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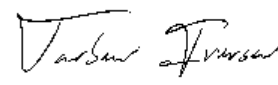
**“The Reformer’s Dilemma: Authoritarian Policymaking
in Saudi Arabia”**

presented by **Andrew Michael Leber**

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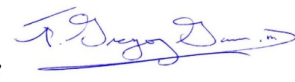
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The Reformer's Dilemma: Authoritarian Policymaking in Saudi Arabia

A dissertation presented

by

Andrew Michael Leber

to

the Department of Government

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The Reformer's Dilemma: Authoritarian Policy Reforms in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

When do authoritarian rulers adopt redistributive reforms, extending policy benefits beyond a circle of existing supporters? In their most dramatic form, these policy changes include major reform drives such as the Shah of Iran's White Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party's pursuit of socialism with Chinese characteristics under Deng Xiaoping, and the more recent Vision 2030 reforms advanced by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The substantive impact of these reform drives, and the more regular occurrence of smaller authoritarian policy reforms, indicates a need for theories of authoritarian policymaking that accommodate policy reform as well as the policy status quo.

Existing depictions of authoritarian rule typically divide societies into two broad camps. Political insiders collectively offer regimes and rulers important resources for maintaining power, while enjoying privileged access to policymaking decisions. Outsiders, by contrast, are shut out from policymaking processes and typically on the losing end of policy decisions; rulers' insider-provided political resources as well as repressive institutions keep outsider mobilization in check. Status quo policies reinforce these divisions and signal rulers' loyalty to insiders.

The passage of time puts pressure on the policy status quo, however, by generating new outsider constituencies, new grievances or capacity for mobilization among existing outsiders, or weakening the utility of resources provided by political insiders. Each of these developments threatens to undermine rulers' strategies of political control. While policy reforms might signal rulers' recognition of outsiders' greater de facto power, any drive for reform risks destabilizing backlash or at best debilitating resistance from powerful insider constituencies. I term the resulting

tradeoff—between address long-term threats of rebellion from outsiders and short-term threats of backlash from insiders—the authoritarian “reformer’s dilemma.”

Existing frameworks for authoritarian policymaking provide unsatisfying explanations for how autocrats address this dilemma. Theories that emphasize rulers’ reliance on a “winning” coalition of insiders predict that rulers always defend the political and policy status quo—failing to explain documented examples of policy reform under authoritarianism. Other approaches suggest that rulers primarily respond to outsider mobilization with political reforms, offering new forms of political participation rather than direct policy concessions. Given the limits on opposition influence within such quasi-democratic institutions, however, political liberalization short of full democratization is unlikely to lead to major policy changes. Most common is the idea that rulers offer policy concessions whenever outsiders mobilize in opposition, an explanation with intuitive appeal but little direct empirical support.

By contrast, I argue that policy reforms follow information shocks that signal *future* threats from political outsiders. A public signal of future, regime-threatening mobilization from outsiders encourages rulers to adopt policy reforms while discouraging insiders from impeding them—lest they be expropriated entirely in a regime-ending revolution. I identify a particular information shock likely to spur political action in a wide range of contexts: reference regime failure, or the overthrow of regimes that shares many characteristics with a given autocracy.

Empirically, I first establish the plausibility of my theory using case studies of 21st-century policymaking in a long-lived authoritarian regime: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I draw on elite interviews with Saudi bureaucrats and business managers, unpublished dissertations by Saudi urban planners and local administrators, archival media coverage, government statistics, and polling data (including an original survey of Saudi labor-market attitudes) to establish relevant stakeholders and proposed policy reforms in two issues areas: a “balanced development” project to address spatial

inequalities as well as the “Saudization” of the Kingdom’s heavily expatriate private-sector workforce. Balanced development represents a negative case for my theory—no reference regime failure, no lasting policy change. However, the overthrow of autocracies across the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring uprisings (2010-2012) highlighted the potential threat posed by rising youth unemployment. This led Saudi rulers to redouble their efforts at imposing Saudization over the protests of influential business leaders, sustaining these policy changes long after the direct threat of unrest had passed—an indication of future-oriented fears rather than day-to-day observations of threats. Alternative accounts of authoritarian policymaking find little support in either case.

To assess the generalizability of my claims, I test the association between reference regime failure (here, the failure of an autocracy in the same geographic region) and redistributive policy reforms in a global sample of post-World War II autocracies. Across a number of model specifications, I find that reference regime failure is associated with a substantively large and statistically significant increase in the likelihood of policy adoption. Alternative explanations, particularly the threat of unrest, do not consistently explain the adoption of new policies.

This project demonstrates that policy reforms represent a substantively important part of the authoritarian “toolkit” for maintaining power. It further indicates that these policies are adopted not in response to domestic demands but following external signals of future threats. This implies a need for a greater focus on political calculations and policy decisions within the authoritarian “executive”—despite the difficulties of acquiring data—relative to bargaining in participatory institutions or demands pressed by street protests.

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The questions that would eventually percolate up into the motivations for this dissertation have their origin in past experiences in Egypt and Qatar. While studying in Cairo with the Center for Arabic Study Abroad in 2012-2013, I was fortunate enough to take a memorable microbus/service trip with Paul Cuno-Booth and Andrew Alger through the Nile Valley of Upper Egypt in January of 2013. Seeing the relative underdevelopment of the South of Egypt led me to wonder just what political forces steered most policy benefits to the Delta region time and again. My interest in MENA-region policy outcomes grew further during several years as a research assistant at the Brookings Doha Center, watching the Qatari officials pledge major reforms in the monarchy’s expatriate labor-law regulations even while resisting mounting international pressure for policy change. Into the mix, Matt Buehler made a strong pitch for applying to PhD programs in political science. I’m glad to have proved his intuition right, and grateful to undergraduate professors Melani Cammett and Mark Blyth as well as my one-time boss at the Brookings Doha Center, Shadi Hamid, for writing letters in support of the round of applications that ultimately wound up with me at Harvard.

At Harvard, I'm deeply thankful for the members of my dissertation committee: Melani Cammett, Torben Iversen, Yuhua Wang, and F. Gregory Gause III. Having moved up to Harvard in the intervening time, Melani was my primary advisor from day one and the chair of my dissertation committee, taking great care to guide me towards the kind of research that could play to my strengths as well as speak to research questions on the cutting edge of authoritarianism studies. This project has benefited as much from her ceaseless letter-writing for various grants and administrative hurdles as it has from always encouraging me to revisit and refine concepts and theoretical mechanisms. I was fortunate enough to take two classes in a row with Torben Iversen my first year at Harvard, which was a sound introduction to his formidable intellect; at many stages in this project, I've realized that what I was trying to describe was something that Torben had already recognized in a meeting some months before. Yuhua Wang provided an important set of eyes through thorough case knowledge of contemporary authoritarianism in China as well as keen understanding of theories of authoritarian politics. Greg Gause was kind enough to take time to dial in all the way from Texas A&M for successive committee meetings over the years, and to always keep me on my toes with unmatched Saudi case knowledge.

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encourage me to rest and relax for a while, and have taken a key interest in the worlds that I study – to the point that my mother once memorably dismissed a CNN documentary on Saudi Arabia as “not really having much new to say on the subject.” My siblings Greg, Katie and Meghan were always there for a reality check during my frequent visits home, while also introducing me to an unending string of board games to play during family gatherings.

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Andrew Michael Leber
New Orleans, Louisiana
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

On the night of October 31, 2019, I settled into my seat at the open-air King Fahd National Stadium to watch second “Crown Jewel” event hosted by the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in Riyadh. Watching professional wrestlers pin, throw, and pile-drive each other amid pounding music and on-stage fireworks would have been unthinkable just a few years prior. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had been marked out by policies that limited women’s autonomy, gender mixing, and most forms of public entertainment. These policies have historically formed a key policy concession to conservative religious clerics, who in turn legitimated the ruling Al Saud monarchy in the eyes of faithful citizens. Yet tonight the stadium was filled with a mixed-gender audience of thousands for a spectacle that included the Kingdom’s first all-women pro wrestling match.

Instead of being an isolated incident, the WWE match came as part of a range of policy changes loosely grouped as the Kingdom’s “Vision 2030” reforms, championed by Crown Prince and de facto Saudi ruler Mohammed bin Salman (often styled as “MBS”). Where Saudi citizens once had to venture abroad even to go to the cinema or attend a live concert, the Kingdom’s General Entertainment Authority and Ministry of Sport were now investing billions of dollars in opportunities to have fun at home—including multi-day electronic music raves and fine arts biennials. Where Saudi women were once infamously barred from driving within the Kingdom, now they could not only get behind the wheel but also travel, manage their personal finances, and access government services with less oversight from male “guardians.” Furthermore, instead of trying to attract foreign capital and white-collar expatriates to isolated “enclaves” literally walled off from the Kingdom’s social restrictions, Saudi officials now seek to transform all of Riyadh into a hub of

global commerce to rival the Western-friendly cities of neighboring Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

These reforms—benefiting the median citizen at the expense of the most conservative quarters of Saudi society and political establishment—came as a surprise both for long-standing assumptions about Saudi politics and theories of authoritarian policymaking writ large. Social liberalization policies under Vision 2030 clearly ran counter to the worldview and policy preferences of a clerical establishment that had supported the Al Saud family’s efforts to acquire and maintain power for literally hundreds of years. The Kingdom’s limited steps towards democracy, such as the partial election of municipal councils, never came close to affording citizens a direct voice in policymaking. Efforts to force policy change through protest or public advocacy were likewise stymied by repression. From 2017 onwards, liberal and conservative activists alike were swept up in waves of arrests and arbitrary detentions that quickly dismantled much of Saudi Arabia’s politically minded civil society. Why, then, did MBS pursue and (so far) sustain policy changes that benefited mass constituencies yet threatened the interests of existing supporters of the Saudi regime?

In this dissertation, I advance a theory of authoritarian policy reforms that sheds light on the these forms of policymaking. Autocrats face a growing “reformer’s dilemma” as regimes age: while reforms might secure long-run stability by accommodating the new policy demands of a changing society, they risk short-term backlash by threatening standing commitments to insider constituencies. I argue that rulers sustain reforms at odds with their regimes’ coalitions of support when presented with a public signal that the political risks under the status quo outweigh the risk of reform: the overthrow of comparable regimes, or reference regime failure. Autocratic failures in regional reference countries increase surviving incumbents’ motivation to adopt policy reforms and decrease insiders’ resistance to change. Furthermore, by spurring policy change in advance of

domestic mobilization demanding reform, they help render policy reforms credible even in the absence of political reform.

The rest of the introductory chapter is organized as follows. The second section explains why our theoretical understanding of authoritarianism tends to rule out substantive policy change under the same authoritarian regime. The third section introduces the concept of the reformer's dilemma and provides an overview of my arguments. The fourth section provides a plan of the dissertation.

1.2 Authoritarian Policymaking

Authoritarian policymaking holds considerable practical implications for individuals and communities across the globe. Anywhere from 36-70% of the world's population (2.7-5.7 billion people) are governed by non-democracies, depending on the metric chosen, with electoral competition either sharply circumscribed or absent altogether.¹ Nor does this solely reflect China's large population, with China only accounting for around 40-50% of this total. Policy outcomes in particular countries matter for the individuals who live under those non-democratic regimes; moving to live under a democratic regime is often a fraught undertaking and is simply not an option for most individuals, to say nothing of considerable democratic backsliding even in ostensibly established democracies.

A growing body of work has challenged a stylized image of non-democracies as simply reflecting the rule of the few, establishing the motivations for autocrats to adopt various welfare programs and other policy reforms. Such work emphasizes that autocracies can be good for the

¹ Freedom House's "Not Free" measure suggests 38% of the world's population is governed by non-autocracies as of 2020. "Freedom in the World 2022" (Freedom House, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>. For Polity V measures of autocracy and democracy, as of 2018, the number is 36% if "autocracy" is measured with scores of 0 or less, and 42% if scores are measured at less than 6 (ranging from -10 to +10). Monty G. Marshall and Ted Robert Gurr, "Polity5," *The Polity Project [Dataset]*, 2018. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) measure of autocracies presently codes India as an electoral autocracy, with 70% of the world classified as living under autocracies as of 2021." Nazifa Alizada et al., "Autocratization Changing Nature?," Democracy Report (Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), 2022).

poor,² often invest in key social policies such as pension schemes,³ undertake difficult forms of redistribution such as land reform more easily than democracies,⁴ and are responsible for the establishment of most of the world's primary education systems.⁵

Still, compared with the vast literature on policy processes in democracies, we have relatively little sense of when and why authoritarian regimes adopt new policies over time. In an ideal-typical democracy, different social constituencies are free to organize, advocate, and agitate for the formation of political coalitions in a bid to take or retain power at elections, in turn forming various issue-specific coalitions to enact various policies while in power.⁶ By contrast, we generally understand authoritarian regimes as governing through fixed coalitions of support while repressing efforts to influence policy “from below.” The bulk of research on authoritarian politics has therefore focused on ways that regimes and supporters establish and maintain power-sharing agreements, privileging accounts of cross-national policy divergence over investigations of variation over time within the same regime.⁷

Authoritarian repression curtails civil liberties and the ability of opposition or civil-society groups to organize independently from the regime. As a byproduct of this, it also imposes considerable difficulties on researchers seeking accurate information on why particular policies were

² Casey B. Mulligan, Ricard Gil, and Xavier Sala-i-Martin, “Do Democracies Have Different Public Policies than Nondemocracies?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2004): 51–74; Michael Ross, “Is Democracy Good for the Poor?” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2006): 860–74.

³ Isabela Mares and Matthew E. Carnes, “Social Policy in Developing Countries,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 93–113; Carl Henrik Knutsen and Magnus Rasmussen, “The Autocratic Welfare State: Old-Age Pensions, Credible Commitments, and Regime Survival,” *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 5 (2018): 659–95.

⁴ Michael Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵ Agustina S. Paglayan, “The Non-Democratic Roots of Mass Education: Evidence from 200 Years,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 1 (2021): 179–98.

⁶ Kathleen Bawn et al., “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (2012): 571–97.

⁷ Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279–1301; Carles Boix and Milan W. Svobik, “The Foundations of Limited Authoritarian Government: Institutions, Commitment, and Power-Sharing in Dictatorships,” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 2 (2013): 300–316; Barbara Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work: Power, Personalization, and Collapse* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

adopted under authoritarian regimes, or even whether policies *were* meaningfully enacted after their initial announcement. Autocracies frequently repress independent media, code policymaking secrecy as a matter of national security, falsify official statistics, and even criminalize forms of academic inquiry—all of which hinders an accurate assessment of the policymaking process. This can make cross-national comparisons even more attractive as a means of exploring authoritarian politics, given that differences in regimes’ historical origins or institutional configurations are more readily observable than backroom deals for particular policies. Still, change over time within a given authoritarian regime is worthy of study in its own right. Noting that the structure of U.S. political institutions makes it far more difficult to address social inequality than in Canada or European counterparts, for example, hardly precludes scholars from undertaking a vast range of inquiries into how policy change *does* happen in the United States.⁸ Furthermore, avoiding the “black box” of authoritarian policymaking leaves key causal mechanisms assumed rather than empirically demonstrated, in turn generating inaccurate predictions of (a lack of) authoritarian policymaking.

1.3 The Argument

In studying authoritarian policymaking, I focus on autocrats’ adoption of policy reforms: new policies that extend new benefits or privileges to an outsider social constituency poorly served by existing policy, at a notable cost to insider constituencies who benefit more under the policy status quo. In their most dramatic form, these policy changes include major reform drives such as the Shah of Iran’s White Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s,⁹ the Chinese Communist Party’s pursuit of socialism with Chinese characteristics under Deng Xiaoping,¹⁰ and the more recent Vision

⁸ Compare Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz, “Comparative Perspectives on Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in the United States,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 (2011): 841–56; Andrea Louise Campbell, “How Policies Make Citizens,” in *How Policies Make Citizens* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁹ James A. Bill, “Modernization and Reform from above: The Case of Iran,” *The Journal of Politics* 32, no. 1 (1970): 19–40; Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran* (University of California Press, 2017), 46–79.

¹⁰ Susan L. Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China* (University of California Press, 1993).

2030 reforms advanced by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.¹¹ The substantive impact of these reform drives, and the more regular occurrence of smaller authoritarian policy reforms, indicates a need for theories of authoritarian policymaking that accommodate policy reform as well as the policy status quo.

I follow existing depictions of authoritarian rule in dividing societies into two broad camps. Political insiders collectively offer regimes and rulers important resources for maintaining power, while enjoying privileged access to policymaking decisions. Outsiders, by contrast, are shut out from policymaking processes and typically on the losing end of policy decisions; rulers' insider-provided political resources as well as repressive institutions keep outsider mobilization in check. Status quo policies reinforce these divisions and signal rulers' loyalty to insiders. The passage of time puts pressure on the policy status quo, however, by generating new outsider constituencies, new grievances or capacity for mobilization among existing outsiders, or weakening the utility of resources provided by political insiders. Each of these developments threatens to undermine rulers' strategies of political control. While policy reforms might signal rulers' recognition of outsiders' greater de facto power, any drive for reform risks destabilizing backlash or at best debilitating resistance from powerful insider constituencies. I term the resulting tradeoff—between address long-term threats of rebellion from outsiders and short-term threats of backlash from insiders—an authoritarian “reformer’s dilemma.”

Existing frameworks for authoritarian policymaking provide unsatisfying explanations for how autocrats address this dilemma. Theories that emphasize rulers' reliance on a “winning” coalition of insiders predict that rulers always defend the political and policy status quo—failing to

¹¹ Daniel Moshashai, Andrew M. Leber, and James D. Savage, “Saudi Arabia Plans for Its Economic Future: Vision 2030, the National Transformation Plan and Saudi Fiscal Reform,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 3 (2020): 381–401.

explain documented examples of policy reform under authoritarianism. Other approaches suggest that rulers primarily respond to outsider mobilization with political reforms, offering new forms of political participation rather than direct policy concessions. Given the limits on opposition influence within such quasi-democratic institutions, however, political liberalization short of full democratization is unlikely to lead to major policy changes. Most common is the idea that rulers offer policy concessions whenever outsiders mobilize in opposition, an explanation with intuitive appeal but little direct empirical support.

By contrast, I argue that policy reforms follow information shocks that signal *future* threats from political outsiders. A public signal of future, regime-threatening mobilization from outsiders encourages rulers to adopt policy reforms while discouraging insiders from impeding them—lest they be expropriated entirely in a regime-ending revolution. I identify a particular information shock likely to spur political action in a wide range of contexts: reference regime failure, or the overthrow of regimes that shares many characteristics with a given autocracy.

1.4 Plan of the Dissertation

The dissertation proceeds as follows. In Chapter 2, I outline the concept of the reformer’s dilemma, and explain why existing approaches to authoritarian politics and policymaking struggle to explain the occurrence of authoritarian policy reforms. I further outline data and methods used for the dissertation. In Chapter 3, I justify my focus on cases of policymaking in 21st-century Saudi Arabia, describe the actors from my theoretical argument as present in the cases, and outline the time periods that structure my subsequent case studies. Chapter 4 examines rulers’ pursuit of so-called “balanced development” policies aimed at addressing spatial inequalities in Saudi Arabia by redistributing state investments to more rural and underdeveloped regions. Chapter 5 addresses the adoption of Saudization reforms aimed at promoting the nationalization of the Saudi private-sector

workforce. Chapter 6 considers the generalizability of my argument by studying the adoption of policy reforms in a global sample of post-WW2 autocracies. Chapter 7 concludes.

Chapter 2

A Theory of Authoritarian Policy Reforms

2.1 Introduction

When do autocrats extend new policy benefits to otherwise politically marginalized groups? Existing depictions of authoritarian rule typically divide societies into two broad camps: political insiders and outsiders. Political insiders collectively offer the regime and its leaders important resources for maintaining power while enjoying privileged access to policymaking decisions. Outsiders, by contrast, are shut out from policymaking processes and typically on the losing end of policy decisions; rulers' insider-provided political resources as well as repressive institutions keep outsider mobilization in check. Status quo policies reinforce these divisions while solidifying rulers' hold on power by signaling their loyalty to insiders. The passage of time puts pressure on this status quo, however, by generating new or newly mobilized social groups as a consequence of past policy choices, threatening to overwhelm rulers' strategies of political control. While rulers might opt for policy reforms to signal their recognition of outsiders' greater de facto power, this threatens to undermine their backing from insider constituencies; any drive for reform risks destabilizing backlash or at best debilitating resistance.

I argue that the trade-off between the long-term threat of rebellion from outsiders and the short-term threat of retaliation from insiders constitutes a "reformer's dilemma" for individual rulers. There is no way for rulers to simultaneously address both sources of political risk, as signaling a new commitment to outsiders' policy concerns risks angering insiders. Existing approaches to authoritarian policymaking generally ignore one side of this dilemma. According to these approaches, secure in the idea that insiders constitute a "winning" coalition of support, rulers might

foreswear policy reforms entirely. Or rulers might opt for political reforms, offering representatives of outsider constituencies new forms of policymaking influence, thereby turning them into a new set of “insiders.” Finally, rulers could ignore the threat of backlash entirely, committing to new policy benefits whenever outsiders develop a capacity for mobilization. The empirical record of authoritarian politics encourages skepticism of these approaches.

This chapter introduces a new theory explaining when authoritarian rulers successfully press for policy reforms, rather than opting solely for repression or offering political concessions. I argue that rulers and insiders alike respond to information shocks that signal future threats from political outsiders. When they perceive these threats, rulers become more willing to take short-term political risks, even as insiders offer less resistance to reforms that might better secure the regime and the existing social hierarchy. I identify a particular kind of information shock likely to spur political action in a wide range of contexts: reference regime failure, or the overthrow of an authoritarian regime that shares many characteristics with the autocracy in question. A public signal of future, regime-threatening mobilization from outsiders both encourages rulers to adopt policy reforms and discourages insiders from impeding them—lest they be expropriated entirely in a regime-ending revolution. Figure 1 summarizes the argument, with arrows representing causal relationships.

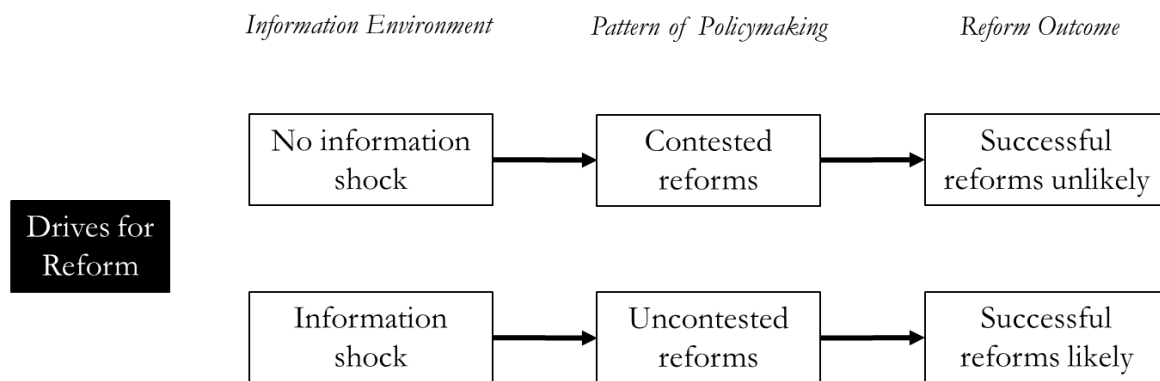


Figure 1: Summary of theory.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin by establishing authoritarian regimes' redistributive policy changes as my outcome of interest and plot the interests of well-connected political insiders and marginalized outsiders with respect to policymaking. I also introduce the concept of the reformer's dilemma as a shorthand for autocrats' tradeoffs between the risks posed by political insiders and outsiders. I explain why existing approaches to authoritarian policymaking fail to account for real-world instances of autocratic policy reforms, before providing an original theory of how information shocks—namely, the experiences of *other* authoritarian regimes—can prompt these policy changes. I subsequently lay out the data and methods I will use to test my argument against rival explanations for the remainder of the dissertation.

2.2 The Reformer's Dilemma: Actors & Interests

As an entry point into new theorizing on authoritarian policymaking, I focus on a type of policy change poorly predicted by existing models: redistributive policy reforms. These policy changes reverse the positions of policy winners and losers: offering new material benefits (or other privileges) to a social constituency poorly served by existing policy, at a notable cost to constituencies who benefit more under the policy status quo. Per Theodore Lowi's distinction between different classes of policy, I distinguish these changes from mere distribution, or the extension of benefits on a temporary or individual basis; in contrast, policy reforms entail the establishment of new rules that redistribute benefits among broad social categories.¹² I seek to explain the circumstances under which authoritarian regimes adopt new programmatic policies or provide new public goods, at a cost to existing policy beneficiaries, rather than how they manipulate the application of existing policies to maximize political returns.¹³ I likewise distinguish policy

¹² Theodore J. Lowi, "American Business, Public Policy, Case-Studies, and Political Theory," *World Politics* 16, no. 4 (1964): 690–91.

¹³ See the distinction between programmatic policies and targeted "punishment regimes" under existing policies in Michael Albertus, Sofia Fenner, and Dan Slater, *Coercive Distribution* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 10–11.

reform from *political* reform, or affording new constituencies representation in political institutions or greater collective influence in policymaking processes. This conceptual distinction is important given that several existing theories imply that policy reform effectively results from political reform, even as other approaches conflate the two.¹⁴

The origins of policy reforms are important to explain as a new literature on the authoritarian welfare state places a growing emphasis on the role of policy, rather than institutions of repression or political participation, in sustaining authoritarian rule.¹⁵ Studies in this vein have made important contributions in demonstrating that redistributive policies often arise under authoritarian regimes, suggesting the political benefit of these policies to autocrats in the abstract, and exploring cross-national variation in particular configurations of policies—no small feats of scholarship. As considerable work on the welfare policies of advanced industrial democracies has stressed, however, the passage of time places new pressures on existing policies.¹⁶ Long-term social or economic changes can undermine the effectiveness of existing strategies of social control, as the outcomes of past policy choices generate new social constituencies or stoke new grievances among existing constituencies. As a framework for understanding the challenges facing authoritarian rulers over

¹⁴ Finkel et al, for example, discuss reform as “a policy *or* institutional change intended to improve the welfare of the excluded group.” Evgeny Finkel, Scott Gehlbach, and Tricia D. Olsen, “Does Reform Prevent Rebellion? Evidence From Russia’s Emancipation of the Serfs,” *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 8 (July 1, 2015): 985, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414014565887>.

¹⁵ Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *Development, Democracy, and Welfare States: Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Erik Wibbels and John S. Ahlquist, “Development, Trade, and Social Insurance,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2011): 125–49; Wen-Chin Wu, “When Do Dictators Decide to Liberalize Trade Regimes? Inequality and Trade Openness in Authoritarian Countries,” *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (December 1, 2015): 790–801, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12149>; Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution*; Henry Thomson, “Food and Power: Agricultural Policy under Democracy and Dictatorship,” *Comparative Politics* 49, no. 2 (January 1, 2017): 273–96, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041517820201387>; Knutsen and Rasmussen, “The Autocratic Welfare State”; Albertus, Fenner, and Slater, *Coercive Distribution*; Jennifer Pan, *Welfare for Autocrats: How Social Assistance in China Cares for Its Rulers* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Ferdinand Eibl, *Social Dictatorships: The Political Economy of the Welfare State in the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Paglayan, “The Non-Democratic Roots of Mass Education.”

¹⁶ Paul Pierson, “The New Politics of the Welfare State,” *World Politics* 48, no. 2 (1996): 143–79; Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme, “New Politics and Class Politics in the Context of Austerity and Globalization: Welfare State Regress in 18 Countries, 1975–95,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (2003): 425–46.

time, I synthesize common understandings of authoritarian rule to divide social constituencies among insiders—organized supporters of incumbent regimes—and marginalized outsiders who stand to benefit from policy reforms. Over time, rulers are increasingly squeezed between insiders’ expectations that the policy status quo will be maintained and mounting pressure from outsiders to enact policy reforms—a situation I refer to as the reformer’s dilemma.

Insiders

Numerous approaches to authoritarian or non-democratic rule emphasize that rulers hold power (and regimes endure) by virtue of the support of a “coalition” of various social constituencies.¹⁷ The influential game-theoretic model of regime and leader behavior put forward in the *Logic of Political Survival* (LPS) by Bueno de Mesquita et al., depicts rulers as maintained in power by a “winning” coalition of supporters who possess the “qualities or characteristics” to determine the regime’s leadership (or its very continuation).¹⁸ Comparative historical analyses of authoritarian regimes look to the early years of regimes to identify these coalitions, typically focusing on the policy choices made by regime founders as an indication of the regime’s core supporters. Empirical investigations have probed the differences between a wide range of potential coalitions, from those including or excluding mass constituencies (such as organized labor),¹⁹ holders of fixed or mobile capital,²⁰ those based on or opposed to landowning elites,²¹ and those that incorporate or sideline

¹⁷ “Coalitions” is sometimes used instead to refer to specific individuals within an authoritarian regime’s inner circle supporting a particular leader. Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5–6.

¹⁸ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (MIT Press, 2003), 42. Still, given that authoritarian leaders frequently acquire and retain power by non-institutional means, the selectorate is difficult to distinguish conceptually or empirically from the winning coalition. Mary E. Gallagher and Jonathan K. Hanson, “Power Tool or Dull Blade? Selectorate Theory for Autocracies,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (2015): 374.

¹⁹ David Waldner, *State Building and Late Development* (Cornell University Press, 1999); Eibl, *Social Dictatorships*.

