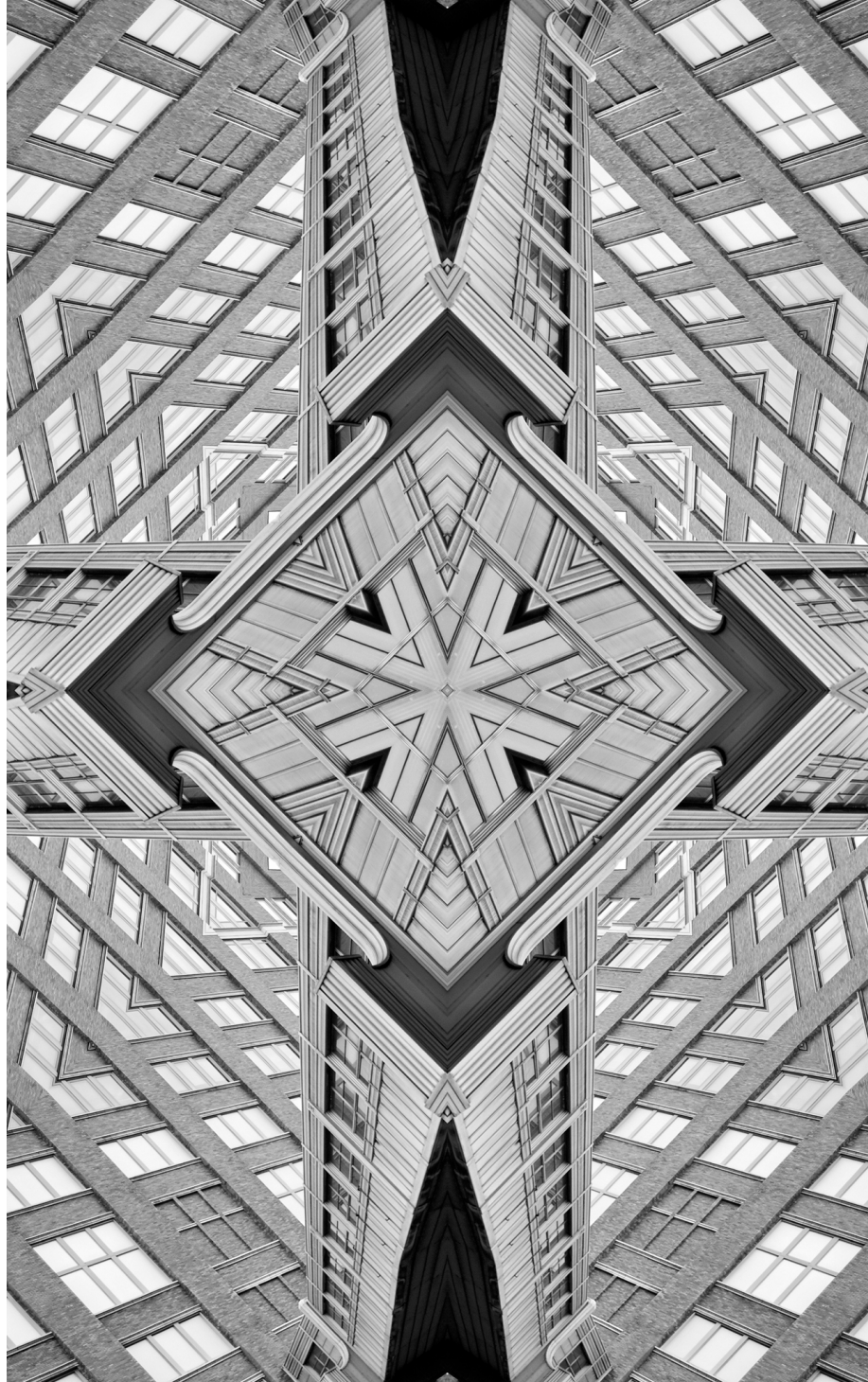


Issue

Brief

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Saudi Arabia, a Kingdom in Transition

