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# SAUDI ARABIA'S PERIPHERIES IN TIMES OF REFORM: THE LOCAL PUZZLE

edited by **Eleonora Ardemagni**

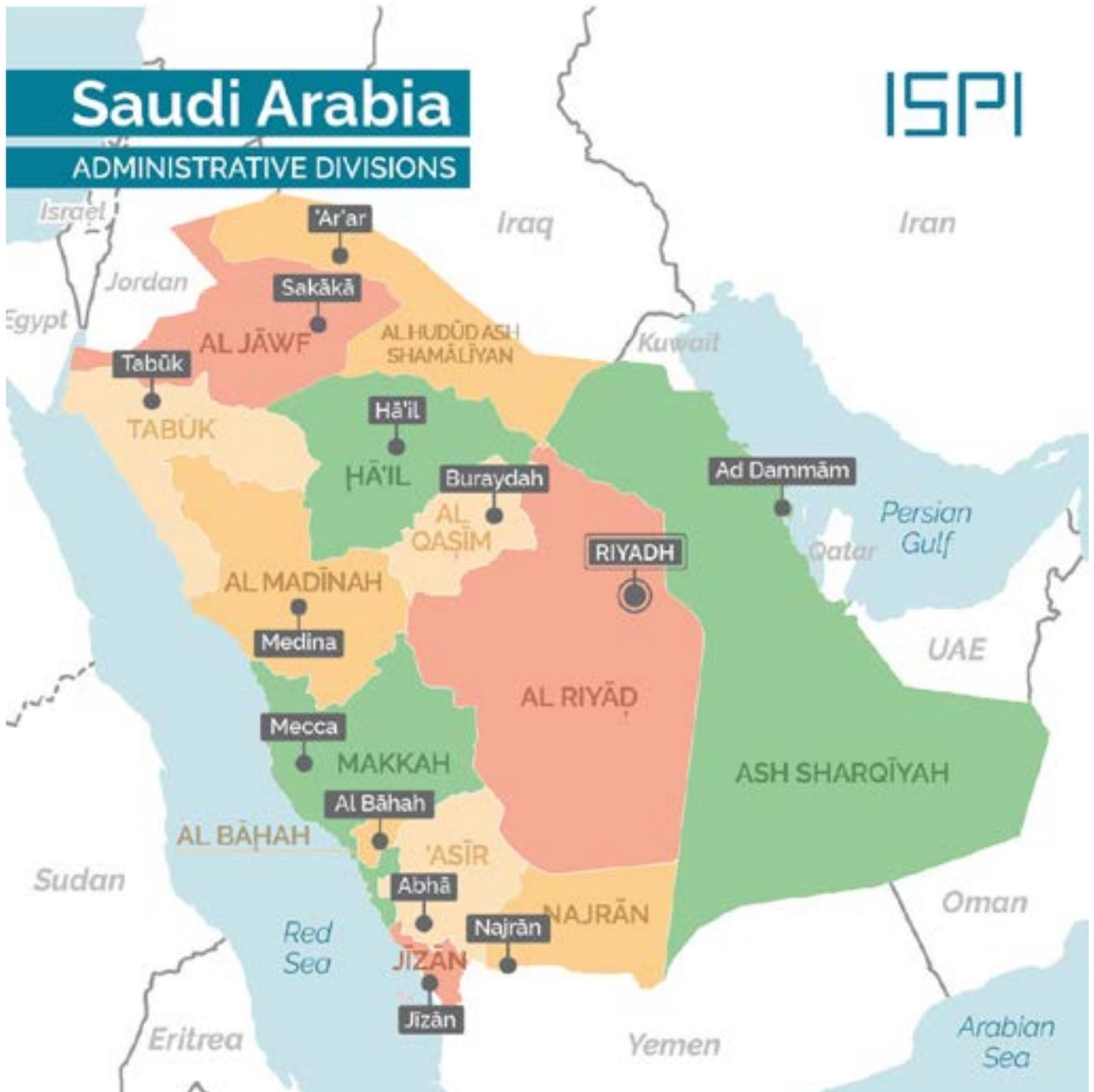




In Saudi Arabia, "Vision 2030" and Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud's economic and social reforms affect also the geographical peripheries of the kingdom. Some of these provinces present long-time economic and social inequalities with respect to the political centre, showing also distinct features in terms of culture and, sometimes, confessional identity. Borderland areas are also connected for kinship and networks with troubled neighbouring states (from Yemen to Iraq), with implications for border security. Adopting the geographical prism, this ISPI Dossier analyses how Riyadh's peripheries are coping with transformation "from above", redefining local balances. How are royal reforms imaging and changing Saudi peripheries? What is the impact of Saudi policies on centre-periphery relations, patterns of economic development and recruitment in the border guard? What about the relationship between Saudi top-down nationalism and local identities?

*\* Eleonora Ardemagni is an ISPI Associate Research Fellow (contributing to the MENA. Teaching Assistant at the Catholic University of Milan (MSc courses "Regional Studies Middle East"/ "History of Islamic Asia"; "New Conflicts: History, Strategy and Narrative") and of Brescia (BA, "History and Institutions of Asian and African Countries").*

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## Vision 2030 in Saudi Peripheries: Modelling Local Identities

Eman Al Hussein  
Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington  
(AGSIW)

Saudi Arabia has been undergoing a massive transformation process to implement "Vision 2030", a roadmap for post-oil diversification. At the heart of the vision is a strong emphasis on [tourism](#), [culture](#) and [entertainment](#) as vehicles for economic change. In a country as vast as Saudi Arabia, translating into reality such ambitious plans while simultaneously, modifying public opinion and perceptions are challenging endeavors. Moreover, the restructuring of the Saudi economy is also playing a role in re-defining identities. This is partially due to the new-found interest in peripheral regions for tourism projects. On the other hand, the capital Riyadh remains central and even subject to further expansion under recent plans to develop it into an entertainment and business hub. The analysis of the various projects in the kingdom and their implications provides a useful lens to make sense of the nature of the proposed reforms, and how they might potentially impact the center-periphery balance.



## THE CENTER: RIYADH AS THE TRANSFORMATION HUB

Due to the 1970s oil boom, rapid urbanization encouraged migration to bigger cities, and especially Riyadh, where the quality of education, job prospects, infrastructure and public services remain significantly better than in many other parts of the kingdom. The centrality and size of Riyadh has always been a widely discussed issue, especially in the past few years. For example, in early 2019 megaprojects were [announced](#) in Riyadh with a total cost of \$22 billion: these include recreation parks, cultural venues, medical as well as sports facilities and housing. These projects are also [expected](#) to generate jobs and attract local and foreign investors. Two megaprojects are also underway: Qiddiyah (a massive entertainment, sports, and arts center on the outskirts of Riyadh) and Diriyah Gate. Diriyah is significant for its history, being the birthplace of the royal family, the reason why it has received special attention over the past few years.