²⁰ Thomas B. Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes: Indonesia and Malaysia in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Yuhua Wang, *Tying the Autocrat’s Hands* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²¹ Catherine Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State: Territorial Authority and Institutional Choice* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution*; Matt Buehler, *Why Alliances Fail: Islamist and Leftist Coalitions in North Africa* (Syracuse University Press, 2018); Janine A. Clark, *Local Politics in Jordan and Morocco: Strategies of Centralization and Decentralization* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

religious authorities.²² Other approaches to non-democratic politics further simplify the coalition to a single class: the rich.²³

In theorizing authoritarian policy reforms, I set aside the conceptual language of coalitions to instead focus directly on insiders and their interests. While it is difficult to identify *ex ante* what the true winning coalition is for authoritarian regimes, given the opacity of political competition and the uncertain conditions under which incumbents lose power, it is comparatively easier to identify powerful interest groups and their preferred policies (as well as when rulers act against these interests). I therefore build on Thomas Pepinsky's definition of regime supporters to define observable indicators as to which social constituencies constitute regime insiders: those groups that (1) favor the reproduction of the political regime, (2) possess both the organizational capacity and political access to influence the policymaking process, and (3) possess financial, coercive, and/or ideological resources that support the regime's hold on power.²⁴ Insiders provide rulers and regimes with the resources they use to keep the broader population in check, whether by generating economic growth to fund limited welfare programs or by helping to repress any effort to change the political status quo from below. In turn, they generally benefit from policy choices in one or more relevant issue areas.

Insiders' primary political interest is to maintain these existing policy privileges. The resources and capacity for collective action that make insiders useful to regimes can also make them dangerous if a ruler turns against their interests, with regime supporters typically posing the most

²² Yu-Ming Liou and Paul Musgrave, "Oil, Autocratic Survival, and the Gendered Resource Curse: When Inefficient Policy Is Politically Expedient," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2016): 440–56.

²³ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁴ Pepinsky's definition includes the sense that insiders or supporters "benefit from existing policy choices," which may be true under the policymaking status quo but can change if rulers adopt policy reforms. "Capital Mobility and Coalitional Politics: Authoritarian Regimes and Economic Adjustment in Southeast Asia," *World Politics* 60, no. 3 (2008): 450.

direct and immediate domestic threat to a ruler's survival in office.²⁵ Even seemingly minor policy changes against the interests of insiders can suggest to existing beneficiaries that more substantial changes will follow, spurring counter-mobilization by threatening to withhold critical support from rulers or to actively rebel against them.²⁶

Outsiders

If rulers only had to worry about retaining the support of political insiders, they would face few political incentives to pursue major changes to public policy after the establishment of the regimes they govern. Yet insiders likely constitute only a small portion of the societies that autocrats govern, leaving numerous outsider constituencies with little to no influence over policy processes and who face far greater obstacles in organizing collectively to press for any political demands. Some outsider constituencies may nevertheless favor the continuation of the current political regime, or at least be ambivalent about it. Policy choices demanded by insiders might also provide some marginal benefits for broader constituencies, or insiders themselves might inspire enough fear or loyalty among some outsider constituencies to deter any mobilization in opposition of the regime.

Still, policy choices calibrated to lock in support from political insiders typically generate grievances among outsiders on the losing end of policy choices. Even if regime founders calibrate relations with insider constituencies to guard against these de facto threats, long-term processes of social change can either newly empower outsiders or sap the political resources of insiders in ways that rulers are unable to predict or prevent. Landed elites' social control over rural communities may be increasingly irrelevant in the face of urbanization and industrialization, even as an increasingly organized working class or wealthy middle class presses new demands for social services or

²⁵ Gordon Tullock, *Autocracy* (Springer, 1987), 17–34; Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 4–5.

²⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968), 347; Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes*, 17. Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo, “If You’re against Them You’re with Us: The Effect of Expropriation on Autocratic Survival,” *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 8 (2012): 976–81.

developmental policies. Likewise, there may be less and less value in appeasing conservative religious elites by enforcing costly social restrictions as religious beliefs exercise less of a hold on an increasingly well-educated society. In all, despite the deterrent effect of the regime's repressive apparatus and other political resources, outsiders might still retain what Acemoglu and Robinson refer to as "de facto" political power: the latent ability to threaten the regime's continuation by weight of numbers or brute force if mobilized under the right set of circumstances.²⁷

Each of these changes entails mounting risk for authoritarian regimes—"a combustible situation [that] comes with a long fuse"²⁸—as some outsider constituencies recognize their status as policy "losers" as well as their collective potential to demand policy change or even regime change. While regimes' security services can help to contain or repress these challenges to some extent, many autocrats lack the institutional arrangements that can effectively deter or prevent large-scale uprisings.²⁹ If street protests, mass demonstrations or labor strikes overwhelm security services, they can directly overthrow incumbent autocrats. Even protests that do not physically remove rulers from office can still pose an indirect threat should rivals seize on mass unrest to justify a coup against such an "incompetent" leader.³⁰ Existing supporters of the regime might have little to fear from a coup that reshuffles regime leadership, keeping other political arrangements intact; individual autocrats, by contrast, understandably care both that the regime continues in power and that they continue to lead it.

²⁷ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 21–26.

²⁸ Jeremy Wallace, "Cities, Redistribution, and Authoritarian Regime Survival," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 3 (2013): 637.

²⁹ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³⁰ John B. Londregan and Keith T. Poole, "Poverty, the Coup Trap, and the Seizure of Executive Power," *World Politics* 42, no. 2 (1990): 151–83; Deniz Aksoy, David B. Carter, and Joseph Wright, "Terrorism and the Fate of Dictators," *World Politics* 67, no. 3 (2015): 423–68; Holger Albrecht and Dorothy Ohl, "Exit, Resistance, Loyalty: Military Behavior during Unrest in Authoritarian Regimes," *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 1 (2016): 40–42.

The Reformer's Dilemma

Over time, the mounting friction between the rising threat posed by outsiders' mobilizing potential and the status quo policy expectations of insiders presents incumbent autocrats with what I term the reformer's dilemma: the tradeoff between potential political benefits of policy reforms in the long term and the short-term political risks posed by departing from the policy status quo.³¹ Rulers likely have some indication of mounting grievances among outsider constituencies, whether through small-scale protests contained by regime security services or various forms of public and private information gathering. Policy reforms could offer an outsider constituency a greater or status-based stake in the political status quo, inoculating groups against the potential efforts of activists to mobilize opposition against the regime. While this may not be enough to stop the most highly-motivated individuals from challenging the regime or its policies on occasion, it diminishes the potential for a serious revolutionary threat to arise.

Yet even if policy reforms might make a rebellion from outsider constituencies less likely, new redistribution risks backlash from regime insiders by threatening these constituencies' immediate interests. This is true even if reforms would benefit insider constituencies (or some subset therein) in the long run; insiders are likely to prefer the certainty of benefits under the status quo over the uncertain promise of future rewards. In a best-case scenario, this can result in concerted efforts by insiders (both those directly affected and those aligned with them) to deter or delay policy changes, diminishing the effectiveness of reform and succeeding mostly in raising outsiders' policy

³¹ Mark Williams uses the term to refer to interest-group opposition to economic liberalization in Mexico in the 1980s. Mark Eric Williams, *Market Reforms in Mexico: Coalitions, Institutions, and the Politics of Policy Change* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 26-27. I use the phrase to refer not just to opposition from existing policy beneficiaries, but the fact that authoritarian rulers are forced to choose between risking this form of opposition and risking mobilization from outsiders tomorrow.

expectations before failing to meet them.³² Worse, autocrats' efforts to pursue reforms might lead to their own removal from power if insider counter-mobilization extends to backing a rival leader in an attempt to re-establish the political status quo. Accordingly, in surveying the attempts of mid-20th century rulers to maintain political order amid dramatically changing societies, Samuel Huntington discusses at length the challenges faced by autocratic reformers in maintaining power amid drastic social change, arguing that only a "master politician" with the "highest order" of political skill could navigate between the Scylla of revolution and the Charybdis of reaction.³³

2.3 Why Autocrats Don't Reform (In Theory)

Existing studies of authoritarian politics, including a growing literature on the authoritarian welfare provision, struggle to explain the adoption of authoritarian policy reforms in the face of this reformer's dilemma. Formal models of authoritarianism as well as comparative historical approaches to authoritarian regimes and policy choices emphasize the durability of starting coalitions and their policy demands. By framing rulers' policymaking choices as the result of bargaining with either insiders or outsiders, these approaches suggest that policy reforms only happen when existing regime supporters demand them (against their direct interests), when political reforms incorporate representatives of outsider constituencies as new political insiders, or when outsiders mobilize collectively to threaten the regime. In contrast to these explanations, I advance a new theory under which authoritarian rulers unilaterally advance new reforms in response to information shocks that signal outsiders' ability to threaten the regime in the future (or the inability of existing supporters to deter such mobilization).

³² Failed reforms may prove even worse than staying the course on public policies by spurring mobilization from disappointed outsiders. Evgeny Finkel and Scott Gehlbach, *Reform and Rebellion in Weak States* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³³ Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 345.

Winning coalition models

Numerous theories of authoritarian politics rooted in game-theoretic and comparative-historical analysis contend that authoritarian policymaking simply reflects the interests of political insiders. In the LPS model, for example, political actors have clear knowledge of which groups form the polity's "selectorate" (the universe of potential coalition members) and the combination of their support necessary for leaders to retain power and for the regime to continue in its current form: the "winning coalition" of support. Diverting any resources to court outsiders—policy reforms—amounts to "political suicide," creating an opening for a challenger to pledge a return to the policy status quo, earn the loyalty of insiders, and depose the existing leader.³⁴

While coalition-building in the LPS model is an abstraction, with different constituencies' political endowments analogized to votes for the regime's leadership, studies that document the construction of varying authoritarian coalitions likewise imply continuity over time and continued support for initial policy choices. In these accounts, regime commitments made early on in state-building projects, and the institutional arrangements that accompany them, "generate long-term expectations that cannot be reversed at whim."³⁵ Constituencies that enjoy the privileged status of insiders expect that their privileges and property are secure from rulers' whims, while rulers expect that core supporters will work to maintain the political status quo. The longer that rulers and their successors abide by this understanding, the more stable the regime's elite politics, as rulers and insiders accumulate information about each other's preferences, abilities, and loyalties.³⁶ In turn, any

³⁴ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (MIT Press, 2003), 89.

³⁵ Sean L. Yom, *From Resilience to Revolution: How Foreign Interventions Destabilize the Middle East* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 38. See also Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35; Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes*, 16–20; Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 34–38.

³⁶ Scott Abramson and Carlos Velasco Rivera, "Time Is Power: The Noninstitutional Sources of Stability in Autocracies," *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 4 (2016): 1281–82.

move to change the policymaking status quo in ways that impose new costs on insiders threatens to destabilize the regime.

Across both sets of theories, whether the driving force is the rational expectations of political actors or path dependency, policymaking results from bargaining between a ruler and insiders. By emphasizing the idea that the winning coalition is fixed—either as an objective fact or resulting from a world-historical critical juncture—these explanations broadly predict that we should not observe policy reforms at all. Both game-theoretical and comparative-historical approaches allow for the idea that autocrats might seek to “narrow” coalitions over time, excluding insiders from policymaking influence and attendant benefits, if afforded the opportunity.³⁷ Yet remaining insiders are unlikely to demand policies that cut against their own interests for the benefit of seemingly marginal outsiders and are apt to balk—or worse—at the suggestion that they tolerate such policies without due compensation. While bargaining between rulers and political insiders might occasionally generate new policies, perhaps as a response to technological change or shifting conditions in the global economy, these should maintain existing divisions between policy winners and losers.

However, this approach struggles to account for numerous examples of autocrats extending new policy benefits beyond a core group of political insiders. Even in the 1980s, for example, Western Sovietologists leveraged available data to establish that there *was* meaningful variation in the domestic policymaking of the Soviet Union, documenting the emergence of new, mass-oriented policy benefits in the USSR (and other communist regimes) as a cost to powerful insider constituencies such as military leaders or managers of heavy-industry projects.³⁸ In the 1990s, the

³⁷ Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*, 2003, 400–401; Yom, *From Resilience to Revolution*, 38; Albertus, Fenner, and Slater, *Coercive Distribution*, 19.

³⁸ Valerie Jane Bunce, “The Succession Connection: Policy Cycles and Political Change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,” *American Political Science Review* 74, no. 4 (1980): 966–77; Philip G. Roeder, “Do New Soviet Leaders Really Make a Difference? Rethinking the ‘Succession Connection,’” *American Political Science Review* 79, no. 4 (1985): 958–76; Valerie Bunce and Philip G. Roeder, “The Effects of Leadership Succession in the Soviet Union,” *American Political*

Chinese Communist Party pursued new policies that codified sustained investments in the country's Western regions³⁹ and among the urban (and later rural) poor,⁴⁰ despite the greater political importance accorded upwardly mobile workers in the major cities of the Eastern regions and direct members of the Party itself. These dynamics have also occurred in more “competitive” authoritarian regimes that tolerate elections and parliamentary representation. From the 1970s onward, scholars of what we would now consider authoritarian regimes in Latin American politics documented new policy changes to the benefit of previously marginalized mass constituencies.⁴¹ In 1989, for example, the dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regime in Mexico adopted a new National Solidarity Program of poverty relief even as it pursued policies of economic liberalization that went against the interests of institutionalized sources of regime support among industrial workers and peasants.⁴²

Political Reforms

If coalitions of insiders determine policy choices, policy reforms might result from political reform: expanding the coalition of insider constituencies with policy influence. Rulers might afford new political representation to constituencies with growing economic or coercive potential, effectively transforming them into political insiders. Regime policymaking could subsequently shift to align with this new coalition of insiders, as rulers bargain with an expanded set of constituencies to set policy choices. This aligns with models of democratization, chiefly those offered by Daren

Science Review 80, no. 1 (1986): 215–24; Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers' Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁹ Jeremy Wallace, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution, and Regime Survival in China* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 128–43.

⁴⁰ Pan, *Welfare for Autocrats*.

⁴¹ David Collier, “Squatters and Oligarchs: Authoritarian Rule and Policy Change in Peru,” 1976; Merilee S. Grindle, *Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Peasants in Mexico: A Case Study in Public Policy, Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Peasants in Mexico* (University of California Press, 1977), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520329713>.

⁴² Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 125–26. Magaloni's argument, however, seeks to explain the targeting of benefits within the overall adoption of the program, rather than on the adoption of the program itself.

Acemoglu and James Robinson, that suggest new redistribution—i.e. policy reform—typically occurs only after democratization (or significant political liberalization).⁴³ In this model, democratization allows an elite (analogous to an authoritarian regime and its insider constituencies of support) to make credible policy commitments to marginalized outsiders when the latter mobilizes enough to pose a “revolutionary threat”; insiders drop their objection to a (relative) loss of influence so long as they are assured some form of policymaking representation under the new regime. Bueno de Mesquita and Alistair Smith likewise extend the LPS model to suggest that mass mobilization can prompt rulers to expand their winning coalition, ostensibly to incorporate mobilized social constituencies, as a means of transforming them into insiders with influence over policy outcomes.⁴⁴

Absent these political concessions, autocrats (or incumbent elites) might have little incentive to follow through on policies pledged in the heat of a revolutionary moment; once the transitory threat passes, the masses will again lack leverage vis-à-vis the regime. By contrast, political reform—ceding political power—credibly commits elites to future redistribution by letting the median voter (or at least the median insider of the new coalition) determine policy outcomes. A closely related literature makes a similar argument for quasi-democratic institutions under authoritarianism, such as circumscribed legislatures, that facilitate autocrats’ commitments to major policy changes.⁴⁵ This further suggests that policy reforms are downstream of political reform; political rights conceded by

⁴³ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. While other accounts differ as to the types of incumbent and opposition constituencies driving such political contestation, they concur in framing democratization as a credible commitment to policy reform (typically to the benefit of some form of rising middle class). Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Reprint edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ben W. Ansell and David J. Samuels, *Inequality and Democratization* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴⁴ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita and Alastair Smith, “Leader Survival, Revolutions, and the Nature of Government Finance,” *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 4 (2010): 936–50.

⁴⁵ Gandhi and Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats.”

rulers play an independent causal role in empowering constituencies to demand and receive policy concessions.⁴⁶

The idea of sequenced political and then policy reform is challenged by the empirical record, however. Conceding some forms of political representation does not necessarily entail real influence over policy, as conceded even by scholars who have argued strongly that authoritarian elections and parliaments “matter” in terms of political representation and democratic contestation.⁴⁷ Across the autocracies of the Middle East & North Africa, for example, regimes design and administer electoral systems with an eye towards ensuring that their existing supporters gain access to public offices, not to facilitate the political empowerment of new opposition members.⁴⁸ Hence while the Moroccan monarchy tolerates a relative degree of electoral contestation, recent and clear opposition electoral victories have not translated into meaningful policy changes.⁴⁹ Likewise, some of the most prominent examples of authoritarian policy reforms—such as those in China and, more recently, Saudi Arabia—have occurred under political systems that we would not consider to rule with the aid of national-level parliaments. Political reforms might even preclude the possibility of policy reforms under autocracy if they serve to destabilize the regime before newly incorporated constituencies can demand policy changes. Studies of the Chinese and Soviet regimes’ experiences during the 1980s, for example, broadly concluded that prioritizing political reforms as a prelude to policy reforms

⁴⁶ Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 77–82.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, “Elections under Authoritarianism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 407.

⁴⁸ Ellen Lust-Okar and Amaney Ahmad Jamal, “Rulers and Rules: Reassessing the Influence of Regime Type on Electoral Law Formation,” *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 3 (2002): 337–66; Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*; Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak’s Egypt* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Francesco Cavatorta, “Morocco: The Promise of Democracy and the Reality of Authoritarianism,” *The International Spectator* 51, no. 1 (2016): 86–98.

ultimately doomed the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev, while the opposite proved both possible and successful under Deng Xiaoping's leadership in China.⁵⁰

Threats & Mobilization

Finally, a general “threat-based” model of authoritarian policymaking holds that rulers offer policy concessions to outsiders when facing new threats. It holds intuitive appeal to think that autocrats offer policy concessions to mobilized outsiders: granting higher wages to workers’ unions holding strikes and sit-ins or eliminating discriminatory policy in response to sustained protests from those harmed by these policies. Recent work on authoritarian politics presents it almost as a truism that “the core mechanism for citizen influence on policymaking [under authoritarian regimes] is the threat of unrest,” and that even the most despotic of autocrats “commonly appease discontent via policy concessions.”⁵¹ Broad comparisons between democratic and autocratic policymaking typically frame the threat of unrest as the equivalent of votes under autocracy, with policies responding to the “latent threat” posed by various constituencies.⁵² Even Acemoglu and Robinson’s model of democratization allows for new redistribution absent democratization when the masses can mobilize *ad infinitum*, securing today’s policy concessions through the threat of tomorrow’s mass action.⁵³ This pattern is continued in recent work on the authoritarian welfare state, which tends to explain the adoption of new policies as a response by regimes to threatening mass constituencies.⁵⁴ A variant of

⁵⁰ Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China*; Philip G. Roeder, *Red Sunset* (Princeton University Press, 1993), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691019420/red-sunset>.

⁵¹ Rory Truex, “Authoritarian Gridlock? Understanding Delay in the Chinese Legislative System,” *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 9 (2020): 1461; Svoboda, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 163.

⁵² Wu, “When Do Dictators Decide to Liberalize Trade Regimes?”; Thomson, “Food and Power.”

⁵³ Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 200–201.

⁵⁴ Pan, *Welfare for Autocrats*, 32–34.

this argument suggests that autocrats offer policy concessions to mobilize mass constituencies against yet-further threats (such as elite rivals or an invading army).⁵⁵

Still, threat-based explanations struggle to predict exactly when mobilization translates into meaningful policy reforms. In terms of threats from outsider groups, as Eibl notes, it is difficult to spell out the knife-edge conditions under which social mobilization is powerful enough to demand and receive major policy concessions but not so powerful that their demands fall short of regime change.⁵⁶ Prominent threat-based accounts of the origins of authoritarian welfare policies therefore tend to focus either on the influence of mass mobilization at a particular point in time relative to regime onset, or else work backwards from the adoption of policies to threats that might have served to justify them. As I empirically demonstrate in case studies, there is nearly always some indication of domestic threat that might retroactively justify the adoption of a given policy; careful process tracing is needed to determine whether policy reforms emerge as an explicit concession to a mobilized constituency. Furthermore, the most extensive empirical test of “threat-based” path to redistribution—focusing on Tsar Nicholas II’s “Great Reforms” in Russia—found that greater unrest was generally associated with *lower* levels of redistribution, regardless of the presence of participatory institutions.⁵⁷

Policy reforms appear even less likely to be caused by elite conflict within existing authoritarian regimes. Incumbent rulers or ruling factions are more likely to rely on the repressive capacity of specialized security services, particularly as these are often geared towards guarding against coup threats from rival leaders or elite factions.⁵⁸ While authoritarian regimes occasionally

⁵⁵ Waldner, *State Building and Late Development*; Eibl, *Social Dictatorships*; Kenneth Scheve and David Stasavage, “The Constriction of Wealth: Mass Warfare and the Demand for Progressive Taxation,” *International Organization* 64, no. 4 (2010): 529–61.

⁵⁶ *Social Dictatorships*, 15.

⁵⁷ Paul Castañeda Dower et al., “Collective Action and Representation in Autocracies: Evidence from Russia’s Great Reforms,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (2018): 141–42.

⁵⁸ Eibl, *Social Dictatorships*, 14.

deploy select groups of citizens within strategies of countermobilization, these are typically security-service “auxiliaries” mobilized through the (less expansive and expensive) promise of individual rewards rather than mass constituencies responding to programmatic pledges.⁵⁹ If anything, we should expect autocracies to *retract* once-generous benefits from mass constituencies over time, as the need for mobilization diminishes.⁶⁰

Table 1 summarizes the expectations of these approaches with respect to policy reforms.

Table 1: Summary of expectations of existing approaches to authoritarian policymaking with respect to policy reforms.

	Patterns of policymaking:	Conditions under which policy reforms occur:
Winning-Coalition	Rulers bargain with insiders	Insiders demand policy reforms (against their interests)
Authoritarian institutions	Rulers incorporate outsiders into coalitions and bargain with them as insiders	Outsiders gain political representation & policymaking influence as insiders
Threats	Rulers bargain with outsiders as a response to new threats	a) Marginalized groups mobilize against regime b) Rulers seek to mobilize marginalized groups against rivals/enemies

⁵⁹ Ashley Anderson and Melani Cammett, in *Ruling by Other Means: State-Mobilized Movements*, ed. Grzegorz Ekiert, Elizabeth J. Perry, and Xiaojun Yan (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 261–90.

⁶⁰ Albertus, Fenner, and Slater, *Coercive Distribution*, 87–91; Steven Brooke, *Winning Hearts and Votes: Social Services and the Islamist Political Advantage* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 22–23.

2.4 Information Shocks & Authoritarian Policy Reforms

Existing theories do not provide a satisfying account of authoritarian policy reforms, either struggling to explain the existence of these policy changes in the first place or assuming away the potential for backlash from among autocrats' existing supporters. Most of the time, in line with accounts that emphasize insiders' outside influence on authoritarian policymaking, I anticipate that we should expect rulers to abide by the policy status quo in fearing the potential for insider backlash more than (potentially far-off) mobilization from outsiders). Even when rulers possess some information that they might benefit politically from reform, the potential costs of angering insider constituencies are likely much clearer in the minds of rulers than the potential costs of abiding by the status quo.⁶¹ Still, this decision rests on the relative risk posed by insiders and outsiders, rather than certain knowledge that insiders will be able to forestall any revolutionary threat from political outsiders. While insiders are unlikely to collectively mobilize against their interests in championing reform, a given ruler or ruling clique might still deem policy reform necessary and unavoidable if the challenge from below becomes truly dire.⁶²

I argue that rulers therefore impose policy reforms from the top down in seeking to forestall future mobilization from outsiders that could offer insiders a pretext to agitate for leadership change or threaten to sweep away the regime in its entirety. They are more likely to pursue these reforms, and do so successfully, in response to information shocks: events that publicly signal the potential for outsiders to pose a threat in advance of actual mass mobilization. Specifically, these information shocks suggest that outsider mobilization will eventually become “unmanageable,” overwhelming

⁶¹ Nimah Mazaheri, *Oil Booms and Business Busts: Why Resource Wealth Hurts Entrepreneurs in the Developing World* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 50–53.

⁶² While some aspects of policymaking may be delegated to subordinates or be contested at various levels of government bureaucracies, rulers are almost certainly involved in public policymaking with substantial redistributive implications given the political sensitivities involved. Michael Albertus, “Explaining Patterns of Redistribution under Autocracy: The Case of Peru’s Revolution from Above,” *Latin American Research Review*, 2015, 109.

autocratic strategies of political control based on the political resources provided by insiders and the ability of the repressive apparatus to deter or disperse protests.⁶³ At this point, rulers have a greater incentive to roll the dice on reform, given that abiding by the policy status quo appears likely to end in regime failure and their own removal from power. While it is difficult for rulers and researchers to determine ex ante the “manageability” of potential unrest in relation to strategies of political control, specific events or signals hold the potential to offer rulers (and other political actors) a fleeting glimpse of an unmanageable future if they cling to the policy status quo.

These information shocks, observable to insiders and rulers alike, make redistributive policy reforms more likely through two mechanisms (Figure 2). First, they incentivize rulers to take greater short-term political risks in pursuit of policy reforms, by suggesting that the threat of their own removal due to outsider mobilization is not a far-off possibility but quite likely in the near term. Despite the dangers and uncertainties of breaking with the policy status quo, a signal of future mobilization by outsiders reminds rulers that there are risks by sticking to the status quo as well. Second, public information shocks also diminish both the willingness of insiders to mobilize against reform (at least in the short term) and their effectiveness in deterring rulers from reforms by doing so. Information shocks diminish the appetite of insiders for delaying reforms by emphasizing the potential for their total loss of policy influence (or worse) amid regime change rather than the loss of a specific policy privilege.⁶⁴ They can also undercut the leverage of insiders in lobbying against reforms by revealing insiders’ political assets to be less valuable than previously understood;

⁶³ The term is Slater’s. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511760891>.

⁶⁴ While outsider constituencies might likewise take inspiration from an information shock, given that this suggests a greater likelihood of a successful outsider revolt, rulers are well-positioned by virtue of their direct influence over state institutions to promote new policy reforms in advance of any demands for action by would-be opposition activists.

threatening some form of counter-mobilization is more likely to lead rulers to call insiders' bluff than to abandon reforms.

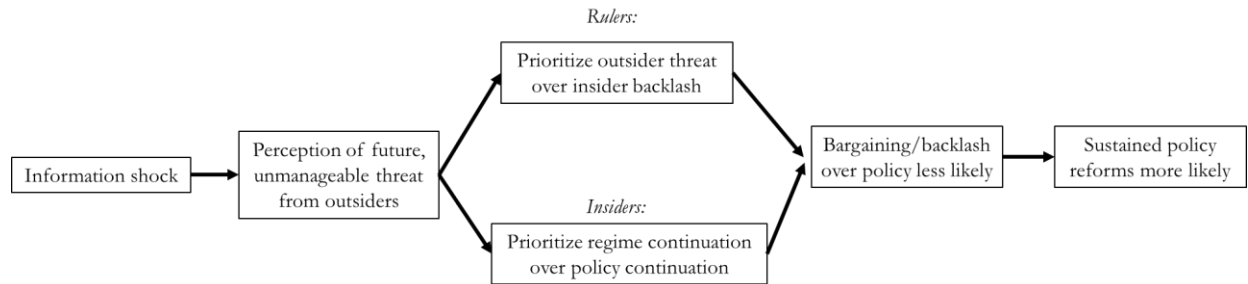


Figure 2: How information shocks affect the potential for reform.

A wide range of context-specific events might constitute “information shocks” that indicate future threats for authoritarian regimes and their coalitions of support. For electoral authoritarian regimes, this might entail the unexpected loss of elections in a symbolically important locality or a narrower-than-expected vote outcome in general elections.⁶⁵ Privately conducted opinion polls might function similarly if they reveal something unexpected about outsider constituencies’ preferences or views about the regime and various authority figures.⁶⁶ In seeking to explain autocrats’ similar willingness to take short-term risks in adopting new military or security-sector reforms, scholars have also suggested unexpected developments such as major battlefield defeats and the loss of national territory as key signals.⁶⁷ While actual mobilization from below might serve as an information shock to prompt policy reform, the information provided by protests or demonstrations is likely to be swamped by the fact that political crises heighten rulers’ reliance on the political resources provided by insider constituencies. Even if some insiders support rulers’

⁶⁵ Dan Slater and Joseph Wong discuss several potential shocks—including electoral setbacks and loss of geopolitical support—relevant to ruling parties in East and Southeast Asian developmental states, albeit in relation to democratization rather than reform. “The Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental Asia,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 3 (2013): 717–33.

⁶⁶ Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme B. Robertson, “Information, Elections, and Political Change,” *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015): 466–67.

⁶⁷ Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator’s Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 25–26; Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police*, 84–88.

offers of policy reforms as a concession to the mobilized opposition, offers of policy concessions still risk in-fighting among the regime’s coalition of support—potentially dooming its ability to stand firm amid the crisis. By contrast, if the regime is able to survive the crisis of mobilization without meaningful policy reforms—and with no other relevant signal of the costs of inaction—then rulers might conclude that the threat from below was manageable after all. Accordingly, efforts to identify specific forms of mobilization that generate new policy commitments from rulers have been highly bounded by particular contexts, limited to specific historical events.⁶⁸

To provide a falsifiable account of authoritarian policy reforms, I focus primarily on an information shock that is relatively common and generalizable across a wide range of political contexts: the overthrow of a “reference” regime similar to the one led by a would-be reformer. Autocrats and their advisers frequently consider not just their country’s own experiences in deciding on strategies of rule, but those of fellow autocracies.⁶⁹ They are likely to be particularly attentive to “reference” regimes that share key attributes such as language ties, geographic proximity, or a similar colonial history—most typically those in the same region. These reference cases provide more salient examples to incumbent rulers than authoritarian regimes further afield, given that peer leaders of these regimes will in many cases confront similar socio-economic policy challenges and retain power with the support of coalitions made up of similar insiders constituencies.⁷⁰ Accordingly, efforts to analyze such authoritarian “learning” have often focused on historically connected regimes

⁶⁸ For example, see Slater, *Ordering Power*, 13–14.