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Saudi Arabia, under the tutelage of the crown prince and heir apparent Mohammed bin Salman, is remoulding its two main exports—oil and Islam—to future-proof both the Saudi state and the monarchy that runs it. While transitions of such scale and consequence have been attempted before, they have met with limited success. Today, the challenges and opportunities before Riyadh are simultaneously invigorating and jarring. This brief assesses Saudi Arabia's journey from two critical lenses: the evolution of ideology, and the overhaul of its domestic and international economy.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with a population of 36 million, is widely regarded as an enigma state. It is the home of Islam, hosting two of the religion’s holiest sites in Mecca and Medina. The majority of Saudis practice Sunni Islam,^a and as such, the kingdom has long espoused and promoted the teachings of 18th-century Hanbali cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, or ‘Wahhabism’.¹

In 1902, then-22-year-old Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman Al Saud (also known as Ibn Saud) set out to restore the rule of the Al Saud (House of Saud^b), capturing Riyadh, the ancient capital of the Saudi kingdom, and later Mecca, in 1924, and Medina in 1925.² To achieve this, the young chief first mobilised the Ikhwan, a militia of tribespeople, and later crushed them in 1932 to establish his supremacy as king amid the founding of the present-day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

In 1933, Ibn Saud invited American companies to Saudi Arabia to search for oil—a decision that many described as “un-Islamic”.^c Oil was first found in the territory in 1938, soon becoming a commodity that would change the landscape of Saudi Arabia, the West Asia region (or the Middle East), and the global order.³

The shift in global geopolitics amid the United States’s (US) entry into the region, driven by its increasing thirst for industrialisation and, thereby, oil, was etched into history in February 1945 when Ibn Saud met with then US President Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁴ Thus began a decades-long security arrangement between Riyadh and Washington, consequential to both the American polity and the House of Saud: the US guaranteed Saudi Arabia political security and the maintenance of power, and Saudi Arabia guaranteed the US energy security.

Decades later, in the 2020s, the oil era and the idea of ‘Pax Americana’ are under duress.⁵ While oil remains a critical energy source for the developing world, developed countries are moving towards renewable energy. Alongside the US becoming a net energy exporter due to its domestic shale revolution, American foreign policy has also adapted, reorienting its appetite for taking on risks emerging from West Asia’s geopolitical divides.⁶

a The other main branch is Shia Islam.

b The current ruling royal family.

c Ibn Saud worked through the *Ulema* (scholars of Islamic law and doctrine) and used quotes from the Quran to prove otherwise.

Introduction

However, more notable than the fundamental changes in the US military's historical postures in West Asia was the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) as Saudi crown prince and heir apparent in 2017, and the dramatic changes announced since.^{7,8} The MBS-led Saudi polity has adopted a two-pronged approach as part of its 'Vision 2030':⁹ first, the kingdom must future-proof itself and build alternate economic models not dependent on oil; and second, to realise these changes, it must pursue fundamental ideological shifts away from conservatism or traditionalism towards moderate Islam.¹⁰

The first requirement to implement the new approach was to manage internal familial politics within the monarchy. On taking charge, MBS stamped his authority by 'imprisoning' hundreds of 'VIPs', including high-ranking royals such as Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh under the guise of combatting systemic corruption.¹¹ The move was part of the long-term goal to install power, and defang and instil fear in the opposition.

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Political Islam as an ideology has prevailed in West Asia since the 1920s, led by ideologues such as Egyptian scholar and Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al-Banna.¹² Other ideologies more immersed in Islamic theology, such as Wahhabism, have also been incubated within Saudi society and moulded around the state and governance structures. Scholars have noted that Wahhabism was hyphenated with the Al Saud to cultivate a Saudi nationality by stitching together a political structure despite tribal and ideological differences such as those between Arab tribes.¹³ A more hardened management of such ideologies by Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's most pious and important places, in exchange for economic gains, is unprecedented for the kingdom. Notably, Riyadh and MBS are not the first to take up this challenge. Indeed, Saudi Arabia would like to pursue the model adopted by its smaller but equally powerful neighbour, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Media reports indicate that by 2019, a mere two years into MBS's rise to power, UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan had begun to view the former as a protégé.¹⁴