In 2020, despite the double impact of the coronavirus crisis and falling oil prices, the Royal Commission for the City of Riyadh announced a \$800 billion plan to double the capital's population, reaching 15 million within a decade. The main objective behind this plan is [to transform Riyadh](#) "into the Middle East's top economic, social and cultural hub." The announcement generated much debate on social media due to the potential implications the expansion would have on infrastructures and services. Not only do these plans confirm the prominence and centrality of Riyadh in the overall scheme

of change, but they also shed light on future migration trends that are likely to emerge as a result of planned initiatives and urban transformation.

## THE PERIPHERIES: BUILDING FROM SCRATCH OR RE-INVENTING EXISTING SITES

The northwest region of Tabuk, which accounts for less than 3% of the country's population, will be home to the three most ambitious megaprojects funded by the Public Investment Fund (PIF). The projects will be built from scratch to target international tourists as well as potential residents: the three projects are NEOM (a \$500 billion futuristic city), Amaala (located on Prince Mohammed bin Salman's nature reserve), and the Red Sea Project, and are going to be located near each other. Their total size is around 58,000 square kilometers, covering almost all of the Tabuk coastline.

The enormous size of these developments is already posing a number of issues. In late August, a royal decree [dismissed high officials](#) from their positions "for facilitating encroachment on government land" within the Red Sea project and other in-progress sites. A few days later, videos of demolished homes in villages within the regions of Tabuk and Medina circulated on social media. National news outlets considered the demolition in line with the recent royal decree to prevent violations and [encroachments of government land](#). The regions of Medina and Qassim are now using a [satellite sensing system](#) "to monitor geographical alternations on government land, especially those falling within the scope of major projects." However, the Red Sea Project specifically mentions the impor-

tance of neighboring villages for the cultural identity of its project, stating [on its website](#) that visitors will have the chance to experience the Saudi "lifestyle in the various towns and villages in the area."

In the neighboring region of Medina, other megaprojects are also underway to make the most of its Islamic and pre-Islamic sites. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mada'in Salih has long been a tourist attraction limited to foreigners in Saudi Arabia due to religious restrictions that were lifted with the new Saudi leadership. The presence of tourists over the past years, even though limited to residents of the kingdom, helped push wide-scale changes to attract even more foreign and local tourists. The annual festival of "Winter at Tantora" brought much change that was not limited to performing artists but also to [developing the region into](#) "the world's largest living museum and a major cultural, arts, adventure tourism and heritage destination." [Art installments](#) and exhibitions turned the area into a prestigious destination for a segment of the population that can afford the high costs of its accommodations, services, and restaurants.

Religious tourism constitutes an important source of revenue as plans are underway to accommodate more than 30 million Mecca visitors by 2030 and more than 12 million Medina visitors by 2040. The Vision also stresses the importance of restoring Islamic sites and the development of [Islamic museums](#) in the holy cities for religious tourists and citizens alike. However, it seems that plans for massive expansion might happen at the expense of existing historic

neighborhoods, as concluded in the "[Future Saudi Cities](#)" reports, a joint cooperation between the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT) and the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs. The Mecca [report](#) argues that current development plans can wipe out historic neighborhoods due to the lack of specific criteria to "distinguish historical vernacular urban patterns from informal, unplanned settlements." (2019, p. 82). Whereas the [Medina report](#) points out that planned expansions can "seriously damage the city's identity and transform the oldest Islamic city where the first Muslim community was established into a place with no local spirit and culture, and no environmental assets." (2019, p. 98).

The various regions in the south are perhaps benefiting the most from tourism developments. Unlike the projects in Tabuk that are built from scratch, tourism in the south relies on its rich and diverse culture and heritage. For many decades, the lack of interest in developing the south contributed to a common and negative perception of its culture and lifestyle. Now, however, this sudden interest has not only been contributing to bringing tourism, but these regions are starting to be perceived in a different way with respect to the past. International and local social media influencers have been instrumental in introducing the south via their Instagram photos. The Ministry of Culture is also active in promoting the southern regions through different events, such as the "[Flower Men](#)" festival in Rijal Almaa. However, the way the south has been portrayed, especially through social media platforms, and the emphasis on the "[exotic](#)" characteristics of the south has the poten-

tial to reduce the region to a one-dimensional culture subject to a “tourist gaze.”

### CONTESTING NORMS AND PRESERVING IDENTITIES

What sets the capital apart from the rest of the kingdom (with the exception of the socially relaxed Jeddah) is the rapid social transformation it experienced over the past three years. In a short period of time, Riyadh witnessed the introduction of cinemas and concerts, lifted gender segregation and the women's driving ban, and curbed the powers of the religious police. However, the transformation has not been free of [controversy](#) as social change continues to stir public opinion. In the absence of the religious police, the “Public Decency Law” was passed to fill the void and to stop [mounting criticism](#) of social openness. The law does not force women to wear the traditional black cloak (abaya) but states that they should dress modestly, which opened the door for various interpretations on what constitutes a “modest” outfit. As a result, incidents of contesting social norms, including what constitutes appropriate attire for women, are occasionally taking place in the capital.

But in other Saudi regions, people continue to watch from afar how change is unfolding in the capital. For example, while cinemas opened in Riyadh in early 2018, the region of Tabuk, with the highest number of megaprojects, just opened its [first movie theater](#) in June 2020. While many regions can modernize their streets, open trendy shops and follow the food trends from the capital, social norms and values remain more or less intact. Moreover, other regions seem more immune to debates on social

issues simply because they are not on the same trajectory of social transformation as the capital is. This widens the gap between the center and peripheries and can result in different expectations as to what they perceive as appropriate. A woman visiting Hail from Riyadh, for example, was [denied entry](#) into a theme park for not wearing the abaya. The debate that emerged as a result of the incident confirms the wide array of opinions on social issues despite the supposedly uniformed façade that is advertised from the top.

The developments and reforms underway in the kingdom's various regions are playing a role in re-shaping the pre-existing identities of the peripheries, as well as in creating new ones. In the Eastern province, the quest for development helped demolish the Al-Musawarah neighborhood (which was the center of civil unrest in the Eastern Province, especially since 2011) and to build it into a cultural center inspired by the history of the region and [in line with Vision 2030](#). In other regions, locals are setting their own standards for what they consider appropriate and decent, while others are too overwhelmed by change to take a similar step.

Projects to develop Diriyah and the emphasis on its historical significance will further impact the center-periphery balance. Diriyah enjoys a central place in the national narrative that considers it the “[homeland of its forefathers](#)”. As the [chief executive](#) of the Diriyah Gate Development Authority puts it “Diriyah is what the Acropolis is to Athens, what the Colosseum is to Rome; that's what Diriyah is to the Saudi penin-



sula and to the Arabian Peninsula". This has also been further reinforced in the new [Saudi textbooks](#) that delve into detail regarding the significance of Diriyah, its history and cultural importance. The coming years will further shape the relationship between the center and peripheral regions, especially when development projects (some still in their early phases) will be concluded, making even more tangible the social issues they have already been highlighting.



