Saudi Arabia’s Nation-Branding Strategy
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Executive Summary

In 2016, Saudi Arabia embarked on a new path to diversify its economy. Implementing Vision 2030, the kingdom's roadmap for a post-oil era, requires opening up the country and working to change public perception in the West. As part of a nation-branding strategy, Saudi leaders aim to foster the kingdom's cultural resources to improve its image abroad as a means to attract investment and align interests. However, Saudi Arabia's assertive foreign policy, with the war in Yemen, past diplomatic spats with Western countries, and the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, severely hampered the initial effectiveness of its rebranding strategy. Today, the development of the entertainment and tourism sectors, presence of women in public life, and heavy investment in cultural initiatives are improving the quality of life for Saudi citizens. Moreover, the constant showcasing of cultural, entertainment, and sporting events and the boom of development projects to diversify the economy have not only increased foreign direct investment but have also provided opportunities to generate soft power.

Introduction

When Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced Vision 2030 in 2016, he set the kingdom on a path to move beyond oil dependence. This roadmap has encompassed extensive economic and social reforms. These reforms have improved various aspects of quality of life for Saudis, generating support, among youth and women, for example, for other measures and stances the government undertakes. The social relaxation has also generated new revenue from Saudis who are now spending domestically on various entertainment options despite rising inflation and the tripling of the value-added tax rate from 5% to 15% in 2020. On top of this, this social opening has also encompassed and permitted various initiatives for Saudi Arabia to enhance its soft power strategy and improve its image in the West. According to the Saudi minister of culture, “While culture has traditionally been associated with soft power ... it is increasingly driving global prosperity.”

Joseph Nye's concept of “soft power” explains states' use of persuasion and attraction in international relations as noncoercive measures to influence and change perceptions and ultimately policies. Since 2016, the Saudi leadership has worked to maximize the country's soft power resources by holding entertainment and sporting events, promoting cultural programs and initiatives, and opening up the country for tourism. On top of the domestic benefits, these initiatives have created numerous opportunities for building strategic ties and enhancing coordination with international state partners to align interests.

These moves are key to the kingdom's branding, reshaping international public perceptions of the country. According to Ying Fan, “Nation branding can be an important tool in the development of a nation's soft power.”

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associations regarding the kingdom's treatment of women by advancing female empowerment in certain capacities, increasing women’s workforce participation, and placing women in specific jobs to promote Saudi Arabia's image.³

In Saudi Arabia, the state has become the main player on the cultural scene, as both the funder and promoter of various cultural programs and entertainment venues. The Saudi leadership has established various commissions and authorities to oversee and develop the production of movies and television series, sports, and fashion. These commissions foster Saudi talent and promote Saudis’ work inside and outside the country. State centralization is part of a wider control of the kingdom’s decision making that has characterized the new political paradigm since Mohammed bin Salman became crown prince in 2017.

According to Saud Kateb, former deputy minister for public diplomacy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the kingdom is utilizing different tools in its rebranding initiative, including “the Ministry of Culture, Misk Foundation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Media, the Ministry of Sports, the Shura Council, the General Entertainment Authority and others.”⁴ However, they haven’t been unified under one common strategy. Kateb argued that, despite all of the kingdom's efforts, there is no “clear and comprehensive vision” to highlight Saudi Arabia's unique values and features and incorporate them into the country’s outreach.⁵

There have been both internal and external contradictions to these policies. On the domestic front, the kingdom has been trying to change public behavior through the promotion of national pride with a focus on youth. For example, Saudi leaders have been relaxing the social scene, with an eye to attracting foreign visitors and investment, but also expect citizens to comply with a vague public decency law that varies depending on particular settings.⁶ The rapid social change has thus affected some regions of the kingdom more than others. This creates different social realities and exasperates a faction of the Saudi population that remains conservative.

The increase in nationalist sentiment also has bred certain hostile tendencies against the very foreigners who are also the focus of the state’s rebranding strategy. The exodus of foreigners in recent years, especially as a result of the pandemic, was only temporary. When the Saudi economy began to recover from the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic in the fourth quarter of 2021, the private sector introduced 250,000 jobs for non-Saudis and 83,000 for Saudi citizens.⁷ This shows the extent to which the economy still depends on foreign workers.

