was particularly under the control of Wahhabi scholars, and educational content was aligned with Wahhabism.

4.5.2. Approach to the Zionism and Israel

Another issue to which Wahhabism reacts strongly is Zionism and Israel. Excluding recent efforts to improve relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia has historically been a rival to Israel. In fact, during the wars between Arabs and Israel, Saudi Arabia has generally sided against Israel. Therefore, the issues of Zionism and Israel are significant to Saudi Arabia, and harsh statements against them are included in Saudi school's textbooks.

If we need to give an example from Saudi school textbooks that existed before the 2010s, we can cite a sentence from an Arabic grammar book. This sentence emphasizes that Israel is ugly and that their weapons are nothing but treachery. (*The West, Christians, Israel and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks*, 2008, p. 12) Similarly, there are passages related to Zionism and the goals of the Jews, and the style of these passages is harsh. Additionally, the map provided in the book does not depict Israel as an independent state, and this region is labeled as Palestine. It is emphasized that Israel has occupied this region. (*The West, Christians, Israel and Jews in Saudi Arabian Schoolbooks*, 2008, p. 17)

Harsh statements about Zionism, Judaism, and Israel also found their way into books between 2017 and 2019. For example, the book *Tawhid* includes a hadith stating that the Day of Judgment will not come until Muslims fight the Jews. (Pardo, 2020b, p. 4) Similarly, the 2019 edition of the book does not include maps showing the state of Israel. The name of the region is emphasized as Palestine. (Pardo, 2020b, p. 90) In addition, pro-Israel material has increased. For example, references to Jews have increased in the narration of Palestinian history.

In 2022, we see that some harsh expressions related to Israel and Judaism have been removed. For example, in 2021, there was some information about patriotic poetry in the Arabic language book. The themes of such poems include anti-colonialism and Israeli settlement in Palestine. The poems also express anger towards these events. For example, there is anger expressed in the poems about Jews settling in Palestine. In 2022, however, information related to Israel and Judaism was removed from these texts. In other words, the theme of anger toward Israel is no longer mentioned among the themes of the poems. This example is a clear indication of a softening stance toward Israel. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 220)

Another example concerns the presence of the State of Israel on maps. In the 2022 edition, the names of countries were removed from maps that had previously included them. This is an important example of softening. Although this change was implemented in all books at the time, it is an important example for the beginning. In the changes made in 2023, the names of countries were removed from most of the maps. Similarly, harsh expressions denigrating Israel and Zionism were also present in the books. For example, "Zionist enemy," "Israeli enemy," etc. These expressions have also been replaced with softer

ones. Additionally, the photo of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the caption stating that the mosque is in Jerusalem, Palestine, which was present in 2021, has also been removed. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 102)

To give one more example, a section removed from the Social Studies textbook in 2022 can be cited. This section mentioned the positive outcomes of the Intifada in Palestine. For example, the Intifada led to sympathy for Palestine in the international community. There were statements such as “The economic dependence of Palestinians on Israel has decreased.” Such statements glorified and supported the Intifada. However, this statement was removed from the 2022 edition of the book. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 207) This example reflects a softening of stance toward Israel. In addition, the hadith that was mentioned before mentioned a future war between Muslims and Jewish before the doomsday. This hadith was also removed in 2020 edition of the book. (Pardo, 2020a, p. 5)

In summary, harsh statements about Israel and Zionism in Saudi Arabian school textbooks, especially those published after 2022, have either been removed or softened. This sharp change also symbolizes a serious departure from Wahhabism.

4.5.3. Gender Issues

Another topic undergoing change in school textbooks is gender issues. Saudi Arabian society is patriarchal. Wahhabism has supported this situation and restricted women's roles and rights in social life as much as possible. It has been mentioned earlier that such restrictions were lifted especially after 2017. In this section, it will be explained whether the changing roles of women in social life and their developing rights have had an impact on school textbooks.

The importance of this issue in terms of our topic is that Wahhabism has taken an extremely harsh and rigid approach towards women. Examples of this approach can be seen in the Hijras established during the early period of Saudi history. These practices continued even after the state was officially established. Therefore, as previously explained, the strict approach of Wahhabism toward women is a clearly observable phenomenon throughout Saudi history, with examples provided in previous sections. For this reason, the changing approach toward the image of women is undeniably a departure from Wahhabism.

The approach to women in school textbooks has also changed, especially in 2021 and 2022. We believe that examples will help us to better understand this issue. First, in 2022, a change that was not very noticeable but could be considered very important was made in the high school level Islamic Studies textbook, and the new book was published in 2023. To put it more accurately, a few words were

removed from the existing text. Here, several verses from the Quran were included, and the lessons to be drawn from these verses were written.

One of the lessons to be learned from this verse is that fornication and homosexuality are prohibited in the book. The rest of the sentence also states that both outward and inward evil deeds are prohibited. In other words, fornication and homosexuality are prohibited as evil deeds. However, in the new edition of the book, the terms *fornication* and *homosexuality* have been removed. Only the phrase *evil deeds* remain. The specific removal of these two terms indicates a softening stance toward them. Whether the Saudi state did this voluntarily or to improve its image in the West, this situation is a serious issue from the perspective of Wahhabism and supports our theory of shifting from Wahhabism.

The second example concerns women's rights in the workplace. The 2021 edition of the book stated that women could not serve as judges in courts. This was based on a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. In 2022, the reference to women not being able to serve as judges was removed. The following year, the book was completely removed, and thus this hadith was also removed. This example is also important for our topic because the ruling given in the book was based on the hadith, which reflects the approach of Wahhabi scholars to the issue, which has been supported by practices that have continued for years. The removal of this statement was also a direct move against Wahhabism.

In another amendment made in 2022, it was stated that a woman must obey her husband as a condition for a successful marriage. A verse was also referenced in this regard, but this phrase has also been removed from new editions of the book. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 75) Similarly, it was stated that an attempt by a man to resemble a woman or by a woman to resemble a man is one of the greatest sins. This was also based on a hadith. However, we observe that this statement has also been removed in newer editions. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 76) Similarly, the statement requiring a woman to obey her husband has also been removed.

Another example is the issue of whether women can travel without a mahram. This issue is also closely related to the issue of guardianship that exists in Saudi Arabia. The connection between the guardianship issue and Wahhabism is well known, as there are clear opinions from religious scholars on this matter, some of which we have previously discussed. Prior to 2022, there was a statement in the hadith book stating that a woman could not travel without a mahram. However, we observe that this statement has been removed in the new editions published in 2022. (*Updated Review Saudi Textbooks 2023-24*, 2024, p. 208)

In short, the perceptions and rules that Wahhabism has established regarding women's rights and roles have been largely removed from the new textbooks. This clearly shows that the Saudi state has opened the door to a sharp shift away from Wahhabism in gender issues in the new textbooks.

4.6. Conclusion

Some of the reforms implemented during the reign of Mohammed bin Salman include women finally gaining the right to drive after many years, the weakening of the guardianship system, the opening of holiday resorts where mixed-gender concerts are held, the removal of extreme expressions from educational textbooks, and the reduction of the powers of religious police. This list, as described, goes on and on. These reforms were likely unimaginable even a decade ago for a Saudi citizen. However, these reforms have been implemented, and these kinds of reforms continue to be implemented. When considering the scope, content, and diversity of the reforms, it is evident that they have transformed to a degree that cannot even be compared to the pre-MBS era. Therefore, as a final note, I can say that the reforms of the Mohammed bin Salman era represent a sharp and decisive departure from Wahhabism.



5. WHY IS MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN ABANDONING WAHHABISM, THE OFFICIAL IDEOLOGY OF SAUDI ARABIA?