The UAE "liberalised" its economy, and to a certain extent its polity, beginning in 2007 to allow economic dividends to take shape without interference. The country realised it would need to disassociate from the common regional image of West Asia—that of conservative and radical Islam percolating in the society as a theological and state-sponsored design.¹⁵ The September 2001 US terror attacks caused a setback to the West Asia region, particularly to Islam as promoted by the Saudis. This is due to the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the lack of options before the Arab states other than to align with the US-led West against al Qaeda and its associates globally as their economic futures and monarchies' sustainability depended on integration into Western economic models and security architectures. As such, although the Arab states were often disgruntled by the overreach of Pax Americana, they also saw its utility, as American hegemony remained unchallenged in the 1990s and the 2000s.¹⁶

Ideological changes framed around strong theological inclinations are not easy to manoeuvre. MBS has often been the subject of criticism from the international community, including on issues of human rights. Yet, the MBS-led project to shift Saudi Arabia away from Wahhabism and radical Islam to a more open polity characterised by markets and religious moderation has found widespread global support, including from India.^{17,18}

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Today, the Saudis are less contemptuous of Western culture and moderatism, as older generations had been. In 2018, Saudi Arabia lifted its ban on women driving via a royal decree signed by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who has seemingly backed these ‘liberalising’ initiatives.¹⁹ Since then, more cultural openings have taken place, enabling the building of an economic blueprint beyond oil, including in sectors related to entertainment and sports. For instance, the kingdom has set up the Saudi Pro League for football, attracting a number of major international players by offering exorbitant contracts, ironically funded by petrodollars;²⁰ Western artists have also come to hold concerts in the country.²¹

Another ideological shift—perhaps more difficult and consequential to reshaping perceptions of the kingdom abroad—was the defanging of the notorious ‘religious police’ or the ‘*mutawa*’ (Sharia police), officially known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, one of Saudi’s most criticised policing mechanisms for the past five decades or so.²² Tasked with the implementation of strict and conservative practices of Islam in society, the *mutawa* had been a core part of the kingdom’s turn towards hardline religious indoctrination, known as the *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*, that occurred between the 1960s and 1980s.²³

Notably, 1979 was a year of significant churn for the region, strongly driving Riyadh’s push to institutionalise Islam as the core doctrine driving political outcomes. Two events that year shaped much of the ideological designs now being deconstructed by MBS. First was the Islamic revolution in Iran that saw the return of the ultraconservative Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini from exile to take charge after protesters toppled the regime of the West-backed Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.²⁴ This change of power in Tehran automatically launched a doubling-down of ideology in Saudi Arabia as the sectarian division between Shias and Sunnis would be the core of the competition for theological and, by association, regional supremacy.²⁵

The second event, which had a significant impact on the Saudi political and security psyche at the time but now features little in public discussions, was the November 1979 siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamist preacher Juhayman-Al-Utaybi and hundreds of his armed followers, who belonged to an organisation called Al-Jamaa al-Salafiya al-Muhtasiba (or JSM, a “rejectionist” Islamic movement in Saudi Arabia that emerged in the 1960s), on the first day of *Muharram* (the first month of the Islamic calendar).^{26,27}