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⁵ Ibid.
As for external contradictions, the kingdom’s foreign policies since 2015 have at times reflected negatively on nation-branding efforts. The war in Yemen, diplomatic spats with Sweden, Germany, and Canada, and the Gulf crisis with Qatar from 2017 to 2021 have all hindered Saudi aspirations to change the country’s image abroad. The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the arrest of women’s rights activities in 2018 also attracted negative media attention and international scrutiny. Nonetheless, recent entertainment, sports, and cultural events have garnered wide participation from international artists and actors, suggesting that the kingdom has managed to navigate past the initial negative fallout.

Understanding Saudi Arabia’s Soft Power Shift

For decades, the kingdom utilized its position as the land of Islam’s two most holy sites, using its religious leadership to exert influence over the Muslim world. This was done through different state and quasi-government entities that expanded the kingdom’s public outreach to Muslim communities around the world. The popularity of Saudi religious clerics was an essential factor in increasing the kingdom’s influence and outreach to Muslim communities. The kingdom also maintained its influence over the Muslim world through organizations and institutions, notably the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Muslim World League, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Religion was as important for the kingdom’s foreign policy as it was for domestic consumption. Different state bodies, including the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and the education sector highlighted the plight of Muslims and emphasized the kingdom’s support for these communities. These institutions were also instrumental in stressing the religious significance of the kingdom and the importance of preserving Islamic teachings, which contributed to fostering a sense of religious identity among Saudis.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and the wave of attacks that hit Saudi Arabia from 2003 to 2005, the position of the kingdom toward religion and religious institutions began to change. Saudi Arabia became an active player in the fight against terrorism. Saudi leaders used multiple approaches, such as using Saudi religious scholars who had been released from prison in the late 1990s, in their counterterrorism strategy.

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings further changed Saudi Arabia’s calculations in the region, especially with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and allied groups in Egypt and other Arab countries. Other regional players, such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, also turned to religious statecraft. In doing so, “Both Qatar and the UAE have crafted their own distinct visions of the role Islam should play in the politics of the region.” While Qatar’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood has continued, Saudi Arabia and the UAE designated the movement a terrorist organization in 2014.

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Saudi Arabia’s moves to curb the religious police in 2016 and arrest notable religious clerics in 2017 demonstrated a shift toward a state-led approach to religion. This was confirmed in January when King Salman bin Abdulaziz issued a royal decree designating February 22 Saudi Arabia’s “Founding Day,” further breaking away from the Wahhabi alliance that it relied on in the past for political legitimacy.

The appointment of Mohammed al-Issa as the new secretary general of the Muslim World League in 2016 was meant to change the direction of the organization, which had been criticized for spreading Wahhabi teachings. Now, the organization is making clear efforts to demonstrate the kingdom’s new approach to religion, or “moderate Islam.” It is doing so, for example, by addressing Muslims in the diaspora and encouraging them to integrate into the Western societies they live in. In May, the Muslim World League hosted for the first time the Forum on Common Values Among Religious Followers. The participation of Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu faith leaders demonstrates the kingdom’s new focus on promoting “common values” and “moderate Islam” as part of its outreach initiatives. Issa’s numerous visits abroad, including to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and a synagogue in Paris, also highlight the kingdom’s new approach toward religion and the Muslim World League’s instrumental role in rebranding efforts.

Cultural Initiatives

Cultural diplomacy is becoming an important tool in Saudi rebranding initiatives. The Saudi Ministry of Culture has been active in promoting various programs and initiatives to strengthen the kingdom’s identity and appreciation of its heritage. In 2020, Saudi Arabia announced the creation of 11 new cultural councils under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture, including the Heritage Commission, Film Commission, Music Commission, and Fashion Commission. According to the Saudi minister of culture, the emphasis on culture is essential because it can generate revenue and expand the kingdom’s outreach.