5.1. Introduction

In the previous section, we evaluated Mohammed bin Salman's reforms and showed that MBS changed Wahhabism, the official ideology of the Saudi Arabia for many years. After demonstrating this, a question arises: Why does MBS want to change the Wahhabi ideology that has provided legitimacy to the Saudi dynasty for many years? Why are the reforms aimed at significantly altering the face of the Saudi state? Answering these questions will help us understand the underlying reasons behind Mohammed bin Salman's desire for change and enable us to contextualize the reforms more effectively.

As we have shown earlier, the regime explains this change by focusing more on the economic sphere. However, a group led by writers such as Madawi Al-Rasheed and Christopher Davidson argues that the reforms and repression are applied simultaneously. Reforms that are carried out by MBS are merely cosmetic measures designed to mask his rising authoritarianism. Additionally, by eliminating Wahhabi institutionalism, MBS has pushed other power centers outside his own sphere of influence off the stage. Therefore, according to this group, the popular reforms being implemented are particularly effective in influencing the younger generation, thereby legitimizing MBS and strengthening his power.

The other group acknowledges the authoritarian nature of MBS's reforms but claims that the real goal is long-term regime survival and stability. According to this group, the Saudi state's system in the economy, social life, and other areas has become worn out and prone to potential crises. Therefore, the future of the Saudi state and, consequently, the royal family can only be secured by changing this worn-out system. This is why MBS is implementing reforms.

Although three different arguments stand out in the existing literature, the economy-based argument is more commonly used by the regime, but the existing academic, semi-academic, and even non-academic literature does not focus on this argument. For this reason, we will focus more on the other two pieces of literature. The power consolidation argument is a strong argument, but it is incomplete and cannot explain some phenomena. If MBS's goal is to deceive with these reforms, he would not be so concerned with economic reforms that are crucial for the country's future, or he would limit the reforms to a more modest level and not pursue such a radical break from Wahhabism. Also, he continues to give new rights for women and these rights are mentioned in the legal documents such as Family Law 2022. Therefore, the power consolidation argument does not fully explain the case.

The regime survival argument is more consistent and comprehensive in explaining the case, but in this argument, Wahhabism is generally treated as part of the problem, meaning that Wahhabism is not at the center of the problem. I argue that Wahhabism is at the center of all problems in the new system that MBS wants to establish. In other words, the functioning of MBS's new system depends on the abandonment of Wahhabism.

Therefore, I am re-constructing the regime's survival argument around Wahhabism. I have divided the problems and crises that existed before MBS into three categories which are oil dependency, social unrest and international pressure on curriculum and women rights. The first problem is the oil dependency in economy, because oil prices fluctuate sharply and the future of oil is seriously doubtful due to the use of new energy sources. The second problem is social unrest, especially among the younger generation, who have different demands and are governed by a very rigid system in the global world. As an international pressure problem, especially after the events of September 11 and the emergence of ISIS, Western public opinion has declared Saudi Arabia a scapegoat because of its extreme ideology, and as a result, there is a kind of international pressure on Saudi Arabia to change its curriculum and education system. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has a poor record on human rights and women's rights, which has drawn criticism. The main challenges of the pre-MBS era can be summarized as follows.

MBS, on the other hand, is trying to solve these pre-existing problems through reforms. He has developed an economic diversification project as a solution to the rentier system and implemented reforms known as social liberalization to resolve social unrest. For example, he has created mixed-gender environments and brought world-renowned artists to Saudi Arabia to perform concerts. It is also working to resolve international pressure, or rather problems originating from abroad, by improving education and human and women's rights. Two of the three main themes in the Vision 2030 document support the existence of these problems because the Vision 2030 document is a kind of long-term project to find solutions to Saudi Arabia's problems and create a transformed Saudi Arabia. Two of these three themes are “Vibrant Society,” which is presented as a solution to social unrest, and “Thriving Economy,” which seeks to address the challenges of the existing oil-dependent economic model. (*Saudi Vision 2030*, n.d.)

The equation we have presented differs from the survival claims of the existing regime. The existing literature generally treats Wahhabism as part of the problem, whereas, in my opinion, the solution to all of MBS's problems lies in abandoning Wahhabism. For example, increasing women's participation in the workforce is necessary for economic diversification, which may seem unrelated, but Wahhabi ideology stands in the way of this. Similarly, changing the regime's image is necessary to attract international investment, and this too is contingent on abandoning Wahhabism. It is also clear that social issues, and the development of education and women's rights are all tied to Wahhabism. Therefore, the

regime's survival is dependent on the abandonment of Wahhabism. However, the regime survival should not be seen as a pure goal for survival, because MBS's survival and the regime's survival are intertwined. Therefore, when we mention the survival of the regime, we should also implicitly think of MBS's survival.

In summary, I argue that Mohammed bin Salman's long-term goal is the survival of the regime because the regime has accumulated stress over the long term and is prone to potential crises. Furthermore, MBS's survival also means his own survival in this sense because there is no non-personal state independent of the royal family in Saudi Arabia. Achieving regime survival is also dependent on abandoning Wahhabism. Since Wahhabism is one of the founding elements of the Saudi state, changing it would cause problems both among the conservative population and among official and unofficial religious scholars. In addition, MBS has built the state's survival strategy around his own name. He has presented himself as a visionary, young, and open to innovation, and has branded himself as MBS. For these reasons, MBS has consolidated his power and embarked on reforms.

5.2. Power Consolidation in the Short-Run

For Mohammed bin Salman to implement his reforms in the long term and gain public acceptance, he chooses the option of consolidation of his power in the short term, and there are various reasons for this. Firstly, MBS has established his survival strategy not through greater participation or transparency, but through a system in which he holds absolute authority. In addition, due to the monarchical system in Saudi Arabia, the survival of the regime itself could spell the end for MBS. In other words, the survival of the regime is intertwined with MBS's survival. Furthermore, abandoning an ideology like Wahhabism could have been met with resistance from the people or the ulema who have embraced this ideology for decades. For these reasons, MBS consolidated his power before implementing reforms.

It is necessary to touch upon an important point here. As will be discussed later, it was necessary for MBS to consolidate his power in the short term to carry out major changes, but he will not relinquish this power after implementing his reforms, and the regime will continue to become more authoritarian. Although he has become a more popular figure as his reforms have been implemented, MBS is someone who has zero tolerance for dissent. The 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi is an important turning point that shows what he is capable of in this regard. Currently, activists and some members of the ulema are in prison. In other words, the authoritarian nature of the regime is a reality, and it is likely that, as Davidson suggests, an absolute sultanism regime is being established. (Davidson, 2021) However, it is not entirely accurate to evaluate the reforms within this narrow framework, and therefore the regime survival argument will also be considered. Before moving on to this, it would be useful to look at the reasons why MBS chose the option of consolidation of power in the short term.

5.3. Survival Strategy Established through the MBS Brand

Muhammad bin Salman has framed his reforms and innovations under his own name. In other words, Mohammed bin Salman has created an image of MBS as a visionary, innovative, and friend of the youth. He has engaged in serious advertising and PR efforts during his visits to the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, during his visit to the United Kingdom, he placed advertisements on billboards with the phrase “He is opening Saudi Arabia to the world” next to his picture. (*Saudi Crown Prince Launches Ad Blitz to Promote London Visit*, n.d.) He also visited the United States as well. During his visit to the United States, he also promoted himself extensively and demonstrated that he is the person who will take Saudi Arabia forward. In addition to political visits, he has toured important educational institutions such as Harvard and MIT, visited Silicon Valley, and met with prominent figures like Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates. (*Mbs’ Visit to Us Has Been a Resounding Success*, n.d.) Such activities promote the image of MBS as an innovative, visionary, and open-minded leader. Therefore, MBS has developed his reforms through his own persona.