⁶⁹ This has been observed most clearly in terms the slow diffusion of techniques of repression, with autocrats adopting new technologies of surveillance and strategies of suppression based on the experiences of their peers (at times facilitated by direct sales or training programs). Hall & Ambriso 2017 Vitali Silitski, “Survival of the Fittest: Domestic and International Dimensions of the Authoritarian Reaction in the Former Soviet Union Following the Colored Revolutions,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 4 (2010): 339–50; Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, “Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the ‘Arab Awakening,’” *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (2011): 647–53.

⁷⁰ Such authoritarian “learning” is not necessarily limited to regional cases, however. Karrie J. Koesel and Valerie J. Bunce, “Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 3 (2013): 753–68.

such as the successor states to the former Soviet union, or the various autocracies of the MENA region connected by colonial experiences, language, and religious ties.⁷¹

The overthrow of an authoritarian regime counterpart constitutes an information shock distinct from any actual domestic mobilization—a clear indication that domestic threats facing a similar authoritarian regime ultimately proved unmanageable. Regime failure represents the worst possible outcome for autocracy, one which “would counsel [other] authoritarian leaders to take preemptive measures.”⁷² While the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in general is relatively common, a specific regime’s overthrow is still likely to be an unexpected event in most cases. Both the overthrow of the Soviet Union and the fall of authoritarian regimes in the Arab Spring uprisings prompted post-mortems suggesting that regional experts had “missed” the potential for regime-ending mobilization in each case, even as other observers have underestimated the durability of authoritarian regimes such as the Kingdom of Jordan or post-Revolutionary Iran.⁷³ Common cognitive biases suggest that rulers will attach outsize importance to reference regime failures, seizing on similarities between their own political situation and those of deposed rulers (and minimizing differences) while overestimating the possibility that a similar threat could remove them from power in the near future.⁷⁴ The reformer’s dilemma further helps explain why rulers might quickly move on policy reforms after observing crises from afar, in contrast to accounts that suggest autocrats can only learn from their peer regimes as part of a slow, deliberative process.⁷⁵ When it comes to the

⁷¹ Silitski, ““Survival of the Fittest”; Heydemann and Leenders, “Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience.”

⁷² Koesel and Bunce, “Diffusion-Proofing,” 759.

⁷³ Thomas F. Remington, “Sovietology and System Stability,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 8, no. 3 (1992): 239–69; F. Gregory Gause III, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2011, 81–90; Marc Lynch, “Jordan, Forever on the Brink,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), May 7, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/07/jordan-forever-on-the-brink/>.

⁷⁴ Kurt Weyland, *Revolution and Reaction* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 46–51.

⁷⁵ Compare with Sean L. Yom, “Authoritarian Monarchies as an Epistemic Community Diffusion, Repression, and Survival During the Arab Spring,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 1 (2014); Oisín Tansey, Kevin Koehler, and Alexander Schmotz, “Ties to the Rest: Autocratic Linkages and Regime Survival,” *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 9 (2017): 1221–54; Edward Goldring and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Rethinking Democratic Diffusion: Bringing Regime Type Back In,” *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 2 (2020): 319–53.

“long fuse” of slowly accumulating socio-economic grievances, autocrats likely have policy ideas on hand, lacking only the political will to execute them. As a result, where developing new tools of repression and surveillance may take years of adjustment fine-tuning, acting on long-delayed policy proposals can happen relatively quickly as the political calculations of incumbent rulers and insiders change.

In terms of empirical predictions, my theory implies that regime failure within a given region makes surviving autocracies in the same region more likely to successfully implement redistributive policy reforms. Such reference regime failure should encourage leaders to adopt reforms by heightening the perceived threat posed by outsiders (with a revolt from below appearing both more likely and more likely to overthrow ruler or regime) and encourage the successful implementation of reforms by diminishing the likelihood of backlash from insiders.

Could ideology serve as an information “shock”? Regimes’ espousal of left-wing, redistributive ideologies have been associated with their adoption of new redistributive policies upon coming to power, even if the causal role of ideology per se can be difficult to separate from rulers’ efforts to take power with mass support to begin with.⁷⁶ Likewise, James Scott likewise identifies “high modernist” beliefs in the power of the administrative state to effect major social transformation as encouraging autocrats to adopt major policies of social transformation across much of the 20th century.⁷⁷ Rulers own experiences along their path to power might also inform their normative interest in particular policies, as Calvert Jones discusses with respect to Emirati royals’ pursuit of select social liberalization policies.⁷⁸ Still, even if new rulers in existing regimes possess strong ideas

⁷⁶ Stephen Kosack, “The Logic of Pro-Poor Policymaking: Political Entrepreneurship and Mass Education,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (2014): 409–44; Dulce Manzano, *Bringing down the Educational Wall: Political Regimes, Ideology, and the Expansion of Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 94–99.

⁷⁷ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (Yale University Press, 1998), 87–102.

⁷⁸ Calvert W. Jones, “Seeing like an Autocrat: Liberal Social Engineering in an Illiberal State,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 1 (2015): 24–41; Calvert W. Jones, *Bedouins into Bourgeois: Remaking Citizens for Globalization* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

about the importance of policy reforms, this does not guarantee that other prominent constituencies will share these causal beliefs about the appropriate ends and means of policy. Ideas might provide a “road map” for how to carry out specific policy reforms once rulers choose to pursue them,⁷⁹ but private beliefs are likely insufficient for an autocrat to convince at least some insider constituencies of the need for reform, or to forge ahead despite the threat of insider backlash. However, information shocks might *generate* a kind of ideology in the sense of a cluster of ideas for rulers to “posit, explain, and justify ends and means of organized social action and specifically political action,” in this case with the aim of preserving the existing political order.⁸⁰ What sustains policy reform beyond an information shock is a new set of beliefs among rulers about how their hold on power “works,” and what they must do for the regime to remain in power.

My theory differs from alternative theories of authoritarian policymaking in terms of its predictions regarding the initiation of policy reforms and the mechanisms by which policy reforms are sustained over time. First, we should observe rulers unilaterally pursuing reform efforts from above rather than as an explicit concession to either political insiders or outsiders. Instead of always seeking to execute the policy priorities of a fixed coalition of support, as in winning-coalition explanations of policymaking, rulers weight the risk of insider backlash against the potential for outsider support. Following an information shock, this means a greater willingness to turn the regime’s coercive apparatus and other state institutions against insider constituencies who stand in the way of reform.

Second, policy reforms are sustained not due to the institutionalization of outsiders’ political influence, or by sustained outsider mobilization, but by a durable shift in threat perceptions among

⁷⁹ Peter A. Hall, “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain,” *Comparative Politics*, 1993, 275–96.

⁸⁰ Martin Seliger, *Ideology and Politics* (George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 959.

rulers and their successors. Rulers come to believe that a new constellation of policies is necessary to ward off future rebellion from below, even if any instances of actual mobilization are quickly contained. Political reforms are neither necessary nor sufficient to sustain this policy change. Short of full democratization (i.e. regime change), an increase in outsider representation in quasi-democratic parliaments or participation in elections should prove immaterial to actual policymaking influence. Yet formal representation is unnecessary if outsider constituencies (and the threat they pose) are able to live rent-free in the minds of autocrats and their advisors. Fears of the future threat posed by a given outsider constituency may therefor bear no relation to day-to-day riots, demonstrations, and other forms of mobilization managed by these groups (or their absence).

2.5 Methods & Data

For this study, I utilize a mixed-methods research design, combining process-tracing of specific cases of authoritarian policymaking in Saudi Arabia over the course of a 20-year period with cross-national comparisons of authoritarian regimes' adoption of major policy reforms between 1945 and 2008. Process tracing of policy choices under a continuous authoritarian regime permits me to operationalize "policy reform" in terms of policy choices relevant for a given country and explore them in-depth: identifying the relevant social groups or categories with a stake in policy reform or the status quo, specifying the content and potential impact of proposed reforms, and collecting data to indicate whether announced reforms truly imposed political costs on insiders and extended new benefits to outsiders.⁸¹ Additionally, given the novelty of my independent variable (information shocks) and its operationalization in the form of reference regime failure, qualitative analysis is appropriate in first testing the plausibility of the causal mechanisms of my argument,

⁸¹ Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Process Tracing: From Philosophical Roots to Best Practices," in *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–37.

before further testing their wider applicability in cross-national analysis. I provide an in-depth justification for exploring policy reforms in Saudi Arabia in the subsequent Chapter 3.

However, relying on the study of policymaking within one country at a particular point in time risks over-fitting a model of authoritarian policy reforms by emphasizing Saudi-specific factors at the expense of systematic variables that might drive policy reforms across cases. I therefore complement my model-building small-*n* analysis with a large-*n* analysis of the adoption of policy reforms across a much wider geographic and temporal range: all authoritarian regimes (i.e. those lacking free and fair elections) from 1945 to 2008. This is a feasible undertaking due to the present availability of time-series data of the adoption of new redistributive policies covering a large number of autocracies for the 20th and early 21st centuries. While finding a relationship between information shocks and policy reforms in both small-*n* and large-*n* analysis does not guarantee that my study has correctly specified the underlying model of authoritarian policy reforms, quantitative analysis provides both a gauge of the explanatory power of my theory beyond the Saudi case and the extent to which other systematic variables may be responsible for the adoption of policy reforms in the majority of cases.⁸²

Qualitative Data Sources

I collected data for this project over the course of roughly 9 months of fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, spread out between July of 2017 and March of 2020. While the bulk of my time was spent in the capital city of Riyadh, I also undertook three field visits to the Northern region of Ha'il in 2019-2020 (each lasting around 5 days) and three field visits to the Southern region of Jazan in 2018-2019 (ranging in duration from 3 days to 2 weeks). In this time, I conducted 49 semi-structured interviews with Saudi citizens and expatriates over the course of this time period, encompassing mid-level Saudi

⁸² Ingo Rohlfing, "What You See and What You Get: Pitfalls and Principles of Nested Analysis in Comparative Research," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 11 (2008): 1507–9.

officials at central and regional offices of the Ministries of Economy and Planning, Agriculture, Municipalities and Rural Affairs, Human Resources, and Education; managers and human-resources employees at firms ranging from multi-billion dollar contracting firms to five-employee small businesses; Saudi and expatriate consultants involved in past and ongoing development projects; and editors of several print and online news outlets.

I gathered additional data from archives of past Saudi media coverage and government statistics held at the King Fahd National Library, the King Abdul Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives, and KFCRIS's own internal library. I further consulted electronic editions of articles in prominent Saudi newspapers such as *Al-Riyadh* and *Al-Jazirah*, each available for the entirety of the time period under consideration. I supplemented and contextualized this material with information on Saudi policies and policymaking in reports published by Saudi research centers and academics, white papers published by government entities or discussed in publicly available panel discussions, and digital archives of blog posts that discussed Saudi politics and policymaking during the heyday of the Saudi blogosphere in the early 2000s.

Combining these data sources provided a strong basis for an in-depth consideration of select areas of Saudi policy over the past few decades. To be sure, the willingness of Saudi and expatriate interlocutors to discuss policymaking (past or present) declined sharply over the course of the three years I visited the Kingdom. This is not surprising given the mounting repression of critical perspectives during this time period, with arbitrary arrests and detentions ranging from independent religious clerics to women's rights activists having a chilling effect on open conversations—to say nothing of impact of the murder of Saudi media figure Jamal Khashoggi in October of 2018. Still, a substantial number of individuals remained willing to shed light on past and present implementation of public policies, the reasoning behind them, and other data sources that might corroborate their

accounts. Furthermore, at least until quite recently official news outlets within the Kingdom were able to air differing viewpoints on particular policy issues, so long as any criticism was directed at incompetent officials or the lobbying of particular interest groups rather than at the monarchy per se. I make extensive use of the weekly news magazine *Al-Yamamah*, which includes an “Issue of the Week” forum discussing relevant social or economic concerns and featuring viewpoints from a wide range of relevant stakeholders. Many blog posts from the early 2000s went even further in critical discussions of particular policy issues. I was further able to speak with many Saudi individuals familiar with media coverage in this era to provide relevant context for the interpretation of media content.

While much of the qualitative analysis in the dissertation rests on publicly available sources and interviews, I also make use of internal U.S. State Department diplomatic cables illegally obtained by Chelsea Manning and subsequently released into the public domain by the WikiLeaks organization in 2010-2011.⁸³ The academic use of leaked documents has been accompanied by commentary on the methodological pitfalls and ethical implications of doing so.⁸⁴ These discussions emphasize the importance of contextualizing leaked documents rather than equating them with “smoking gun” evidence,⁸⁵ the potential for severe selection bias and manipulation of leaked data,⁸⁶ and the danger that utilizing leaked information can place individuals at risk at present and incentivize further leaking in the future. Most recently, Christopher Darnton has issued a strong challenge to the use of such documents, arguing that the hazards of “non-consensually obtained

⁸³ Robert Mackey, Jacob Harris, Ravi Somaiya and Nicholas Kulish. “All Leaked U.S. Cables Were Made Available Online as WikiLeaks Splintered - NYTimes.Com,” accessed February 25, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110905022404/https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/01/all-leaked-u-s-cables-were-made-available-online-as-wikileaks-splintered/>.

⁸⁴ Gabriel J. Michael, “Who’s Afraid of WikiLeaks? Missed Opportunities in Political Science Research,” *Review of Policy Research* 32, no. 2 (2015): 175–99; John O’Loughlin, “The Perils of Self-Censorship in Academic Research in a Wikileaks World,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no. 4 (2016): 337–45.

⁸⁵ Daniel Drezner, “Why WikiLeaks Is Bad for Scholars,” CHE, December 5, 2010, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-wikileaks-is-bad-for-scholars/>.

⁸⁶ James P. Kelly Jr, “WikiLeaks: A Guide for American Law Librarians,” *Law Library Journal* 104 (2012): 245.

evidence...generally outweigh the benefit[s] of their use” and calling—at a minimum—for more rigorous and explicit defense of the use of such materials in written work.⁸⁷

In making use of these cables, I have therefore paid close attention to the incompleteness of this archive, the need to contextualize individual documents, and the potential for harm from drawing attention to individual cables. To begin with, the WikiLeaks archive likely reflects only a portion of cables generated by diplomats based in Saudi Arabia. For example, the National Security Archive, a research project based at George Washington University, has released 9,837 cables originating in Saudi Arabia from the first three years of the Carter administration, 1977 to 1979 (over 3,000/year); in comparison, the WikiLeaks archive includes only 1,610 cables for the entire 2003-2010 time period (around 200/year). This may reflect some unclassified correspondence being diverted to alternative channels such as e-mail, but it seems more likely that the WikiLeaks archive reflects only a partial and very selective record of early-2000s diplomatic traffic. Accordingly, wherever possible I seek to corroborate aspects of claims advanced on the basis of WikiLeaks cables with publicly available media coverage or commentary from within Saudi Arabia.

Second, I interpreted statements contained within these cables in light of the fact that they were usually either made by Saudi individuals to official representatives of the U.S. government or reflected the perceptions of U.S. diplomats drawing on a number of anonymized interactions. To familiarize myself with the nature of these conversations, I undertook a broad program of reading shaped by relevant keywords, including cables mentioning “King” or “Crown Prince Abdullah” (# cables), “Saudization” or “unemployment” (# cables), and the names of each of the 13 regions of the Kingdom. Based on this reading, and on my own interactions with the U.S. diplomatic community during my visits, these cables would be a poor guide to the views of Saudis outside the

⁸⁷ Christopher Darnton, “The Provenance Problem: Research Methods and Ethics in the Age of WikiLeaks,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 3 (2021): 1110–25.

halls of power. Diplomats faced clear limitations in their ability to gain insights beyond elite circles, not least in terms of travel restrictions (from both the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Department). Still, extant cables are useful for accessing the contemporary views of Saudi royal family members, high officials (such as ministers, deputy ministers, and regional governors) and the kind of elite business figures who enjoyed privileged personal access to Saudi royals in the early 20th century. Finally, in terms of harms mitigation, I have excluded any cables that request that U.S. diplomats “strictly protect” a given source, given that this is an explicit indication that attention to the cable could cause harm to the individual, or those that mention conversations with any form of political activist within Saudi Arabia (regardless of context).⁸⁸ Ultimately, I make use of eight diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in this dissertation, where these documents shed particular light on the calculations of Saudi rulers and their advisors as well as the actions of key political insiders.

Public Opinion Data

While my theory focuses mainly on the perceptions and actions of Saudi rulers and insiders, I also compile a number of public opinion polls offering insights into the views of the broader Saudi population both prior to and following policy reforms, each fielded between 2003 and 2020. The first is an in-person survey of 1,026 adult Saudis (517 Saudi men and 509 Saudi women) conducted between April 20 and May 10 in 2003 and incorporated into the fourth wave of the World Values Survey.⁸⁹ The second survey comes from the second wave of the Arab Barometer survey project (a public-opinion research network primarily based at Princeton University) comprising 1,404 face-to-face interviews (707 with Saudi women, 697 with Saudi men) conducted between January 5 and

⁸⁸ Darnton, 1121.

⁸⁹ Mansoor Moaddel, “The Saudi Public Speaks: Religion, Gender, and Politics,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006): 79–108.

February 6 as well as March 26 and April 9 of 2011.⁹⁰ A third set of surveys comes from the Arab Opinion Index, a semi-annual face-to-face survey conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies based in Doha, Qatar. Data used in my dissertation comprises five waves of surveys (2011, 2012/13, 2014, 2015, 2016), with each survey covering around 1,200 Saudi citizens with an even gender distribution.⁹¹ Each of these surveys is designed to be nationally representative, covering most of the main regions of Saudi Arabia (North, South, Center, East and West) even if specific locations for sampling vary between surveys.

Additionally, I designed and fielded an original telephone survey covering 2,732 Saudi citizens of working age (i.e. 18 to 45), fielded between August 21 and October 15 of 2020.⁹² This survey was approved and conducted under a research partnership between Saudi Arabia's Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF), tasked with boosting Saudi labor-force participation, and Harvard University's Evidence for Policy Design (EPoD) research unit. The survey was approved by both HRDF and EPoD as an investigation of variation in attitudes towards the Saudi labor market across three regions of Saudi Arabia: Riyadh (home to the capital city of the same name), Ha'il (in the North of the country), and Jazan (in the South). I selected these regions on the basis of having spent significant time in each, to better contextualize any findings from the survey. Approval from officials within HRDF was necessary for a commercial survey firm to field the questionnaire; funding was provided by EPoD through the HRDF-EPoD partnership. I formulated survey questions in English and the survey firm (whose staff included several Arabic-speaking Saudi nationals) provided an Arabic-language translation. I subsequently reviewed this translation and

⁹⁰ "Arab Barometer Wave II: Technical Report," Arab Barometer Project, 2010-2011.

⁹¹ The 2012/13 survey covers slightly more respondents (1,500). The 2017/18 survey covers a substantially larger number of respondents (3,218), albeit with numerous questions only asked of sub-sets of the total survey sample.

⁹² I developed and fielded the survey in partnership with Jonas Draege, of New Oslo University College.

checked it against the interpretations of other native Arabic speakers from Saudi Arabia, making corrections where needed to facilitate understanding.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, public-health regulations within Saudi Arabia as well as new ethical guidelines for human-subjects research made it impractical to continue with in-person interviews, leading us to opt for telephone interviews instead. While fielding the survey during the pandemic was certainly not ideal, I was unable to negotiate a delay in the start date for fielding the survey due to pressure from HRDF to conclude the labor-market research partnership with EPoD by the end of 2020. In discussions with the survey firm, our revised means of recruiting participants was to utilize random dialing from a registry of phone numbers for over 1 million Saudi citizens provided by HRDF based on households who had ever come into contact with HRDF since the organizations foundation 2000.⁹³ Despite stratifying our sample by gender, education level, and age for each region, this sampling strategy likely biases our sample towards respondents more likely to have experienced difficulty finding employment, given that the main aim of HRDF is connecting Saudis with jobs or training programs).⁹⁴ I take these biases into account when making any inferences from this data, focusing on differences across relevant sub-groups rather than aggregate values calculated from the data. The main sample of the survey ultimately covers 2,732 Saudi citizens broadly representative of three Saudi regions—Riyadh (1,000), Ha'il (724) and Jazan (600)—as well as smaller samples covering the cities of Jeddah (152 respondents), Buraidah (159) and Dammam (199).

⁹³ All identifiers from the database other than gender and geographic location were removed prior to the survey firm accessing this information, and all copies of phone number held by researchers or the survey firm were destroyed subsequent to fielding the survey.

⁹⁴ Across the entire survey sample, for example, around 43% of male respondents who were in the labor force (i.e. not in school and at least looking for work) and nearly 60% of female respondents in the labor force reported being unemployed. Official statistics for unemployment covering the same age group indicate much lower unemployment rates for working-age Saudi men (around 13.5%) and women (around 36%).

Cross-National Data

To test the generalizability of my theory within a wider set of cases, I draw on three separate datasets to create a cross-national time series of two types of major policy changes under autocracy (labor reforms and land reforms) from 1945 to 2008. The first is Milan Svolik’s dataset of authoritarian regimes, which includes all instances of regimes governing independent countries during this time period where elections are neither free nor fair. This represents a total of 137 countries across every major region of the world. Within countries’ authoritarian “spells” (per Svolik, the length of time a country is under some form of authoritarian rule), I distinguish between specific regimes on the basis of whether successive leaders are “politically affiliated” or not (again, per Svolik’s distinctions).

The second is Knut Rasmussen’s *Social Policies Around the World* dataset, which covers the global adoption of a range of welfare policies from 1795 through 2010.⁹⁵ This dataset records the adoption and enforcement of major welfare policies for 154 countries, including all 137 countries covered by Svolik’s dataset. I focus on four policies that extended new material benefits to mass constituencies, chiefly old-age pensions, accident insurance, sickness benefits, and unemployment benefits. While some of these plausibly represent instances in which, say, urban workers represented by a major trade union are a key insider group for autocracies, I address this potential in cross-national regression analysis.

The third is a global dataset of land reform collected by Michael Albertus, indicating instances in which land was redistributed for all independent countries between 1900 and 2010.⁹⁶ Each of these represents an instance in which land was stripped from a wealthy land-owning class

⁹⁵ Magnus Rasmussen. “The Social Policy around the World (SPaW) Database: Codebook,” 2016. 10.13140/RG.2.1.2383.7842.

⁹⁶ Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution*, 268–78.

and provided to another social group, coded by year. While some of these represent instances in which a new regime seizes land from supporters of the outgoing political leadership (a factor I control for in cross-national analysis), several plausibly represent cases in which other events encouraged rulers and regimes to distance themselves politically from the policy demands of powerful landowners.

Chapter 3

Political Actors & Interests in 21st Century Saudi Arabia

3.1 Introduction

I focus on two cases of attempted policy reforms in Saudi Arabia, an example of a regime where prior theories would predict few grounds on which to expect policy reforms as well as substantively important case.

Among current or former authoritarian regimes, Saudi Arabia held several advantages as a site of study. As a practical matter, my language skills and prior experiences abroad encouraged the selection of cases drawn from Arabic-speaking regions of the Middle East and North Africa. Ongoing political violence or outright civil war rendered research access impossible for a number of countries, while active repression of academic research (such as the murder of graduate student Giulio Regini by Egyptian security services in 2016) rendered yet others a dangerous environment to undertake academic inquiries.

On theoretical ground, Saudi Arabia represents site where alternative approaches to authoritarian policymaking would not predict redistributive policy reforms. By the close of the 20th century, the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had been in existence for over 75 years as a political entity, with the Al Saud dynasty extending back centuries. This represents a considerable period of time for close associations to develop between rulers and various insider constituencies, making it potentially quite costly for rulers to move against existing stakeholders. Additionally, the Kingdom lacks the kind of quasi-democratic political institutions thought to facilitate policy concessions to potential opposition, such as political parties or an elected parliament. While the institution of dynastic monarchy has itself been identified as an important source of institutional strength,

accounts stressing this have typically focused on its utility in securing relations between rulers and existing political insiders, not in facilitating policy concessions to political outsiders.⁹⁷ Finally, the Kingdom's considerable natural resource wealth suggests that authoritarian politics may be the wrong theoretical lens with which to understand Saudi policymaking. If policy outcomes in Saudi Arabia are driven by increases or decreases in rulers' access to non-tax revenue represented by natural resource rents, then my case studies may reflect aspects of politics in a resource-rich "rentier state" rather than political phenomena that might generalize to other, less oil-rich authoritarian regimes.⁹⁸

On the other hand, if information shocks *do* play a role in promoting policy reforms, Saudi Arabia provides a useful proving ground for this theory. The sheer duration of the Saudi regime means that it has had to confront the long-term implications of policies adopted in the middle of the 20th century, from a growing reliance on expatriate labor to staff the country's private sector to a affording a conservative religious establishment considerable influence over the Kingdom's education and justice systems. More recently, Saudi rulers have had to confront pockets of popular mobilization in various regions of the Kingdom, have adopted (very limited) forms of participatory institutions under international pressure, and have confronted the political upheavals of the 2010-2012 Arab Spring uprisings in numerous countries with which it shares close diplomatic and social ties. Additionally, Saudi Arabia lacks the truly stratospheric oil wealth of "extreme rentiers"—such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—each of which possessed oil resources generating

⁹⁷ Victor Menaldo, "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs," *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 707–22; Nimah Mazaheri, "The Saudi Monarchy and Economic Familism in an Era of Business Environment Reforms," *Business and Politics* 15, no. 3 (2013): 295–321.

⁹⁸ See, for example, the discussion of Saudi Arabia as a rentier state in Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Cornell University Press, 1997); Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats* (Cornell University Press, 2010); Mazaheri, *Oil Booms and Business Busts*.

upwards of \$100,000 per citizen in the early 20th century.⁹⁹ Even in past resource booms, Saudi resources were not limitless, leaving the domestic distribution of resource rents to be guided by political calculations.¹⁰⁰ A finding that Saudi rulers have adopted redistributive policy reforms even in times of relative rent abundance suggests that meaningful (albeit authoritarian) policymaking does take place within the Kingdom that cannot be explained solely as a result of available resources or clientelist distribution.

Beyond this, Saudi Arabia fits squarely within the scope conditions of my project. Saudi Arabia is a thoroughly authoritarian regime, with no national-level elections to speak of and a hereditary monarch as an executive. Additionally, despite the complexities and inefficiencies of Saudi state structures, rulers have access to relatively capable domestic and international advisors to design new public policies and a relatively capable administrative state with which to implement these policies. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the main actors of my argument as represented in 21st century Saudi Arabia, as well as key insider constituencies with policy influence inside the Kingdom. I define two policy areas relevant to these insider constituencies that I address in my case studies and define the time periods over which I address these case studies.

3.2 Saudi Rulers

Executive authority in Saudi Arabia rests with members of the Al Saud royal family—specifically, the direct descendants of King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin ‘Abd al-Rahman Al Saud. The Kingdom is an absolute, dynastic monarchy in which succession has proceeded laterally across the sons of King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz since the monarch’s death in 1953. The current King, Salman bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, represents the seventh such brother to reign since then; however, current Crown Prince

⁹⁹ Michael Herb, *The Wages of Oil: Parliaments and Economic Development in Kuwait and the UAE* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 13–14.

¹⁰⁰ Gwenn Okruhlik, “Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States,” *Comparative Politics*, 1999, 295–315.

Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is currently in the line of succession to become the first ruling monarch from the next generation of Saudi royals (i.e. King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s grandchildren). Although the full royal family with all of its minor branches numbers into the thousands, decision-making authority has typically rested primarily in the hands of the reigning monarch, albeit with some input from the several dozen princes directly in the line of succession.¹⁰¹ Monarchs (or a direct proxy such as the Crown Prince) typically must at least sign off on major policy decisions, albeit with the details of implementation are often left to subordinates within the Saudi bureaucracy.¹⁰²

There are no representative institutions that serve as a formal check on the King’s policymaking powers or as a source of elected representation for the broader Saudi population. A Consultative Assembly has brought a growing number Saudi experts, scholars, and specialists together as an advisory body to the monarchy, but it has no formal legislative powers or ability to meaningfully constrain the monarchy; its membership is directly appointed by the King and serves at his pleasure.¹⁰³ When various insider constituencies press for particular policies, they do so either through either direct personal connections to the monarch or through key intermediaries such as royal advisors or the Crown Prince.

3.3 Saudi Insiders & Relevant Policies

In defining the Saudi regime’s coalitions support at the close of the 20th century, and specifying the focus of subsequent case studies, I identify several insider constituencies that have enjoyed particular policymaking influence under successive Saudi rulers, in turn providing the regime with important services or political resources to ensure its continuation. In this section, I focus on three key insider constituencies that are well-represented in secondary literature—religious clerics,

¹⁰¹ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 93.

¹⁰² Andrew Hammond, *The Islamic Utopia: The Illusion of Reform in Saudi Arabia* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 46–48.

¹⁰³ R. Hrair Dekmejian, “Saudi Arabia’s Consultative Council,” *The Middle East Journal*, 1998, 204–18.

business leaders, and a technocratic elite largely drawn from a few major regions of the Kingdom— discuss their access to policymaking, note their utility in terms of managing some forms of outsider threat, and identify outsider constituencies with divergent policy preferences. These constituencies overlap with some Saudis' own depictions of the ruling coalition, such as blogger Fahad al-Farhan's discussion of how the ruling family and government rely on the support of religious institutions (clerics) and capitalist institutions (business leaders) in order to control Saudi society and retain power.¹⁰⁴

Religious clerics

Almost every account of the Saudi regime's historical origins notes the political alliance between the Al Saud royal family and conservative religious clerics, dating back to a 1744 pact between Islamic scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad bin Saud al Muqrin (considered the founder of the Saudi dynasty).¹⁰⁵ Successive generations of clerics—many of them direct descendants of 'Abd al-Wahhab as the Al ash-Sheikh family—have legitimated the authority of Saudi rulers in exchange for those rulers' enforcement of the clerics' conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam (a variant of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence). Despite periodic tensions in this relationship, religious clerics consistently preached the importance of the Muslim faithful obeying their rulers, consistently mobilizing “all available symbolic and ideological resources on behalf of the political authorities.”¹⁰⁶ Successive generations of Saudi leaders deemed the support of religious clerics crucial to the regime's continuation in power, including all political actors within the

¹⁰⁴ Fouad Al-Farhan, “Fī Al-s'ūdiyya, Matā Sataqūl al-Hukūma Ana Fahimtukum? [In Saudi Arabia, When Will the Government Say I Understand You?],” Personal Blog, January 20, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120122224130/https://www.alfarhan.ws/?p=243>.