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A number of festivals and events early in the year highlighted Saudi Arabia’s heritage and culture. In March, Riyadh hosted a Sadu festival after the traditional form of embroidery common in the Arabian Peninsula was recognized by UNESCO in 2020. Sadu-inspired art is now more commonly used to highlight the kingdom’s heritage, such as the design of the G-20 logo when Saudi Arabia hosted the summit in 2020.

These initiatives also involve food and cuisine. In late 2021, the ministry began promoting the history and culture of local coffee, announcing that 2022 would be designated the “Year of Saudi Coffee.” This was followed by an announcement from the Ministry of Commerce changing the name of “Arabic coffee” to “Saudi coffee” in Saudi restaurants, cafes, and stores. The minister of culture highlighted that coffee “conveys deep meanings of generosity, hospitality, cultural diversity, and the specificity of the unique Saudi culture.” The move to celebrate Saudi coffee is happening in parallel with a boom for coffee shops across the kingdom, providing economic and employment opportunities, particularly for young Saudis. Further, in March, Saudi Arabia held its first truffle festival, promoting Saudi delicacies.

Initiatives to showcase the kingdom’s cuisine and cultural diversity are increasingly visible abroad. Saudi Arabia opened a “Saudi Cafe” in Davos during the 2022 World Economic Forum Annual Meeting. The cafe’s design was inspired by traditional Saudi wall decorations and visitors were served food from different regions of the kingdom. Also, Saudi Arabia’s pavilion at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival introduced its visitors to different types of Saudi coffee. Such initiatives, some organized by newly established bodies, such as the Culinary Arts Commission, are central to the kingdom’s rebranding efforts.

While the Ministry of Culture is behind many of the initiatives aimed at promoting the country’s culture abroad and at home, many Saudis are also encouraged to participate in showcasing the country’s heritage. One prime example was the February 22 Founding Day celebration commemorating the foundation of the first Saudi state in 1727 by Mohammed ibn Saud. To encourage participation in the events, the chairman of the General Entertainment Authority, Turki Al-Sheikh, announced that those who showed up wearing traditional Saudi dress would be granted free entry into entertainment venues. He later tweeted a video of the crowd, which highlights the role citizens play in constructing the new Saudi narrative.

21 Saudi Tourism Authority (SaudiTourism), Twitter post, May 26, 2022, 1:52 p.m.
22 Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture (mocsaudi_en), Twitter post, May 24, 2022, 10:01 a.m.
25 Turki AlAlshikh (Turki_Alalshikh), Twitter post, February 23, 2022, 10:57 a.m.
Establishing an Entertainment Sector

Entertainment has become an essential component of the kingdom’s diversification plan. According to Vision 2030, the kingdom aims to increase household spending on entertainment domestically from 2.9% to 6%. The Saudi film sector is benefiting from the recently founded Cultural Development Fund, which allocated more than $230 million to support Saudi film production.

Saudi Arabia has used opening cinemas not only to benefit the nascent local movie industry and generate revenue but as a tool to paint a more positive image of the kingdom. The role of Saudi women in the filmmaking industry has been central to the Saudi leadership’s efforts to showcase the kingdom’s new social environment. For example, Haifa Al-Mansour, one of Saudi Arabia’s first female directors, directed the movie “The Perfect Candidate,” which was entered into the 2019 Venice Film Festival. The movie highlights the kingdom’s efforts in empowering women by showing the journey of a doctor, who drives her own car, running for municipal elections. Mansour was honored at the first Red Sea Film Festival in Jeddah in December 2021. Saudi women were assigned highly visible roles during the festival showcasing the country’s development. The festival was hosted by a Saudi filmmaker, and the participation of Saudi actresses was covered widely by local newspapers.

Entertainment has also been used to widen the aperture for what is considered acceptable discourse. Recent Saudi television series and movies have taken advantage of the restrictions imposed on religious scholars to explore controversial themes and criticize religious clerics for restricting social life in the past. However, some limitations remain. One Saudi filmmaker stated that he was informed that movies should not directly discuss God or politics. Nevertheless, some Saudi productions have attracted growing audiences in the kingdom and broader region.