## Saudi Vision 2030: The Importance of Being in Riyadh

Mark C. Thompson  
 King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic  
 Studies (KFCRIS)

In recent years, there has been a significant over-concentration of wealth, power, and employment opportunities in the main urban centers, especially the capital Riyadh. Nonetheless, this over-concentration in the capital worries some. In fact, research conducted outside Riyadh, in particular in the northern and southern regions, documents that there can be a sense of marginalization, a feeling that it is necessary to migrate to the capital (or other urban centers such as Jeddah and the Dammam-Khobar-Dhahran conurbation) in order to find a job and 'get on in life'.<sup>[1]</sup>

### CAPITAL AND INTERNAL MIGRATION: THE OVER-DOMINANCE OF RIYADH

Since the launch of Saudi Vision 2030 in April 2016 the importance of the capital has increased. Vision 2030 is a decidedly 'top-down' project that exemplifies Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's drive to centralize all decision-making processes. <sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, Riyadh is where everything

happens, and most Saudis comprehend, especially the young and ambitious, that if an individual wants to get ahead, he or she needs to be in Riyadh. As a result, the capital's population has ballooned to approximately seven and a quarter million.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet, the danger is that this internal migration could create a gulf between Riyadh and the rest of the Kingdom.

Another Riyadh-related issue is the 'brain drain' away from other parts of Saudi Arabia to the capital, frequently to the detriment of the former. This is particularly true when considering the lure of public sector jobs, e.g. in the ministries, or positions in the Royal Diwan (court) and most especially the foreign consultancy firms that have become highly active in Saudi policymaking following the launch of Vision 2030. The capital is home to the Saudi headquarters of foreign consultancies such as McKinsey and Boston Consultancy Group (BCG) as well as local consultancy companies such as Strategic Gears. In consequence, the 'best and the brightest' are often drawn to these companies and institutions due to higher salaries and the 'trendy' connotations associated with them.

Furthermore, it also appears that traditional geographic core-periphery polarization (urban centres-provinces) is being replaced by a social core-periphery based on an economic stratification divide that drives a policy of exclusion.<sup>[4]</sup> This could prove politically problematic if dangerous disconnects are created between the urbanized population of the capital and more marginalized populations in the provinces. Indeed, the November 2018

visit by King Salman, accompanied by Crown Prince Mohammed, to al-Qassim, Hail and Tabuk was interpreted by analysts as an attempt to shore up support across the wider Kingdom.

### REGIONAL EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

In the course conducting qualitative research across Saudi Arabia over several years, when asked to list the issues that concern them most, young nationals nearly always cite employment as the most important.<sup>[5]</sup> In truth, employment is a key issue because it is how many individuals judge the government, particularly those who believe that it is the government's duty to provide everyone with a job, preferably a public sector one. Many young Saudis, in particular young men and graduates, are looking for a 'job for life', that is a position in the public-sector (or with a major corporation) whereby the individual is guaranteed a lifelong salary plus accompanying benefits such as healthcare for both himself and his family. Thus, increasing private sector employment in line with the goal of Saudi Vision 2030 is problematic because wide swathes of young nationals from across the regions continue to show a marked preference for public sector employment.<sup>[6]</sup>

Nonetheless, current economic concerns linked to the coronavirus pandemic and low oil prices are particularly pertinent to nationals trying to enter the labour market for the first time. In fact, many are concerned that they will be unable to find employment until after 2021, as it could take companies years to recover from the after-effects of the pandemic. The danger is that the Saudi government might try to mitigate

the problem by employing young nationals in public sector positions, many of them 'phantom' ones, but ultimately, this would only be a temporary solution to a growing crisis.

In addition, there are sociocultural issues such as the perception amongst some young Saudis that certain occupations are beneath them. This can afflict young nationals in both the main urban centers areas and regions, a problem underscored by their parents frequently expressing the same views. Yet, the root of the problem is historic. Take the al-Ahsa in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia as an example: fifty years ago, local people were involved in agriculture, farming, and handicrafts. However, following the oil boom Aramco recruiters came to the local schools and offered the young men jobs with free housing and other benefits. This resulted in a whole constituency abandoning traditional jobs in the town to go to work for Aramco. Subsequently, the same nationals hired expatriates from the Asian sub-continent to do their old jobs and this sudden transition created the current trend. Thus, the 'some jobs are beneath us' mentality is a relatively new phenomenon, one that education and necessity must change if the Saudi government wishes to increase employment of nationals across all sectors and regions.

Yet, there are also regional issues that exacerbate employment problems. Many who live in locations such as Asir, Aljouf, al-Qassim and Najran Province complain of a lack of local job opportunities and job creation schemes away from the main urban centers. [7] For example, in small towns in al-Qassim

Province, many young men are obliged leave al-Qassim to find work in Riyadh. According to a group of friends in al-Mithnab, the government needs to create more well-paid employment opportunities in the regions as they are discouraged from working in their hometowns because of low salaries.[8] Local salaries are much lower than those of public-sector jobs in the capital or large state owned enterprises such as the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC) or Aramco.[9] Another example: amongst the five members of a group of friends interviewed in the small town of Layla, al-Aflaj (south of Riyadh), one was an Arabic primary school teacher in Najran; another was deputy head of a private elementary school in Narjis, Riyadh; one unemployed young man attended Prince Sattam University in al-Aflaj, then worked for a bank in Riyadh for a year and was hoping to secure a position with Jawazat (the passport and visa agency of the Ministry of Interior) in the capital.[10] The final two remained out-of-work because they did not want to leave their hometown even though they had very little chance of finding a job. In fact, for some young men moving away from their hometowns and families is never an option. As Bosbait and Wilson observe "there is a marked preference for Saudis to work close to home"[11] and it is unthinkable for some young men to move away from their extended families.

Unfortunately, there is a danger that a lack of jobs and rising living costs associated with the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and low oil prices could push young nationals to the margins of society. This must be addressed otherwise it will place enormous social strain



on the existing social contract and undermine efforts to implement Saudi Vision 2030. Indeed, regional employment opportunities are critical to implementing Vision 2030 and should be of concern to the Saudi government. From my research, I found that this sense of provincial marginalization (and disregard from elites in the principal cities) can be reminiscent of the disempowerment that Donald Trump and the Brexit Leave campaigns tapped into successfully in 2016, thereby disrupting the political status quo in both states.<sup>[12]</sup>

11. M. Bosbait and R. Wilson, "Education, School to Work Transitions and Unemployment in Saudi Arabia", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 41(4), 2005, p. 542.

12. Yet, others wonder if this is really a problem as the population of the provinces is small in comparison to the main urban centres (especially Riyadh):

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1. Author's focus groups.
  2. See: H. Fathallah, "[Failure of Regional Governance in Saudi Arabia](#)", Carnegie Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 26 July 2018.
  3. See [here](#). The other main urban centers of Jeddah and the Dammam-Khobar-Dhahran conurbation have also grown considerably.
  4. A. Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World*, Second Edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 64-5.
  5. See, for example: Multiple focus groups conducted across Saudi Arabia, 2016–2019, for M.C. Thompson, *Being Young Male and Saudi: Identity and Politics in a Globalized Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
  6. M.C. Thompson, "Inherent contradictions in the Saudi rentier state: distributive capacity, youth employment preferences, and attitudes to education", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 47, 2020 - Issue 1: Revisiting Rentierism: The Changing Political Economy of Resource-Dependent States in the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, January 2020.
  7. Author's focus group.
  8. Author's focus group.
  9. Author's focus group.
  10. Author's focus group.