In addition, Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, and there may be internal conflicts within the royal family. For example, King Faisal and King Saud were involved in a power struggle, and King Saud was forced to abdicate. Before initiating reform activities, MBS removed Crown Prince Nayef from power and forced other members of the royal family to pledge allegiance to him. (“How Saudi Elite Became Five-Star Prisoners at the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton,” 2017) As a result, he has become the sole source of power. While the reforms may appear beneficial on the surface, any failures could lead to MBS being removed from power. Therefore, the survival of the regime is synonymous with the survival of MBS. For this reason, he has consolidated his power.

There are also social reasons for MBS's consolidation of power in the short term. The Saudi people have embraced the strict Wahhabi ideology since the establishment of the state and have lived their lives within this ideological framework, with their worldview and activities shaped by this ideology. This ideology, which has provided the Saudi dynasty with significant legitimacy, has also always posed a threat to the Saudi political system. Two examples will illustrate this point.

As mentioned in the previous sections of this thesis, the seizure of the Grand Mosque took place in 1979. Those who carried out this act claimed that the Saudi dynasty had strayed from Islam (Wahhabism). (Büyükkara, 2020) In other words, those who carried out this act were people who adhered to strict Wahhabi ideology. We see something similar in the emergence of the organization known as Al-Qaeda. The ideology that gave rise to this organization was also a strict Wahhabi ideology, and its founder, Osama bin Laden, claimed that Saudi Arabia had deviated from its founding ideology and strayed from the path of Islam. He even emphasized that the Saudi state was an ally of the United

States and that jihad against the Saudis was therefore necessary.(Compilation of Usama Bin Laden Statements 1994, 2004)

As can be seen, the strict Wahhabi interpretation has given rise to radical cadres and groups within Saudi Arabia. In fact, when examining the countries of origin of people who joined ISIS, Saudi Arabia ranks second after Tunisia.(Bremmer, 2017) This situation demonstrates that the strict Wahhabi ideology has a serious influence on the Saudi people. If MBS needs to abandon Wahhabism in the long term for the survival of the regime, he is doing so. It was also necessary for him to secure his own power against potential threats from Saudi citizens influenced by Wahhabi ideology. This is because events like the Kaaba siege or Al-Qaeda could repeat themselves, potentially plunging the Saudi political system into crisis. In short, MBS has consolidated his power in the short term to prevent such events from occurring.

There is also an ideological reason for MBS to consolidate his power in the short term. This reason has both political and social dimensions. However, as this part is more related to Wahhabism and its official or unofficial representatives, we thought it more appropriate to mention it under a separate heading.

The Wahhabi ulema or clique has been in a symbiotic relationship with the political structure since the establishment of the Saudi state. Although the political dynasty holds the real power in this relationship, the ulema also wields power to varying degrees. For example, during the reign of King Faisal, a crisis arose between the scholars and the state over the introduction of television into the country. In response to the scholars' opposition, Faisal conceded and agreed to allow only religious broadcasts, thereby permitting television to be introduced into the country. (Al-Rasheed, 2010) Such examples can be found in Saudi history, though they are not numerous. Nevertheless, even with a power distribution of 99% to 1%, a political rivalry has emerged between the dynasty and the ulema. For this reason, MBS has become the sole and absolute power, eliminating this opposing bloc because such a sharp break from Wahhabism would endanger the future of Wahhabism and its representatives. MBS has strengthened his power in response to this potential threat, and this ideological reason has a more political dimension.

On the other hand, MBS has arrested important scholars who have prestige and influence among the people. The most prominent of these scholars affiliated with Sahwa are Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda. This group had previously criticized various policies of Saudi Arabia based on Wahhabism. Their criticisms included alliances with non-Muslim states, the diminishing role of religious scholars in the Saudi political system, and the waning influence of Islam in Saudi governance.(Lacroix, 2011) The impact of this movement on the public poses a problem for MBS, who has abandoned Wahhabism. This is because such a movement could develop a serious opposition base within the Saudi royal family and

mobilize the masses. This could lead to new incidents similar to the new Grand Mosque seizure. For this reason, MBS has imprisoned these individuals to prevent potential opposition and crises.

In short, Mohammed bin Salman has consolidated his power while implementing reforms to solve Saudi Arabia's chronic problems that have been accumulating over time. MBS has consolidated his power in the short term because he has devised a survival strategy for himself, and because the survival of the regime means his own survival. He has also taken this measure because he is wary of opposition, as the solution to the problems lies in abandoning Wahhabism. However, this does not legitimize human rights violations, as if he had not built his solution strategy around himself these reforms could have developed differently. Currently, however, his targets are not only Wahhabi clerics but also all kinds of activists, women's rights defenders, and opposition members seeking justice.

5.4. Why Is the Argument of Power Consolidation Not Being Enough?

While I believe that the MBS regime has consolidated its power through reforms but at the same time, I also argue that MBS and his reforms have broader goals in a wider perspective. Therefore, I claim that the ultimate goal of the reforms is the long-term survival of the regime. While the reasons for MBS's consolidation of power in the short term have been discussed, in order to support the thesis that the regime will survive in the long term, it is first necessary to critique and refute the thesis of the consolidation of power. Those who defend the thesis of the consolidation of power argue that the reforms are a mask to hide authoritarianism and that the reforms have a dual structure and contain elements of repression. I will attempt to demonstrate why this claim is not enough to explain the whole reforms process for various reasons.

If the reforms carried out by MBS were merely cosmetic,(al-Rasheed, 2017) he would not insist on continuing them by increasing their scope and intensity, especially after the Ritz Carlton incident, which had already significantly strengthened his power. He would not have relaxed the Wahhabi ideology, which has been deeply rooted in society for years, through less comprehensive reforms. We have already discussed the best example of this in the field of education. We have mentioned that the curriculum and course content have undergone a sharp change, especially after 2022. It is also undisputed that the winds of change in the field of education will continue.

In addition, several large-scale projects, particularly in the fields of economy and tourism, have been announced. These projects, which can be referred to as “giga projects,” also have extremely high costs. The NEOM projects, as they are known, aimed to build futuristic cities entirely powered by renewable energy, with an estimated cost of around 500 billion dollars. However, it is now estimated that the costs could rise to 8-9 trillion dollars.(The New Arab, 2025a) Despite the slowdown caused by the pandemic

and other economic factors, construction continues.(Ravenscroft, 2025) New tourist destinations are being opened, offering luxurious tourist attractions to visitors. If MBS's reforms were merely superficial and served as a facade, as some have suggested, it would not make sense to continue with such economically costly and socially contentious projects in areas like education, the economy, and tourism.

Certain economic developments and figures provide information about the regime's long-term survival efforts. One of Saudi Arabia's main goals in economic reforms is to increase non-oil revenues. In line with this goal, non-oil activities accounted for 49 percent of Saudi Arabia's total economy in 2023. Between 2016 and 2023, the ratio of non-oil revenues to oil revenues increased by 35%. (*State of the Saudi Economy Annual Report 2023*,) In other words, the regime has been relatively successful in increasing non-oil revenues, and such efforts continue.

Regulations continue to be implemented, particularly in the areas of women's rights and law. As mentioned in the section describing the reforms of Mohammed bin Salman, reforms continue to be implemented to improve women's rights. The employment rate of women continues to increase. With the legal regulations implemented in 2022, the guardianship system, which was the subject of the most complaints from women, is being relaxed, and women are being granted more rights in matters such as marriage.(*Family Law Royal Decree No. M/73*, 2022) In other words, the continued implementation of reforms in women's rights refutes the claim that these reforms are superficial.