Traditionally, Saudi television production was tailored specifically to family-friendly shows released during the holy month of Ramadan. Now, new series and movies are being released throughout the year on streaming platforms. New productions are increasingly targeted toward an older and international audience rather than focusing on family-friendly content for Gulf viewers. In 2020, Netflix exclusively acquired six Saudi short films produced by Telfaz11, a...
media production company run by Saudi filmmakers and social media influencers. Telfaz11 later struck a deal with Netflix to develop and produce eight more films for the streaming service.

Other productions are completely or partially funded by the Saudi-owned MBC Group, which is competing with Netflix with its streaming service Shahid (and premium paid service Shahid VIP) by providing its viewers more local content than its counterpart. As of late 2020, Shahid VIP became available for viewers in Europe and North America. Interest in attracting international viewership has impacted the types of projects that are being funded and promoted as well as the crews that produce and write the scripts for these productions.

The MBC miniseries “Rashash” is a recent example of the kingdom’s efforts to appeal to a more international audience. The crime-drama series is based on Saudi drug trafficker and criminal Rashash Al-Otaibi who was caught by security forces in the late 1980s. The series has been advertised as having an “all-Saudi cast,” but the crew members, including the series creator, director, and screenwriters, are all foreigners. As a result, the script was initially written in English and had to be translated into Arabic. This created dialect errors and confusion among the cast. Moreover, the series was briefly delayed due to an objection from Otaibi’s family and tribe.

The series demonstrates an aspect of the kingdom’s new approach – targeting television production to an international audience as a means of outreach and to project a specific image of Saudi Arabia. For local observers, “Rashash” did not necessarily speak to a Saudi audience nor did it reflect the culture of Saudi Arabia. Commentators also pointed out that the series was filmed from a perspective that romanticized the desert and highlighted aspects of Saudi culture that are not of great significance for locals.

While Saudi Arabia has taken significant steps to boost and develop local film production, it is also seeking to be a destination for international filmmakers. By becoming a hub for movie makers, Saudi Arabia wants to highlight the country’s geography and heritage sites to attract tourism and interest in the kingdom. For example, the upcoming international production “Desert Warrior” is being shot in the futuristic city of Neom. Gerard Butler’s action movie “Kandahar” will be shot entirely in Saudi Arabia, primarily in Al Ula but also in Hail.
and Jeddah. Both “Desert Warrior” and “Kandahar” are funded, in part, by the MBC Group.42 Kandahar has also benefited from a 40% cash rebate organized by the Saudi Film Commission to attract international productions to the kingdom.43 As part of Saudi Arabia's push to become a hub for regional media and movie production, Al Ula and Neom are being equipped with purpose-built facilities, soundstages, and accommodations for casts and crews expected to be completed in mid-2022.44

Tourism

Tourism is an important sector for Saudi Arabia, not only as a source for non-oil revenue but as a tool to enhance the kingdom's soft power. Beyond being “a driver” for economic growth, the Ministry of Tourism considers tourism “a bridge for cultural communication with the world.”45 Moreover, tourism is expected to generate jobs for Saudi job seekers to reduce unemployment. While religious tourism has traditionally accounted for the majority of visitors to Saudi Arabia, numerous development plans are underway to boost nonreligious tourism and to increase the tourism sector's contribution to gross domestic product from 3% to 10% by 2030.46

The kingdom has been actively taking advantage of Islamic and pre-Islamic heritage sites as tourism and cultural diplomacy assets. Today, the kingdom is rehabilitating old mosques and pre-Islamic sites to promote heritage initiatives. It is also working on registering more sites with UNESCO to strengthen the kingdom's tourist appeal. As part of its new cultural initiatives, the Saudi leadership has paid special attention to reviving and promoting Diriyah, the birthplace of the Al Saud dynasty. Diriyah has become the site of numerous cultural venues and exhibitions, such as the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, which began in December 2021 and concluded in March.47 Through the rehabilitation of these sites, the Saudi leadership is working to cement the royal family's legacy and attract foreign tourism and international interest.