## Eastern Saudi Arabia: Is De-Sectarianization a Byproduct of Vision 2030?

Simon Mabon  
 Lancaster University and SEPAD Project

When protests broke out in January 2016 across the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia following the execution of Sheikh Nimr al Nimr, a prominent Shi'a cleric, and 47 other prisoners, relations between Shi'a groups and the Saudi establishment appeared to be at an all-time low. By 2017, following widespread protests amongst Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population – estimated to be in the region of 10-15% – the Old Quarter of Awamiya, in the Kingdom's Eastern Province was levelled by the state's security forces in a months-long battle with militants. The design of the Old Quarter, replete with a maze of narrow alleyways, had long been used by those engaged in violent resistance to the state: it was destroyed after a campaign against militants alleged to have ties with Iran and replaced by a shopping and entertainment complex at a cost of almost \$300 million.

In response to the gentrification of Awamiya, the mayor of the Eastern Province, Fahad Jubeir, [declared optimism](#) that the transformation of the area will "have the magical

**Simon Mabon** is Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Director of the Richardson Institute at Lancaster University, UK; he is also Project Director of SEPAD-Sectarianism Proxies and De-Sectarianisation Project.

effect of changing the area from a shelter for terrorists into a beacon of civilization." This process of gentrification was designed to cultivate a more pliant, docile Shi'a population and was emblematic of the programme of reforms implemented by the Kingdom's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) as part of a package of reforms aimed to redraw the very essence of the Saudi state under the banner of Vision 2030.

As part of this process, Shi'a groups have certainly benefitted from Vision 2030 and the process of de-sectarianization coming from the re-imagining of national identity: but this only refers to compliant individuals. Indeed, the biopolitical machinery of the state continues to be deployed by those in power against Shi'a – and others – who speak out against the ruling family and Vision 2030 more broadly. Therefore, de-sectarianization appears as an accidental bi-product of the new vision of Saudi identity.

The dramatic transformation of Awamiya is a consequence of evolving relations between the Saudi state and the Shi'a population, stemming from a broader re-imagining of the relationship between the state, Wahhabi ulemma and of religion in the Kingdom. Members of the royal family have long been torn between their loyalty to the Wahhabi dominated clerical establishment and [desire for reconciliation with Saudi Shi'a](#). While there was little hope for a serious thaw in relations as violent tensions remained, a shift to a more positive relationship was brought about with the capture of the militants. In this way, improved relations between the state and

Shi'a groups – intentional or not – could be one prominent bi-product of the creation of a new economic vision designed to help the Saudi state move away from a reliance on oil.

### RE-IMAGINING THE SAUDI STATE

The very idea of reimagining the Saudi state is not new, but has taken place a number of times since the formation of the current incarnation in 1932. Indeed, this includes the central role of religion within the political organisation, the adoption of a trans-national form of Islam, and now a retreat into a nationalist agenda in what has been described as the fourth Saudi state. Some have [described](#) this as "hyper-nationalism", [centred](#) around the Crown Prince, but constructed on an image of a Saudi citizen committed to economic and social change underscored by Vision 2030.

Central to this process is the re-imagining of the role of religion in Saudi Arabia. This process, understood as [de-sectarianization](#) is one that takes place in myriad forms and can be understood in a range of different ways, practically, conceptually, and methodologically.

As Hannah Arendt has persuasively argued, no collective identity is possible that does not close itself off against an outside; put another way, identities are [defined](#) in terms of what they are not.

The establishment of the Saudi state was brought about through the cultivation of a relationship between Al Saud tribe and Wahhabi clerics. The legitimacy of the ruling family has traditionally been forged from this alliance and a commitment to Wahhabism,

whose perception of Shi'a Muslims as heretics had a dramatic impact on Saudi Shi'a.

Often framing Shi'a as rawafidh (rejectionists), government clerics used a wide range of derogatory language towards them, along with extolling a systemic process of discrimination. Shi'a religious practices were routinely inhibited, with mosques banned from broadcasting the call to prayer in al Ahsa. Moreover, Ashura processions in al Ahsa had been [disallowed since 1913](#). Fatwas were routinely used to condemn Shi'a for their idolatry, polytheists, or calling them to convert to Islam. [According to one member of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars](#), "they are not our brothers [...] they are brothers of Satan".

As Kristin Smith Diwan astutely [observes](#), Shi'a groups have been "culturally targeted by a religious orthodoxy that has disparaged them as deviant and politically marginalized by a state that has favoured both the Sunni religious establishment and a Najdi tribal elite". Adding to this, Shi'a engagement with the Saudi state has long been conditioned by broader regional dynamics. Tensions with Iran, war in Iraq, the Arab Uprisings, and conflict in Syria and Yemen have all impacted on domestic relations, particularly as Shi'a are condemned in speeches by Saudi clerics. Yet in recent years, there appears to have been a thaw in relations, creating space for a recalibration in the relationship between Sunni and Shi'a but also in the very essence of the Saudi identity.

#### **NATIONALISM AND A THAW IN RELATIONS?**

While there was a gradual improvement in relations under Abdullah, who released political

prisoners, developed infrastructure in Shi'a areas and relaxed restrictions on observing Shi'a rituals, there was trepidation about his successor. The coronation of Salman as King in early 2015 and his son Mohammad as Crown Prince in 2017, resulted in a re-calibration of Saudi national identity and a continuation of pragmatic engagement with the Shi'a.

This emerging Saudi nationalism is seen in a range of ways, helped by the ongoing conflict in Yemen, the rivalry with Iran, and the blockade of Qatar. On the state-religion pact, the kingdom recalibrated state discourse and policies with regard to Sunni extremism, while escalating the crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, the new Saudi political leadership reduced the role of Sunni clerics in the state (as in the case of the *sahwa*, the Islamic awakening movement). Yet social change is central to the evolution of the state.

Under the direction of the King and Crown Prince, Saudi Arabia has embraced a cosmopolitan geographic reality which includes pre-Islamic histories. In this process, Madain Saleh and Al-Ula are now two protected sites supported by the establishment of royal commissions to help tourism. Another example of pre-Islamic heritage as source of pride is Deriyya, the [re-imagined first Saudi capital](#) where Muhammad ibn Saud met with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. In discussions with one Saudi advisor, he told me of the lack of awareness amongst Saudis about their own country, an issue exacerbated by the lack of internal movement within the Kingdom beyond the key cities. The new vision of Saudi

Arabia also includes plans for global and internal tourism and the opening up of a state previously accessible to a select few.

While NEOM was the flagship of Vision 2030, the Eastern Province also benefitted from the economic plan. Traditionally, the Eastern Province has been an industrial powerhouse driven by extraction and refinement: but the region has recently engaged in diversification.

For example, the city of Al Khobar was the first in the Middle East to experience the 5G wireless network. Moreover, the healthcare industry in the province was given financial investments from external funders, notably the United Arab Emirates, leading to the establishment of world leading facilities for post-acute [conditions and rehabilitation services](#).