In short, it would be wrong to view MBS's reforms as merely cosmetic and a mask for power consolidation. This is because the scope and severity of the reforms continue to expand. MBS could have consolidated his power without causing such a sharp turnaround. Additionally, futuristic projects with significant economic costs are continuing despite setbacks, indicating that the reforms aim for something else in the long term. Finally, economic indicators show an increase and diversification of non-oil revenues. When all these factors are considered together, it becomes clear that the regime's long-term goal is its own survival. Although the argument of power consolidation is valid, it is insufficient to explain the entire reform process.

5.5. Regime Survival Strategies Through Reforms

Although we criticize the argument of power consolidation, it is a fact that MBS has consolidated his power. By destroying the dynastic consensus and eliminating potential rivals, and although this power consolidation was carried out to facilitate regime survival, it is likely to continue in the future. In other words, regime survival makes it unlikely that MBS will transition to a more democratic or less authoritarian system in the long term. However, our criticism is that the reforms implemented by the

regime are being evaluated superficially, solely within the framework of power consolidation. Therefore, I will examine the reforms in the context of regime survival.

Those who address these reforms under the heading of “regime survival” in the literature consider Wahhabism, i.e., the official ideology, to be part of the problem. In other words, Wahhabism is only part of the problem in the existing Saudi system. For example, there are economic problems, and these are related to the rentier state system, meaning they have little connection to Wahhabism. However, according to my claim and the causal mechanism I will establish, the solution to the fundamental problems in Saudi Arabia depends on the abandonment of Wahhabism. In other words, Wahhabism does not constitute a part of the problem but rather the fundamental basis of the problems. I will address this situation by distinguishing between the problems pre-MBS and the solutions post-MBS. Here, the period post-MBS refers to the time from 2017, when MBS came to power, until 2025, and does not refer to the person or period that will come after him.

Before explaining the topic in this section, it would be appropriate to clearly explain the causal mechanism that is planned. First, I will specify before 2017 as the Pre-MBS period, which is the year when MBS was the crown prince. I am using this date as a reference point because reforms began in earnest after this date. As mentioned earlier, the post-MBS period refers to the period after 2017. In the Pre-MBS period, I address the problems and issues faced by Saudi Arabia as oil dependency, social unrest and international pressure problems which were mentioned in the introduction to this section. Oil dependency and social unrest are those that are specific to Saudi Arabia and have little connection to other countries, with external countries not heavily involved. International pressure, on the other hand, are those where foreign countries have attempted to intervene and exerted relative pressure or made efforts to compel Saudi Arabia to alter its stance on these matters.

My claim is that all the solutions Saudi Arabia wants to implement in the post-MBS era seem to be linked to abandoning Wahhabism. For this reason, MBS, who aims to ensure the long-term survival of the regime, is also abandoning Wahhabism to achieve this. I will explain this section in more detail within the framework of this argument.

5.5.1. Oil Dependency Problem in Pre-MBS's Era

The most important factor that has kept the Saudi Arabian state afloat for years and made it such an important state is undoubtedly oil. As explained in the historical background section, the discovery of oil enabled the country to make rapid strides and develop itself, because the Saudi economy was not very prosperous before oil. The country's desert climate prevented large-scale agricultural activity. The Saudi state also lacked any particular expertise in the production or processing of any materials. As a

result, the main factor keeping the Saudi state afloat was the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, particularly the commercial activities that took place in Medina. The discovery of oil undoubtedly transformed the country's landscape and propelled Saudi Arabia to a prominent position on the political stage.

However, the future of oil as an energy source is uncertain. Fluctuations in oil prices in certain years have seriously affected the Saudi economy. In addition, as a rentier state, Saudi Arabia's main source of economic income is largely oil exports. The state distributes a certain amount of this oil revenue to the people and does not collect taxes or any other payments from them, while also providing certain subsidies. In return, it secures the obedience of the people. (Beblawi, 1987) This system, which we can briefly describe in this way, can plunge the country into serious crises due to fluctuations in oil prices. Therefore, one of the biggest problems facing Saudi Arabia is its rentier economy dependent on oil. It would be appropriate to illustrate the various aspects of this problem with some data.

When we look at the price of oil per barrel over the years, we see a fluctuating picture. For example, the price of a barrel of oil, which was \$12 in 1998, rose to \$28 in 2000, meaning it more than doubled in just two years. The price of oil, which reached \$96-97 in 2008, dropped to \$61 in 2009. Similarly, the price of oil, which was \$71 in 2018, fell to the \$41–\$42 range in 2020. In 2022, the price exceeded \$100, but by 2025, it is projected to be in the \$68, –\$69, range. (*Brent Crude Oil Price Annually 1976-2025*, n.d.) As can be seen, the price of oil rises and falls very rapidly within just one or two years. This poses a significant problem for a country whose economy is heavily dependent on oil.

When we examine Saudi Arabia's budget balance in relation to GDP during these periods, the picture becomes clearer. For example, in 1998, this ratio was -8.88%, while it rose to 3.18% in 2000. Similarly, this ratio, which was 29.8% in 2008, declined to -5.38% in 2009. In 2018, this ratio was -5.45%, and in 2020, it dropped to -10.68%. In 2022, this ratio was 2.5%, and in 2025, it dropped to -4.93%. (*Budget Balance in Relation to Gdp Saudi Arabia 2030*, n.d.) As can be seen, fluctuations in oil prices directly affect the Saudi economy. When oil prices are high, Saudi Arabia either has a budget surplus or a low budget deficit. However, as oil prices decline, Saudi Arabia's budget deficit is significantly affected in a negative manner.

In addition to fluctuations in oil prices, there is also a global trend toward renewable energy. Countries are developing various strategies in this regard, including Saudi Arabia's NEOM and similar projects. For this reason, efforts are being made to restrict the use of fossil fuels. The production of electric vehicles is being prioritized and becoming more widespread. For example, in 2020, only 4.4% of all vehicles sold were electric. Four years later, in 2024, electric vehicles accounted for 22% of all vehicles sold worldwide. (Ritchie, 2024) In other words, the proportion of electric vehicles in the total

vehicle market has nearly increased by 5-6 times in just four years, and this growth is expected to continue. This situation also will affect the oil industry undoubtedly.

The transition to renewable energy is part of a larger program, which is the fight against global warming. Carbon emissions are being reduced to eliminate the threat of global warming. For this reason, the use of fossil fuels is being reduced, and the use of alternative renewable energy sources is being encouraged. Various agreements have been made in this area, the most important of which is the Paris Climate Agreement. (*The Paris Agreement* | *Unfccc*, n.d.) In short, there is a global desire to prepare for a post-fossil fuel era and to use renewable energy sources. This situation undoubtedly poses a threat to Saudi Arabia, whose economy is based on oil.

In summary, the biggest problem in Saudi Arabia before the MBS era was its oil-dependent economy. Fluctuations in oil prices have generally had a negative impact on the Saudi economy. Additionally, the growing global demand for renewable energy, along with developments such as the increasing use of electric vehicles, is casting doubt on the future of fossil fuels. For these reasons, oil dependency offers little promise for the future of the Saudi economy and, consequently, its people, and currently poses a significant potential crisis for the country.

5.5.2. Social Unrest Problem in Pre-MBS' Era

The second major problem facing Saudi Arabia is social unrest. The Saudi people are dissatisfied with the current system in many areas, from the economy to education and social life. In particular, economic fluctuations, the rigidity of the regime, and the influence of Wahhabi ideology in all areas of life have caused serious unrest among the Saudi people from time to time. As mentioned in the historical background section, the people have occasionally demanded political participation, but these demands have remained superficial, and the people have been unable to gain any power within the government. These and similar factors have created tension among the people, and the fact that these issues have been swept under the rug rather than resolved has caused them to grow and become chronic.