Saudi Arabia is also working on developing cities, such as Neom, which is being marketed as a zone with its own “progressive laws that are compatible with international norms and conducive to economic growth.”48 Many developments are currently underway in Neom, including the world's largest green hydrogen project, Trojena mountain tourist destination, and The

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42 Chris Newbould, “Saudi Arabia is Becoming a Global Film Destination: From 'Kandahar' to 'Desert Warrior',' The National, February 27, 2022.
46 Ibid.
Line, an ambitious and rapidly evolving urban development project. Similarly, various development projects in Al Ula aim to improve tourism infrastructure and provide visitors with entertainment options. The "Desert X" art biennial founded in Southern California concluded its second edition in March despite the negative scrutiny that shadowed the first edition in 2020. The sculpture of American artist Lita Albuquerque was reportedly “the first public showing of a female figure in the kingdom.” Al Ula has become a hub for various art exhibitions and events that cater mostly to a foreign rather than local audience.

Saudi Arabia has also partnered with Western countries and organizations to develop and promote its heritage and cultural initiatives. While the kingdom’s interest in diversification remains a driving factor for its agenda, aligning interests through cultural initiatives also strengthens its soft power. For example, Saudi Arabia’s relatively new and strengthened partnership with Greece includes the preservation of historic sites, exchange of expertise on cultural, museum, and heritage projects, and co-organizing exhibitions. France is also becoming an important player in the cultural domain in the kingdom. The archeological site of Hegra in Al Ula, Saudi Arabia’s first UNESCO World Heritage Site, has become both a central tourist attraction and a means to connect and collaborate with foreign agencies and firms to develop the area. For example, the Saudi Royal Commission for AlUla is working in close collaboration with French architects and artists on the development of Al Ula. Mohammed bin Salman requested support from French President Emmanuel Macron, and they signed an agreement establishing the French Agency for AlUla Development in 2018.

Sports

Sports are another cornerstone for Saudi Arabia’s diversification and rebranding strategy. The kingdom has hosted numerous international sports events, such as the Dakar Rally, Formula E, and the Saudi Cup horse race. Furthermore, Saudi officials struck a deal with the Spanish football federation in 2019 to host the Spanish Super Cup final, initially for three years and recently extended through 2029. And, for the first time, Jeddah hosted the Formula 1 Saudi Arabia Grand Prix in December 2021 and again in March. Jeddah will also host the much debated Saudi-backed LIV Golf league in October. For the Saudi economy, sporting events

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54 Visiting the archeological site was previously restricted to foreign tourists visiting the kingdom, as Saudi citizens were not easily granted permission to enter due to religious restrictions that forbid Muslims from entering the tomb areas.
are a tool for bringing in tourists, especially since the kingdom eased procedures and began allowing foreigners to apply for e-visas in 2019. This emphasis on sports and tourism was clear when Argentinian football star Lionel Messi visited Saudi Arabia in May to participate in tourism events in Jeddah and was unveiled as the kingdom's new tourism ambassador.

Additionally, Saudis have also acquired football, or soccer, clubs abroad. The head of the General Entertainment Authority bought Spanish club Almeria in 2019. In 2020, a saga around the kingdom's takeover of the English Premier League team Newcastle United erupted, though the deal did not materialize until late 2021. Speculation regarding Saudi Arabia’s Newcastle involvement led other clubs to vote in favor of blocking sponsorship deals with companies aligned with the Public Investment Fund. The block was later removed, opening the door for the Public Investment Fund to execute sponsorship agreements. Moreover, leaked images of the away jerseys for the club’s next season reveal striking similarities with Saudi Arabia’s white and green national team colors.

Saudi Arabia’s acquisition of Newcastle United has aided the kingdom’s soft power aspirations; according to an official from Saudi Arabia's General Sports Authority, “The move will change the English's perception of Saudi Arabia and will establish a new mental image of Saudi Arabia for future generations.”

Saudi journalists have argued that the acquisition will improve the kingdom’s image and increase Mohammed bin Salman’s popularity. Potential issues related to the kingdom’s image and sensitivities, however, have been on full display since day one. When local fans in the United Kingdom dressed in Saudi-inspired attire for the first home match after the acquisition, the club circulated a note on social media asking fans to refrain from doing so again. Interestingly, a few days later the club backtracked on its statement and informed supporters that they can wear “culturally inspired clothing.” Episodes like this are a reminder that, for Saudi Arabia, the acquisition’s success will likely be measured at least as much for its contribution to improving the country’s image as its potential for generating revenue in the long run.