### AN (UN)INTENDED BENEFICIARY?

Domestically, the key beneficiaries of this de-sectarianizing move have been the Kingdom's Shi'a population. Long the subject of persecution, discrimination, and victims of the punitive arm of the state, Shi'a in Saudi Arabia have suffered due to the virulent rejection of the Shi'a sect of Islam by the Wahhabi ulema. Indeed, the erosion of the Kingdom's previously intolerant Wahhabi vision has been fundamental to the de-sectarianization process in the Saudi state. Instead, in its place, is the claim that the Kingdom's initial Islamic heritage was one of tolerance. Leaving aside the veracity of these claims, this concerted effort moves Saudi Arabia away from a reliance on religion and re-shapes its image internationally, much to the chagrin of Wahhabi clerics.

In spite of this, structural violence and xenophobia directed at Shi'a groups remains commonplace across the Kingdom. Human Rights Watch [reports](#) document accounts of hate speech, incitement to hatred and discrimination, along with lesser charges that require repudiation. Indeed, In contrast, [speaking with Time Magazine](#), Mohammed bin Salman proclaimed that in the Kingdom "we have Sunni and Shiite sects. We have four schools of thought of Sunni, we have a lot of schools of thought of Shiite, and they are living normally in Saudi Arabia. They are living as Saudis in Saudi Arabia [...] we don't differentiate among Saudis based on sects. We live in Saudi Arabia as Saudis in Saudi Arabia".

On a trip to the United States in 2018, [MbS spoke of Saudi Arabia](#) as a kingdom of Sunni and Shiite, underpinned by Islam, "the same culture and the same interest [...] we believe that we are a mix of Muslim schools and sects". A prominent Shi'a intellectual, Tawfiq Al Saif, celebrated this shift and [the recognition that](#) "Saudi national identity is the umbrella of all Saudis, and that their differences in doctrine fall within the diversity that enriches the country's culture and life."

Nevertheless, while Shi'a groups benefitted from the de-sectarianization trend, stemming from the cultivation of a new national identity, this only applies to docile and compliant members of society who accept the idea of the new Saudi state. Indeed, a wave of arrests have taken place against those dubbed 'traitors', or seen to be working with enemy



governments and against Vision 2030. Arrests continue to take place across the Kingdom, including those from Shi'a communities, albeit at a far lesser rate than in previous years. While these reform moves are generally positive for Shi'a groups, the legacy of discrimination remains, along with a current of people who reject this burgeoning rapprochement and the gentrification of the Eastern Province.

What continues, however, is a dramatic transformation of the Saudi state, underpinned by a de-sectarianization of political life – and the re-imagining of the role of religion in the Kingdom – in an effort to reassert a nationalist

agenda in support of the royal family. How COVID-19 and the economic crises that follow will affect this process remains to be seen, as the domestic impact of regional affairs. After all, this process of de-sectarianization is centered on an economic vision of the future that seeks to bring people together under the tutelage of the Crown Prince. It is still unknown whether this de-sectarianization process will play out in the medium to long term. But in the short term, there is a clear benefit for Shi'a Muslims in the Kingdom, on the assumption, of course, that they adhere to the vision set out by the new political leadership.



## Saudi Arabia: How Yemen War Weighs on South's Economy

Andrew Leber  
 Harvard University

In the past few years, Saudi Arabia has witnessed a flurry of top-down socio-economic reforms – typically referred to by the title of one main reform program, Vision 2030 – aimed at easing conservative restrictions on Saudi social life and diversifying an oil-reliant economy. While considerable international media coverage has documented the impact of these changes on Saudi society in the Kingdom's largest cities – especially Riyadh – journalists and analysts for Western outlets have only rarely ventured out to investigate how these reforms have affected Saudi Arabia's rural areas and secondary cities. [\[1\]](#)

In the Kingdom's Southern regions, signs and statues bearing the mark of "Vision 2030" are everywhere, but local developments still bear the imprimatur of earlier state spending during the 2003-2014 commodities boom under the late King Abdullah. On the face of it, recent policy changes hold economic and even civic promise for the country's Southern regions. However, these changes have yet to translate into concrete economic gains that can offset the

retrenchment in state spending that sustained the Kingdom's peripheral economies in the past.

### INVESTMENTS TO COUNTERACT INEQUALITY

Accounting for around 17% of the Saudi population, the three Southern regions of 'Asir, Najran and Jazan cover a wide range of terrain: from Saudi Arabia's highest mountains (Jebel Al Soudah, 3,133m) to its largest islands (Farasan Islands) to around half of the Kingdom's rain-fed agriculture (50,000 hectares).[2] While the majority of Saudi citizens are Sunni Muslims, anywhere from a sizeable minority to an outright majority of residents in Najran are Isma'ili Shia Muslims, many of whom have faced periodic discrimination in access to government jobs and services.[3]

Generally, though, these areas have not faced active discrimination so much as neglect from state authorities and development schemes. While the Saudi state expanded basic services across the Kingdom over the course of the first oil boom (1973-1986), peripheral development often depended on local officials' connections to the royal family and personal interest in governing effectively. Prince Muhammad bin Turki al-Sudairi, for example, became known for using his position as Governor of Jazan to enrich himself at the expense of the region, only to be removed from office after an outbreak of Rift Valley fever in Jazan attracted the attention of then-Crown Prince Abdullah.[4] His successor, Prince Muhammad bin Nasser, put greater effort into being seen to encourage investments from the state and Saudi business leaders, branding himself the "Prince of Development." [5]

Under the reign of King Abdullah (2005-2015), the Saudi state (newly enriched by rising resource revenues during the second oil boom in the 2000s) made some efforts to redress spatial inequalities through large, capital-intensive development projects: expanding the Kingdom's university system to include all thirteen Saudi regions and attempting to foster local "development corridors" through the establishment of standalone "economic cities." [6] Even if the economic cities failed to take off as engines for development, access to jobs and higher education in the South grew at a similar rate to the Kingdom's central regions throughout this time period (Figure 1).

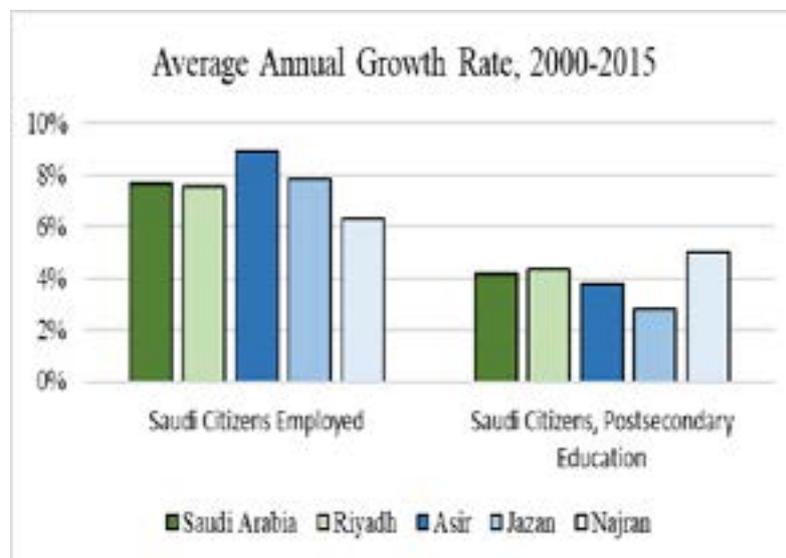


Figure 1: Average annual growth in the number of Saudi citizens with jobs and higher than secondary education. Source: Labour Market Surveys, 2000 and 2015 (Q2), Demographic Surveys, General Authority of Statistics (Saudi Arabia), 2000 and 2016.