In Saudi Arabia, the unemployment rate among the younger generation (aged 15-25) was particularly high in the period before MBS. For example, in 2005, the youth unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia was around 25-26%. This rate remained at 24-25% five years later in 2010, indicating little change over the five-year period. In 2017, when MBS came to power, this rate was 31.5%, the highest since 1995. By 2024, this rate had dropped significantly to around 13%. (*Saudi Arabia Youth Unemployment Rate (1991-2024)*, n.d.) Undoubtedly, youth unemployment rates were high in the pre-MBS era, and it is certain that this created unrest among young people.

Surveys conducted in Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2011 also contribute to our understanding of social unrest. For example, 58 percent of the Saudi population viewed rising living costs as a concern. Similarly, 57 percent of the population viewed unemployment as a major concern. Another survey will help us further illustrate our point. In 2009, 98 percent of Saudis believed that the country was on the right track. However, just one year later, this percentage dropped to 62%, marking a significant decline. (3rd Annual ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey 2011, 2011) The fact that Saudi society lives under pressure also requires caution when interpreting these figures, as the people are seriously wary of the regime. Therefore, it can be said that the level of dissatisfaction is much higher.

In addition to these issues, there are other areas of concern for Saudi society. Saudi women were at the forefront of these concerns. Their participation in social life was very limited; they did not have the right to obtain a passport or travel alone. They were also prohibited from driving cars within the country. These issues were among the biggest problems facing Saudi women and were factors that triggered social unrest.

Saudi women have also engaged in various protest activities to seek their rights in these matters. In the 1990s, many women organized a car-driving protest in Riyadh and were arrested. In the 2000s, women also prepared and sent petitions to the kingdom on several occasions to obtain the right to drive. For example, a petition submitted in 2006 was rejected by the kingdom. ("F.a.q. About the Saudi Women Driving Ban," 2015) Following this, another protest movement emerged in 2011. Activist Manal al Sharif invited women to join a protest in Riyadh to drive cars, but before the scheduled date of the protest, Manal drove a car, filmed herself, and shared the video on social media. She was subsequently arrested and detained for a week. On the scheduled protest date, approximately 30 to 40 women drove in Riyadh. (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 291)

Similarly, some campaigns have been organized against the male guardianship system. Thousands of women have signed online petitions calling for the abolition of this system. Various hashtag campaigns have also been run on Twitter. Women have tried to raise awareness against the guardianship system with hashtags such as "I am my own guardian." (Sidahmed, 2016) In addition, the lack of entertainment culture in the country, the closure of places such as cinemas and theaters, and the absence of concerts, musical performances, and similar activities may be said to cause unrest among the younger generation. A study was conducted to gather the opinions of Saudi youth regarding Western music activities in Saudi Arabia. According to this study, while some people view these festivals negatively, the majority believe that these festivals and concerts are important for Saudi Arabia's image. (Hothan & Butler, 2025)

In short, the second major problem in Saudi Arabia before the MBS era was social unrest. The deterioration of economic conditions, the presence of norms that make social life difficult for young people, and the severe exclusion of women from social life have all contributed to this problem. In particular, the fact that the proportion of young people in the total population is around 60-70% makes this issue even more understandable. (*Age Structure*, n.d.)

5.5.3. International Pressure Problem in Pre-MBS's Era

Problems that existed in Saudi Arabia before the MBS era can generally be divided into two categories: an economy dependent on oil and social unrest. However, another issue that needs to be addressed is the pressure Saudi Arabia faces from the international arena due to certain issues. In particular, following the September 11 attacks, the Saudi state was accused of teaching extremist ideas to children and spreading them to other countries, and was made a scapegoat. (Mumtaz, 1987) As a result, the existing international pressure has also affected Saudi Arabia's domestic issues. In the areas where pressure was exerted, the most important of which is the curriculum and education, the Saudi state has faced various problems. Additionally, the curriculum and education system are crucial for cultivating citizens aligned with the new vision of Saudi Arabia envisioned by MBS. For this reason, I consider the areas subject to international pressure as a third problem, in addition to the two primary issues mentioned earlier.

When I refer to international pressure, I am referring specifically to pressure exerted by political governments in the US and Europe. Saudi Arabia felt this pressure particularly strongly after September 11. Although there has not been intense pressure at the government level since then, as will be explained, the US Congress and House of Representatives have repeatedly raised such issues. Additionally, non-governmental organizations have also criticized Saudi Arabia by publishing various reports, particularly on women's rights. Furthermore, various international institutions or organizations affiliated with them may also exert pressure on Saudi Arabia.

Although government-level pressure factors are deterrent in international politics, non-governmental organizations can also have various effects. For this reason, we have included pressure from all different sources in our analysis of pressure. The fact that the US is a kind of partner to Saudi Arabia in the Middle East means that this pressure factor can be criticized, and it can be argued that there is no real pressure or that it is merely symbolic. While this argument is partially true, examples will demonstrate that Saudi Arabia has been subjected to serious pressure at various times. Furthermore, even if the efforts of American policymakers to link certain relations with Saudi Arabia to reforms in areas such as the curriculum and women's rights do not materialize, this shows that the United States

may occasionally use this as leverage. Additionally, changes in the US government can also affect relations with Saudi Arabia.

The fact that the vast majority of the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks in 2001 were Saudi citizens drew the world's attention to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia came under serious pressure from the media. As mentioned earlier, King Abdullah even promised the US that he would implement several reforms. (“Opinion | a Promise of Reform in Saudi Arabia,” 2009) The main point of criticism directed at Saudi Arabia was extremism. A briefing presented to the US Department of Defense in 2002 mentioned that Saudi Arabia was involved in every level of the terrorist chain and was symbolized as the core of evil. (Mumtaz, 2025)

Similarly, this can be seen in the report published in 2004 by the commission established by the United States to investigate the September 11 attacks. Although the report refrains from making negative statements about the Saudi state, it does criticize the Saudi state on certain issues. The most important of these issues is the extremism of the Saudi state. For this reason, a short recommendation paragraph has been included in the report. In this paragraph, it is stated that the problems between Saudi Arabia and the United States should be openly discussed and debated. Additionally, it is emphasized that extremism should be combated within the context of respect for cultures and tolerance, and that Saudi Arabia should also comply with this. (*The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004) This situation demonstrates the international effort to exert pressure on Saudi Arabia or, at the very least, to bring about change within the country.

This pressure continued after 2001, and the Saudi government promised that the curriculum would be changed, particularly removing expressions of intolerance. In 2006, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Turki al Faysal visited the United States and mentioned that comprehensive reforms on education had been prepared. (Weinberg, 2017) There are indications that this pressure on Saudi Arabia continued in subsequent years. In particular, in 2017, the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing on Saudi Arabia's curriculum reforms. During this hearing, various experts were consulted, and recommendations were made to the US government. (*Saudi Arabia's Troubling Educational Curriculum*, n.d.)