60 Dan Roan, “Newcastle: Premier League Clubs Vote to Block Sponsorship Deals Linked to Owners,” BBC Sport, October 19, 2021.
While Western media has often labeled Saudi Arabia's interest in this domain – similar to investments from other Gulf states – as “sportswashing,” Saudi officials argue that sports are “a tool for change,” pointing to the role sports play in the domestic changes taking place in the kingdom. For example, while prior to 2018 women were not allowed to enter stadiums, as with entertainment events, sports events are now open to mixed audiences. Saudi Arabia has also hosted women's championships, such as the Aramco Saudi Ladies International golf tournament, and mega-events for female WWE wrestlers. In the face of international scrutiny, Minister of Sports Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki al-Faisal has argued that Saudi Arabia has always faced criticism – previously for not opening up to the world and now for using sports to change the kingdom.

Women’s Empowerment

Saudi Arabia's interest in expanding its soft power potential has also led it to pay special attention to the areas that require improvement, especially the status of women in the country. For decades, gender segregation kept women out of sight in the workforce and public life in the kingdom. Saudi female labor participation was mainly limited to positions in the education and health sectors. Moreover, the kingdom’s poor reputation regarding the treatment of women, especially enforcing a driving ban up until 2018, received wide media coverage in the West. The situation of women contributed to a negative perception of the kingdom that became particularly challenging for the kingdom’s economic diversification plans.

King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's reign from 2005 to 2015 was characterized by limited but significant reforms toward women's empowerment. During his de facto reign in the early 2000s, the government began allowing the issuance of identity cards to women. Previously, Saudi women were not issued national identity cards; they were only added to their male guardians' family registry card. This arrangement ensured that only men were able to make changes to family documents. Additionally, the government appointed women to some high positions, such as the appointment of Norah Al-Faiz as vice-minister of education in 2009. In 2011, the government announced that women would be permitted to vote as well as run for office in the 2015 municipal elections. And in 2013, the king appointed 30 women to the Shura Council. Saudi women were also allowed to work in shops as saleswomen in gender-mixed environments.

These limited reforms were openly and frequently criticized by religious clerics and conservatives alike. This made the topic of women's empowerment a delicate matter in the kingdom and a common topic for debate in mass media. On the other hand, Saudi women's rights activists continued to challenge the driving ban in the hope that King Abdullah’s reforms...
would extend to allowing women to drive. The two opposing camps increased polarization in Saudi society. This perhaps contributed to the new leadership of King Salman bin Abdulaziz in 2015 adopting a radically different approach to elevating the role of women in the country.

The Saudi government has recently granted women more rights, such as allowing women to be issued passports without the consent of a male guardian and giving them access to family records, which in the past was restricted to men. Saudi leaders in recent years have also been successful in increasing female participation in the labor market. However, women still only occupy around 2.5% of leadership positions. Moreover, the push to open up the country and project a modern image has made some companies prefer hiring unveiled Saudi women. As a result, veiled Saudi job seekers have complained about discrimination in job interviews. This is an added dimension to the country’s push toward relaxing the social scene, which might create tensions among conservatives who still prefer to veil and feel increasingly excluded from the workforce.

Women in Diplomacy

While Saudi women have been employed in the Foreign Ministry for more than a decade, giving them leadership roles has been a more recent development. Since 2019, three Saudi women have been strategically posted as ambassadors in countries where the kingdom’s reputation needed a boost. These moves have aimed to highlight the kingdom’s strides in women’s employment and deflect criticism over the kingdom’s human rights record. Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud was appointed Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States in 2019. She replaced Prince Khalid bin Salman, brother of Mohammed bin Salman, who departed from the United States following the Khashoggi murder. The choice of Princess Reema, daughter of the kingdom’s ambassador to the United States from 1983 to 2005, was meant to recalibrate Saudi-U.S. relations and improve the kingdom’s image.