¹⁰⁵ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14–19.

¹⁰⁶ Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*, trans. Ethan S. Rundell (Yale University Press, 2014), 11.

royal family who held significant power at the outset of the 21st century.¹⁰⁷ Religious clerics thus retained considerable latitude to organize and press their demands with Saudi rulers, retaining nominal control of several state agencies (including the Ministries of Justice and Islamic Affairs) as well as their own sanctioned spaces for meeting and coordination (through the Council of Senior Scholars, or Committee of Grand Ulama’).¹⁰⁸

Saudi rulers have generally sustained policies to the benefit of clerics throughout the 20th century, chiefly in the form of proscribing most forms of public entertainment and in closely regulating Saudi social interactions in public spaces.¹⁰⁹ The most infamous set of policies imposed a stark gender segregation in Saudi schools, workplaces, and nearly every café, restaurant or shop, in addition to a de facto ban on Saudi women driving. Other prohibitions included a ban on most films and music in public spaces or on public airwaves, the mandatory closure of shops and government offices during Muslim prayer times, and forbidding any non-Muslim religious practices (in addition to severe constraints on Shi’a or non-Hanbali Sunni practices). Further policy support for religious clerics and their aims included expansive state support for proselytization abroad and institutions of Islamic education at home, incorporating clerical authority deep within state institutions, as well as a state-funded religious police to enforce religious orthodoxy: the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

By the 1990s, these policies far surpassed the already conservative social policies of countries elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula and the wider MENA region. They in turn generated grievances and periodic protests, in writing or in person, by more liberal-minded Saudi citizens who chafed

¹⁰⁷ Mouline, 210–17; Hammond, *The Islamic Utopia*, 84–85; Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck, *Blood and Oil: Mohammed Bin Salman’s Ruthless Quest for Global Power: “The Explosive New Book”* (John Murray, 2020), 57.

¹⁰⁸ Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam*.

¹⁰⁹ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–42.

against the restrictions on public life.¹¹⁰ They also limited the Kingdom's ability to access several forms of economic growth outside of the oil and gas industry. As just one small example, the ban on most forms of entertainment caused the Kingdom to forgo much of a potentially massive domestic leisure industry, with wealthy Saudis instead traveling abroad to the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, or Europe to so much as attend a public movie showing.¹¹¹ Still, a standing assumption of many accounts of Saudi politics—at least until quite recently—was that clerics formed an inevitable and unchanging part of the Saudi regime's "winning coalition." While Saudi rulers might periodically try to renegotiate this relationship, or to replace individual clerics within the Council of Senior Scholars and other state institutions, they should fear dire consequences in abrogating the assumed "bargain" between clerics and rulers.

However, the considerable socio-economic reforms of the past few years under the Vision 2030 policy changes necessarily call into question the necessity of support from the Saudi clerical establishment. While it may be too early to judge the success of these reforms, similar policy choices that have broken with past practices by Saudi rulers raise the possibility of a generalizable phenomenon that might shed light on new policy choices under MBS.

Business leaders

Across much of the MENA region, business communities or "crony capitalists" have served as an important constituency for authoritarian regimes. Even as policies of economic liberalization in the 1980s and into the 1990s led to the retrenchment of generous welfare states across much of the region (although less so in the GCC monarchies), in which "privileged economic networks

¹¹⁰ Richard Dekmejian, "The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia," *The Middle East Journal*, 2003, 400–413.

¹¹¹ L. L. Wynn, *Pyramids and Nightclubs: A Travel Ethnography of Arab and Western Imaginations of Egypt, from King Tut and a Colony of Atlantis to Rumors of Sex Orgies, ... Marauding Prince, and Blonde Belly Dancers* (University of Texas Press, 2010), 169–99.

capture[d] a disproportionate share of the benefits of reform.”¹¹² While largely dependent on discretionary access to either state funds or state policy as the source of their wealth, such business leaders in the MENA region and elsewhere derive the political leverage to maintain these privileges from their ability to “produce something of value” to the political leadership of authoritarian regimes: completing infrastructure projects within state-led development schemes,¹¹³ facilitating access to international financial markets,¹¹⁴ or generating sources of patronage that augmented state resources while still being subject to a degree of political control.¹¹⁵

Successive studies have likewise emphasized the role of various “captains of industry” in augmenting Al Saud rule.¹¹⁶ Most prominent of these are major conglomerates centered around non-royal families such as the Bin Laden Group, primarily a construction contracting firm whose patriarch Mohammad bin Laden rose to prominence as contractor to King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (head of the unified Kingdom from 1932-1953) as successive Saudi royals.¹¹⁷ The largest of these “family firms”—including the Bin Laden Group as well as the Olayan Group, the Alireza Company, and the Al Rajhi Bank—accounted for a considerable part of Saudi Arabia’s non-oil GDP across much of the 20th century, with a 1990 estimate suggesting that their activities accounted for as much as 1/3 of

¹¹² Steven Heydemann, *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited* (Springer, 2004), 8.

¹¹³ Eva Rana Bellin, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 51–52.

¹¹⁴ Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes*, 53–61; Khalid Almezaini, “Private Sector Actors in the UAE and Their Role in the Process of Economic and Political Reform,” in *Business Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Steffen Hertog, Giacomo Luciani, and Marc Valeri (Hurst Publishers, 2013), 43–66; Nathan Hodson, “Breaking Loose: Reduced Private Sector Dependence on Governments in GCC Economies,” *Business Politics in the Middle East. London: Hurst and Company*, 2013, 101–32; Mazaheri, “The Saudi Monarchy and Economic Familism in an Era of Business Environment Reforms.”

¹¹⁵ Diwan et al. “Introduction: Crony Capitalism in the Middle East—What Do We Know and Why Does it Matter?,” *Crony Capitalism in the Middle East*, Ch. 1

¹¹⁶ Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause III, “Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On,” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 4 (2012): 74–88; Al-Farhan, “Fī Al-s’ūdiyya, Matā Sataqūl al-Hukūma Ana Fahimtukum? [In Saudi Arabia, When Will the Government Say I Understand You?];” Mazaheri, “The Saudi Monarchy and Economic Familism in an Era of Business Environment Reforms.”

¹¹⁷ Steve Coll, *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century* (Penguin, 2008), 39–45.

Saudi Arabia's GDP.¹¹⁸ While the extent of the business sector's influence over policy has been a subject of debate, prominent firms and merchant families have nevertheless benefited from privileged ties to Saudi rulers and have enjoyed various policy privileges accordingly, and have been able to block policy reforms that might benefit Saudi job-seekers or expatriate workers at the expense of firms and employers.¹¹⁹

The Saudi private sector encompasses a quite wide range of individual firms; only a smaller number of more influential businesses have direct access to Saudi rulers to press for specific policy outcomes (Figure 3). Among Saudi construction contractors, for example, only a small portion maintain an institutional affiliation with the Saudi Council of Chambers: less than 15% of more than 139,000 contracting firms in 2002.¹²⁰ Only 3,690 (2.6% of all firms) held a certification permitting open bidding on large government contracts (worth >\$1 million). Finally, even within *this* narrow tranche of firms, only 160 (<5% of certified contractors) obtained a Class-1 certification permitting them to bid on the largest government projects ranging into the hundreds of millions of dollars. Executives of the very largest contracting firms, such as Saudi Oger (owned by Lebanese-Saudi businessman Sa'ad al-Hariri) or the Saudi Binladin Group, have enjoyed personal ties with successive Saudi rulers that facilitate direct access for making policy requests or negotiating specific projects. Still, the Saudi Council of Chambers system provides an institutional forum for a wider range of businesses to coordinate policy demands and gain access to Saudi policymakers.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ John A. Davis, Elye L. Pitts, and Keely Cormier, "Challenges Facing Family Companies in the Gulf Region," *Family Business Review* 13, no. 3 (2000): 217.

¹¹⁹ For a more expansive view of the business community's lobbying power, see Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth*, 272–82. While Hertog emphasizes the limitations on business lobbying power in Saudi policymaking, he still portrays the broader community as exercising a diffuse veto over policies that might cut against their interests. *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 252–53.

¹²⁰ Ministry of Planning, "Eighth Development Plan" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, June 2004), 124.

¹²¹ Al-Farhan, "Fī Al-s'ūdiyya, Matā Sataqūl al-Hukūma Ana Fahimtukum? [In Saudi Arabia, When Will the Government Say I Understand You?]."

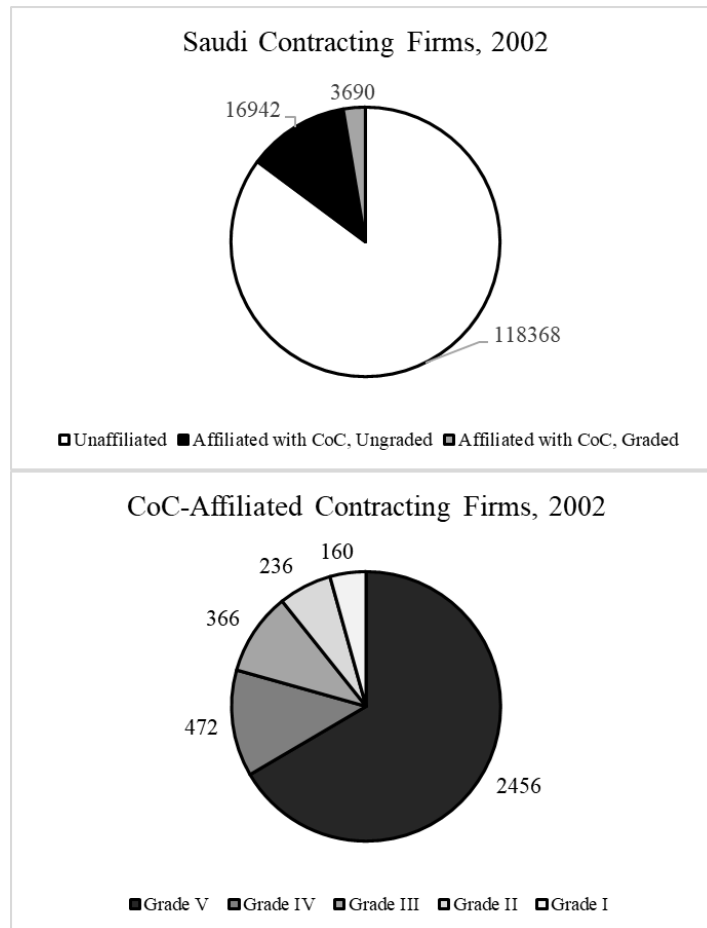


Figure 3: Saudi contracting firms in 2002, by affiliation with the Council of Chambers and (among those affiliated), capacity grade assigned by MoMRA. Source: Eighth Development Plan, pg. 214.

By the 21st century, a nominal Saudi policy aim directly at odds with business leaders’ interests was the effort to “Saudize” the Kingdom’s private-sector workforce. Within Saudi Arabia, policies regulating expatriate workers have historically privileged private-sector employers in affording firms access to a low-cost, sternly disciplined labor supply.¹²² Saudi citizens, by contrast, were afforded well-paying jobs in the burgeoning bureaucracy; public-sector employment and a rage of other

¹²² Typically, non-citizens may reside within Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies only by virtue of their employment (or that of a family member). The region’s kafala (“sponsorship”) system built on British colonial practices of labor regulation to sub-contract much of labor migration policy to individual firms. Changing jobs and even leaving the country can occur only with the express permission of employers, limiting the bargaining leverage of most expatriate employees – particularly low-wage, low-skilled workers, whose home countries are hesitant to apply international pressure to improve working conditions. Omar Hesham AlShehabi, “Policing Labour in Empire: The Modern Origins of the Kafala Sponsorship System in the Gulf Arab States,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 2 (2021): 291–310.

subsidies formed the backbone of the Saudi welfare state (as well as an effective form of social control) in the mid-20th century.¹²³ As workers hailing from South Asia, East Asia, and other Arab countries migrated to the Kingdom, major employers in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies derived considerable wealth from its ability to staff blue-collar jobs in retail, construction, and other manual-labor and service positions.¹²⁴ However, by the 21st century business interests in maintaining access to expatriate workers was increasingly in conflict with a growing number of Saudi job-seekers and recent Saudi graduates underemployed in low-level jobs.

Centralizing Technocrats

Authoritarian coalition-building frequently features a spatial component, with rulers and regimes relying on support from particular regions, ethnic homelands, or major cities to secure their hold on power.¹²⁵ The Saudi regime is no different, with patterns of state-building and state-led investments privileging Saudi communities in the heartland of the Najd (the desert plains at the center of the Arabian Peninsula) and other major cities above the Saudi periphery in the North (formerly part of the Shammari Emirate) and South (formerly part of the Idrisid Emirate). Although the Kingdom in its current form is an amalgamation of several prior political units, the Najd formed the “conquering core” of what would become the “Third Saudi State” (1932-present), following prior failed attempts by the Al Saud family to extend its control over the Arabian Peninsula. While economic elites within various regions were incorporated into Saudi state-building project on favorable terms, most regions in the North and South of the Kingdom had few economic elites to speak of. A disproportionate share of the Kingdom’s early bureaucracy (as well as its more recent

¹²³ Ibrahim Mohamed Al-Awaji, “Bureaucracy and Society in Saudi Arabia” (PhD Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1971), 53–81; Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 108–9. For a more in-depth look at the role of public employment playing a similar role in in de-mobilizing society in Kuwait and Qatar, see Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹²⁴ Herb, *The Wages of Oil*, 26.

¹²⁵ Roland Hodler and Paul A. Raschky, “Regional Favoritism,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 2 (2014): 995–1033.

technocratic elite) has therefor hailed from an East-West “growth axis” of the Kingdom’s major cities: running from the Western Hejaz mountains, through the Al Saud “heartland” of Riyadh (the capital city) and the neighboring region of Qassim, and on to the oil industries of the Eastern Province.

.As a result of these patterns, in successive 20th-century studies of the Saudi bureaucracy, Saudis from the Central and Western regions accounted for nearly 80% of a survey of top bureaucrats in the late 1960s, and nearly the same in data provided by the Civil Service bureau on a similar collection of top bureaucrats in 1995.¹²⁶ By contrast, few top Saudi officials come from the Kingdom’s peripheral regions: a series of cities and towns scattered across the Northern deserts and Southern regions close to the Yemeni border.¹²⁷ In 2000, for example, the Saudi cabinet included only one Minister from the outside the core regions of the Kingdom: Mohammed bin ‘Ali Fayez, born in the Northern region of Ha’il, who headed the Ministry of Civil Service.

Ideological motives and personal biases among this bureaucratic elite have overlapped to reinforce a regional bias in policymaking, encouraging the concentration of infrastructural and industrial investments in the Kingdom’s core regions. Even when motivated by promoting the Kingdom’s economic development rather than expanding and enriching personal networks, many senior bureaucrats found good reason to promote developmental policies that prioritized the Kingdom’s core regions. As the five core regions of the development corridor were home to the large and economically important Saudi cities, they provided the strongest infrastructural basis for investing in further industrial or commercial ventures.¹²⁸ Most of the major businesses that could

¹²⁶ Al-Awaji, “Bureaucracy and Society in Saudi Arabia,” 175. Hamed Al-Wardy, “Bureaucracy, Representation, and Equity in Saudi Arabia: An Outcome Analysis” (PhD Dissertation, University of Akron, 1996), 72.

¹²⁷ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 41–45, 97.

¹²⁸ Abdulla Mubarak, “State-Led Petrochemical Industrialization and Urban-Regional Development in Saudi Arabia” (PhD Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1994), 194–98.

benefit from increased investments or lobby for particular policies were based in these regions as well; Figure 4 shows the breakdown of major contracting firms by region.

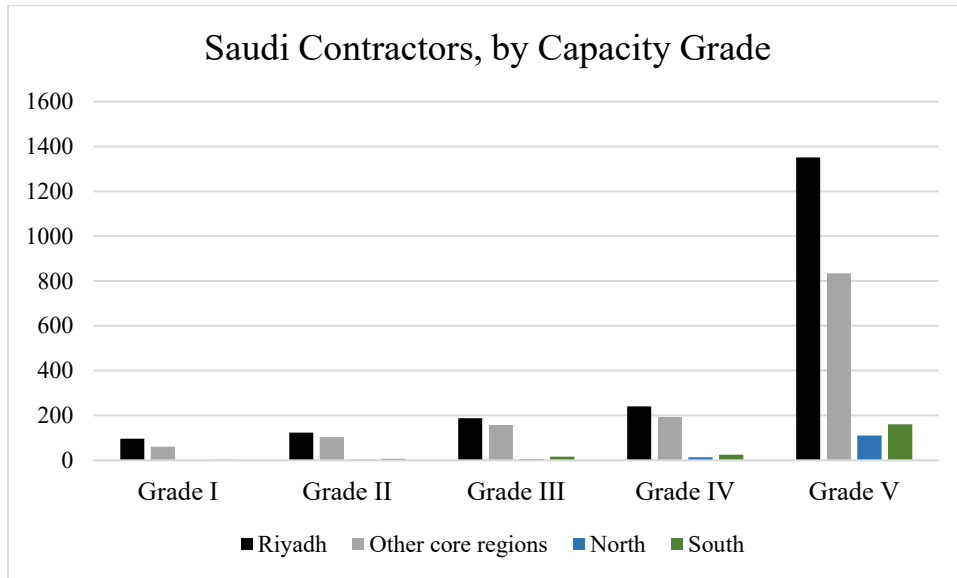


Figure 4: Saudi contracting firms, by location and capacity grade assigned by MoMRA. Source: Eighth Development Plan, pg. 214

Accordingly, the Kingdom’s five-year “development plans” were often “excessively pre-occupied with macro- and sectoral planning,” neither laying out “explicit rural and regional development policies” nor indicating “strong and serious commitment” to address spatial inequalities.¹²⁹ Senior bureaucrats’ geographic origins and attendant social networks further discouraged investments in the peripheral North and South by affecting the legibility of these areas. Bureaucrats hailing from and resident in major cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah were frequently unaware of and uninterested in local economic conditions in the peripheral regions of the North and South. One Saudi graduate student thus attributed limited development focus on the Saudi periphery to “the mental and physical distance between the regions and the top officials of the central

¹²⁹ Abdulla Ali Al-Ibrahim, “Regional and Urban Development in Saudi Arabia” (PhD Dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1982), 320, 329.

bureaucracy, who insist on maintaining full authority and power over the regions while... not knowing how to deal with them.”¹³⁰

As bureaucratic insiders helped steer resources to communities in the Najd and along the East-West growth corridor, communities in the Northern and Southern regions not only lacked access to policymaking but lost out economically as even existing local industries stagnated.¹³¹ While prioritizing the development of the Najd region offered Saudi communities most socially and geographically proximate to the ruling family a greater stake in the continuation of the regime, the North and South seemed relatively immaterial to the Saudi regime’s hold on power, possessing neither economic leverage nor coercive might nor much symbolic authority to bargain with. While policy planning documents made mention of efforts to promote “balanced development” across the Kingdom’s regions as early as the 1980s, this did not translate into a reform priority for Saudi rulers through the end of the 20th century.

¹³⁰ Abdolazeez Shafi Al-Otaibi, “Bureaucracy and the Challenges of Regional Disparity: The Case of Saudi Arabia” (PhD Dissertation, State University of New York at Albany, 1988), 197. Otaibi, dissertation, 1988, 197.

¹³¹ Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 41–45, 97.

3.4 Timeline for Case Studies

I focus on the politics of Saudi Arabia in the 21st century (particularly 2000-2019) for several reasons. The first is appropriate fit for my theory. By the 2000s, the Saudi regime had governed for almost as long as the entire duration of the Soviet Union, raising the likelihood that past policy choices would bring growing pressure on the political arrangements that prevailed in the decades immediately following the Kingdom's unification (completed in 1932). This passage of time represents the antecedent condition likely to present Saudi rulers with a reformers dilemma in terms of abiding by past political guarantees or attempting reforms. Additionally, the 2000-2019 time frame encompasses the demonstrations and regime failures of the Arab Spring, representing a major information shock that should plausibly trigger new, sustained policy reforms within the Kingdom.

Second, while local media coverage of some policy dynamics extends back for much of the 20th century as well, focusing on a more recent time period permits present-day interviews with individuals alive and active in policymaking over the past two decades to provide important context for the interpretation of textual sources and events. The 21st century also provides much better coverage in terms of quantitative data. With respect to the Saudi labor market, state statistical agencies the number of employed and unemployed Saudis were not systematically tracked until 1999; numbers on private-sector employment per se are likewise largely unavailable until 2005. Finally, this time period includes the years leading up to the major policy changes adopted as part of the Vision 2030 program under MBS, permitting me to assess points of continuity and change in areas of policymaking relevant throughout the time period.

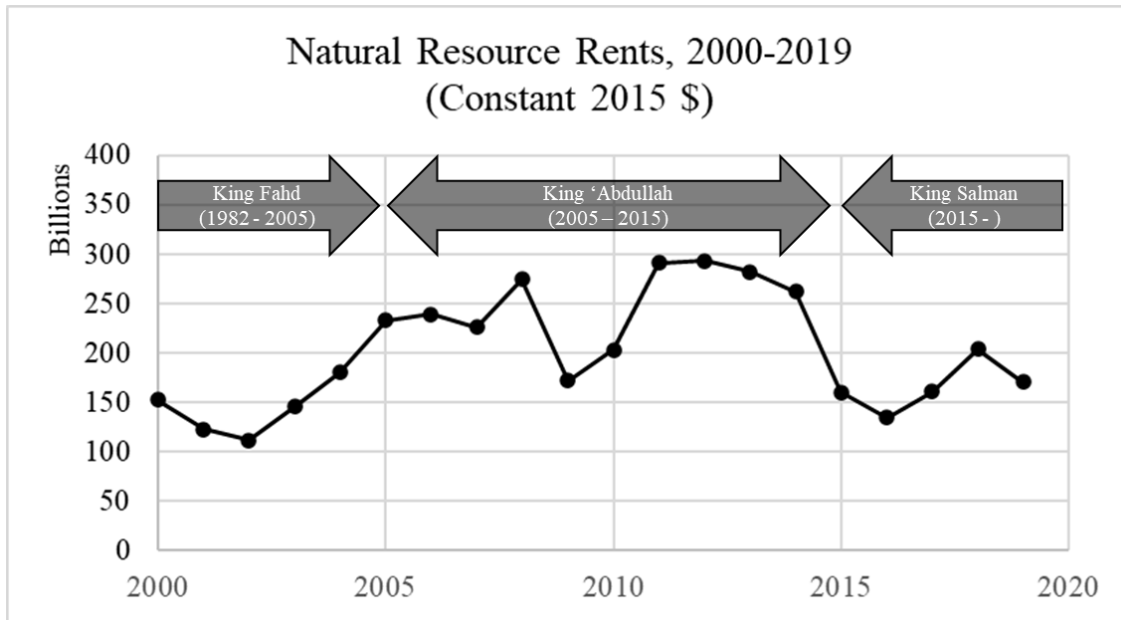


Figure 5: Timeline showing Saudi oil rents as well as reigning monarch, 2000-2019. Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank.

I further divide these two decades into four sections (Figure 5), each roughly five years in length, specifying which various case-specific dynamics I expect to affect policy outcomes in each.

2000-2005

The first section of time extends from 2000 until August of 2005, when Crown Prince ‘Abdullah formally succeeded King Fahd bin ‘Abd al-Aziz upon the latter’s death at more than 80 years of age. Saudi Arabia confronted a number of diplomatic, security, and social challenges during this section of time. Chief among these was the fallout in the U.S.-Saudi relationship following the participation of 15 Saudi citizens in the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the U.S. capital—an attack itself funded and organized by Saudi-born terror financier Osama bin Laden and his immediate advisors within the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda.¹³² While official Saudi reactions to the Al-Qaeda terror attacks were initially muted, this changed as Saudi Arabia faced its

¹³² Clifford Chanin and F. Gregory Gause III, “US-Saudi Relations: Bump in the Road or End of the Road?,” *Middle East Policy* 10, no. 4 (2003): 116; David Ottaway, “The King and Us - U.S.-Saudi Relations in the Wake of 9/11 Essay,” *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 3 (2009): 121–31.

own domestic terror insurgency in the years that followed, prompting an extensive counter-terrorism campaign targeting this threat.¹³³

These years witnessed Crown Prince ‘Abdullah’s gradual assumption of more and more official responsibilities (and exercise of more power) within the Saudi regime as Fahd continued to weaken from the aftereffects of a stroke in 1995 as well as old age. This afforded ‘Abdullah greater latitude to appoint officials with personal loyalty to him in some technocratic positions, even if major state institutions remained under the control of half-brothers such as Prince Sultan (Ministry of Defense) and Prince Nayef (Ministry of the Interior).¹³⁴ International scrutiny following the 9/11 terror attacks encouraged Saudi leaders to permit limited experiments with representative institutions during this time, such as elected municipal councils (scheduled for 2005) and a “National Dialogue” conference designed to air select and limited social grievances regarding the state of the Saudi economy and society.¹³⁵

¹³³ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 199–226.

¹³⁴ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 137–41.

¹³⁵ Madawi Al-Rasheed, “Modernizing Authoritarian Rule in Saudi Arabia,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2009): 587–601; Joseph Kéchichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Saudi Arabia* (Routledge, 2012), 71–101, 131–58; Mark C. Thompson, *Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change: National Dialogue and Civil Society* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

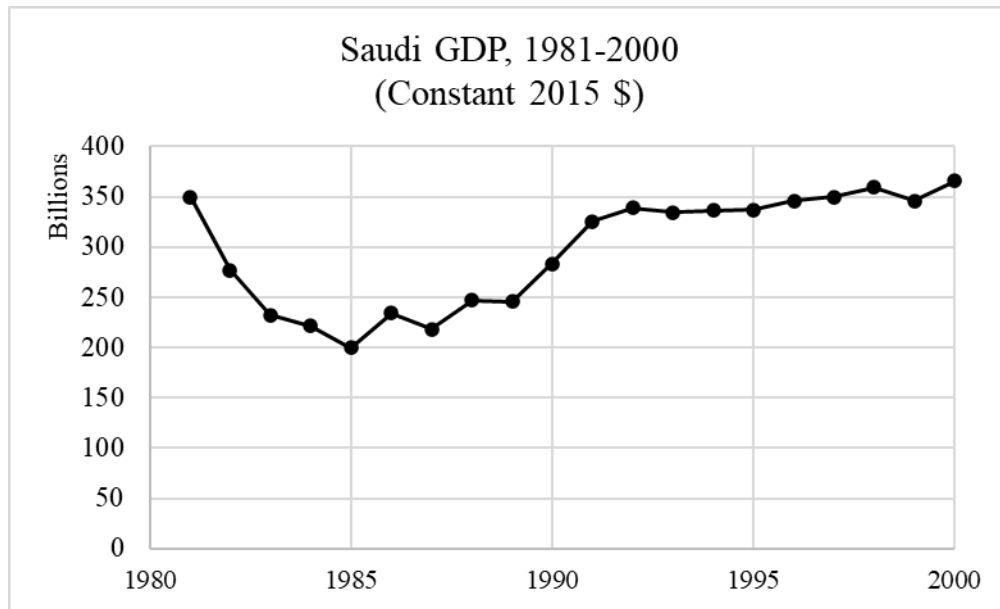


Figure 6: Saudi GDP, in constant 2015 U.S. \$. Source: World Development Indicators.

At the same time, local media played host to growing public concern over the fallout from nearly twenty years of stagnant economic growth, during which per-capita income barely increased and jobs for Saudi citizens struggled to keep pace with demographic pressures (Figure 6). Saudi economic planners' assumptions that the Kingdom's private sector would gradually swap out expatriate labor for Saudi citizens proved ill-founded; Saudi citizens represented about 40.2% of the Kingdom's total workforce (public and private) in the 1992 census, barely increasing to 40.8% in the 2004 census. While an increase in oil prices during this time raised the possibility of future government spending to ameliorate social concerns, as of 2004 Saudi economic planning documents still warned against putting too much stock in a continued and uninterrupted increase in the price of oil.

In this time period, I assess whether mere knowledge of social grievances regarding poverty or unemployment were sufficient to prompt substantive policy reforms within Saudi Arabia. I examine specific instances of actual mobilization within the Kingdom to determine whether these resulted in the Saudi regime shifting resources to better address local demands.

2005-2011

This section of time saw Saudi Arabia enjoy relative domestic stability as well as unprecedented state revenues as a result of the worldwide increase in oil prices from ~\$50-60/barrel over the course of 2004 to over \$100/barrel by the close of 2010. King ‘Abdullah, now fully installed as monarchy, oversaw an increase in state spending on all fronts during this time period, along with the announcement of various mega-projects aimed to diversify the Kingdom’s economy. While the 2008-9 financial crisis prompted a brief scare about the sustainability of these revenues, and dealt damage to some over-leveraged family firms within the Saudi private sector, it had little impact on current spending by the Saudi government. On the political front, while ‘Abdullah and other members of the royal family feared encirclement by a newly empowered Iran and a Shi‘ite led government in Iraq following the U.S. invasion of the latter, a meeting between President George W. Bush and ‘Abdullah at Bush’s ranch in Crawford, Texas in early 2005 appeared to restore full U.S. diplomatic and security support to the monarchy.¹³⁶ At home, a domestic insurgency by a branch of Al-Qaeda (in the Arabian Peninsula) sputtered out amid infighting within the group and relentless pressure from police forces with the Saudi Ministry of the Interior.¹³⁷

For this time period, I track the continued pace of reforms from 2000-2005. I assess whether the Kingdom’s limited representative institutions adopted in the previous time period played any role in the adoption or continuation of any policy reforms that did occur. I also address whether rentier-state dynamics better describe new policies adopted during this time period, during an influx of additional funds from the Kingdom’s resource revenues.