## VISION 2030: NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCLUSION?

At first glance, the Vision 2030 reforms would seem to offer new opportunities for the Southern regions through tourism, as government officials have sought to encourage both visits from foreign tourists and domestic vacations by Saudi citizens. Where the Southern regions were once marginalized in national narratives that emphasized the tribal culture of the central Najd region or a uniform Islamic identity, images from the green Al Soudah mountains of 'Asir as well to the crystal-blue waters of the Farasan Islands (off the coast of Jazan) easily lent themselves to colorful imaginary for a "new" Saudi Arabia on display in promotional images for Saudi tourism advertisements.<sup>[7]</sup> These areas also received considerable attention as a potential sites for state and foreign investment into tourism mega-projects.

A redoubled emphasis on incorporating new forms of "authentic" Saudi heritage into a national narrative has also brought considerable official attention to local offerings, such as the long-running yet small-scale coffee industry in Jazan's mountainous areas, along the border with Yemen.<sup>[8]</sup> While patronizing or demeaning depictions of Southerners in Saudi television dramas continue to draw occasional complaints, these have been criticized more forcefully in the public sphere. The present Governor of the 'Asir region, Prince Turki bin Talal, issued an official rebuke this past April to broadcaster MBC over a television show that depicted the region as mired in factional fighting and drug trafficking.<sup>[9]</sup>

The social changes underway elsewhere in the Kingdom are also apparent in the South. The Al-Muftaha cultural center, a longstanding fine arts community under royal patronage in 'Asir's regional capital of Abha, has attracted renewed attention from state-backed arts programs, including Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's MiSK foundation.<sup>[10]</sup> And while gender segregation in Southern towns like Jazan City can be stricter than in, say, more liberal areas of Riyadh, the city [saw its first "specialty coffee" café](#) open in 2019 with an (unprecedented for the area) open floorplan. The idea of tourism as development has likewise trickled down even to some of the most isolated areas in the region as well.

## NO SUBSTITUTE FOR STATE SPENDING

Still, economic dividends from Vision 2030 have been undercut by ongoing retrenchment in state spending as well as the disruptions to investment and tourism resulting from the war in neighboring Yemen. Southern households are already far more reliant on public-sector employment than the Kingdom's leading regions (Figure 2), with limited in-region opportunities in the private sector for recent graduates. The region has also relied on state spending to stave off the negative economic and social effects from the spill-over of the Yemen conflict, including the relocation of thousands of Saudi citizens from along the border, in part by offering considerable compensation in the form of new housing or grants to finance new homes.<sup>[11]</sup> Salaries paid out to soldiers deployed along the Southern front (many of them from Southern regions

themselves) trickle down into the local economy as well through spending while on leave.

2019.<sup>[12]</sup> Efforts to encourage domestic tourism has been somewhat more successful, with a state-organized Al Soudah Season tourism festival drawing attention to 'Asir and the pandemic forcing Saudis to consider domestic tourism destinations.

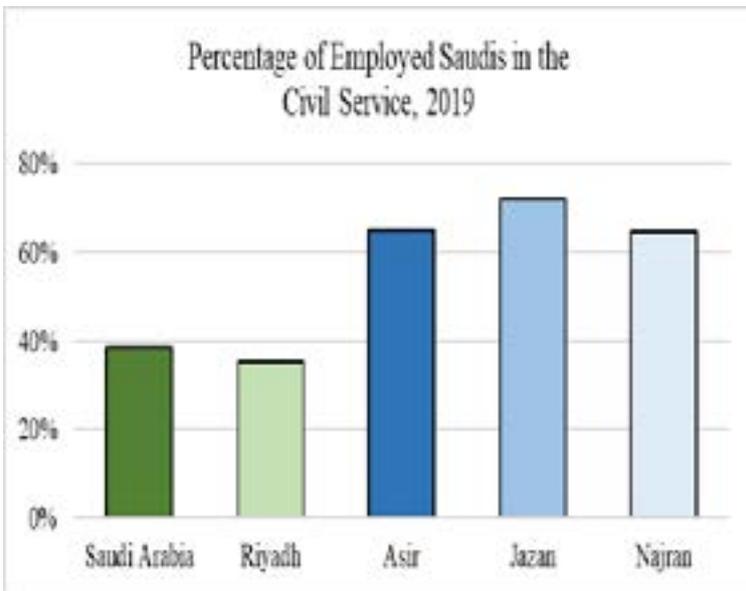


Figure 2: Percentage of employed Saudis listed under Civil Service regulations rather than the General Organization of Social Insurance. Civil service numbers likely undercount the numbers of Saudis employed by the state as they do not include some state-owned enterprises as well as military or security personnel. Source: Labour Market Survey, 2019 (Q4), General Authority for Statistics, Saudi Arabia.

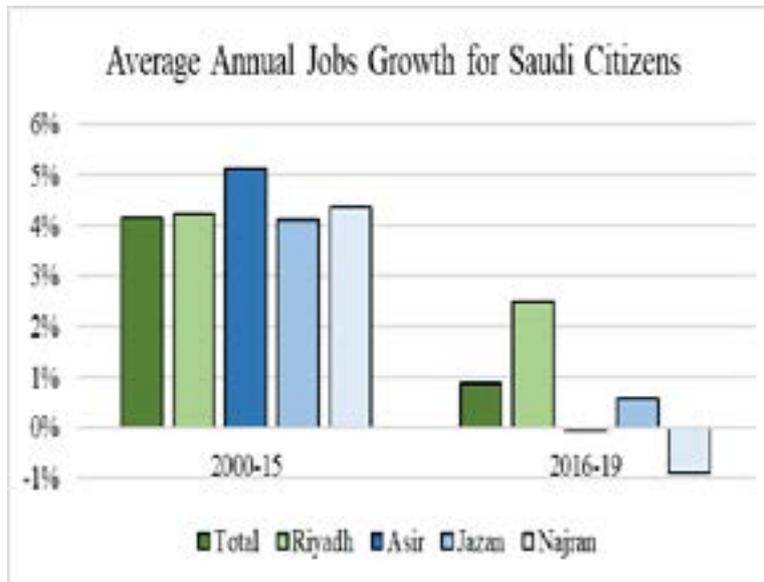


Figure 3: Average annual growth rate between 2000 and 2015, and 2016 and 2019 for select regions. Source: Labour Market Surveys, General Authority for Statistics (Saudi Arabia).