Two other female ambassadors were posted to Scandinavian countries. Amal al-Moallimi was appointed Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Norway in 2020. Her assignment has been especially important due to ongoing criticism in Norwegian media and by nongovernmental organizations over the Saudi human rights record. Inas al-Shahwan was appointed ambassador to Sweden and Iceland in April 2021. The appointment of two female ambassadors in Nordic countries is not a coincidence; it shows the leadership’s awareness of the importance paid to gender equality and women’s rights in these countries.

This was seemingly a way to improve Saudi Arabia’s image abroad without triggering controversy inside the country. However, such maneuvers abroad have still stirred debate inside the country. The televised appearance of a female Saudi official at the United Nations without a headscarf in 2015 sparked sharp criticism on social media, and the government subsequently launched an investigation into the incident.

Women as Spokespersons and in the Military

The Saudi leadership has been showcasing its advancement of women through the appointment of women as government and military spokespersons. The trend started in 2017 with the appointment of Fatima Baeshen as the spokesperson for the Saudi Embassy in Washington. In 2020, Norah Al-Haqbani became the first female spokesperson for the Saudi Human Rights Commission. In 2021, Saudi television channels broadcast the Hajj security briefing for the first time conducted by a female soldier. The video was widely shared among Saudis on social media.

In Gulf countries, women’s participation in the military has been a highly contested topic. However, Saudi leaders decided in 2018 to allow women to join the military. In early 2020, the first military section for women in the kingdom’s armed forces was launched, and the first class of women soldiers graduated in 2021. These developments have been highlighted widely in Saudi media, both in Arabic and English. In fact, women have been positioned in jobs, such as the Saudi royal guard, that would generate media attention to show both domestically and abroad that the kingdom is taking important steps toward inclusivity.

However, the presence of Saudi women in the security sector is not new. In fact, due to gender segregation, the need for women in various security apparatuses was long a necessity. Saudi women have always worked in airport security and have overseen female prisons and public prosecution services, especially investigations. Similarly, security services in malls, hospitals, and the grand mosques have employed women. Still, because of the kingdom’s interest in displaying the presence of Saudi women in public life, these positions have been revamped by instituting special uniforms for these jobs to showcase that women are in these positions.

The Prospects and Limits of Saudi Soft Power

While states can successfully combine hard and soft power tools to achieve their objectives, the kingdom’s hard power actions have undoubtedly hampered some of its rebranding efforts and complicated its soft power aspirations. The war in Yemen has been especially damaging after seven years of conflict. In response to growing criticism, Saudi Arabia began to highlight...
its humanitarian aid to Yemen on mass media. According to the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, Yemen is ranked the top recipient of aid from the kingdom having received over $19 billion.\(^79\) On top of this, Saudi Arabia committed $2 billion in assistance following peace talks in Riyadh in April.\(^80\)

The murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul likewise damaged Saudi Arabia's soft power outreach and is often brought up in discussions regarding the kingdom's transformation. Turkey's attempts to repair relations with Saudi Arabia led to transferring the trial in absentia of 26 Saudis implicated in Khashoggi's murder to Saudi Arabia and was followed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to the kingdom in April.\(^81\) Such efforts might help the country move on from past miscalculations and negative media scrutiny, which is critical for the kingdom's transformation plans.

And indeed investment opportunities in Saudi Arabia continue to appeal to foreign companies. The Public Investment Fund's subsidiary, the Development and Investment Entertainment Company, has partnered with theater operator AMC Entertainment to open cinemas across the country. Even after the murder of Khashoggi in 2018, AMC continued to open dozens of theaters in the kingdom, despite criticism. Interestingly, the kingdom's conservative history was used to justify moving ahead with the plans. According to AMC Entertainment's chief executive, Adam Aron, by helping the country to open up and allow Saudis access to movies, AMC was "doing something very good for the people of the country."\(^82\) Other international businesses that have established contracts for sports and entertainment events in Saudi Arabia have used similar justification, arguing that sports can be a neutral tool for change.\(^83\)

There is no question that the Saudi government has been fostering the cultural scene through new state-led commissions. But there are risks in the state centralization of arts management. Bringing arts and entertainment under these state-led initiatives could have a negative effect on local production, which might try to align with or promote the state's narrative in an attempt to be picked up or sponsored. This could restrict creativity in favor of producing narratives that only reaffirm the kingdom's rebranding efforts. As a result, local productions might not reach the wider audience the kingdom aims to attract.