¹³⁶ Rachel Bronson, “Rethinking Religion: The Legacy of the US-Saudi Relationship,” *Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2005): 119–37.

¹³⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, “Islamist Violence and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia,” *International Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2008): 714–15.

2011-2015

During the third time period, the Saudi government was confronted by a changing regional environment in the form of the Arab Spring uprisings. The Saudi government invested considerable resources in trying to contain and subsequently roll back the impact of the uprisings, ranging from leading a direct security operation in the neighboring Kingdom of Bahrain to contain demonstrations there to offering significant financial resources to authoritarian regimes that either resisted initial waves of protest or re-established non-democratic rule after a brief interregnum. The Kingdom also dealt with some notable popular mobilization at home, albeit largely confined to predominantly Shi'a Muslim communities within the Kingdom's Eastern Province.¹³⁸ Still, the Kingdom remained able to spend significant sums at home and abroad due to continued high oil prices (remaining over \$100/barrel from early 2010 until early 2014).

For this time period, I address whether the information shock of the MENA-region uprisings played a causal role in the adoption of policy reforms inside Saudi Arabia. I also examine the extent to which policy changes came as a direct concession to protests that broke out in some parts of the Kingdom.

2015-2019

King 'Abdullah passed away in January of 2015, shortly after a prolonged slide in oil prices began to sharply reduce government revenues. The succession of 'Abdullah's half-brother Salman as King of Saudi Arabia in turn kicked off several years of political maneuvering as to who would in

¹³⁸ Simon Mabon, "Kingdom in Crisis? The Arab Spring and Instability in Saudi Arabia," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 3 (2012): 530–53; Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford University Press, 2013), 110–25; Guido Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring," Research Report (SWP Research Paper, 2014), <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/253147>; Eman Ragab, "Beyond Money and Diplomacy: Regional Policies of Saudi Arabia and UAE after the Arab Spring," *The International Spectator* 52, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 37–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1309101>.

turn follow Salman.¹³⁹ While Prince Nayef's son, Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN), was quickly appointed as Crown Prince and retained control of the Ministry of the Interior at the outset of 2015, King Salman also worked to elevate the position of his own son Mohammed bin Salman (MBS)—first as Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister. By the summer of 2017, MBS had decisively won out over MBN in this leadership contest, taking his older cousin's place as Crown Prince and rapidly becoming the Kingdom's de facto ruler. In contrast to past Saudi rulers' heavier reliance on their Islamic credentials to burnish their legitimacy, MBS has leaned more heavily on what might be described as a "high modernist" ideology: attempting to re-order Saudi society from above through the institutions of the administrative state with expanded economic opportunity and the dominant aim of Saudi policy rather than ascribing to something or other. This might represent something different.

These changes were not widely anticipated. An expert assessment of the Kingdom's political future in 2015, just as MBS was beginning to accumulate power, concluded that Saudi Arabia "will not have a Gorbachev moment, because the royal family will not give up their control of the nation, nor will they loosen their ties with the Wahhabis and their faith."¹⁴⁰ Given the lack of a clear political science framework for authoritarian policymaking or policy reforms, popular explanations for the Vision 2030 reforms have generally been rooted in the very micro level (the specific personality of the Crown Prince) or the very macro level (economic pressures resulting from the recent drop in oil prices).¹⁴¹ Neither set of explanations is fully satisfying. Despite the focus on the personalization of

¹³⁹ Stig Stenslie, "The End of Elite Unity and the Stability of Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 61–82; Judith A. Cochran, "The Rise in Power of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 369–85.

¹⁴⁰ Bruce Riedel, "The Prince of Counterterrorism: The Story of Washington's Favorite Saudi, Muhammad Bin Nayef," Brookings Institution, September 29, 2015, <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2015/the-prince-of-counterterrorism.html>.

¹⁴¹ Yu-Ming Liou and Paul Musgrave, "Here's Why Saudi Arabia Is Loosening Its Restrictions on Women," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/06/27/heres-why-saudi-arabia-is-loosening-its-restrictions-on-women/>; Daniel Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Beyond Great Forces," *Foreign Aff.* 98 (2019): 148; Karen Elliott House, *Profile of a Prince: Promise and Peril in Mohammed Bin Salman's Vision 2030* (Belfer Center

power under the Crown Prince, even past Saudi Kings with considerable personal authority, such as King Faisal, were constrained by the interests of important social constituencies. Likewise, past economic downturns have not triggered the kind of wide-ranging policy changes witnessed in the past few years in Saudi Arabia.

For this time period, while I do not assess aspects of MBS' policy agenda related to religious authorities, I consider whether his rise to power (or the contemporaneous fall in government resource revenues) led the Saudi regime to abandon any past policy reforms. For policy reforms sustained during this time period, I further assess whether they represent a continuation of the political logic adopted in earlier time periods.

I focus on cases of attempted policy reforms in Saudi Arabia as an example of a regime where prior theories would predict few grounds on which to expect policy reforms, ... , and as a substantively important case. My language skills and prior experiences abroad encouraged the selection of cases drawn from Arabic-speaking regions of the Middle East and North Africa. Ongoing political violence or outright civil war rendered research access impossible for a number of countries, while active repression of academic research (such as the murder of graduate student Giulio Regini by Egyptian security services in 2016) rendered yet others a dangerous environment to undertake academic inquiries.

Among the remaining countries governed currently or previously by authoritarian regimes, Saudi Arabia holds several advantages as a site of study. On the one hand, existing theories of authoritarian politics and policymaking suggest that Saudi Arabia is a poor candidate for the adoption of policy reforms. Beyond this, the Kingdom lacks the kind of quasi-democratic political

for Science and International Affairs, 2019); Stephen Grand and Katherine Wolff, "Assessing Saudi Vision 2030: A 2020 Review" (Atlantic Council, June 17, 2020), 4–6, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/assessing-saudi-vision-2030-a-2020-review/>.

institutions thought to facilitate policy concessions to potential opposition, such as political parties or an elected parliament. While the institution of dynastic monarchy has itself been identified as an important source of institutional strength, accounts stressing this have typically focused on its utility in securing relations between rulers and existing political insiders, not in facilitating policy concessions to political outsiders.¹⁴² Hence, the adoption of policy reforms with meaningful enforcement would constitute a surprising finding in need of explanation. Above all, Saudi Arabia often been portrayed as the archetypal example of a “rentier” state, with the regime’s access to considerable resource wealth facilitating a wide range of clientelist relationships and short-term handouts to address the needs of particular individuals while being locked in to a lack of reforms.

On the other hand, if information shocks *do* play a role in promoting policy reforms, Saudi Arabia provides a useful proving ground for this theory. Unlike Tunisia or Iraq, Saudi Arabia was governed by nominally the same authoritarian system of government that had prevailed since the inception of the Kingdom’s current form in 1932. This facilitates inquiries into relatively recent (21st century) policy changes, including those that might plausibly have been motivated by the 2010-2012 Arab Spring uprisings that removed a number of regional autocrats from power. Additionally, despite media depictions of a “Kingdom of Silence,” this time period is reasonably well documented by local and international media coverage, while still within living memory for officials active in government at the time of adoption of particular policy changes. Finally, Saudi Arabia lacks the truly stratospheric oil wealth of the so-called super-rentiers: Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, each of which possessed oil resources generating upwards of \$100,000 per citizen in the early 20th century.

¹⁴² Menaldo, “The Middle East and North Africa’s Resilient Monarchs.”

Chapter 4

Balanced Development in the Saudi Periphery

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the drive to reform Saudi Arabia's economic development policies in the early 2000s, an effort that purported alter patterns of state distribution to encourage more equitable investment in economically marginalized areas. Establishing a policy mechanism to direct greater investments in the peripheral North and South of the Kingdom might have compensated for the fact that these communities lacked any meaningful policy influence through representation in either the upper-level Saudi bureaucracy or the business community. However, while new ideas about economic planning encouraged Saudi rulers to direct greater state investments toward the Kingdom's "lagging" regions in the early 2000s, these ideas were not backed up by any signal of a future threat of mobilization emanating from the Saudi periphery. Accordingly, while peripheral regions benefited alongside core regions of the Kingdom during the initial years of the second oil boom (2003-2014), marquee investments in regional projects were abandoned at the first sign of new fiscal constraints. The MBS era has further reinforced the centralization of investments, with central regions but mainly the capital region of Riyadh experiencing greater growth in jobs and income than elsewhere in the country.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I first provide brief background on Saudi economic development policies in the latter 20th centuries and the ways that they exacerbated spatial inequalities between Kingdom's core urban agglomerations and more peripheral and rural areas. Next, I show how a faction within the Kingdom's technocratic class encouraged Crown Prince (and later King) 'Abdullah to voice nominal support for policies that would achieve "balanced

development” by addressing these spatial disparities, encouraging more equitable opportunities across the Kingdom’s regions. Third, I address whether promises of increased development translated into meaningful improvements in the Saudi periphery relative to the core regions in the East, West and Center of the country. In a fourth section, I assess whether even nominal support for balanced development survived into the MBS era. A fifth section concludes.

4.2 Unbalanced Development, 1970-2000

Through the 1990s, economic development and state investments across the Kingdom were directed disproportionately to regions well-represented among the technocratic and business elite with insider access to Saudi rulers: the Center, East, and West of the country. Outside observers as well as Saudi academics have highlighted the underdeveloped status of Saudi Arabia’s Northern and Southern regions. Surveying a wide range of indicators from 1945 to the early 2000s, Steffen Hertog concludes that the South as a whole “has been the main loser in the process [of economic development],” joining the Northern regions at the bottom of “an internal hierarchy that is very difficult to effectively challenge.”¹⁴³ Saudi academics from the late 1980s concurred, observing that “the Southern and Northern remain predominantly rural regions and are practically untouched by industrialization and related services,” creating “wide regional differentials in income and social welfare.”¹⁴⁴

Much of the Saudi bureaucracy placed little emphasis on spatial inequalities in economic planning or in the execution of development policy during this time. The 5-year development plans of the 1970s were “excessively pre-occupied with macro- and sectoral planning,” neither laying out “explicit rural and regional development policies” nor indicating “strong and serious commitment”

¹⁴³ Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer, and Stéphane Lacroix, “National Cohesion and the Political Economy of Regions in Post-World War II Saudi Arabia,” in *Saudi Arabia in Transition* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 97.

¹⁴⁴ Al-Ibrahim, “Regional and Urban Development in Saudi Arabia,” 7.

to address spatial inequalities.¹⁴⁵ Even after the Ministry of Planning committed to achieving “balanced regional development” in the 4th Development Plan (1985), it made little effort to figure out what this would entail. The lone entity somewhat concerned with understanding how to promote regional development was the Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs (MOMRA), founded in 1975. While MoMRA bureaucrats *did* undertake economic development plans of a number of regions, and tended to break with the technocratic consensus about the need for centralized economic development, they lacked the political backing to insist that any of the Kingdom’s line ministries take them seriously.¹⁴⁶ Accordingly, in 1980 MOMRA’s Deputy Minister, Saleh al-Malik, could only hope that Saudi rulers would assign the Kingdoms regional governors greater formal responsibility for regional development.¹⁴⁷

The regional governor system did little to counteract the centralizing tendencies of the Saudi bureaucracy, however, in issuing appointments exclusively from the ranks of the Al Saud royal family or the closely related Al Sudairi clan (from the town of Al-Ghat in the present-day region of Riyadh). While these governors nominally bore primary responsibility for ensuring security and “stability” in the various regions of the Kingdom, they reported directly to the Ministry of the Interior—one Ministry among many in the Saudi cabinet, and not one principally concerned with economic development.¹⁴⁸ Hence several Saudi urban planners and academics identified Prince Khalid Al Faisal (governor of the Southern region of ‘Asir from 1971 to 2007) as a clear example of a governor taking a hands-on approach to local development, they still noted that his ability to overcome the “centralization” of development policy was quite limited.¹⁴⁹ By contrast, the

¹⁴⁵ Al-Ibrahim, 320, 329.

¹⁴⁶ Al-Otaibi, “Challenges of Regional Disparity,” 194.

¹⁴⁷ Qtd. in Nizar Hassan Samman, “Saudi Arabia and the Role of the Imarates in Regional Development” (Claremont Graduate School, 1982), 464–65.

¹⁴⁸ Samman, 389–93. 389-393. The 1992 Law of Regions reorganized the 14 *Imarat* into 13 *manatiq*, or “regions.”

¹⁴⁹ Author interview, mid-level urban planner, Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs, Riyadh, February 18, 2020; author interview, Jazan University official, Jazan City, October 9, 2019. Even a strong supporter of Prince Khalid Al

Kingdom's central regions tended to have powerful figures assigned to their governance as well as an easier time securing development funds, reinforcing the centralization of development policy. For example, governor of Riyadh (and later King) Prince Salman bin 'Abd al-'Aziz was able to create an entirely separate bureaucracy for Riyadh's development, known as the Riyadh Development Authority (RDA), to ensure a steady stream of projects for the capital region despite an overall slowdown in state spending in the 1980s. As a former administrator in the RDA noted, "other regions have tried duplicating [the RDA], but they never performed the same way as in Riyadh. Some had more powerful written laws than those given to the RDA, but they didn't have King [i.e. Prince] Salman."¹⁵⁰

Available data further indicates that spatial inequalities that arose within Saudi Arabia reflected not just pre-existing economic endowments of each region of the Kingdom at the point of state formation, but patterns of state investment that prioritized the Kingdom's East-West development axis for economic development. Subnational budget estimates prepared by Saudi economist Ahmed Binobaid indicate that state spending within the East, West, and Center of the Kingdom was nearly twice that of spending on the Northern and Southern regions on a per-capita basis.¹⁵¹ With the exception of Jazan, loans distributed by the Saudi Industrial Development Fund (SIDF), aimed at increasing the Kingdom's overall industrial capacity, exhibit a similar pattern (Figure 7).¹⁵² Even MoMRA, ostensibly more concerned with regional development, allocated considerably more municipal-projects funds in in core regions of the Kingdom (relative to the North and South) between 1970 and 1987, as shown in Figure 8 (out of a total of around SAR 52 billion in

Faisal's track record in 'Asir emphasized that the governor had only managed to achieve balanced development *within* the region rather than bringing the region up to the level of Riyadh.

¹⁵⁰ Author interview, former RDA director of planning & projects, Riyadh, October 7, 2019.

¹⁵¹ Ahmad Sulaiman Bin-Obaid, "Regional Development in Saudi Arabia: The Government's Role" (PhD Dissertation, The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1992).

¹⁵² Data derived from "Annual Report" (Ministry of Finance and National Economy: SIDF, 1992).

spending).¹⁵³ Most striking is the collapse of agricultural production in the Southern regions of the Kingdom, with Najran, ‘Asir and Jazan among the few areas of Saudi Arabia to receive regular rainfall. Despite these natural advantages, agricultural production in the South collapsed between 1975 and 1985 (with the total area under production falling by around 67%), even as it expanded in the arid deserts elsewhere in the country. Lack of funding was a leading indicator here as well; while the South retained over 38% of the Kingdom’s farmland in 1983, it received less than 10% of the loans granted by the Saudi Agricultural Bank (and a declining percentage thereafter) as most of these funds went to capital-intensive farms owned by well-connected Saudi families from the core regions of the Kingdom.¹⁵⁴

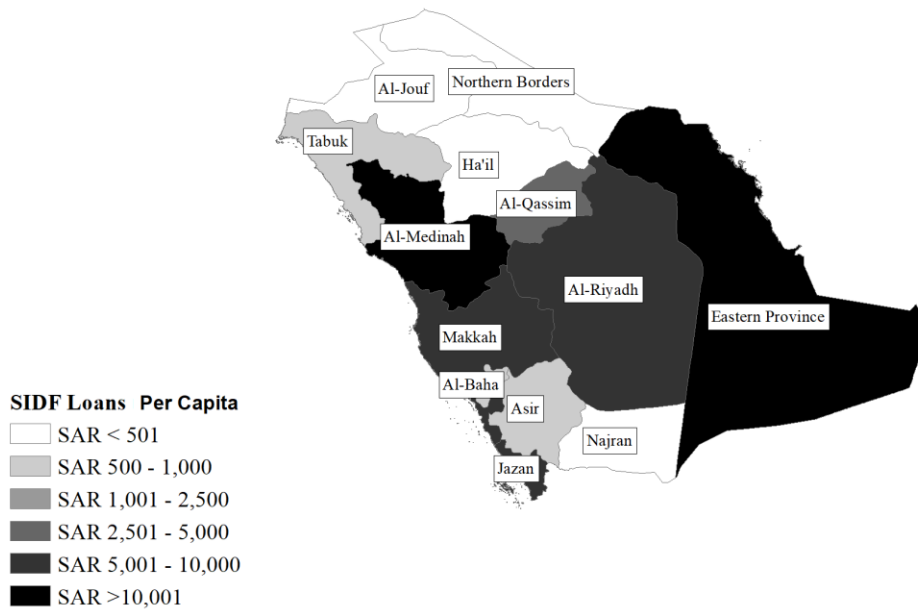


Figure 7: Saudi Industrial Development Funds per capita, 1974-1987 (population values based on 1974 census numbers for each region).

¹⁵³ Data derived from 1988 MoMRA reports, as noted in Saleh Al Hathloul and Narayanan Edadan, “The Distribution and Growth of Urban Settlements in Saudi Arabia,” *GeoJournal* 23, no. 3 (1991): 269–81.

¹⁵⁴ While farmland expanded dramatically in the North (a nearly five-fold increase) this mainly reflected a large number of capital-intensive farms owned by Saudi families from the central regions, typically benefiting from a political connections as well. Mubarak, “Urban-Regional Development in Saudi Arabia,” 191.

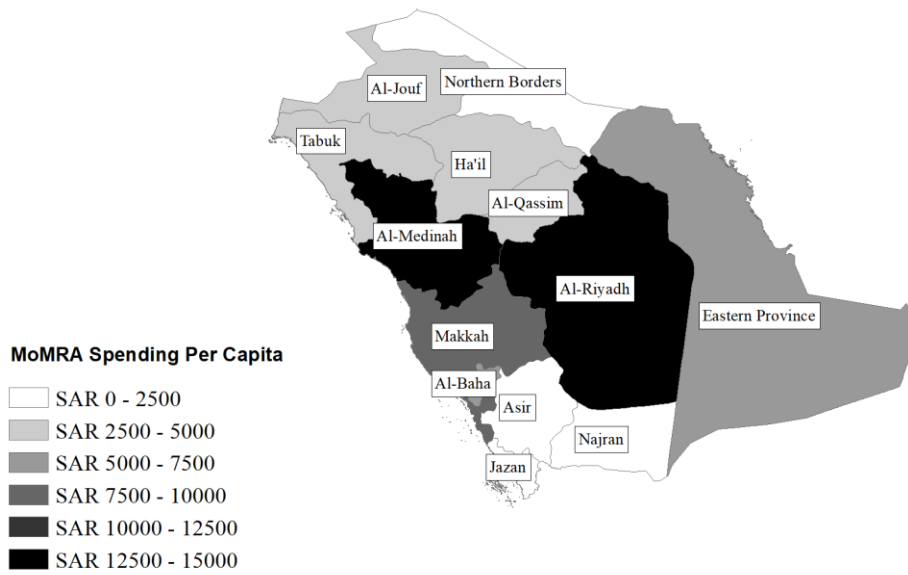


Figure 8: MoMRA spending per capita, 1974-1987 (population values reflect 1974 census numbers for each region's population). Data reflects roughly 80% of total MoMRA project expenditures during this time period.

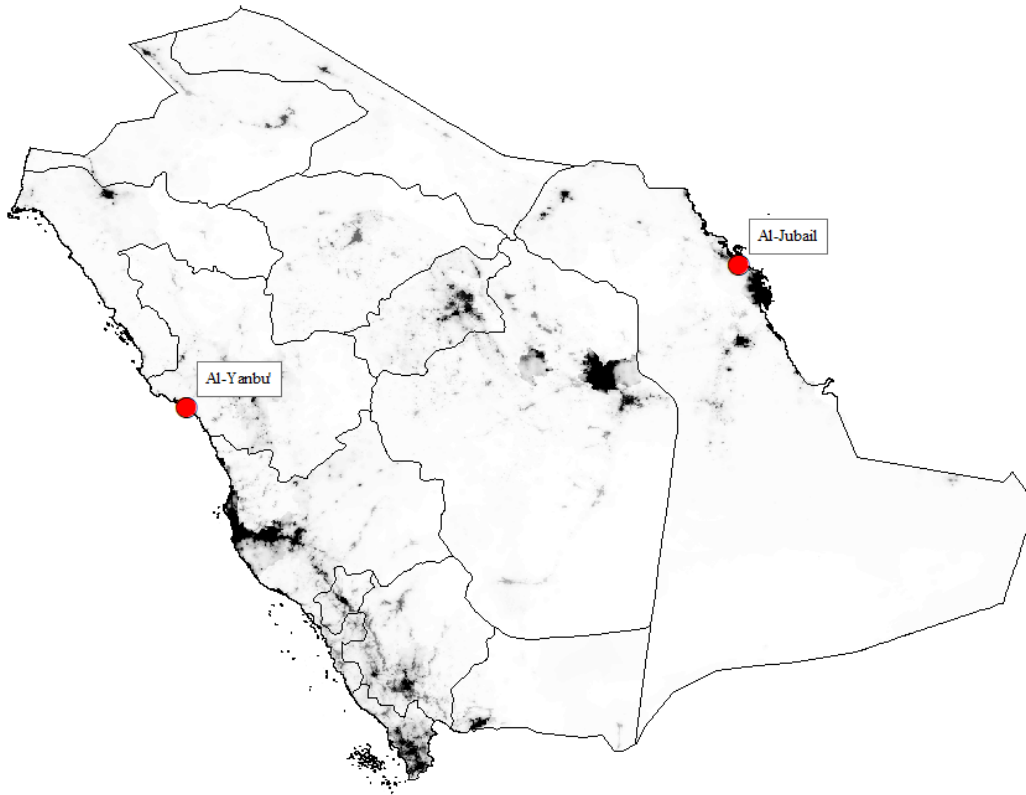


Figure 9: Location of industrial cities of Jubail and Yanbu'. Shading reflects underlying population density as of 2020.

Large development projects from this time period reflected aims of diversifying and expanding the overall Saudi economy rather than channeling new development to these “lagging” regions. For example, twin industrial cities in Jubail (near Dammam in the Eastern Province) and Yanbu’ (along the coastline of the Medina region) which focused on retaining value from oil and natural-gas extraction through petrochemicals production (Figure 9). These cities were quite successful in economic terms, representing a considerable portion of Saudi Arabia’s industrial capacity by the early 1990s (around 40% of national manufacturing capacity and over 50% of chemical manufacturing capacity).¹⁵⁵ Still, as shown in Figure 9, the placement of the cities did little to address the spatial inequalities embedded in Saudi development plans. Investments in Jubail largely served as

¹⁵⁵ Mubarak, 383.

an extension of the Eastern Province's extensive oil-and-gas industry, while Yanbu' remained an administrative "island" of industrial output, isolated from the rest of the Medina region's economic activity.¹⁵⁶

Despite occasional concerns over the potential for underdevelopment to lead to mobilization in the Saudi periphery, even major protests did not prompt a reconsideration of Saudi development policies among Saudi rulers. In 1979, for example, Saudi Shi'a communities in Qatif engaged in a series of escalating protests against their social, economic, and political marginalization within the Sunni-centric Saudi Kingdom, their grievances fueled in no small part by watching the Saudi state steer the bulk of development funds for the region into the nearby oil towns of Dammam and Dhahran.¹⁵⁷ While Saudi officials such as Vice Minister of the Interior Prince Ahmad met with Shi'a community and acknowledged the community had not received its "fair share of central government funds," mass demonstrations were ultimately met with force and put down by the combined efforts of MoI security services and soldiers from the Saudi National Guard.¹⁵⁸ Not only did pledges of development not come to pass, but the uprising seems to have made little impression on the importance of development to forestall such potential for discontent in the future. Interviewed a year after the uprising, Prince Ahmed downplayed the need for regional governors to play an active role in determining development policy, dismissing citizens' policy requests as often "completely illogical" and calling for regional governors to employ careful screening of any policy requests before forwarding them to the central ministries.¹⁵⁹ Even the Governor of the Eastern Province, Prince 'Abd al-Muhsin Juluwi, continued to downplay any active role for the regional governor in promoting localized development. He emphasized that his office's

¹⁵⁶ Mubarak, 385–86.

¹⁵⁷ Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 179–216.

¹⁵⁸ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 108–11.

¹⁵⁹ Samman, "The Role of the Imarates," 382–83.

role towards government ministries and economic policy was “one of supervision only, without interference in records, items or instruction.”¹⁶⁰

4.3 Balanced Development: Uptake & Announcement, 2000-2005

While Saudi policies continued to prioritize development in the East-West growth axis into the 1990s, the succession of ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz as King in 2005 was accompanied by official narratives stressing the need for more “inclusive” development that would distribute the nation’s wealth to all its regions. Serious pursuit of balanced development across regions as a policy goal beginning in 2005 appeared to mark a clear break from the development plans of the previous era in challenging the coalitional hierarchy of Saudi regions—promoting development in politically, economically and geographically peripheral areas rather than just the Kingdom’s economic core. The initial impetus for balanced development policies came not from widescale protests, reforms to the Kingdom’s political institutions, or an information shock regarding future threats, but through lobbying by a select faction of bureaucrats’ and academics’ successful lobbying of ‘Abdullah as Crown Prince.

However, these ideas were not accompanied by any sign of potential political threat emanating from the Northern and Southern regions of the Kingdom. Accordingly, Saudi rulers moved ahead with plans to invest in these regions only when a major influx of oil revenues meant that they could do so without meaningfully reducing spending in other regions of the Kingdom.

Policy Ideas and Elite Uptake

Balanced development originated in the ideas of several urban planners working for the relatively weak Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs (MoMRA), who cut against the grain of Saudi development policymaking to argue for greater investment in the peripheral Northern and

¹⁶⁰ Samman, 407.

Southern regions. One former MoMRA official referred to this loose intellectual community as “planners,” advocated for Saudi development policies to prioritize business development and infrastructure in peripheral regions even at the expense of aggregate economic growth; “bankers,” by contrast, cared only about aggregate economic growth (largely concentrated in the Kingdom’s major cities).¹⁶¹ Development ideas in this intellectual current, as seen in several dissertations completed in the United States and elsewhere, argued that the Saudi government’s considerable resources meant that it could “undertake extensive regional development programs without reducing the country’s economic growth rate and progress.”¹⁶² Others went further in emphasizing the lack of political representation as contributing to the underdevelopment of the North and South of the country. Abdolazeez Al Otaibi (later a consultant to numerous ministries, including MoMRA) thus argued for an institutional mechanism to support (re)distribution, by adopting an elected legislature that could express the needs of local communities and serve as a counterweight to the centralizing tendencies of the state bureaucracy.¹⁶³

The concept of balanced development gained a royal hearing in the late 1990s in the form of then-Crown Prince ‘Abdullah. MoMRA officials and advisors had incorporated many of their ideas about targeted investments in peripheral regions into a National Spatial Strategy (NSS) by the mid-1980s, only for the proposal to languish with the Saudi Council of Ministers from 1988. Following the third submission of the plan in 1996, however, MoMRA officials managed to secure an audience with then-Crown Prince ‘Abdullah to press their case.¹⁶⁴ In ‘Abdullah, the planners found a more receptive audience than in years past, possibly due to the Crown Prince having acquired greater de facto power within the ruling family after 1995 (following a stroke suffered by King Fahad that

¹⁶¹ Author interview, former MoMRA under-secretary and advisor, September 17, 2018.

¹⁶² Al-Ibrahim, “Regional and Urban Development in Saudi Arabia,” 394.

¹⁶³ Al-Otaibi, “Challenges of Regional Disparity,” 263–68.

¹⁶⁴ Author interview, former MoMRA under-secretary and advisor, September 17, 2018.

largely incapacitated him). Per one MoMRA bureaucrat present for initial discussions, the Crown Prince “found in the strategy proof that we have a problem [of regional disparities]”; the appeals of various urban planners evidently connected with ‘Abdullah’s experiences in the sparsely populated Northern regions of the country, where the National Guard armed forces he led recruited most of its members.¹⁶⁵ ‘Abdullah then worked to build a consensus within the key figures of the Council of Ministers behind at least rhetorical commitment to the idea of balanced development, finally signing off on the proposal in his capacity as Prime Minister in August of 2000.¹⁶⁶

Prince ‘Abdullah’s newfound interest in regional development was likely reinforced by an official visit he made to Jazan in 2000. The region’s underdevelopment due to state policies had been compounded by the particularly unscrupulous rule of governors from the royal-adjacent Sudairi family. One academic in Jazan referred to the last Sudairi governor—Mohammad bin Turki—as a corrupt and tyrannical “pharaoh,” while an online discussion about the family line complained of Jazan suffering “underdevelopment, neglect, and administrative corruption” during their tenure.¹⁶⁷ Still, little word of this neglect circulated in Riyadh, with the Sudairi family striving to repress any complaint of their local rule. Instead, Jazan attracted official interest due to an outbreak of the Rift Valley Fever (RVF) virus in September of 2000, which quickly afflicted several hundred individuals in Jazan (along with several in neighboring ‘Asir).¹⁶⁸ Crown Prince ‘Abdullah seized on the Saudi government’s subsequent response to the virus to make a show of the state’s (and

¹⁶⁵ Author interview, mid-level bureaucrat involved in urban planning at MoMRA, February 18, 2020; “Al-Istratijiyya al-’amraniyya al-Wataniyya [National Spatial Strategy]” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs, 1996), 3.