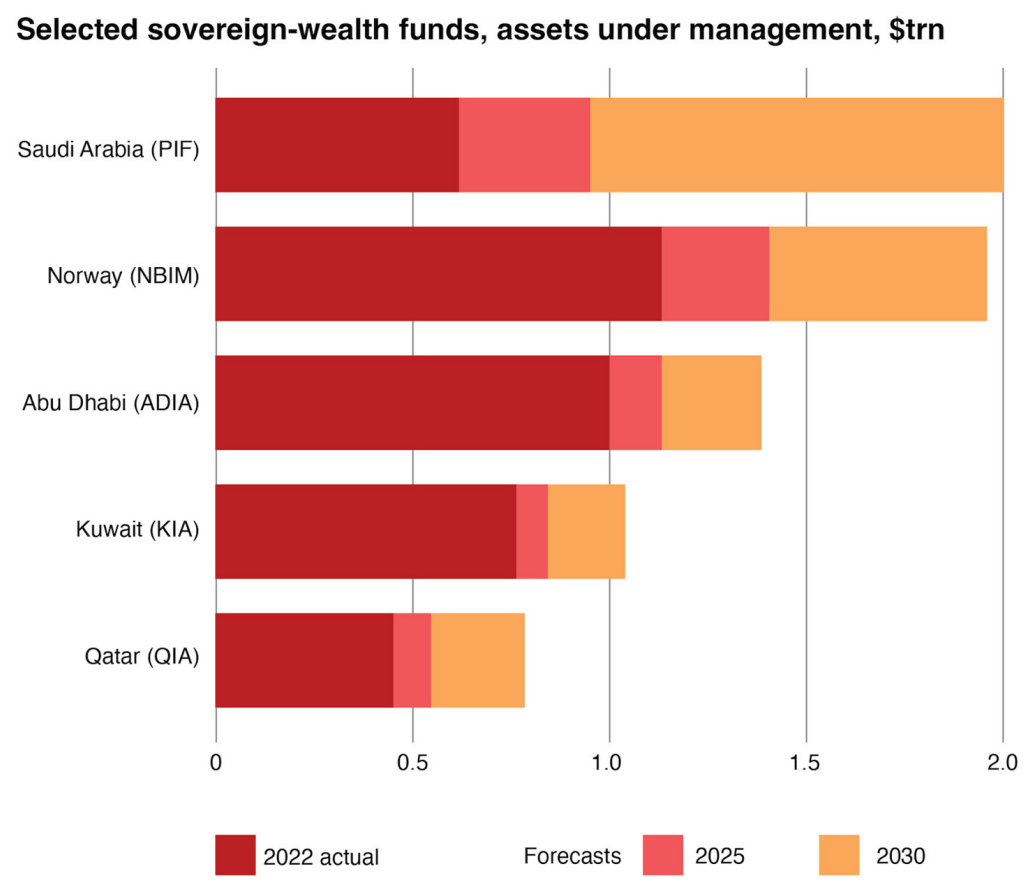
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The JSM had a wide theological mandate, centred around combating the mainstream schools and organisations of state-supported Islam, including ideologies such as Wahhabism and groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as pushing back against oil-money-fuelled consumerism, urbanisation, and the closing gaps in the societal ranks between men and women.^{28,29} The Saudi state and forces struggled to end the siege, eventually managing to do so with clandestine help from France.³⁰ While Al-Utaybi and 60 others were eventually executed, the episode led to long-term shifts in the kingdom, particularly the relationship between power, authority, society, and ideology. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia gave the mutawa unprecedented powers to maintain 'morality' as per Islamic laws.

Reversing Saudi Arabia's Islamic awakening is critical to building global confidence for increased investments in the kingdom as it shifts away from oil dependency. However, under MBS's rule, the mutawa has been curtailed, but not disbanded. This is because the kingdom is undertaking a delicate and difficult change, orchestrated on the shoulders of a single leader. Learnings from the events of 1979 have likely played a part, and it largely remains unknown how others in the vast Al Saud family view the shifts being implemented as part of Vision 2030.³¹

At the same time, Saudi Arabia is also emerging as a big investor outside the Gulf region. The Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund currently has an estimated US\$923 billion in assets under management, which is expected to cross US\$1 trillion in the future.³² Of the top global sovereign-wealth funds, only one is a Western fund (Norway, which is also incubated by petrodollars), while the others are Arab states, including the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: World's Top Wealth Funds as of 2022