The unresolved Yemen conflict has hindered private-sector investment in Southern economies, particularly tourism. Interruptions to commercial air travel by Houthi rockets are frequent, if seldom publicized, and have targeted all of the region's commercial airports. Even on the Farasan Islands – initially promoted as a top site for tourism development – there was little sign of new investments as of late

Labor market surveys show that few jobs are being created locally in this new age of austerity, however. While jobs held by Saudi nationals increased by about 1% annually from 2016 and 2019, only Jazan gained jobs overall (figure 3). While these Southern regions mirrored the rest of the Kingdom in expanding job opportunities for Saudi women, this came as jobs held by Saudi men fell by 4-5%. Losses

of jobs covered by the General Organization for Social Insurance (GOSI, plausibly in the private sector) were offset only by an increase in public-sector civil service jobs. Stagnant job markets in these peripheral economies, along with persistent concerns about subpar infrastructure, in turn encourage citizens in these regions to migrate toward the major cities such as Jeddah and Riyadh.<sup>[13]</sup> Citizens relocating out of the Southern regions accounted for nearly 30% of Saudi internal migration in 2017.<sup>[14]</sup>

Saudi citizens in the Kingdom's Southern regions experience nothing like the economic deprivation across the border in Yemen. Yet short of a peaceful resolution to the war, redoubled efforts to invest in tourism ventures, and successful efforts to attract large-scale foreign investment to these regions, Southern citizens will increasingly venture elsewhere to find gainful employment outside of the public sector.

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and reporting by Anuj Chopra in Al-Ahza as well "[Once propped up by Qatari high-rollers, Saudi city prays for truce](#)," APF, December 9, 2019.

2. *Population Characteristics Survey*, General Authority for Statistics, 2017, Saudi Arabia; *Agricultural Census*, General Authority for Statistics, 2015, pp. 383.

3. *The Ismailis of Najran: Second-class Saudi Citizens*, Human Rights Watch, September 2008, pp. 59-80.

4. See discussion of Prince Muhammad bin Turki Al-Sudairi at "[Prince of Jazan takes over entire village – including its inhabitants](#)", Al-Shabaka al-Libiraliyya al-Hurra [The Free Liberal Network] (online forum), December 27, 2011.

5. Muhammad al-Hilali, "[Prince Muhammad bin Nasser: It is the turn of businessmen to seize opportunities in 'Jazan Economic City'](#)" *Al-Eqtisadiyya*, February 27, 2015; Nayif bin Sa'idan, "[Muhammad bin Nasser and the path to development](#)", *Al-Watan*, January 29, 2019.

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9. Taqwa al-Khatib, "[Governor of 'Asir region orders rapid halt 'Anaqid' series – what's the reason?](#)", Foochia, April 6, 2020.

10. For more on the history of this arts community, see Sean Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture, and Society in the Kingdom*, Lynne Rienner, 2019, pp. 21-72.

11. Mohamed al-Maliki, "[Governor of Al-Dayer for Al-Madar: the transfer of border villages is a necessity because of the importance of a buffer zone on the borders](#)", *Al-Madar News*, July 17, 2016.

12. David Kenner, "[Saudi Arabia's quiet frontier](#)," Institute of Current World Affairs, January 6, 2020.

13. See, for example, persistent complaints about electricity supply in Jazan. 'Awaji al-N'ami, "[\[What next, Jazan electricity?\]](#)", *Al-Watan*, June 23, 2020.

14. *Population Characteristics Survey*, General Authority for Statistics (Saudi Arabia), 2017



## The Evolution of the Saudi Border Guard: Not Exactly a Local Force

Eleonora Ardemagni  
 ISPI and Catholic University

**T**he Border Guard is the most understudied force of Saudi Arabia. But in the 2000-2020 timeframe, militias hostile to the kingdom have grown at its borders (the Houthis in Yemen; the Hashd al Shaabi in Iraq). The Border Guard is also the force that has suffered the highest number of Saudi casualties in Yemen since 2015<sup>[1]</sup> and its trajectory is extremely intertwined with that of the Yemeni Border Guard. Two dynamics describe the evolution of the Saudi Border Guard, especially on the frontier with Yemen, since the outbreak of the “first Saada war” in 2004<sup>[2]</sup>: the Border Guard has extended its operative duties and transformed in personnel composition.

The Saudi Border Guard now plays a rising role in internal security (with a rediscovered emphasis on maritime threats), since it is no longer exclusively focused on counter-smuggling activities. The Saudi Border Guard is also a “less local force” than in the past: it still works in the peripheries, but increasingly relying on non-indigenous personnel, thus unfamiliar with the borderland’s social and tribal fabric.

**Eleonora Ardemagni** is an ISPI Associate Research Fellow (contributing to the MENA Teaching Assistant at the Catholic University of Milan and of Brescia.



The recruitment of locals has diminished, due to increasing Saudi mistrust of the loyalty of borderland tribes (who are mostly Ismaili or Zaydi Shia)<sup>[3]</sup> and the second conflict with the Houthis begun in 2015.<sup>[4]</sup>

In this evolving framework, Saudi forces along the frontier still show a hybrid nature, merging Border Guard soldiers with guards from tribes belonging to the Saudi-Yemeni borderland. Since 2004 Saudi Arabia's border security has been governed by a series of security players supporting the Border Guard, including National Guard troops, Royal Saudi Land Forces (the army) and new regiments: as threats rise, the Saudi Border Guard is no longer the main frontier actor and a security fragmentation trend is visible.

### THE SAUDI BORDER GUARD: AN OVERVIEW

In recent years, the Saudi Border Guard has increased active personnel, extended its duties and strengthened training activities. Founded in 1913 as the Coast Guard Authority, the General Directorate of the Border Guard (GDBG) falls under the Ministry of Interior (Mol). The Border Guard has headquarters in Riyadh plus nine commands/regions: Tabuk, Al Jouf, Northern Region, Eastern Region, Najran, Jizan, Asir, Makkah and Madinah. In the last five years, the number of active personnel in the Saudi Border Guard has increased from 10,500 (2016) to 15,000 (2020), according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). In 2018, the Border Guard started to hire women for vacant military positions, with security inspector roles available in Riyadh, Jizan, Makkah, Northern Border and Tabuk.

### TRAINING PROGRAMS: RISING ATTENTION FOR MARITIME BORDERS

The Border Guard of Saudi Arabia has revealed capability limits in securing coastal and mountainous frontiers, relying progressively on military units and elite groups. In 2014, 30,000 Saudi regular forces were sent to the northern border as the "Islamic State" seized territory in Iraq; in 2015, special troops of the National Guard were deployed on the Saudi-Yemeni border after the Houthis' coup in Sanaa. With regard to education and training, the United States is a critical partner for the Saudi Border Guard, which since 2008 has been included in the US military assistance program for Interior Ministry forces ("Mol-MAG"). Training is encompassed in the Saudi Border Guard Development Program (known as MIKSA) started in 2013, in combination with border fence construction and the upgrading of electronic surveillance systems. In 2019, a training program on civil dialogue was organized by the Saudi Border Guard at the Mohammed bin Nayf Academy for Maritime and Security Studies in Jeddah: this four-day course involved 84 qualified male and female members, under the patronage of the King Abdulaziz [Centre for National Dialogue](#). Despite its maritime origins, only the Houthis' asymmetric warfare in the Red Sea pushed the Border Guard to refocus on maritime security after 2015. In 2019, the 9th international training course on combating insecurity in the maritime domain was held in Jeddah, opened by the Director General of the Border Guard, Awwad bin Eid Al Balawi, who is a vice admiral. In 2020, experts and trainees of the Saudi

Border Guard attended the regional training course to combat maritime threats and for maritime security hosted by the Mohammed bin Nayf Academy. In October 2020, the 2nd International Symposium of the Saudi Border Guard, co-organized with the State Border Service of Azerbaijan, is [scheduled to discuss](#) maritime border protection under the theme “Together [...] for secured and safe land and maritime borders”.