¹⁶⁶ Council of Ministers, “Al-Muwafiqah ‘ala al-Istratijiyya al-’amraniyya al-Wataniyya [Approval of National Spatial Strategy],” 127 Decision § (2000).ap

¹⁶⁷ Author interview, academic at Jazan University, Jazan City, October 4, 2019; Safi, “‘Amir Jazan al-Sabiq Yastawala ‘Ala Quriyya Kamila... Bi-Ahliha Wa Masakiniha [Former Governor of Jazan Takes over Entire Village... Including Its Inhabitants],” *Al-Shabaka al-Liberaliyya al-Hurra [Free Liberal Network]*, December 27, 2011, <https://libral.org/vb/archive/index.php/t-121446.html>.

¹⁶⁸ Compton J. Tucker et al., “Reanalysis of the 2000 Rift Valley Fever Outbreak in Southwestern Arabia,” *PLoS One* 15, no. 12 (2020): e0233279.

‘Abdullah’s) commitment to the region. After wrapping up an official visit to France in early October, ‘Abdullah flew directly to Jazan for a meeting that included several of his close political allies, Minister of Interior Prince Nayef, and nearly all relevant ministers.¹⁶⁹

Policy Status Quo Prevails

Neither the concerns raised by heterodox urban planners nor the events in Jizan amounted to a credible threat from peripheral regions, however. The most serious concern raised by the “planner” faction of technocrats in their academic work was the potential for unbalanced development to drive patterns of internal migration within the Kingdom, generating “serious social and economic costs” within Kingdom’s major cities.¹⁷⁰ These potential costs formed the crux of the call to action within the NSS, which warned prolonged internal migration to major cities could result in “many urban dangers, from crowded roads and pollution to unemployment, crime, and poverty.”¹⁷¹ Still, there was little to indicate that the Saudi Kingdom faced a clear and present danger of destabilizing mobilization from the peripheral Northern and Southern regions. Even dissertations that posited a potential threat to “national cohesion and political stability” due to regional imbalances did so only in hypotheticals.¹⁷² Though there was a vague sense that even “the appearance of inequity” in development planning might undermine the legitimacy of the Saudi state in the long run, little evidence was advanced as to why Saudi Arabia’s political leadership needed to care about these issues in the short run.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ “Al-‘amir ‘Abdullah Fi Jazan: “Usra Wahida Fi al-Sira” Wa al-Dira’ [Prince ‘Abdullah in Jazan: One Family through Thick and Thin],” *Al-Yamamah*, October 8, 2000, 10.

¹⁷⁰ Al-Ibrahim, “Regional and Urban Development in Saudi Arabia,” 280.

¹⁷¹ “Al-Istratijiyya al-‘amraniyya al-Wataniyya [National Spatial Strategy],” 3.

¹⁷² Al-Otaibi, “Challenges of Regional Disparity,” 251.

¹⁷³ Al-Wardy, “Bureaucracy, Representation, and Equity in Saudi Arabia,” 239. Wardy spent considerable time at MoMRA and the Institute for public administration before becoming Deputy Governor of the *imara* of the Northern region of Al-Jouf in 1999; he was assassinated in 2003 as part of a wave of localized violence against Al Saud rule. “Dr. Hamad al-Wardy,” *Al-Yaum*, February 17, 2003, <https://www.alyaum.com/a/66645>.

Beyond ‘Abdullah’s personal interest in regional development disparities, there was no sign that this had become an issue pressing enough to warrant diverting resources from the Kingdom’s major population centers. Although ‘Abdullah was reportedly surprised at the extent of underdevelopment in Jazan, this did not trigger the adoption of any specific development policies beyond the formation of a committee of high-ranking officials to study “the pressing and dire development needs” of the region.¹⁷⁴ The Crown Prince reportedly understood underdevelopment in Jazan to be primarily the result of particular corruption on the part of the regional governor, Mohammad bin Turki al-Sudairi; King Fahd (prompted by ‘Abdullah) ordered the governor’s replacement with a more direct member of the Saudi royal family soon thereafter.¹⁷⁵ Nor were any comparable regimes in the surrounding region overthrown or even seriously threatened by the neglect of peripheral regions of the Kingdom, with academic scholarship treating the Middle East and North Africa as a zone of exceptionally “robust” authoritarianism.¹⁷⁶

Accordingly, while the arguments of heterodox urban planners were convincing enough for Prince ‘Abdullah to spend time lobbying for the Council of Ministers to codify the NSS, these arguments did not gain wider purchase among the Saudi bureaucracy or did not immediately affect state investments. Their immediate impact was only in the language of official planning documents, such as the Eight Development Plan (released shortly before the death of the ailing King Fahad and ‘Abdullah’s succession as King).¹⁷⁷ While mirroring earlier planning documents in offering few concrete commitments to addressing regional development disparities, the new development plan at

¹⁷⁴ “Prince ‘Abdullah in Jazan,” 11.

¹⁷⁵ One interview subject noted that ‘Abdullah was particularly incensed to find that his personal donations to fund the construction of a mosque in Jazan had been diverted to the governor’s personal use. Author interview, College of Excellence administrator, Jazan City, October 9, 2018. SPA, “‘ifa’ al-Sudairi Wa t’ayin al-‘amir Mohammad Bin Nasser ‘Amiran Li-Mintaqat Jazan [Dismissal of Sudairi and Appointment of Mohammad Bin Nasser as Governor of Jazan],” *Al-Jazirah*, April 4, 2001, <https://www.al-jazirah.com/2001/20010404/ln1.htm>.

¹⁷⁶ Bellin

¹⁷⁷ Ministry of Planning, “Eight Dev. Plan,” 31.1

least acknowledged potential problems arising from geographic and class inequalities. Hence it was the first of Saudi Arabia's development plans to explicitly mention citizens' poverty, albeit as something the state sought to "contain and effectively eradicate."¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, and in line with concerns raised by proponents of balanced development, the plan raised concerns about the "considerable social and human costs involved" in the Kingdom's internal migration and stressed the need for targeted investment drives to alleviate these problems.¹⁷⁹ The plan also channeled elements of the NSS in calling for the "[e]stablishment of new economic development poles away from major cities."¹⁸⁰ Still, the plan remained "ink on paper" for the time being.

Where the Saudi regime *did* face a meaningful threat of mobilization from the periphery in the early 2000s, it reacted with unrelenting repression and efforts to further exclude local residents from the benefits of economic development. Even as the faction of heterodox urban planners was lobbying Prince 'Abdullah to adopt the national spatial strategy, the Ministry of the Interior (headed by 'Abdullah's brother, Prince Nayef) pursued a campaign of crackdowns against religious practices that deviated from the Sunni Muslim orthodoxy espoused by regime-aligned religious clerics. In the Southern region of Najran, where a large percentage of the local population were Isma'ili Shi'a Muslims, MoI efforts to restrict local religious practices triggered an outbreak of protests targeting Najran's governor, Prince Mish'al bin S'aud.¹⁸¹ Locally based security services responded with an expansive bout of repression, arresting some 400-600 Isma'ili Saudis for participation in (or even suspicion of participation in) demonstrations.¹⁸² Hundreds more were either forced to resign

¹⁷⁸ Ministry of Planning, 31.1

¹⁷⁹ In a possible nod to 'Abdullah's experiences in the Southern regions, the plan specifically encourages "investment drive... in [the] Jizan region and [the] Tihama Plains." Ministry of Planning, 30.

¹⁸⁰ Ministry of Planning, i-ii.

¹⁸¹ "Saudi Unrest Blamed on 'Sorcerer,'" BBC News, April 25, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/725597.stm.

¹⁸² Christoph Wilcke, "The Ismailis of Najran" (Human Rights Watch, September 2008), 24-28, <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/saudiarabia0908web.pdf>.

government jobs or sent far away from the region, with Sunni Saudis brought in to replace exiled Isma'īlis in the local bureaucracy and to change the demographic balance of the region. Even speaking out about the abuses (whether online or to foreign journalists) became grounds for further repression.¹⁸³

4.4 Implementation at Last? Balanced Development 2005-2010

Despite the Saudi Council of Ministers adopting the National Spatial Strategy in 2000, Saudi rulers made little effort to act on pledged reforms. This changed, however, with the influx of considerable new resources revenues in the early 2000s amid rising oil prices. This new resource boom helped transform balanced development schemes from one of *re*-distributing limited resources to simply distributing a slightly larger share of new revenues to peripheral regions. Various indicators of development spending suggest an increase in spending in the Saudi periphery in absolute terms during this time period, generating some short-term benefits, but not enough to meaningfully expand local labor markets or improve local infrastructure.

New Funds, New Projects

The ability to undertake major new investments in the periphery was clearly contingent on the increase in oil revenues during the early 2000s (Figure 10). In a speech announcing the annual budget shortly before his death in 2005, King Fahd noted the state's ability to make use of "the exceptional increase in exports in [2004]" to the benefit of citizens, with "a focus on the regions most in need."¹⁸⁴ Likewise, the Eight Development plan emphasizes that an expected increase in oil revenues should "increase the capacity to finance development projects," but cautioned that these expected revenues were still vulnerable to shifts in global energy markets.¹⁸⁵ Later recollections from

¹⁸³ Wilcke, 41–45.

¹⁸⁴ *Encyclopedia of King Fahd*, 4:573.

¹⁸⁵ Ministry of Planning, "Eight Dev. Plan," 93.

urban planners and from peripheral regions themselves concurred with this assessment. As one urban planner with MoMRA summarized the time period: “King Abdullah received [major] revenues from crude oil and spend it on welfare of his people, and his cities, his regions.”¹⁸⁶ Even in Jazan, while ‘Abdullah’s personal intervention following the epidemic in 2000 had led to some improvements, in the perceptions of one local academic “much of [the region’s] development came with the oil boom.”¹⁸⁷

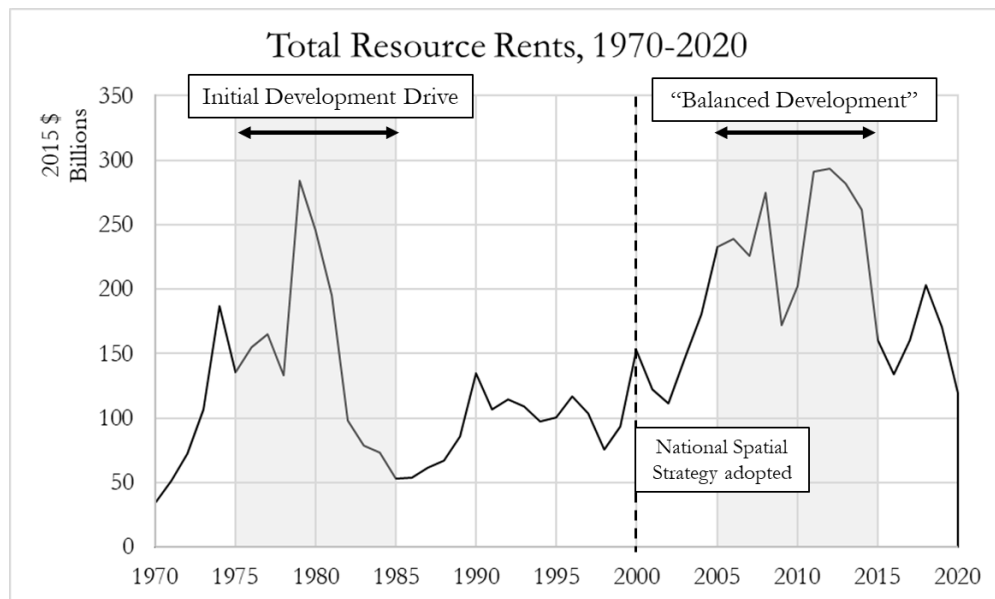


Figure 10: Aggregate resource revenues for Saudi Arabia in constant \$2015. Different economic development drives highlighted in grey.

Still, ‘Abdullah’s succession as King in 2005 meant that ideas regarding balanced development had a greater chance of influencing the allocation of this new spending. The new King made inclusive development an integral part of his rhetorical appeals to the Saudi population after assuming office, undertaking a major tour of the Kingdom’s 13 regions in 2006-7 to highlight new state-funded projects in each.¹⁸⁸ A typical visit entailed the King meeting with regional officials and

¹⁸⁶ Author interview, mid-level bureaucrat involved in urban planning at MoMRA, February 18, 2020.

¹⁸⁷ Author interview, academic at Jazan University, Jazan City, October 4, 2019.

¹⁸⁸ Country experts of authoritarian politics in China and North Korea have likewise emphasized the role of leader visits in signaling new policy priorities for the country. Dae-Sook Suh, “Military-First Politics of Kim Jong Il,” *Asian Perspective*

notables, taking in a cultural performance such as traditional dances or poetry recitation, announcing select amnesties for (non-violent) criminals and debtors, and above all announcing major development projects (usually around SAR 2-3 billion in total) aimed at improving government services and job opportunities within the region.¹⁸⁹ Expansions to the Saudi university system formed a particular point of focus, with King Abdullah placing the founding stone for new universities in regions such as Ha'il, Jazan, and Al-Baha as well as expansions to existing regional university systems.

King Abdullah's rhetoric during these visits pledged that new initiatives would seek to benefit the periphery more than past development drives in the Kingdom. While King Fahd's last speech to the Saudi Shura Council (2005) mentioned a budgeted SAR 41 billion in investment spending, he included only a single reference to "focusing on regions of greater need" (otherwise talking about benefits to the Kingdom as a whole).¹⁹⁰ By contrast, King Abdullah's speeches constantly referenced the need to improve development in outlying regions, at least tacitly acknowledging a past problem of "under-development." In Al-Baha: "This state does not distinguish between one region and another, or between one citizen and another. In the eyes of the state, there are no 'near' regions and 'far-flung' regions."¹⁹¹ In 'Asir: "We must all realize that nation-building does not stop at one stage without another."¹⁹² And in Jazan: "The pace of development in

26, no. 3 (2002): 151–52; Suisheng Zhao, "Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour: Elite Politics in Post-Tiananmen China," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 8 (1993): 1003.

¹⁸⁹ See, for example, Fahad Al-Salman, Ahmad Al-Qatab, and Khalid Al-'amim, "Khadim Al-Haramayn y'alan Qiyam Medinat al-Amir 'Abd al-'Aziz Bin Musa'id al-Iqtisadiyya Fi Ha'il [Custodian of the Two Holy Places Announces Prince 'Abd al-'Aziz Bin Musa'id Economic City in Ha'il]," *Al-Riyadh*, June 14, 2006, <https://www.alriyadh.com/162828>.

¹⁹⁰ *Encyclopedia of King Fahad*, 4:571–73.

¹⁹¹ Ibrahim Al-Shamrani and Ibrahim Al-Zahrani, "Mas'ulin wa al-muwatinun fi al-Baha yu'abaru 'an masha'irihim bi-munasibat ziyarat malak al-insaniyya [Officials and citizens in Al-Baha express their feelings at the visit of the King of Humanity]," *Al-Riyadh*, July 24, 2006, <http://www.alriyadh.com/174063>.

¹⁹² Salman Al-Ahmari and Ahmad Al-Fardous, "Al-Malak 'Abdullah: Al-'umam la taqif 'and hudud yawmiha bal tanzur lil-mustaqbal bi-basira withqa bahithan 'an al-sidara fi zaman la maka fi-hi lil-d'afa' [King Abdullah: Nations don't stop at the borders of today but look to the future with a sharp gaze, always looking forward at a time which is no time for the weak]," *Al-Riyadh*, November 3, 2006, <http://www.alriyadh.com/198997>.

Jazan fell behind in the past, for circumstances in which no individual had a hand.”¹⁹³ As a further indication of the priority that the royal court accorded these visits, the royal court forced visiting heads of state and high officials to accommodate King Abdullah’s travels, rather than vice versa. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak joined King Abdullah in Al-Baha in June of 2006 to discuss the regional repercussions of the Lebanon War,¹⁹⁴ while U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney had to travel out to Tabuk to meet with the King for bilateral consultations in May of 2007.¹⁹⁵

The royal court’s major signal of shifting development priorities came through in a particular set of mega-projects: entirely new “economic cities” that aimed to attract foreign investment and provide local jobs in Ha’il, Jazan, Medina and Rabigh (a rural part of the Mekkah governorate north of Jeddah). The idea of designating select locations for large-scale capital investments—\$7-8 billion for the Medina and Ha’il cities, ~\$27 billion for the Rabigh and Jazan cities—was the specific brainchild of ‘Amr Dabbagh, a businessman closely connected to King ‘Abdullah, and under the authority of the and the Saudi Arabia General Investment Authority (SAGIA) led by Dabbagh.¹⁹⁶ Initial media presentation of the economic cities project focused not just on the potential for attracting foreign investment and diversifying the overall Saudi economy, but also the localized benefits for various Saudi regions. Dr. Ayman al-Kayyal, of the King Fahad University for Petroleum and Mining (KFUPM), emphasized to *Al-Yamamah* that among the benefits of the cities was “distributing urban growth to new areas, with full services, far away from the overcrowded main cities.”¹⁹⁷ U.S. diplomats, in discussions with Saudi counterparts, also took away the idea that cities in

¹⁹³ Mansour Othman et al., “Al-Malik: Fakhur Bi-Kum Fa-Antum b’ad Alla Dar’a al-Watan Wa Hasanihi al-Hasin [King: Proud of You as You Are, after God, Shield of the Nation and Its Strong Fortress],” *Al-Jazirah*, November 5, 2006, <https://www.al-jazirah.com/2006/20061105/fr8.htm>.

¹⁹⁴ Al-Salman, Al-Qatab, and Al-’amim, “Economic City in Ha’il.”

¹⁹⁵ “Cheney Holds Talks with Saudi King,” *Reuters*, May 12, 2007, sec. Latest Crisis, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-cheney-saudi-idUKL1229556120070512>.

¹⁹⁶ “Saudi Arabia’s Economic Cities,” SAGIA presentation, MENA-OECD Investment Programme, Amman, 2010. Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 172–73.

¹⁹⁷ “Al-Mudun al-Iqtisadiyya: Mafhum Ashmal Lil-Tanmiyya [Economic Cities: A Broader Understanding of Development],” *Al-Yamama*, October 21, 2006, 13.

areas such as Ha'il and Jazan were intended to “develop less prosperous regions” while easing the pressure of internal migration on the major cities of the Kingdom.¹⁹⁸ The King announced the foundation of Prince Abdulaziz bin Musaed Economic City in Hail, for example, as “a strong source of development in the region” as well as a future source of “thirty thousand jobs.”¹⁹⁹

These and other mega-projects undertaken during King ‘Abdullah’s time in power reflected the broad distributive paradigm of the era in offering something for everybody. As Figure 11 shows, the Ha'il and Jazan economic cities targeted population centers far from the Kingdom’s East-West economic corridor, with the aim of channeling investments directly into local communities. The King ‘Abdullah Financial District (KAFD), by contrast, was a major development project aimed at both turning Saudi Arabia and the capital city of Riyadh into a major financial hub for the MENA region. The King ‘Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) was effectively a walled city for scientific research, with entry strictly controlled to isolate an international community of researchers within from the Kingdom’s strict social regulations.

¹⁹⁸ “Saudi Investment Authority Outlines Ambitious Plans, Calls for Greater U.s. Investment,” Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Saudi Arabia Riyadh, January 21, 2010), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/10RIYADH97_a.html.

¹⁹⁹ Al-Salman, Al-Qatab, and Al-'amim, “Economic City in Ha'il.”

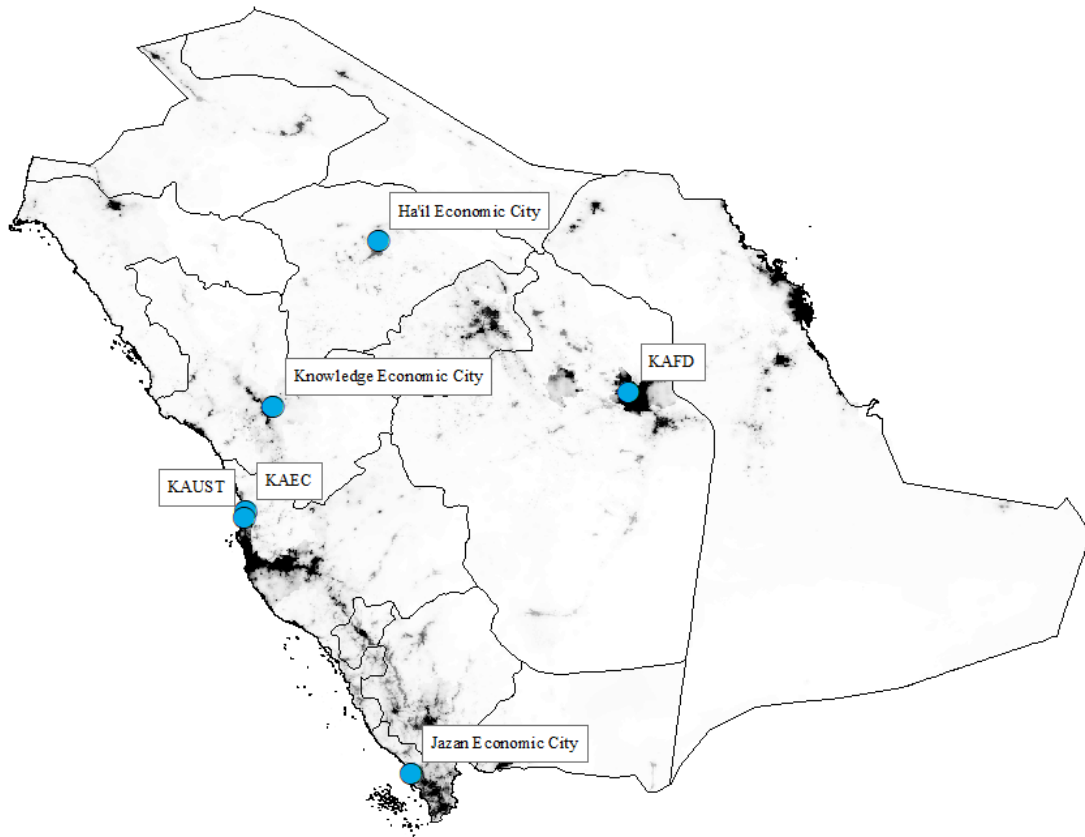


Figure 11: Mega-projects during the King ‘Abdullah era, 2005-2015. Shading reflects underlying population density as of 2020.

In-depth discussion of King Abdullah’s visits in an *Al-Yamama* “issue of the week” segment (focusing on the Southern leg of the journey) provides evidence that the King’s visits were understood by some local citizens in the periphery as signaling a shift in spending priorities. A number of citizens from Jazan and other Southern regions—academics, officials, businessmen and others—emphasized that the government now sought to “spread the umbrella of development” to all regions of the Kingdom, with visits serving to “affirm that every patch of land in the country is close to the heart of leadership.”²⁰⁰ Dr. Ali bin ‘Abbas al-Hikmi, a well-connected member of the

²⁰⁰ “Al-Malak Fi Al-Janub: Ziyarat al-Khayr... Khayrayn [The King in the South: Benevolent Twice Over],” *Al-Yamama*, November 4, 2006.

Kingdom's appointed Shura Council from Jazan, emphasized King Abdullah's "interest in remote and outlying regions of the Kingdom, to give them their share of development *that they have not received in sufficient measure before* [emphasis added]... This visit crowns these efforts and this orientation [towards development]." For his part, poet Ibrahim Al Muftah (the same who had confronted Prince Nayef over development policy in the Farasan Islands decades prior) congratulated the government on a "new understanding" of development—one that would avoid "focusing on some regions while marginalizing other regions." Even a denial of any change by a local official—the Emir of Jazan's Deputy—verged on protesting too much: "Nobody should understand that this to mean that there are any shortcomings in the [present] services of these regions, but rather that the wise leadership wishes to take stock of existing projects and complete what remains."

Private consultancy reports on peripheral regions' economic further indicate an official interest in balanced development beyond mere propaganda overtures. A slide deck prepared by consultancy Booz Allen Hamilton for SAGIA in mid-2005 identifies the ways in which the Northern region of Ha'il "lags behind the Kingdom as a whole" across several development metrics, including household income and access to government services such as healthcare facilities.²⁰¹ Booz Allen and SAGIA in turn hosted a brainstorming session composed of local government officials and businessmen in order to "determine which 'giant initiatives' could be a primary engine for development in Ha'il," with particular attention given to local education institutions that could prepare local citizens for new jobs in the cities.²⁰² For the same meeting, the Ha'il Development Authority—a small agency charged with investigating the potential for local development

²⁰¹ "Action Plan for the Economic Development of Hail," Presentation and workshop for SAGIA, Booz Allen Hamilton, Riyadh, June 5, 2005, slide 1.

²⁰² "Action Plan for the Economic Development of Hail," Presentation and workshop for SAGIA, Booz Allen Hamilton, Jeddah, November 26,, 2005, slides 32-35.

improvements—commissioned a local consultancy to study local public opinion on optimal improvements in development, taking particular care to survey the views of poor communities and unemployed Saudis in Ha'il.²⁰³ The fact that the Development Authority was apparently only interested in these questions in 2005, rather than in the years following its formation in 2002, provides further evidence of newfound political pressure to sort out local development needs.

New Distribution, Little Redistribution

To assess whether balanced development policies represented a sustained policy reform for the Saudi regime, it is first important to establish whether official Saudi rhetoric was ever matched by meaningful investments in the peripheral regions. While challenging to demonstrate clearly due to the paucity of official subnational spending data for Saudi Arabia, available indicators of spending as well as infrastructural indicators provide only partial evidence of convergence in development between core and peripheral regions between 2005 and 2010.

First, I consider two forms of state funding for which sub-national data is available: loans from the Saudi Agricultural Development Fund (ADF) and Saudi Industrial Development Fund (SIDF).²⁰⁴ I examine the change in total funds provided between the period leading up to 'Abdullah's succession (2000-2005) and the time period immediately after (2005-10). Spatial patterns for changes in agricultural loan issuance are consistent with a shift towards a more "balanced" development strategy, favoring the more natural farmland of the Southern regions. Despite increasing government revenues across this time period, loan funding for agricultural development *decreased* in all regions except for three Southern regions (Jizan, 'Asir and Najran), representing a shift away from capital-

²⁰³ "Dirasat Al-Bunya al-Sukaniyya (al-Dimughrafiyya) Fi Mintaqat Ha'il (Al-Nuskha al-Niha'iyya) [Demographic Study of Ha'il Region (Final Copy)]" (Asem Arab Taher Center for Economic and Administrative Studies, December 2005), 13–15.

²⁰⁴ Data are taken from Statistical Yearbooks for the relevant time periods. Data on agricultural loans is only available through 2012; data on SIDF loans is only available through 2010.

intensive farms owned by wealthy individuals and major businesses elsewhere in the region (Figure 12). Accordingly, the Southern regions' share in agricultural fund disbursement increased notably from 11% of total funds in 2000-2005 to 23% in 2006-2010.

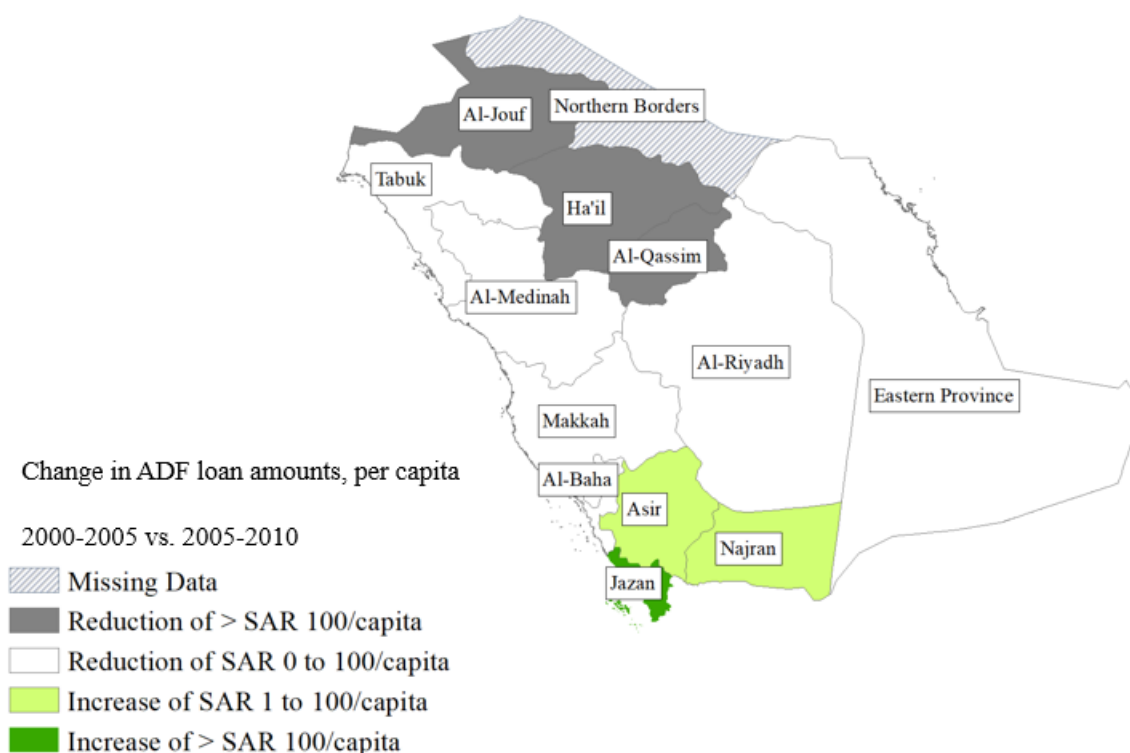


Figure 12: Change in ADF loans, 2000-5 versus 2006-10. Source: Statistical Yearbooks.