Source: *The Economist*³³

For these funds to thrive in the new era of global geopolitical and economic transition, markets that can deliver strong, long-term returns are necessary. This is also important to help wean the Saudi population off the habit of being financially underwritten via subsidies by the kingdom’s oil wealth. The Vision 2030 document continues to drive Saudi Arabia’s emerging economic and geopolitical projects, with their current valuation already topping US\$1.2 trillion.³⁴ Stability is key to consistently achieving such goals. While the idea of a stable global order remains difficult amid wars in the wider neighbourhood

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(Ukraine and Gaza), geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges alike for West Asian states looking to build their own new economic order will persist and adversely impact Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.³⁵

Asian markets, meanwhile, stand to benefit. Despite increasing tensions between the US and China, with the Taiwan³⁶ and the South China Sea³⁷ issues continuing to linger, several countries in the region, including China, India, and Vietnam, remain attractive investment destinations with healthy growth rates predicted despite global and institutional uncertainties.³⁸ India's increasing closeness to the US, particularly through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alongside Japan and Australia, has also allowed it to become a core player in the future of connectivity projects.^{39,40} The signing of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) on the sidelines of the 2023 G20 Summit indicates the interconnected future hoping to be built in the region through Western partnership.⁴¹

The October 2023 terror attacks against Israel by Hamas and the subsequent and ongoing military operations in Gaza by Israeli forces pose a critical challenge for the region to balance its new geoeconomic visions alongside navigating its oldest political crisis. Notably, in a July 2023 report (three months before the Hamas attack), one scholar wrote, "The primary target of this multi-faceted effort [the Abraham Accords^d] is Saudi Arabia. While this Gulf power has taken some small steps, such as allowing Israel use of Saudi airspace, it has also reaffirmed that it will not normalize until the Palestinian issue is settled."⁴² Indeed, while the US has aggressively pushed for Israel-Saudi normalisation, even amid the Gaza war,⁴³ MBS has made it clear that normalisation will not be considered unless the Palestinian state is officially recognised.⁴⁴

^d Bilateral agreements on the normalisation of ties, signed between Israel and the UAE and between Israel and Bahrain in September 2020.

Strategic Autonomy and Incubating Geoeconomics

The term ‘strategic autonomy’ has no universal definition or framework, and can best be understood by a state’s national security and foreign policy aims. It takes root from the idea of not being part of power blocs and carving self-determined paths instead. This philosophy is not new and is reminiscent of the Non-Aligned Movement that emerged amid the Cold War between the US and the erstwhile Soviet Union. Increasingly, both India and West Asia appear to share a renewal of this line of thought. Noted American scholar Ashley J. Tellis termed India’s view of the world as “non-allied forever,”⁴⁵ while Russian scholar Nikolay Surkov highlighted that West Asia, and more specifically the Arab states, are altering their strategies, moving from “dependency and clientelism” to “strategic autonomy”.⁴⁶

However, this diplomatic shuffle has been a challenge for Saudi Arabia as it wants ‘autonomy’ even as it seeks to ensure long-term security with the US, which continues to provide it with net security.⁴⁷ The US is now increasingly seeing its relations with the world—and more specifically, states with which it once had close ties—in ‘us versus them’ terms, or more specifically, building a ‘democracy versus autocracy’ narrative.⁴⁸ While this was previously packaged around the US-China rivalry, Russia’s war against Ukraine has now brought Beijing and Moscow together.⁴⁹

With Israel, the US has succeeded in ensuring that, despite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s erratic behaviour, the country has paused its plan to “marry Israel’s technology with China’s capacity”.⁵⁰ Beijing had previously invoked itself as a critical partner for Jerusalem’s vision of making “a desert bloom,” referring to its science and tech innovations making agriculture possible in Israel’s arid landscape.⁵¹ However, China’s vision has not panned out, with Israel giving in to US demands to keep Chinese companies out of its critical tech infrastructure.⁵² Israel has enjoyed the dividends of ‘taking sides’ with the US steadfastly supporting Israeli military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah (in Lebanon) since October 2023. This has been cemented by China’s vocal support for Palestine, and unwillingness to condemn Hamas by name.⁵³