### THE HOUTHIS VARIABLE ON BORDERLAND AND MINORITIES

The Saudi Border Guard maintains a certain kinship connection with the geographical and tribal territory in which operates, especially along the Saudi-Yemeni frontier. But it doesn't represent a “force of the peripheries”, especially after the Houthis gained power in Yemen. As the kingdom's borderlands mostly host Saudi minorities (Twelver Shia in the eastern region; Shia Ismailis and Zaydis in the south), the Border Guard presents some of the dynamics of exclusion or under-representation applied to the army or the National Guard. On the frontier, the rise of the Houthis acted like a game-changer also for the Border Guard. Indeed, since the early 2000s the Saudis have progressively shifted their approach from a borderland policy, based on shared interests and patronage relations with tribes, to a security-first border policy of [incremental militarization](#). The Jeddah border Treaty, signed between Saudi Arabia and Yemen (2000), accelerated this paradigm change, provoking the resentment of many borderland tribes who found themselves suddenly divided by a

political, but not human, border.<sup>[5]</sup>

### BORDER SECURITY GOVERNANCE: STILL HYBRID FORCES WITH EVOLVING SECURITY STRUCTURES

In this framework, the Saudi Border Guard faces two parallel insurgencies, which in most cases are distinct from one another: the Houthis' fight against the Yemeni government and Saudi Arabia, plus the struggle of borderland tribes against the frontier and the building of a physical fence by the kingdom. From 2000 onwards, Saudi-Yemeni border security governance can be seen as divided into four phases: for each of them, Saudi Arabia has reorganized border security structures, with a central or auxiliary role for the Border Guard. 1) Informal security with borderland tribes (until 2000): before the Jeddah Treaty, the Saudis opted for security arrangements with borderland tribes, whose members were formally included in the Saudi Border Guard or cooperated informally as part of tribal guards. 2) Trans-border cooperation and security formalization (2000): after the Jeddah Treaty, Saudi Arabia and Yemen established a joint Border Guard made up of locals<sup>[6]</sup> and units were deployed on each side of the border, thus formalizing previous and informal security arrangements with borderland tribes. 3) Militarization and Sectarianization (2004-2018): the joint Saudi-Yemeni Border Guard fractured along the Saada “segment” of the frontier due to the conflict with the Houthis. Yemeni remnants of the Border Guard still

loyal to the government started to operate from Saudi territory against the Northern insurgents[7]; the Saudi Border Guard directly fought the Houthis during the "sixth Saada war" (2009). When the Saudis intervened in Yemen in 2015, special forces of the army and especially of the National Guard were deployed at the frontier[8] to support the Border Guard. The Saudi Border Guard – like the other units positioned in the area – relied less on Ismaili and Zaydi borderland tribes, thus preventing potential dissent, while continuing to recruit from Najran's Sunni tribes as rear-guards. On the other side, the Yemeni Border Guard, mainly supported by Riyadh, was staffed with Sunni recruits from outside borderland areas such as Taiz and Ibb[9]: border security governance entered a period of militarization and sectarianization. Many Saudi border villages were also evacuated and empty houses demolished to prevent creation of safe havens for insurgents: the border area is severely hit by Houthis' raids, rocket artillery and missiles (as in the case of Najran city), [fired from the Yemeni territory](#). 4) A variety of security players besides the Border Guard (since 2018 ): since the Saudi-Yemeni border has become a territory of permanent violence, the Saudi Border Guard reacted by increasing out-of-borderland recruitment. Further military forces were deployed at the frontier: among them, the newly-established Al Afwaj regiment (under the Mol, led by General Fahad Saeed Al Qahtani, of a prominent Ismaili tribe of Jizan and Asir), began security patrols in 2019 in mountainous areas to fight intrusions, weapons and drug smuggling.

## NURTURING A PATRIOTIC NARRATIVE

In the last decade, the violent instability of the Saudi-Yemeni frontier has become a catalyst for the kingdom's top-down patriotic message: the Saudi Border Guard is now part of this "militarized nationalism" [mood](#). In 2017, the 1st symposium of the Saudi Border Guard was [titled](#) "A homeland that we don't protect ... we don't deserve to live in it". An uncounted number of Saudi soldiers, included Border Guards, have fallen since 2009 due to the long-lasting conflict with the Houthis. Taking part in the Janadriya [National Festival for Heritage and Culture in 2017](#) (organized by the National Guard), the Border Guard "dedicated a corner to display pictures and information about the men who gave their lives for their country". The [official website](#) of the Saudi Border Guard does not provide an updated list of the "martyrs" who died serving on the border. However, [the reported names](#) all come from the Jizan, Najran and Asir commands, as over half of the enlisted soldiers came from the southwest of Saudi Arabia. In 2015, the Saudi Council of Ministers established compensation funds for fallen and injured soldiers and their families, and King Salman provided extra-month pay for troops stationed at the frontier. As the war in Yemen drags on, the Saudi Border Guard is also part of the official patriotic engine, although it has become less local and more sectarian in recruitment choices.



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1. Which are totally estimated in "hundreds each year".
  2. Occurred in Yemen's upper north, when Yemeni army and auxiliary militias fought the Houthis.
  3. The borderland encompasses agricultural areas neighbouring the Red Sea (Hajja in Yemen and Jizan in Saudi Arabia), as well as provinces with harsh mountains and eastward the desert: Asir and Najran in Saudi Arabia, Saada and al Jawf in Yemen.
  4. The Saudis carried-out a first military intervention against the Houthis in 2009 during the "sixth Saada war".
  5. For instance, the tribal confederation of the Khawlan bin 'Amr was physically divided by the Saudi-Yemeni border agreed in 1934 (Taif Agreement) and definitely established in 2000. Most of its tribes now belong to the Yemeni state, while others fall into the Saudi territory (as the Fayfa, who is engaged in guarding the Saudi side of the border).
  6. Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict*, Oxford University Press, 2017, p.84.
  - [7] Lisa Lenz, *The Yemeni Border Guard: Roles and Interests of the Yemeni Border Tribes in Securing the Yemeni-Saudi Border*, paper presented at the workshop "Yemen's Living Heritage: Tribes and Tribalism into the 21st Century", 14-15 February 2018, Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences.
  8. International Institute for Strategic Studies-The Military Balance, 2016.
  9. I am especially grateful to Ahmed Nagi for sharing comments on local recruitment.