SIDF funds provide little evidence of a meaningful shift in industrial investments, however, regarding a much larger and far more consequential amount of money (the SIDF extended some SAR 177 billion across the 2005-2010 time period, compared with SAR 4.4 billion for the ADF). While many Northern and Southern regions did receive an increase in funds in 2006-2010 (with the exception of Al-Baha in the South and Al-Jouf in the North), for only two regions (Najran in the South and Northern Borders) was the per-capita increase in line with increases for central regions such as Al-Qassim, Riyadh, and the Eastern Province (Figure 13). Even these increases in per-capita

terms still reflected a tiny level of investment compared to funds provided to the Kingdom's core regions. The Saudi periphery's share in industrial development barely increased in the secondary time period, from less than 2% of total loans to around 4% of total loans.

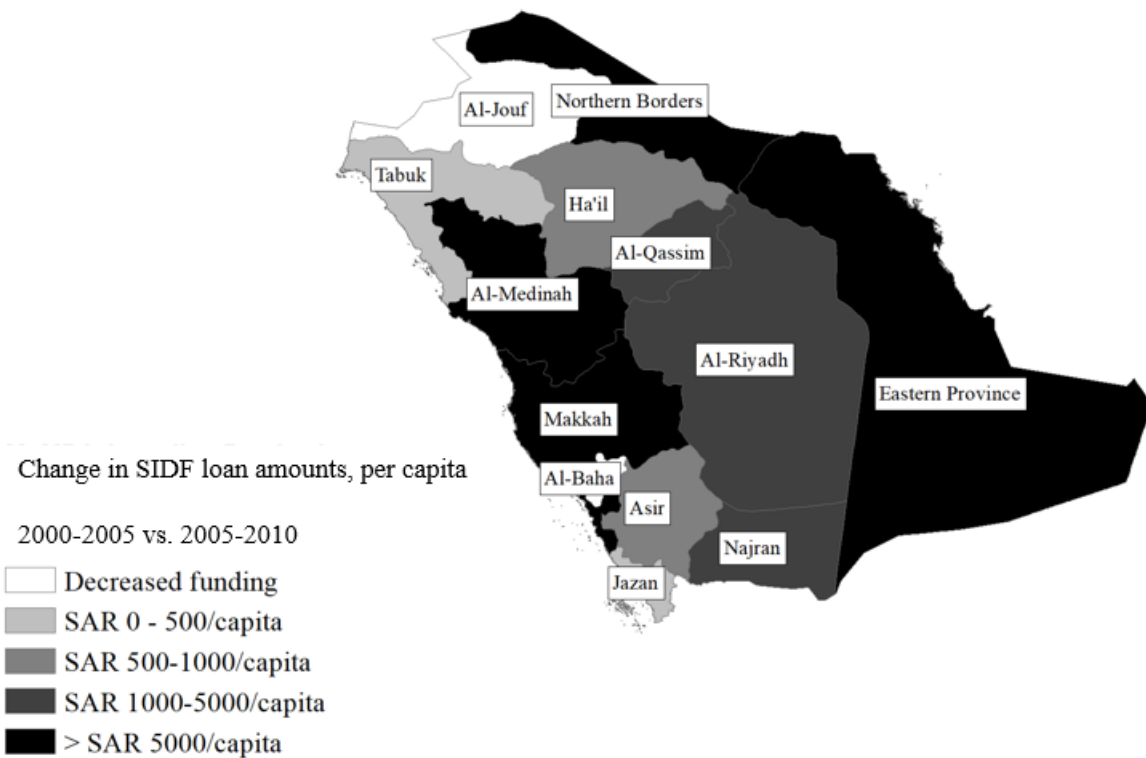


Figure 13: Change in SIDF loans, 2000-5 versus 2006-10. Source: Statistical Yearbooks

As these two funds only represent a small subset of Saudi government spending during this time period, I further examine a number of proxy indicators of development taken from the Saudi census (fielded in 1992, 2004 and 2010), annual statistical yearbooks (consulted in census years), statistics from the former Ministry of Higher Education (consulted in census years save where noted below) and other surveys fielded by the General Authority for Statistics. I focus on these indicators because they data is available and comparable at the regional level, and because they were frequently cited in fieldwork as well as primary sources as particular indicators of state investment in a

particular region.²⁰⁵ I group these indicators into three broad categories: jobs and income, social welfare (chiefly focusing on higher education and healthcare provision), and public infrastructure (major utilities).

For jobs and income, I consider data on household expenditures, changes in the unemployment rate, and the change in the total number of jobs held by Saudi men and women within each region. Data on household expenditures provides the only available subnational proxy for income and wealth, drawn from household surveys fielded in 2007, 2013, and 2018.²⁰⁶ I next calculate the unemployment rate for Saudi citizens from census data; access to jobs has been a constant concern for ordinary Saudi citizens for most of the Kingdom's modern history.²⁰⁷ I also address jobs provision through the growth in the total number of jobs; while a falling regional unemployment rate might indicate greater jobs provision, it might also indicate Saudis moving away to pursue jobs in more economically vibrant regions. I calculate these values separately for Saudi men and women due to the considerable gender segregation of the Saudi workforce.²⁰⁸

For measures of social welfare, I consider the provision of higher education (with access to universities a key request for individuals from peripheral regions during this time period) and healthcare infrastructure. For higher education, I calculate the total number of Saudi men and women enrolled in higher education at the undergraduate level for each of the three census years, based on statistics from the now-defunct Ministry of Higher Education.²⁰⁹ I likewise calculate this

²⁰⁵ Author interview, Ha'il Development Authority, Ha'il City, January 10, 2019; Al-Yamama South.

²⁰⁶ I divide household by the average household size per region to standardize values across regions.

²⁰⁷ I compare the portion of labor force that is employed (i.e. # of employed Saudis/labor force) so that for all measures a higher RRD score indicates better "performance."

²⁰⁸ Eleanor A. Doumato, "Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (1992): 31–47; Roula Baki, "Gender-Segregated Education in Saudi Arabia: Its Impact on Social Norms and the Saudi Labor Market," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 12, no. 28 (2004): n28; Roel Meijer, "Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Gender-Segregation Debate," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 4 (2010): 80–100.

²⁰⁹ I calculate baseline rates from 1993 instead of 1992 to account for regional Teachers' Colleges, which began offering undergraduate degrees (albeit only in education subjects) starting in this year; this facilitates within-region comparability by accounting for pre-university system higher-education institutions.

indicator separately for Saudi men and women due to the gender segregation of Saudi society during this time period and in particular the Saudi education system. As an indicator of the local provision of healthcare, I collect statistics on the number of hospital beds per 1000 Saudi population in each region from annual statistical yearbooks.

Finally, as an indicator of improvements in public infrastructure, I utilize census measures of the portion of households with access to a public electric grid, piped water supplies, and piped sewage networks.²¹⁰ Other studies of have utilized these as standard outcome measures for distributional politics in the MENA region and elsewhere, as have studies of public infrastructure in Saudi Arabia.²¹¹

To determine whether the development trajectories of various regions converged post-2005, I calculate the change in various regional indicators across the two time periods bookended by national censuses: 1992-2004 and 2004-2010. I divide the 2004-2010 rate of change by this 1992-2004 baseline for each indicator, generating a statistic that represents the *relative rate of development* (RRD)—in other words, how much the pace of development increased (or decreased) after 2004:

$$\frac{(\Delta Indicator_{i,2004-2010})}{(\Delta Indicator_{i,1992-2004})} = RRD_i$$

Across each indicator and region, I then assess whether the RRD of the eight Northern and Southern regions was higher than that that in the East-West growth axis: the Central regions of Riyadh and Qassim along with Makkah, Medina and the Eastern Province. If Saudi development priorities continue to reflect the political hierarchy of different regions in the Saudi ruling coalition, we should expect to see little to no systematic convergence across these indicators. A few regions

²¹⁰ The 1992 census only provides statistics for total number of households, while the 2004 census only provides statistics for the total # of *Saudi* households. A comparison of both measures using the 2010 census, however, indicates little difference.

²¹¹ Blaydes, *Elections and Distributive Politics in Mubarak's Egypt*, 64–76; Brian Min, *Power and the Vote: Elections and Electricity in the Developing World* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Karim Gazzeh and Ismaila Rimi Abubakar, “Regional Disparity in Access to Basic Public Services in Saudi Arabia: A Sustainability Challenge,” *Utilities Policy* 52 (2018): 70–80.

might converge for each indicator, but we should not expect to see convergence for over half of regions for a particular indicator, or multiple indicators for the same region. I analyze these measures separately (rather than combining them into a uniform measure of “development”) due to circa 2005 government planning documents’ insistence that “some of the [development] gaps cannot be fully bridged due to factors relating to the development potential and specificities of individual regions.”²¹² Rather than, say, expanding sewage systems in all regions, different regions might be expected to receive a different “mix” of investments. Summary of results are shown in Table 2 & Table 3

²¹² Ministry of Planning, “Eight Dev. Plan,” 205.

Table 2: Convergence by region.

	Income & Jobs (5 indicators)	Social Welfare (3 indicators)	Public Utilities (3 indicators)	Total
Northern Borders	✓		✓	7
Tabouk	✓	✓	✓	7
Hail	✓	✓		6
Najran	✓			5
Jazan	✓	✓		5
Al Jouf	✓	✓		4
Al Baha	✓			4
Asir	✓			3

Note: ✓ = convergence in at least 2 indicators

Table 3: Convergence by indicator.

		Substantial Convergence?	Regions Exhibiting Convergence
Jobs & Income	Household Expenditures	✓	7
	Unemployment Rate (Male)	✓	5
	Unemployment Rate (Female)	✓	7
	Employed Male Saudis, Average Growth Rate		2
	Employed Female Saudis, Average Growth Rate		3
Social Welfare	Undergraduates Enrolled (Male)	✓	5
	Undergraduates Enrolled (Female)		2
	Hospital beds	✓	5
Public Utilities	Electrical Grid Access		1
	Piped Water Access		3
	Piped Sewage Access		1

Notes: “substantial convergence” = 5 or more regions converging.

In the clearest area of convergence, communities in the peripheral regions of the North and South generally experienced greater increases in expenditures than did the core regions of the Kingdom. Between 2007 and 2013 (when data are available), household expenditures in almost all peripheral regions (save Najran) grow more than they did in the Central regions or the East-West growth axis: a 20-50% increase for most regions of the North and South, compared to a roughly 11% increase in the Central regions and just 5% once the Hejaz and Eastern Province are included.²¹³ In other words, while per-capita Saudi household incomes (i.e. controlling for size of household) were over 50% larger across the East, West and Central regions versus the North and South in 2007, by 2013 household expenditures in the “core” were only around 25% higher than in the periphery. As expenditures data by region is not available prior to 2007, we have no baseline with which to compare these changes. Hence aggregate state spending (including the \$125 billion spending package announced by the Saudi monarchy in the wake of the Arab Spring) may have lifted incomes with no special consideration for the periphery, with fixed salary increases disproportionately benefiting households on the lower end of the income spectrum. Still, even equal treatment in Saudi distributive policies during this time period would mark an improvement over the second-class treatment of the North and South through the 1990s.

Likewise, the 2004-2010 time period saw greater decreases in unemployment in the periphery (for both men and women). While male unemployment generally increased across the East-West growth axis, it decreased in four regions and increased at a slower rate in a fifth (‘Asir). Likewise, female Saudi job-seekers in the periphery found it easier to find jobs (relative to core regions and the recent past) in seven out of eight regions. Still, growth in the total *number* of jobs held by Saudi citizens in the periphery converged on the performance of the Kingdom’s core regions

²¹³ On a per-capita basis.

only for a handful of Northern and Southern regions: Ha'il and Najran for Saudi men, Ha'il, Tabouk and the Northern Borders for Saudi women. One explanation, that reduced unemployment numbers are simply due to Saudis residing in the periphery moving to major cities to take up jobs, would be plausible for reductions in unemployment among men only but struggles to explain reduced unemployment among less-mobile women. More likely, most jobs created in the peripheral regions involved directly employing more Saudis in the regional bureaucracy, with little private-sector activity to augment these direct hires. Data from indicate that at least 20% of employed Saudi men and 10% of employed Saudi women in core regions were employed in the private sector, compared with just 5% of Saudi men and less than 1% of Saudi women in the periphery.²¹⁴

We likewise observe partial convergence in terms of government social services that entailed large capital investments: expanding institutions of higher education and the number of hospital beds in each region. Only 1 peripheral region was home to a full public university prior to 2005 (King Khalid University in 'Asir), compared with every single region of the Kingdom in 2010 (Figure 14). It is unsurprising that the opening of new universities in the remaining 7 regions 2005-6 was accompanied by partial convergence in the expansion of undergraduate enrollment for Saudi men (5 out of 8 regions), albeit with a more limited convergence for Saudi women (2 out of 8 regions).²¹⁵ Furthermore, measures of "convergence" understate the qualitative shift in access to higher education. Undergraduates in the Northern and Southern regions now had far greater access to a wide range of subjects, rather than the limited number of bachelor's degrees in education that

²¹⁴ Regional data on private-sector employment are not available prior to 2010.

²¹⁵ Additionally, aggregate numbers of students do not fully capture the benefits offered in expanding local Teachers' Colleges into full universities; while Teachers' Colleges offered undergraduate degrees only in teaching-related disciplines, over 70% of students Jazan University, for example, were studying non-education subjects in the institution's first year of operation.

the older system of teacher’s colleges provided. Growth in hospital beds per-capita likewise outpaced the relative rate of development in Riyadh and Qassim in several regions.

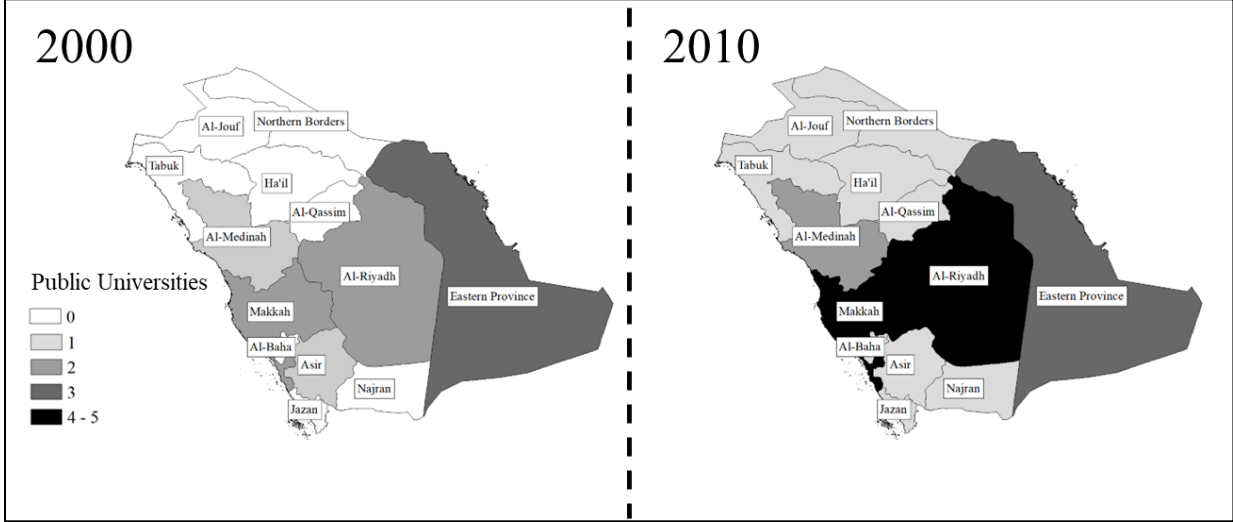


Figure 14: Number of public universities per Saudi region, 2000 and 2010.

We observe the least evidence of convergence in public utilities projects, however. While infrastructural investments such as sewage treatment plants and water pipelines were a mainstay of local development projects (whether announced by King Abdullah or regional governors), only a handful of peripheral regions saw markedly expanded access to either in the time period under consideration. Access to public electrical grids was nearly universal by 2004, with only minor improvements in some Southern and Northern regions in 2004-10. As for access to piped water and piped sewage, only a handful of regions exhibited more rapid expansion of services relative to the more central regions in the latter time period. Accordingly, Saudi urban planners examining the results of the 2010 census warned of a “large disparity in access to piped water supply and sewerage across the provinces.”²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Gazzeh and Abubakar, “Regional Disparity in Access to Basic Public Services in Saudi Arabia,” 70.

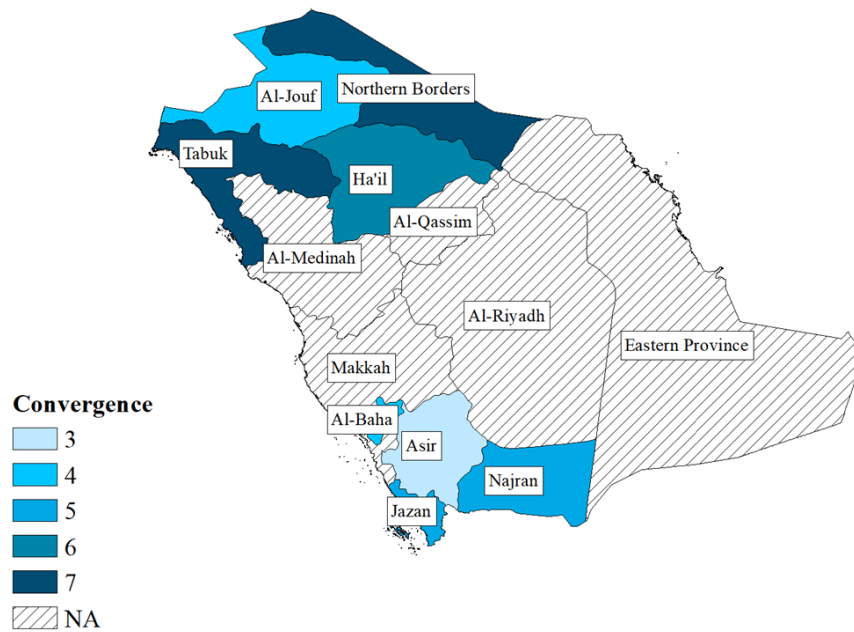


Figure 15: Convergence indicators, mapped.

Taken together, available subnational spending data and development indicators indicate that peripheral regions of the Kingdom did experience marginally improved development outcomes in the years following ‘Abdullah’s promotion of balanced development policies. Each region exhibited convergence with the central regions in three or more development indicators (Table 2). Likewise, for several indicators more than half of the peripheral regions converged on the pace of development in the Kingdom’s core areas (Table 3). Still, clearest evidence of targeted government spending to generate new economic activity—in the form of SIDF loans—continued to indicate an overwhelming focus on the industrial development of the core regions of the Kingdom. Changes in agricultural loan patterns potentially reflect redistribution of funds away from capital-intensive agriculture and toward the more naturally fertile Southern regions. A more plausible policy-specific explanation, however, is that Saudi Arabia had begun to run up against hard environmental constraints, with desert farming practices threatening to exhaust the Kingdom’s limited water

supplies.²¹⁷ This period also witnessed the state's abandonment of programs supporting extravagant desert-farming initiatives aimed at domestic wheat production.²¹⁸

Marginally improving development outcomes in the South and North did not halt internal migration towards the Kingdom's largest cities (Figure 16). From 1992 to 2004, during a time period of limited capital investments by Saudi state agencies, population growth for Saudi citizens across most regions of the Kingdom was relatively equal at just over 2%; only in Riyadh was population growth slightly higher at nearly 3% growth. In 2004-2010, however, Saudi population growth increased across all regions of the East-West growth axis, while barely changing in the peripheral North and South of the Kingdom. This suggests that despite improvements in quality-of-life in the North and South, "balanced development" fell short of transforming cities in these regions into centers of development that could compete with Riyadh or Jeddah in terms of economic activity. At best, investments under the "balanced development" strategy helped avoid Saudi Arabia's population from concentrating in major cities at the rate they did in 1974-1994.

²¹⁷ Souhail Karam, "Saudi Arabia Scraps Wheat Growing to Save Water," *Reuters*, January 8, 2008, sec. Latest Crisis, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL08699206>.

²¹⁸ Jones, *Desert Kingdom*, 234–35.

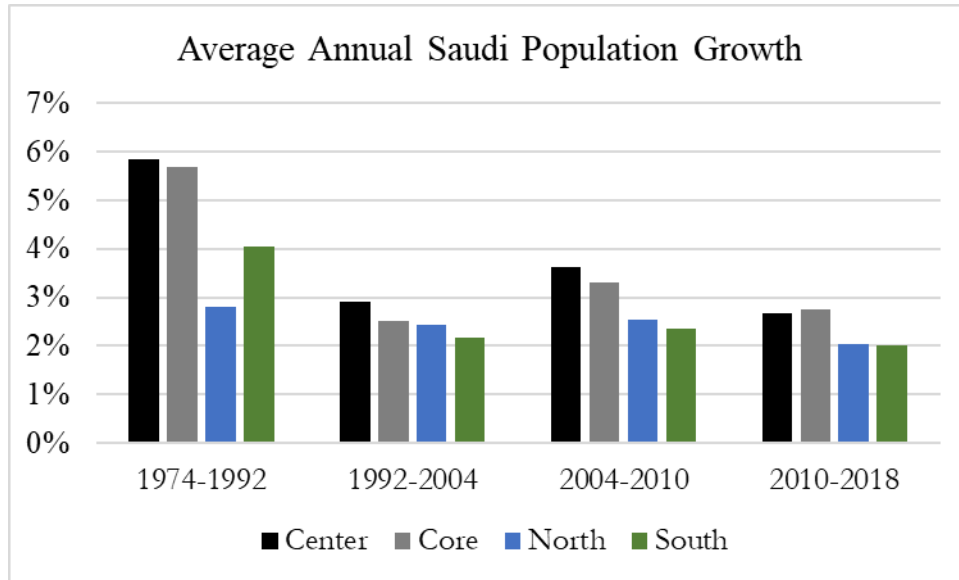


Figure 16: Percentage of Saudi population in each region. Sources: 1974, 1992, 2004, 2010 Population and Housing Census, 2018 Demographic Survey.

Political reforms played little role in limited expansions in distribution during this time period. While the Saudi regime conceded the holding of local elections for municipal councils during this time period, in part due to international scrutiny in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, these authorities lacked the power to independently bring about major state investments on their own.²¹⁹ Although at least some Western and Saudi commentators were cautiously optimistic that local elections might lead to some contestation of policy, Saudi rulers ultimately tolerated local elections only where elected officials had no meaningful access to influence policy.²²⁰ What Saudi rulers conceded was the partial election of local municipalities: oversight bodies that remained under the executive control of state-appointed municipal “mayors.” Saudi municipalities fall under the relatively weak MOMRA, are subordinate to regional governors (themselves overseen by the

²¹⁹ Stéphane Lacroix, “Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia’s New ‘Islam-Liberal’ Reformists,” *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 3 (2004): 345–65; Al-Rasheed, “Modernizing Authoritarian Rule in Saudi Arabia.”

²²⁰ Neil MacFarquhar, “Asterisk Aside, First National Vote for Saudis,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 2005, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/10/world/middleeast/asterisk-aside-first-national-vote-for-saudis.html>; Saeed Saleh Goshash Alghamdy, “Step towards Democracy?: 2005 Municipal Elections in Saudi Arabia” (PhD Dissertation, Cardiff University (United Kingdom), 2011), 128–31.

historically powerful Ministry of Interior, or MOI), and focus only on low-level concerns such as formally issuing building permits.²²¹

As a result, municipal elections did not offer a meaningful platform for representatives of outlying regions to contest development policy. Even from the outset, just 17% of the eligible electorate voted, albeit with somewhat higher rates of turnout among Shi'a communities in the Eastern Province.²²² Much as the elections initially attracted outside Western media and diplomatic attention as an indication of the Kingdom "experimenting with democracy," state-regulated domestic media in Saudi Arabia generally downplayed any connection between elected municipal councils and political change.²²³ In an indication of the council's limited authority, the Saudi regime unilaterally delayed follow-up elections in 2009 without sparking observable mobilization. "The whole experience was a failure," one resident of Dammam complained to the *New York Times* in 2009. "The council has no legislative or executive powers; all they can do is make proposals that get shelved."²²⁴

Nor did episodic violence in the outlying regions of the Kingdom seem to prompt discussion of balanced development reforms from the outset. The Southern regions of 'Asir and Al-Baha attracted considerable attention in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, for example, due to the fact that most of the Saudi participants in the attacks came from these regions.²²⁵ Still, most Saudis who joined Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations typically hailed from elsewhere in the Kingdom, chiefly the Western regions around the Hejaz mountains and the Central regions of

²²¹ Waleed Abdullah Abdulaal, "Municipal Councils in Saudi Arabia: Context and Organization," *Journal of King Abdulaziz University: Environmental Design Science* 6 (2008): 1–25.

²²² Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*, 192–93.

²²³ Alghamdy, "Step towards Democracy?," 223–24.

²²⁴ Michael Slackman, "Saudis' Local Elections Delayed for Two Years," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2009, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/20/world/middleeast/20saudi.html>.

²²⁵ Haykel, Hegghammer, and Lacroix, "National Cohesion and the Political Economy of Regions in Post-World War II Saudi Arabia," 70–75.

Riyadh and Qassim. Likewise, a violent campaign in the Northern region of al-Jouf in 2003 led to the assassination of numerous officials in the regional *Imara* office (blamed on Al-Qaeda but never officially linked).²²⁶ Each of these incidents occurred after the initial uptake of reform ideas by ‘Abdullah, and does not seem to have prompted a particular focus on these three regions. Across several development indicators, for example, increases in investments in these three regions appear to have been the most limited.

4.5 Abandoning Balanced Development

The subsequent trajectory of Saudi Arabia’s regional development strategy indicates that limited expansions in distribution to the Saudi periphery were highly vulnerable to shifts in Saudi rulers’ expectations of future. After a brief drop in revenue in 2009 undermined much of the Kingdom’s mega-projects spending, the drop in oil prices beginning in 2014 as well as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s renewed focus on the aggregate economic have reinforced the spatial inequalities that prevailed before 2005.

Balanced Development Reforms Undermined, 2009-2014

Opponents of the economic cities project within the upper reaches of the Saudi bureaucracy soon mobilized to counter and constrain Amr Dabbagh and the economic cities project. Finance Minister Ibrahim Assaf, a major proponent of orthodox development policies that channeled domestic investments to major cities, limited SAGIA’s access to state funding for the project.²²⁷ These difficulties in securing funding were compounded by the 2008-9 global financial crisis, which sharply curtailed the Saudi government’s resource revenues in the short term due to plummeting oil

²²⁶ “Dr. Hamad al-Wardy.”

²²⁷ Walid Al-Omair, “Hay’at al-Mudun al-Iqtisadiyya: <<Hulm ‘Abdullah>> Fi al-Itijah al-Sahih [Economic Cities Authority: <<‘Abdullah’s Dream>> Is on the Right Path],” *جريدة الرياض*, May 7, 2014, <http://www.alriyadh.com/933550>; Ahmed Al Omran and Nicolas Parasie, “Problems Dog Development of Saudi Planned City,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2016, sec. Markets, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/problems-dog-development-of-saudi-planned-city-1454426157>.

prices and largely erased the prospect for large-scale foreign investments. By 2010, the troubled project had become a target of open criticism with the Saudi press for its cost overruns and the failure to secure clear employment gains for Saudi citizens. In a representative article, Saudi political commentator Dawud al-Sharyan framed the economic cities not as an example of benevolent distribution to the Saudi regions, but as a waste of money that primarily served to benefit expatriate workers and consultants.²²⁸

In the face of these headwinds, King ‘Abdullah and his immediate advisors retreated from promises of any new major investments in the Kingdom’s marginalized regions. From 2011, the mass uprisings and regime failures of the Arab Spring redirected Saudi rulers’ attention to the potential for mass mobilization based on class divisions (as detailed in the next chapter) diminishing the utility of policies aimed primarily at forestalling dissent in a few distant towns and cities. ‘Amr Dabbagh was relieved as head of SAGIA in 2012, and soon after King ‘Abdullah requested a review of the economic cities project from the Supreme Economic Council—an organization that specifically excluded the Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs, the state agency most concerned with regional development disparities and urban planning.²²⁹ This report began the process of winding down the economic cities project, beginning with placing the Jazan Economic City under the control of national oil company Aramco in the hope that it could salvage something of value from the project. The economic city for Ha’il was cancelled internally, as the government “decided that this infrastructure was not viable,” even though publicly a new Economic Cities Authority remained committed to the project.²³⁰ The only city to make any notable progress during

²²⁸ Dawud Al-Sharyan, “Ad’af al-Iyman - al-Kalam al-Khurafi [The Weakest Faith - Fantasy],” *Al-Hayat*, July 11, 2010, <https://www.sauress.com/alhayat/161657>.

²²⁹ “Insihab al-shuruka’ al-mahaliyyin wa al-’alimiyyin min <<Jazan al-iqtisadiyya>> fa-tadakhlat al-dawla [Domestic and global investors withdraw from Jazan Economic City, so the state intervenes],” *Al-Eqtisadiyah*, March 25, 2013, https://www.aleqt.com/2013/03/25/article_742062.html.

²³⁰ Author interview, former advisor at Ministry of Economy and Planning, Riyadh, January 22, 2019; Al-Omair, “‘Abdullah’s Dream.”

the 2010s was the King's namesake city, KAEC. Despite extensive and continued support for the project, it never generated more than 10% of the promised 50,000 job it aimed to bring to the area near Jeddah along the Red Sea Coast.²³¹

Return to “Unbalanced” Development, 2015-2019

Regional disparities and older “balanced development” projects have received scant attention under the MBS-championed Vision 2030 reforms. The official documents of the Vision 2030 program conceded that the economic cities “did not realize their potential,” promising only to “strive to salvage” the cities and their potential benefits for the surrounding region.²³² Even the Jazan Economic City (JEC), named directly by the Vision document as the project most likely to be “salvaged,” had little to show for a decade worth of effort during my fieldwork visits to the region in 2019. The Saudi government had repeatedly shuffled responsibility for the City from government entity to government entity: first to Aramco (which allocated an oil refinery project to the site) and later to the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu‘ (existing locations for isolated petrochemical production). While I was able to visit the City itself, there was little to see aside from the main office building for the mega-project, now titled the Jazan City for Basic and Transformational Industries.²³³ Transferring the city to the Royal Commission reinforced the sense that project would be taken over by people “outside the region,” with more interest in economic returns than local employment.²³⁴ Retaining jobs was certainly not a priority during the handover from Aramco to the Royal Commission, with Aramco reportedly laying off over 6,000 local Saudi employees as part of the

²³¹ Al-Omair; Parasie, “Problems Dog Development of Saudi Planned City.”