During this session, Saudi Arabia's curriculum and textbook content were thoroughly examined. According to the experts' consensus, although the Saudi government has implemented various reforms in the curriculum, the content of textbooks is not at the desired level, and the experts have prepared several recommendations for the US government on this issue. For example, Nina Shea, one of the experts who spoke at the session, stated that the U.S. government should link any security or defense agreements with Saudi Arabia to the cleansing of textbooks. Additionally, certain diplomatic measures

should be taken, such as denying visas to Saudi government officials and their families. (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, 2017)

Another expert at the same session was David Andrew Weinberg. He claims that Saudi Arabia has not made sufficient reforms in education and curriculum, and that the Saudi government has failed to keep its promises on several occasions, for example in 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016. Consequently, Weinberg considers Saudi books to be a matter of security for the United States because extreme ideas originate from them, 15 of the 19 attackers on September 11 were Saudis, and Saudi books are spreading to different countries around the world, posing a threat. For this reason, Weinberg recommends increasing pressure on Saudi Arabia. (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, 2017) This is another speech that shows the pressure on Saudi Arabia. Here, the following question may arise: if there is pressure on Saudi Arabia, why has the Saudi government not made reforms in this regard for years? In fact, the Saudi state has been revising its school textbooks, especially after September 11, but the scope of the changes is much broader than what the United States and experts were expecting, so the revisions have not been satisfactory. Additionally, the fact that Saudi Arabia has made such promises and continues to revise its textbooks is actually a sign that there is pressure on it.

In summary, it can be stated that the Saudi Arabian government's education system and curriculum have been criticized by Western powers due to their extreme ideas. These criticisms came to the fore in earnest after the September 11 attacks in the United States. After this event, the United States and the Western world put pressure on Saudi Arabia to change the content of its textbooks. These demands have been mentioned in speeches in the US Congress and in reports by civil society organizations. Therefore, one of the unresolved issues or stress points of the pre-MBS era is Saudi Arabia's educational textbooks and curriculum.

In addition to educational textbooks, the second area where Saudi Arabia faces pressure is women's rights. Since this issue is covered in the section on social unrest, it will not be discussed in detail here, but it would be appropriate to give an example to illustrate the pressure in this area. There are various indicators of this pressure, but the most striking evidence can be found in the Wikileaks documents. These documents show that the Obama administration pressured the Saudi government to allow women to drive and to improve women's rights. (Leigh, 2011) As a result of this pressure, the Saudi government did not lift the ban, but it did lead to an increase in the activities and protests of women activists in the country, and these issues even began to be discussed in the Saudi media. Therefore, the fact that this pressure did not yield results in the short term does not mean that it was ineffective in the long term.

When viewed as a whole, Saudi Arabia had various problems to solve in the twenty-first century. These problems were oil dependency and social unrest, which affected the country's future. Additionally, there was international pressure as well that created internal issues and developed in conjunction with reactions from the international community. These included the Saudi curriculum and textbooks, as well as the implementation of women's rights. The problems that the Saudi state needed to solve can be summarized under these general headings. MBS is trying to secure the future of the regime by attempting to solve these problems with his reforms. Therefore, the next section will briefly evaluate the reforms made by MBS in these areas. My main argument here is that the solution to all existing problems depends on the abandonment of Wahhabism. This issue will be explained in the next section.

5.6. MBS's Reforms as a Survival Strategy and Wahhabism

I argue that the reforms implemented by Mohammed bin Salman emerged as a solution strategy to the problems mentioned in the previous section. However, I argue that this situation has increased MBS's personal power and created a complex situation in which the survival of the regime is intertwined with MBS's own survival. Although the scope of the reforms has led to the consolidation of MBS's power in the short term, this consolidation should not be expected to diminish in the future. However, it should not be overlooked that the reforms also aim to solve existing problems. The realization of long-term goals also depends on the resolution of the problems mentioned in the previous section. This section will outline the steps taken to address existing problems and explain how these reforms are contingent on the abandonment of Wahhabism.

5.6.1. Solutions for Oil Dependency in Economy in Post-MBS's Era

The first main problem, as mentioned above, is that the Saudi state is a rentier state, meaning that its economic structure is almost entirely dependent on oil. The instability of oil prices and the uncertainty of its future complicate the situation for Saudi Arabia. The Saudi state, led by MBS, is trying to solve existing economic problems by announcing new goals and projects. As outlined in Vision 2030, one of the regime's three-pronged objectives is a thriving economy. (*Saudi Vision 2030*, n.d.) The path to achieving this lies in diversifying economic revenues and activities. It would be appropriate to assess several reforms implemented for this diversification effort and demonstrate that their feasibility is contingent on the abandonment of Wahhabi ideology.

As stated in Vision 2030, the Saudi state aims to become a global investment center. (*Saudi Vision 2030*, n.d.) Attracting investment to the country is an important issue in terms of diversifying the economy. However, it is necessary to make the country attractive to international investors. To achieve this, investors must trust the country and not hesitate to invest. Saudi Arabia's poor record on women's

rights and human rights is one of the factors affecting investors. For this reason, it seems inevitable that Saudi Arabia will have to implement reforms in these areas. The advancement of women's rights and their increased participation in social life are also linked to the abandonment of Wahhabism, as Wahhabi ideology emphasizes that women should not participate in social life, and even prohibits women from driving due to the perceived danger of interacting closely with men. (Ibn Bāz & Musnid, 1996, p. 313)

Another way to diversify and develop the economy is to increase women's participation in the workforce. Women's participation in the workforce supports the economy of countries in various ways. For example, it leads to an increase in production, and women's skills are valued in the country. Additionally, women's entry into the workforce can increase international companies' willingness to invest in the country because no international company wants to create a structure where it can only hire men. As stated in Vision 2030, the Saudi government also aims to utilize women's capabilities and their education, citing this as a means of developing the economy. (*Saudi Vision 2030*, n.d.)

The way to evaluate women in the workplace is again by seriously relaxing and changing Wahhabi ideology. After stating that it is not right for women to work in the same environment as men, Ibn Baz states that it is right for women not to work outside the home. Additionally, since women are not allowed to travel alone, their entry into the workforce becomes impossible. In other words, within Wahhabi thought, women's participation in the workforce has been criticized from various angles, and it has been emphasized that women should work in domestic roles. (AbdurRahman.org, 2013) Therefore, Saudi Arabia's inclusion of women in the workforce depends on either significantly relaxing Wahhabism or abandoning it altogether.

Saudi Arabia aims to revitalize tourism to diversify its economy. To this end, it is opening various new tourist areas and organizing events there. Mixed activities for men and women are being organized at these newly opened tourist sites. It is even stated that unmarried couples visiting Saudi Arabia can share the same room or house. Additionally, flexibility is provided in the attire of female tourists, though it is noted that women must dress modestly on public beaches, creating a degree of ambiguity. This effectively opens the door for women to appear without a headscarf. Furthermore, it is stated that women can wear swimsuit at private beaches or spas. (*Saudi Arabia Visa Requirements*, n.d.) In this context, concerts and festivals are also organized to enhance the country's image internationally. A young Saudi who attended one of these concerts claimed that women's clothing was flexible, that there was a mixed environment of men and women, and that alcohol was even consumed. (Hothan & Butler, 2025) The Saudi government's implementation of these measures is linked to the abandonment of Wahhabism, as such freedoms for women are not even conceivable within Wahhabism. It is impossible for the religious scholars who have not even issued a fatwa permitting women to drive to issue a fatwa permitting these

activities. Indeed, Ibn Baz does not permit people to go to the cinema because he is concerned that problematic situations may arise. (Masjid Daar us Sunnah, 2023)

In summary, the way to fix Saudi Arabia's oil-dependent economy is to diversify the economy. The ways to diversify the economy vary, but attracting international investment, integrating women into the workforce, and developing tourism to create new sources of income are some of the most important ones for Saudi Arabia. As explained, the changes that are being sought are in serious conflict with Wahhabism, which is why MBS is abandoning Wahhabism to resolve this issue. He also branded as a “striving economy” in the new vision document as a solution to this problem.