MBS, however, does not yet see Saudi Arabia as being in an existential crisis. While regional security challenges have increased and the situation in Gaza and Lebanon make it difficult for the kingdom to remain indifferent, building upon strategic autonomy and doing business with China, the world’s second-

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largest economy, is considered important. To achieve this, Saudi Arabia has indulged in frantic geopolitical manoeuvring. Its normalisation of ties with Iran, talks with the Houthis in Yemen, and not walking back on the small concessions it had previously provided Israel, such as access to its airspace for commercial airlines (a trend started by Air India in 2018⁵⁴), add up to it building a 'neutral' position within a conflict being seen as one between Israel and Iran.

This, however, does not mean the kingdom has undergone any fundamental shifts in how it views Iran as a primary ideological and strategic threat. The Gulf states have continued to build security ecosystems among themselves, such as closer protection of airspace and maritime zones. Some scholars view these rapid changes, which include ending intra-Arab rivalries (such as the 43-month-long blockade against Qatar), as a realisation of the fact that the US being a security guarantor is not an absolute.^{55,56} The changes also complement the fact that the Gulf armed forces, although armed with top-of-the-line equipment, have little experience in fighting and winning wars on their own. Israel's triumph against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the Yom Kippur War of 1967 remains a looming example and a psychological dent to date.⁵⁷


However, to freely promote business, attract large sums of foreign direct investment, and make Riyadh attractive to the global economy, MBS has been playing the global geopolitical game with a different deck of cards. The crown prince has shown the US the utility of having good working relations with both Russia and China. In September 2024, Russia's embattled president, Vladimir Putin, thanked MBS for helping organise the largest prisoner swap between the US and Russia since the Cold War.⁵⁸ This strategy is also employed by the UAE, which has mediated multiple deals between Russia and Ukraine to swap captured soldiers.⁵⁹ Both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh remain open for Russian business despite American displeasure.⁶⁰

Accepting India's stance of 'non-allied forever' has not been a hard pill to swallow for the US, despite both countries being part of the Quad. However, it has not been as simple to accept the same in West Asia, where most states were previously subservient to the US to ensure their security guarantees and, in exchange, played a critical role within the larger design of Pax Americana.⁶¹

Moving forward, MBS's wish for strategic autonomy and a security deal will now depend on the incoming Trump presidency in the US. The return of former President Donald Trump will be a challenge and opportunity for Saudi Arabia, as it was in 2016. Trump's first term was managed well by the Saudis as they recognised the brand of transactional politics favoured by Trump.⁶² However, the bonhomie between MBS and Trump will face headwinds; after all, the 2019 oil facility attacks in the Kingdom's eastern province, which shut down half of its oil output and resulted in a loss of 5.7 million barrels (or 5 percent of the world's daily crude oil production), took place during the Trump presidency.⁶³

Riyadh is currently playing a long game. Its brand of strategic autonomy may well help in keeping the US engaged over the long term. This is also critical for the kingdom's geoeconomic aims. The international support for the MBS-led dramatic changes in the kingdom is palpable, with regional and global economic and political security standing to gain.

The Saudis will benefit from expanding their outreach towards Asia beyond big-ticket projects to institutionalise ties between small- and medium-sized enterprises. Projects such as IMEC can become central economic highways in the coming decades, and the member countries can look to the Quad for ideas on constructing the building blocks in areas such as health, digital public infrastructure, blue economy, and good cyber security practices.⁶⁴

Finally, the core challenge for Saudi Arabia, MBS, and Vision 2030, will be political sustainability. While the crown prince arguably has decades in power ahead, managing this transition alongside a young and aspirational population and little experience with a non-oil, market-led economy,⁶⁵ will not be easy. However, the advantage for MBS is that the international community is equally invested in the success of this transition given that its failure will be a tectonic setback. 

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