The restriction of religious control over the social sector has expanded opportunities for entertainment and tourism. But it may also complicate Saudi Arabia's religious soft power outreach.

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81  "Turkish Court Rules That Khashoggi Trial Should Be Transferred to Saudi Arabia," NPR, April 7, 2022.
Moreover, the kingdom’s recent approach to hosting entertainment and sports events conflicts with the religious teachings it promoted in the past. This inconsistency might be coming at the expense of the new approach of promoting “moderate Islam.” The secretary general of the Muslim World League has become instrumental in advancing the new agenda, but it remains to be seen if his outreach to Muslim communities in the diaspora will be fruitful.

There is also the risk that this dramatic social opening may prompt domestic unease or even a backlash. A recent survey of Saudis enquired about the kingdom’s “national attractions” that the leadership should utilize for its soft power approach. Most of the respondents agreed that the kingdom’s religious importance and its role in the Muslim world should come first. The participants also said that “artistic creativity, powerful media, tourism potentials and entertainment attractions” are least important. In fact, participants expressed concern regarding the types of entertainment options that the kingdom has been promoting, arguing that they are seasonal and, therefore, not sustainable. Respondents also said that entertainment should not clash with the social and cultural values of Saudis. Such a push for entertainment options is perceived as weakening the kingdom’s prominence in the Muslim world, reducing the soft power influence it had already acquired over recent decades.

While the kingdom has to an extent managed to open up the country and relax the social scene, issues related to religion regularly surface due to new laws or expectations from both locals and visitors. Some of this is related to the kingdom’s religious identity, which continues to resonate among many Saudis, even youth. While Saudi Arabia’s minister of tourism argued in 2017 that 80% of the population is “moderate,” such vague terms do not necessarily accurately portray the population’s stance regarding the changes and opening of the social scene today. Moreover, the usual assumption made by analysts writing on Saudi Arabia about the youth and their support for the changes does not always acknowledge the extent of diversity among Saudi youth.

As all of the Gulf countries pursue similar diversification projects, especially in arts, sports, and entertainment, regional competition increases. However, with the end of the 2017-21 Gulf crisis with Qatar, there seems to be more synergy among Gulf states. Interest in rebranding and diversification might further align their interests and push them toward greater cooperation. For example, the hosting of the World Cup in Qatar beginning in November will benefit neighboring countries and increase tourism in the Gulf. The untapped potential of Saudi Arabia, especially in the tourism and art sectors, can give it an edge over its neighbors.

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85 Ibid, 32.
Conclusion

As Saudi Arabia is interested in fostering its soft power potential, many of its actions are best understood through its rebranding efforts. The Saudi leadership is focused on changing its perception in the West in order to attract investment and international interest. As a result, many of the country's cultural and sports events, as well as television and movie productions, are targeted toward a foreign audience rather than a local one.

Saudi Arabia is taking advantage of the mystery that long surrounded the kingdom to promote and attract foreign investment and tourism and to change its public image. This explains the kingdom's interest in cultural diplomacy, which has become an important tool to maximize its soft power. Women's empowerment has also become a crucial component of Saudi Arabia's rebranding strategy; for example, lifting the driving ban in 2018 was central to improving the kingdom's image and that of its leadership.

The interest in appealing to foreigners for tourism and investment has created parallel realities and could lead to tensions between the population and the state, especially in regions that are the focus of development projects. Moreover, policies that the kingdom has enacted, such as the public decency law, set different standards between locals and foreigners regarding appearance and behavior. As the kingdom transforms the nature of its soft power brand and takes important steps toward implementing social and economic reforms, achieving a balance between appealing to foreigners and preserving traditional and religious elements of Saudi culture will remain a challenge ahead on its long journey of transformation.