5.6.2. Solutions for Social Unrest in Post-MBS's Era

The solution to the social unrest in Saudi Arabia also lies in the abandonment of Wahhabism. As mentioned in Saudi Arabia, the youth unemployment rate was high before the MBS era, and women with higher education degrees in particular were unable to find job opportunities that would allow them to utilize their skills because women's participation in social life, let alone working life, was a serious problem.(House, 2012) Therefore, increasing women's participation in the workforce was necessary. This, in turn, is largely dependent on the abandonment of Wahhabism, as women working, especially in mixed-gender settings, was not permitted under Wahhabism.

In addition, if we leave female workers aside, reducing youth unemployment in general is also related to the diversification of the economy. This diversification is largely dependent on the abandonment of Wahhabism, as mentioned earlier. In other words, even if we leave the employment status of women aside, the solution to youth unemployment in general is indirectly related to the abandonment of Wahhabism.

Another indicator of social unrest is Saudi Arabia's poor reputation regarding women's rights. For many years, Saudi Arabia has prohibited women from obtaining driver's licenses and has prevented women from exercising many of their rights independently by establishing a guardianship system. These two issues are perhaps the biggest problems facing Saudi women. Additionally, women's participation in social life has been restricted, mixed-gender environments have been banned, and activities such as entertainment, dancing, and festivals have not been permitted. Through the actions of officials known as Mutawwi, the state has demonstrated its authority in such matters and imposed significant pressure on the population. When these factors converge, they create a significant source of stress within Saudi society. It would be appropriate to give a few examples to show that the source of these problems is Wahhabism.

One of the major problems in women life is the guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. Under this system, certain actions that women could take were subject to the approval of their guardians. For example, a woman could not apply for a passport without her guardian's permission, nor could she marry without her guardian's permission. This system prevented women from engaging in many activities and restricted them. These practices were clearly mandated by Wahhabism. The fatwas of Ibn Baz and other Wahhabi scholars also support this view, stating that women cannot travel without a mahram.(AbdurRahman.org, 2011) Additionally, women were prohibited from marrying without their guardian's permission in Saudi Arabia, and Wahhabi scholars have issued fatwas on this matter as well. (AbdurRahman.org, 2015) However, this prohibition has been partially lifted. If a woman who meets the necessary conditions wants to marry someone and her guardian does not give permission, she has the right to apply to the court and get married. (*Family Law Royal Decree No. M/73*, 2022)

The solution to all these problems lies in abandoning Wahhabism. The regime is pursuing an economic diversification policy to improve the economy and reduce unemployment. Efforts are also being made to facilitate women's participation in the workforce by making it easier for them to take up existing jobs, and women are now gaining access to work in areas where they were previously unable to work. Additionally, granting women the right to drive and relaxing the guardianship system are among the reforms implemented, and these are clearly measures tied to the abandonment of Wahhabism. In short, the issues that the younger generation and women complained about were causing social unrest in Saudi society, and the reforms were aimed at eliminating this unrest. The elimination of unrest in this area is clearly linked to the abandonment of Wahhabism. One of the three main themes mentioned in the Vision 2030 document, "Vibrant Society," (*Saudi Vision 2030*, n.d.) also represents the main idea behind the solution developed to address these issues.

5.6.3. Solutions for International Pressure in Post-MBS's Era

Another problem Saudi Arabia faced before the MBS's era was education and curriculum. Generations raised under a curriculum dominated by strict Wahhabi ideology generally grew up with extremist ideas, which posed a threat not only to the Saudi state but also to the United States and the West, which had been targeted by the September 11 attacks, as most of the September 11 attackers were Saudis, Saudi Arabia ranked second in terms of participation in ISIS, and the leader of Al-Qaeda was a Saudi citizen. Additionally, Saudi Arabia experienced the 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Furthermore, the classical education system in Saudi Arabia left generations lacking certain skills necessary in the modern world. In summary, the Saudi curriculum issue was a serious problem both within the country and abroad, and it was also a cause of international pressure on Saudi Arabia. This

international pressure was seen in the women right issue as well, so this problem was creating one of the stress points in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi state's educational reform or curriculum is also closely related to Wahhabi ideology. This is because the Saudi curriculum is generally based on the Wahhabi perspective. For this reason, it contains extreme ideas. Wahhabi ideology also has a harsh stance against other religions, and even other groups within Islam, such as Sufi circles, are considered polytheistic. For this reason, Saudi textbooks contained harsh statements against these groups. Additionally, there were also severe expressions against Israel and Zionism. The content of books on the role of women in society was also generally in line with the Wahhabi ideology's approach to women. For this reason, the content of the books was fundamentally based on Wahhabi ideology. It would be appropriate to give some brief examples of this.

A review of the 2008 report evaluating Saudi textbooks reveals the Wahhabi foundation of the curriculum. For example, the hadith book uses exclusionary language about Jews and Christians, stating that they are enemies of Islam and that caution should be exercised toward them. In the works of Abdulwahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, Jews and Christians are criticized and vilified from various angles. In addition, some extreme Shiite or Sufi ideas were described as idolatry in textbooks prior to 2023. These views, i.e., seeing Sufism and Sufi thought as idolatry, constitute the founding basis of Wahhabism. When Abdulwahhab's famous work Kitab al-Tawhid is examined, it is seen that there are very harsh statements about Sufism. For example, the ritual of visiting tombs or graves, which is important in Sufism, is unequivocally deemed polytheism. Additionally, the rank of sheikh in Sufism is viewed as an intermediary and thus falls under the category of polytheism. (Abdülvehhab)

Another issue that is subject to international pressure and constitutes a point of tension within Saudi society is women's rights and the role of women in society. These issues are clearly closely related to Wahhabism. As this was mentioned in the previous section, it will suffice to provide a few examples here. Regarding women driving, Ibn Baz issued a fatwa stating that it would lead to fitna (sedition), and this fatwa was strictly adhered to until the MBS era. Such fatwas have severely restricted women's participation in social life. This situation has also led to pressure against Saudi Arabia, particularly in the West.

In short, Saudi Arabia's curriculum, education, and women's rights issues were causes of discontent within the country. At the same time, however, the international community was also accusing Saudi Arabia, particularly of terrorist acts. For this reason, Saudi Arabia was forced to reform these areas, and new regulations were introduced regarding education and women's rights. The content of textbooks before the reforms or the lack of rights for women was clearly rooted in Wahhabism. To address these issues, a break from Wahhabi ideology was implemented.

5.7. Conclusion

Under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a major change and transformation, and the official ideology that has prevailed for years, also known as Wahhabism, is being seriously relaxed and abandoned. The change in the official ideology, which has been in place for a long time, is undoubtedly an important development and requires explanation. The existing literature has mainly two different groups and one group addressed of reform and repression paradoxes and has actually claimed that MBS has significantly increased his power. Another group has accepted this argument but claims that the reforms in Saudi Arabia are being carried out for the survival and stability of the regime. I think both arguments have merit, but in my opinion, MBS's long-term goal is regime survival, and MBS has designed his solution strategy to consolidate his power and implement reforms in this way.

It is undeniable that MBS has consolidated his power, but his aggressive pursuit of reforms shows that the regime's goal is more than just power consolidation. On the other hand, the regime's consolidation of power in the short term does not mean that it will abandon this goal in the long term. As Davidson argues, an absolute sultanism regime has been established in Saudi Arabia.(Davidson, 2021) While the regime survival argument is correct, it presents Wahhabism as part of the problem, whereas I argue Wahhabism is at the heart of the problem. Therefore, the regime's survival is possible only through a break with Wahhabi ideology. This should not lead to the conclusion that modernization is impossible without abandoning religious and traditional values, as classical modernization theories claim. If Saudi Arabia had adopted the more mainstream view of Islam, i.e., the orthodox path, from the very beginning of the state's establishment, most of these problems would not have arisen, and even if they had, they would not have threatened the regime's future.

For example, in mainstream Islam, women's rights are much broader. Or the younger generation is not as oppressed as in Saudi Arabia. Social activities can be carried out to a certain extent. For this reason, it is wrong to view Wahhabism as Islam itself. That's why the abandonment of Wahhabism does not support classical modernization theories; rather, it shows that MBS has adopted this theory because he believes that secularization will lead to modernization. However, the existing problems can be solved in a more moderate way without secularization.

Finally, MBS has constructed the survival of the regime through his own image. He has portrayed himself as visionary, young, reformist, and open to innovation. Furthermore, since the system in Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, the survival of the regime is intertwined with the survival of MBS. Therefore, every move he makes to save the regime is also made to save himself. In other words, MBS also benefits personally from these reforms. Therefore, MBS's reforms and efforts to save the regime do not justify

the human rights violations and oppression he has committed. The regime's salvation could have been constructed in different ways, but MBS chose this path. For this reason, MBS cannot hide behind the excuse that he is saving the country.



6. CONCLUSION

As a result, this work addresses the reforms initiated by Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia in 2017 and thereafter. Mohammed bin Salman shared reforms that would change the face of the country with the public through his Vision 2030 project announced in 2016. Upon becoming Crown Prince in 2017, he further consolidated his power and effectively became the sole implementer of these reforms. As a result of these reforms, women gained the right to obtain driver's licenses after a long period of time and began driving. Tourism centers were opened outside of religious sites, and projects aimed at the future, such as NEOM, were launched.

Such reforms have raised some questions. Is Saudi Arabia changing the Wahhabi ideology that it has embraced for many years, and which has provided it with a significant degree of legitimacy? If Saudi Arabia is implementing this change, what are the reasons behind it? These two questions form the basis of this thesis. I argue that MBS has implemented reforms that seriously deviate from the official ideology and continues to do so. Women's rights have increased significantly despite Wahhabism, and similarly, there made some reforms in social and cultural areas against Wahhabism such as concerts, entertainment organizations in women and man mixed way. Similarly, in legal terms, certain decisions have been made against Wahhabism, and the power of Wahhabi institutions has been weakened. Finally, significant reforms have been implemented in school textbooks and curricula against Wahhabism. As explained in the thesis, these reforms are significantly different from previous reforms in both scope and content and symbolize a serious break from Wahhabism.

After answering yes to the first question, the topic turns to why Mohammed bin Salman abandoned Wahhabism. While some in the existing literature argue that the reforms are merely symbolic and that MBS is actually consolidating his power, others argue that MBS's goal is regime survival by changing the existing and worn-out system, but Wahhabism is a part of the problem in this system. I argue that Mohammed bin Salman's long-term goal is regime survival, and he is consolidating his power by establishing this goal through his own persona and brand. Therefore, his goal is actually the survival of both the regime and himself. To achieve this, he must abandon Wahhabism because Wahhabism is an obstacle to solving all the problems facing Saudi Arabia.

No academic study can be comprehensive and complete in every respect. This thesis also has some inevitable shortcomings. The thesis approaches reforms in Saudi Arabia mainly from a domestic perspective and does not consider external factors other than international pressure. However, Saudi Arabia is an important state in the Middle East and has close relations with the United States. Other

superpowers also have various ambitions in the region. Therefore, the policies of major powers in the region are also important in terms of Saudi Arabia's reform process and MBS's goals.

On the other hand, after the military operations launched by Hamas on October 7, Israel has increased its aggression against Gaza. For this reason, the normalization of Arab states with Israel has reached a dead end for now. This situation also indirectly affects the relations of the states in the region with the US. However, we were unable to address this issue in our thesis. Finally, the question of how the Saudi reforms have affected the region so far is also an important one. Is Wahhabism, which Saudi Arabia exports to foreign countries, still spreading, or has Saudi Arabia given up on this? We were unable to address these issues within the scope and limitations of this thesis, but these questions will provide a horizon for new studies in this field.

6.1. Prospects

When evaluating Mohammed bin Salman's reforms, various predictions can be made about the future of Saudi Arabia, the reforms, MBS, and even the Saudi dynasty, and as a result, various scenarios can be created. In this context, there are three basic scenarios that are likely to unfold in the future.

The reforms are highly successful, and under MBS's leadership, a more authoritarian but stable Saudi Arabia emerges. In this scenario, the reforms are successful, and the Saudi state has diversified its economic resources. As a result, the people's standard of living has improved. In addition, Saudi society has become more open and flexible. New futuristic projects have been implemented, and Saudi Arabia has become an innovative and forward-looking state. This scenario is the most positive one for MBS in the long term. However, even this most positive scenario has certain risks. For example, the Saudi society, which is becoming more prosperous and socially more comfortable, may demand political rights, which could threaten the autocratic structure of the regime. Additionally, if the process proceeds in this manner, a system centered around MBS's charismatic persona may emerge in Saudi Arabia, and if this system fails to institutionalize, it could create uncertainty after MBS's tenure. Despite these risks, they are long-term risks, and in a 20–30-year scenario, the positive trajectory of reforms remains the most favorable outcome for the regime.

While reforms fail partially or largely, crises that threaten the regime may arise. Although Mohammed bin Salman has targeted the younger generation and implemented reforms that appeal to them, the conservative segment of society, which has been raised on Wahhabism for many years, is also a reality in Saudi Arabia, and this segment is currently silent. Any crisis that this segment may cause could threaten the regime. For example, the 1979 Siege of the Kaaba was carried out by a group claiming that the Saudi state had separated from Islam, and it caused serious problems for the state.

In addition, the people of Saudi Arabia are accustomed to a rentier system and are not accustomed to paying taxes and other related expenses. As economic diversification takes place, there is a possibility that the economic conditions of the people will deteriorate. If the welfare of the people declines, unemployment rises, purchasing power decreases, and hunger rates rise, the people may react against the regime. In other words, a large-scale economic crisis in the world or in Saudi Arabia could become a serious threat to the regime in Saudi Arabia. However, in a rentier system, since the people do not pay taxes to the state, they may make various political demands based on the principle of “*no taxation without representation*,” which may threaten the regime depending on the scale.

Alongside these crises, internal unrest within the royal family may emerge. As mentioned, Mohammed bin Salman largely purged the royal family from politics in 2019 with the Ritz Carlton incident and rose to absolute power. Any crises or problems that arise, or even if no crises occur, an illness affecting MBS could bring the royal family back into the game, potentially leading to his removal from the throne. In short, MBS's throne may be in danger in proportion to the scale of the crises that will occur, but if the crises are small in scale and MBS does not experience any problems in consolidating his power, there will be no serious change in the country and MBS will continue his path with various maneuvers.

Reforms go as poorly as possible, economic crises erupt, power struggles arise within the dynasty, minorities revolt, and the Saudi dynasty collapses. This is the least likely of all the possibilities because the Saudi dynasty is an important strategic partner for the US at the regional level, and at the global level, this possibility would plunge the region and even the world into a serious crisis. However, even though it is unlikely, we deemed it appropriate to mention it among the possibilities.

These possibilities range from the least likely to the most likely, which is why the collapse of the Saudi dynasty is also included among them. The more likely scenario is that MBS remains on the throne and resolves minor crises through various maneuvers. However, if things do not go as planned, the most likely scenario is that MBS will lose the throne, and another member of the royal family will be the king. The future of the oil kingdom appears to be shaped by the success or failure of reforms.

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