²³² “Vision 2030 Document” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, April 2016), 50.

²³³ In visiting the site, I was warned to fill up on gasoline prior to driving out due to the lack of any gas stations anywhere within the Economic City (only accessible from Jazan City by car) or on the road to it. Aramco finally opened an oil refinery on the site in 2021 after more than a decade of efforts to do so. Adal Mirza, “Aramco’s Jizan Refinery Operating at 50pc | Argus Media,” December 15, 2021, <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/2283340-aramcos-jizan-refinery-operating-at-50pc>.

²³⁴ Author interview, College of Excellence administrator, Jazan City, October 9, 2018. Reinforcing this sense, the acting CEO at the time of my visit had spent the previous 22 years working in the Yanbu‘ industrial city. Author interview, main office, Jazan City for Basic and Transformational Industries, January 15, 2019.

process.²³⁵ By the time the handover was complete, only around 30% of the projects employees were from the region itself (as of 2019).²³⁶

While mega-projects aimed at re-orienting the Saudi economy still feature heavily, under MBS these projects have been oriented toward transforming the Kingdom's macro-economy as well as foreign investors. The most prominent of these projects is Neom, an expansive urban project located along an isolated strip of coastline in the far northwest of the Kingdom.²³⁷ However, the bulk of mega-projects that MBS and Saudi state officials have promoted as integral to Vision 2030 reforms (Figure 17) are located either at considerable remove from existing population centers (such as various tourism investments along the Red Sea coast), or directly cater to the capital city of Riyadh (such as a major theme park, Qiddiyah). Commentators from outlying regions have been left to politely inquire in the Kingdom's op-ed pages as to when subsequent mega-projects might be announced for each area of the Kingdom.²³⁸

²³⁵ Author interview, Ministry of Labor employees, Jizan City, October 7, 2019.

²³⁶ Author interview, main office, Jazan City for Basic and Transformational Industries, January 15, 2019.

²³⁷ The name is a portmanteau of "Neo-" and the start of the Arabic word *mustaqbal*, or "future."

²³⁸ See, for example, 'Issa Al-Halyan, "Medinat <<Neom>> wa baqiyat al-manatiq! [Neom city and the other regions!]," *Okaz*, December 12, 2017, sec. *كتاب ومقالات*, <https://www.okaz.com.sa/articles/na/1597119>.

Table 4 summarizes these differences.

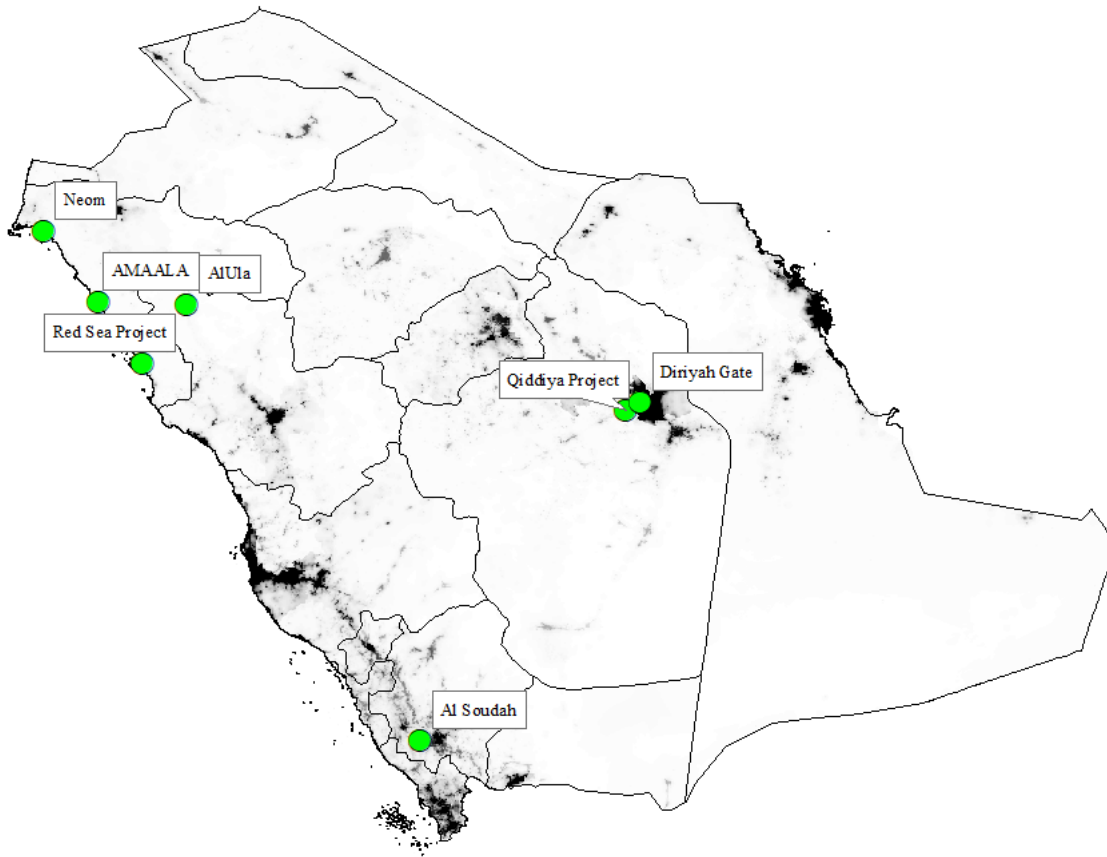


Figure 17: Mega-projects under MBS, 2015-2020.

Table 4: Summary of key attributes, 'Abdullah-era and MBS-era mega-projects. * = nearest city with >200,000 population

	Mega-projects	Avg. distance, nearest city*	2020 pop. w/in 50 miles	2020 pop. w/in 50 miles (excluding Riyadh)
'Abdullah era (2005-2015)	King 'Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) King 'Abdullah Financial District (KAED) King 'Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) Jazan Economic City Ha'il Economic City Knowledge Economic City (Medina)	30.5	16 million	7.1 million
King Salman & MBS era (2015 - ?)	Neom Al-Ula Red Sea Development ALAAMA Qiddiyah Diriyyah Soudah	77.2	11 million	2.3 million

Instead of pushing back against the centralizing tendencies of the Kingdom's economics-oriented technocrats, MBS has instead championed these prioritizing of the overall economy above regional development outcomes. This is clearly visible in the Crown Prince's marquee project of

Neom, launched in 2017. Initially, MBS claimed that Neom and affiliated projects would attract some \$500 billion in investments, and that the entirely new city would become a major commercial hub for the region. Just as the economic cities project formed a centerpiece of ‘Abdullah’s distributive policies, Neom has come to serve as a convenient shorthand for MBS’ efforts to open the Kingdom up to foreign tourism and financial flows. Among the foreign press that MBS has courted with various economic reform plans, the *Wall Street Journal* deemed the city “the centerpiece of MBS’s effort to transform an insular, oil-dependent kingdom into a country with an outward-looking, diversified economy”;²³⁹ *Bloomberg* reporters described it as “the boldest pillar of a social and economic transformation.”²⁴⁰ While it is far from clear what will become of the project, it is certainly not intended to be an engine of economic development and jobs provision for the surrounding region. Even at the outset of the project, MBS noted bluntly in an interview that while “Of course, Saudis will find a lot of jobs there... it’s not Neom’s duty to create jobs for Saudis. Neom’s duty is to be a world hub for everyone in the whole world.”²⁴¹

During fieldwork, local officials in peripheral regions stressed the central government’s demands for what the periphery can contribute to the aggregate economy rather than interest as to how state investments can improve life in the periphery. Under Vision 2030, noted one region-wide administrator in Ha’il, regional officials have been asked for “the comparative advantage that your region could present to the Council of Economic and Developmental Affairs,” the supreme development authority chaired by MBS.²⁴² Accordingly, urban planners at the region’s Development

²³⁹ Justin Scheck, Rory Jones, and Summer Said, “A Prince’s \$500 Billion Desert Dream: Flying Cars, Robot Dinosaurs and a Giant Artificial Moon,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-princes-500-billion-desert-dream-flying-cars-robot-dinosaurs-and-a-giant-artificial-moon-11564097568>.

²⁴⁰ Vivian Nereim and Donna Abu-Nasr, “Saudi Prince’s Megacity Shows Signs of Life,” *Bloomberg*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-07-25/saudi-prince-s-megacity-shows-signs-of-life>.

²⁴¹ Vivian Nereim and Alaa Shahine, “Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Details Plans for New City: Transcript,” *Bloomberg*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-26/saudi-arabia-crown-prince-details-plans-for-new-city-transcript>.

²⁴² Author interview, official at the Ha’il Regional Council, Ha’il City, January 10, 2019.

Authority felt pressure to identify local attractions that could compete for official attention with some of Vision 2030's marquee development projects. At the time, this included efforts to develop a large nature reserve in the desert—around the Al-Musma mountain range—given that “The Crown Prince thinks [in terms of] Neom, the Red Sea projects, and al-Ula. We want to do the same thing with this project.”²⁴³ A new National Spatial Strategy released in late 2019 (NSS 2030) reinforces the framing of various regions as resources for the Kingdom's global economic standing. Gone is any mention of “balanced development” or the potential for poverty in peripheral regions and overcrowded cities alike; while the executive summary of course emphasizes role of the NSS 2030 in reinforcing “quality of life,” it does so in the context of “preserving the Kingdom's economic vitality and its capacity for global [economic] competition.”²⁴⁴ In a meeting with World Bank officials, one MoMRA official discussed regions of the Kingdom as “assets” that needed to be “fully utilized,” while describing local engagement in terms of “[getting] the locals to understand how they will improve their competitiveness in the region, and how to be more productive.”²⁴⁵

Looking at major projects in the periphery that *have* attracted official support further supports these claims; projects that are selected are typically those that promise quick and easy economic “wins.” For example, the Soudah Development Corporation, a state-owned enterprise backed by the public Investment Fund, aims to develop hotel and tourism offerings in the mountainous Southern region of ‘Asir.²⁴⁶ It is the sole mega-project announced during the MBS era that is both in a peripheral region and near sizeable population centers, the cities of Abha and

²⁴³ The planner in turn emphasized how King ‘Abdullah distributed wealth widely, rather than focusing on the “main areas” in the Kingdom. Author interview, Ha'il Development Authority, Ha'il City, January 10, 2019.

²⁴⁴ To drive the point home, the updated NSS was explicitly branded as a Vision 2030 document. “Wathiqat Siyasat Al-Istratijiyya al-'amraniyya al-Wataniyya 2030 [National Spatial Strategy]” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Vision 2030 Project, November 2019), 7.

²⁴⁵ Suleiman Abu Kharmeh, chief technical advisor on National Spatial Strategy 2030, World Bank workshop to discuss NSS 2030, December 17, 2019.

²⁴⁶ Waffa Wael, “Soudah Development Eyes 2 Million Annual Visitors over 3,000 Meters above Sea Level: Year in Review,” *Arab News*, January 5, 2022, <https://arab.news/ykwz7>.

Khamis Mushayt (Figure 17). Yet per a current advisor to MoMRA leadership, this project attracted a “special focus” from Saudi leaders due to its potential for quickly attracting domestic and international tourism, rather than an effort to boost development in the region per se.²⁴⁷ By contrast, while the Jazan region’s Farasan Islands featured heavily in early ad campaigns for Saudi tourism, few major investments followed amid difficulties convincing tourists to visit an area near to the present conflict in Yemen. To be sure, the boosterish regional office of the tourism authority described developments in Farasan as on par with the NEOM project.²⁴⁸ Still, bureaucrats tasked with placing local Saudi job-seekers emphasized that they had only *heard* of how the Farasan Islands would “open the door to a lot of tourism work,” rather than seeing any evidence of it on the ground.²⁴⁹

Available evidence suggests that this re-prioritization of the Kingdom’s core regions has also affected more prosaic economic outcomes in outlying regions. In a potential sign of diminished interest in regional outcomes, Saudi Arabia’s General Authority for Statistics ceased to publish most region-specific measures of economic development and social services in the early 2010s. Household expenditures have grown more slowly in the Kingdom as a whole following the drop in oil prices and diminished government spending, consonant with contemporary accounts of tighter household budgets and my own experiences in the Kingdom at the time.²⁵⁰ On a per-capita basis, household expenditures grew by around 4% in the core regions of Saudi Arabia, but just 2% across the Northern regions and less than 1% in the Southern regions (Figure 18). In terms of jobs provision, between the end of 2016 and the end of 2019 (the time period for which comparable data are

²⁴⁷ Author interview, advisor to Minister’s office in MoMRA, Riyadh, October 29, 2019.

²⁴⁸ Author interview, Jazan branch of Saudi Commission for Tourism, January 17, 2019.

²⁴⁹ Author interview, local Ministry of Labor officials, Jazan City, October 7, 2019.

²⁵⁰ See, for example, Vivian Nereim and Glen Carey, “Saudi Arabia Will Give Cash to Poorer Citizens Hit by Austerity,” *Bloomberg*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-12/saudi-arabia-set-to-begin-cash-transfers-for-poorer-citizens>.

available) jobs growth was heavily concentrated in the capital region of Riyadh; the Southern regions ended this time period with fewer jobs than they started with, on the whole (Figure 19).²⁵¹ While these gains were able to offset losses elsewhere in core areas and the Northern regions, every single Southern region lost jobs for male Saudi citizens during this time period, and growth in jobs for Saudi women lagged behind all other regions.

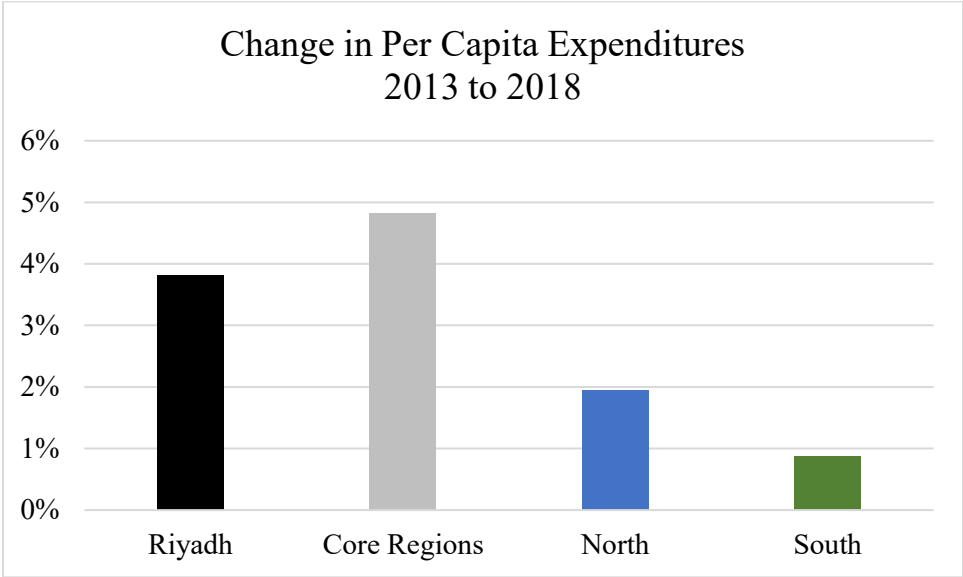


Figure 18: Change in per-capita household income. Source: Income and Expenditure Surveys, General Authority for Statistics.

²⁵¹ Even here, all of the jobs gains in the Northern regions can be traced back to an ‘Abdullah-era industrial project, the Waad al-Shamal (“Promise of the North”) city for mining and extractive industries, adding a large number of citizen jobs at the end of 2019. See: <https://www.bechtel.com/projects/waad-al-shamaal-city-development/>

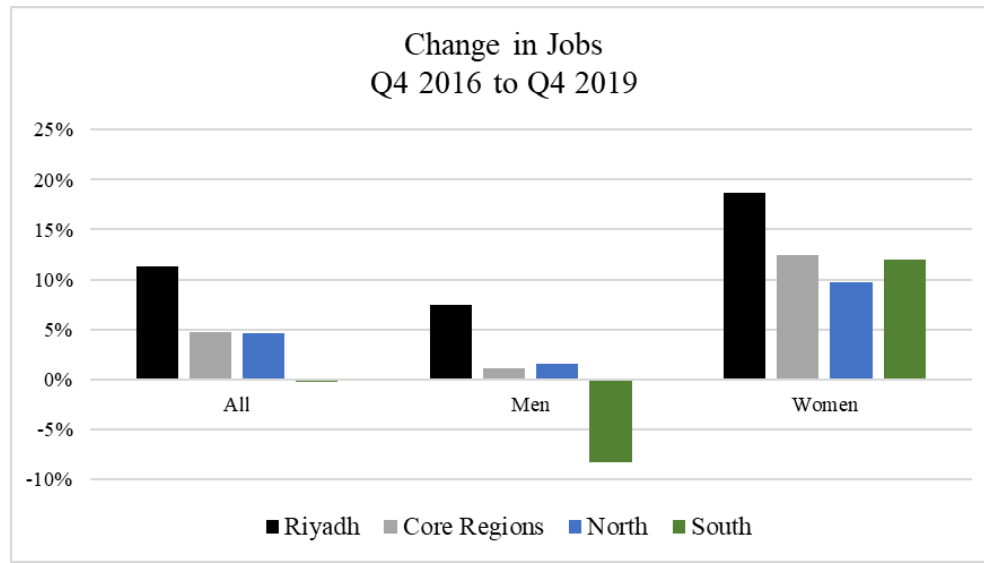


Figure 19: Change in total number of jobs, percentage. Source: Labor Market Surveys, General Authority for Statistics.

In terms of migration, poll results and demographic data suggest that the current development focus on the Kingdom’s core economic areas will continue to draw citizens in the North and South to more economically dynamic core regions. In my original survey, when asked where they would prefer to live if guaranteed a “good job” anywhere in the Kingdom over half of male respondents in Ha’il, Jazan and Buraidah, the capital city of the rural Qassim region north of Riyadh, indicated that they would prefer to leave their home region (Figure 20).²⁵² Saudi women outside of Riyadh were markedly more likely to prefer leaving their home region as well, albeit not to the same degree. Furthermore, among all respondents (men and women) who preferred to move, over 70% indicated that they would prefer to relocate to Riyadh. Out of the entire survey of over 2500 individuals, only one resident of a “core” region indicated they would want to relocate to the North or South: a single resident of Buraidah indicated they would prefer to live and work in ‘Asir. This accords with available data on internal migration within the Kingdom, which notes that the main directions of internal migration are either citizens from core regions moving to other core

²⁵² Follow-up questions about what salary would constitute a “good job” worth leaving their home region for indicated a monthly salary of around SAR 10,000, or around \$2,700.

regions (i.e. Riyadh to the Eastern Province) or citizens from the North and South moving into core regions (Figure 21).

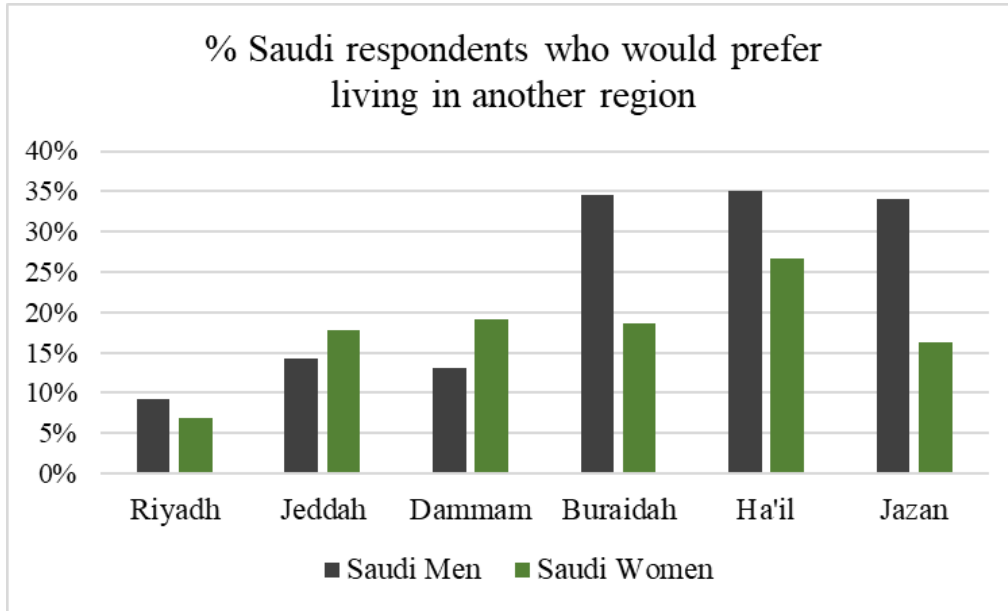


Figure 20: Percentage of respondents to labor-market survey who indicated that they would prefer to move to another region if they could be guaranteed a "good job," by gender of respondent.

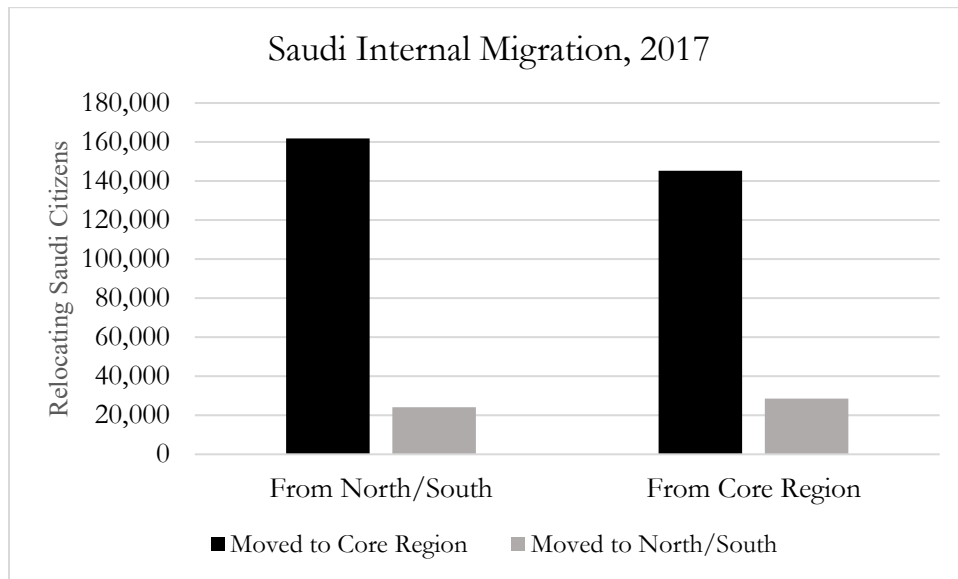


Figure 21: Respondents from a given region who now reside in another region, aggregated by core/periphery distinction. Data source does not indicate whether this reflects those who moved in the previous year or ever. Source: Population Characteristics Survey, 2017

4.6 Conclusion

While the Saudi regime's pursuit of "balanced development" under King 'Abdullah's early years in office pledged to redistribute the Kingdom's development investments to better support the economies of the peripheral Northern and Southern regions, the motivation for this project vanished once increases in the Kingdom's oil revenues no longer appeared limitless. In at least adopting the National Spatial Strategy and championing projects such as the Economic Cities, Crown Prince and then King 'Abdullah sought to respond to the long-term social challenges generated by the Kingdom's past policies: whether the overcrowding of the Kingdom's major cities, creating grievances and potential threats within the regime's core areas of support, or the potential for grievances in the Kingdom's periphery to challenge Al Saud territorial control of the country. Yet in relying largely on 'Abdullah's private conviction of the need for reform, there was little broader buy-in for these changes beyond a handful of closely affiliated bureaucrats in MoMRA as well as independent agencies. As such, while the considerable resource revenues of the second oil boom initially permitted policies that closed the gap between core and peripheral areas, resource constraints, obstruction from most of the Kingdom's technocratic class involved in economic policymaking, as well as the succession of new leaders with different priorities for the Kingdom undermined regional development reforms in the long run (Figure 22).

This brief period of balanced development was accompanied by some lasting changes in the periphery, most notably the establishment of a truly national university system—with responsibility for establishing and supporting the universities falling to a single Ministry (of Higher Education) itself already concerned with overcrowding of the Kingdom's existing major universities. Yet wherever balanced development plans required the coordination of several of the Kingdom's economy-related ministries (including Economy & Planning as well as Finance), promised benefits to the periphery in terms of jobs and economic activity did not follow. As a visual metaphor for this

time period, during a visit to Ha'il pointed to large lots of land cleared out on either side of the major King 'Abd al-'Aziz road in the center of the city. The empty lots resulted from the groundwork for a major expansion of the road from 4 lanes to 6, announced by King 'Abdullah himself during his 2007 visit, the project was subsequently undercut by the Ministry of Finance as officials there balked at the cost of compensating owners on either side of the road.²⁵³ The project subsequently stalled out entirely, in line with most efforts to promote balanced development within the Kingdom.

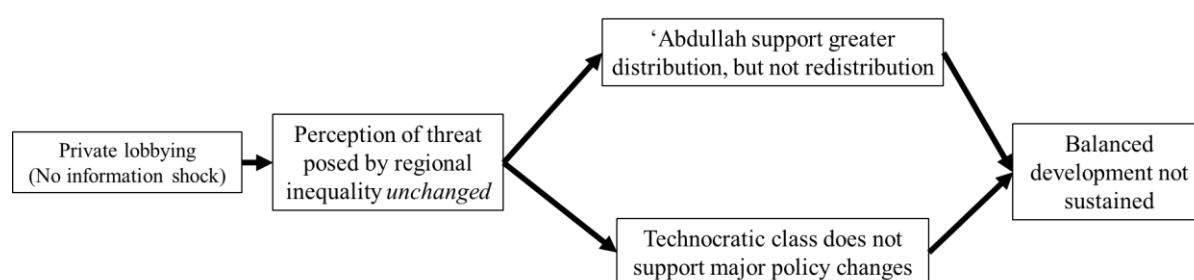


Figure 22: Pathways of regional development reform in Saudi Arabia.

Still, the trajectory of balanced development reforms helps us to rule out key existing explanations for new distribution under autocracy. First, protest has not been a reliable means of securing greater distribution from the Saudi regime even amid major resource booms, and has not provided an avenue for local communities to reverse long-run spatial inequalities. While regional uprisings in the Eastern Province and Najran occurred at the intersection of spatial inequalities and identity-based grievances (given the Kingdom's persistent discrimination against the religious practices of its Shi'a minority), they still serve to indicate how the Saudi regime's response to unrest has not been to flood areas with development dollars, but to deny local residents access to existing forms of distribution (such as state jobs). This stands in contrast to suggestions that local

²⁵³ Ayed Al-Janubi, "Ha'il: King 'Abd al-'Aziz Road... Clogged Artery in Need of Catheter from <<Finance>>," *Al-Eqtisadiyah*, March 13, 2012, https://www.aleqt.com/2012/03/13/article_635967.html.

communities within Saudi Arabia have been able to secure enduring policy reforms regarding the distribution of state wealth through mass mobilization.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁴ Nimah Mazaheri, "Oil, Dissent, and Distribution," *World Development* 99 (2017): 195–98.

Chapter 5

Business Insiders and Saudi Labor Market Reforms

5.1 Introduction

This chapter illustrates the argument of the dissertation by examining Saudi labor market reforms between 2000 and 2020. In Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Arab monarchies, the growing use of expatriate workers to staff private-sector positions since the 1970s has contributed to a persistent labor-market “imbalance”: most citizens work in better-paid, secure jobs in the public sector, while private-sector positions are overwhelmingly held by non-citizens. This arrangement has been perpetuated not only by state access to significant natural resource revenues, which have been able to finance a public-sector workforce far in excess of the country’s needs, but also by the privileged insider position of well-connected Saudi business leaders. As in many advanced, industrialized democracies, large private-sector employers in Saudi Arabia have lobbied rulers to maintain access to low-cost expatriate labor, against efforts at “Saudization” or the nationalization of the Kingdom’s private-sector workforce.²⁵⁵ Over the past decade, however, Saudi rulers have backed policies that place mounting pressure on firms to hire citizens over expatriates, cutting into business profits even for well-connected firms while demonstrating a commitment to providing more (private-sector) jobs for citizens.

In the sections below, I trace Saudi political leaders’ approach to labor-market policies over time, linking redoubled support for Saudization reforms to the failure of key reference regimes in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-2012. Saudi officials realized beginning in the 1990s that rising unemployment among Saudi citizens—and especially Saudi men—posed a potential challenge to

²⁵⁵ Gary P. Freeman, “Modes of Immigration Politics in Liberal Democratic States,” *International Migration Review* 29, no. 4 (1995): 881–902.

Saudi stability if not addressed. Prior to 2011, however, efforts to pressure all private-sector firms to hire more Saudi citizens ran aground in the face of lobbying from key business figures and the Saudi Council of Chambers; Saudi rulers returned to status-quo policies of addressing citizen unemployment through a combination of public-sector hiring and education programs. Uprisings across the MENA region, however, highlighted the revolutionary potential of (male) citizen unemployment. This prompted an enduring political commitment to costly policy change despite business lobbying and the absence of a persistent threat of mobilization within the Kingdom.

5.2 Insider Constraints and Policy Stasis, 2000-2010

In the decade prior to the Arab Spring uprisings, Saudi rulers attempted to force Saudization upon the private sector, only to abandon efforts at reform in the face of backlash from an insider constituency: business elites. Rising youth unemployment (particularly among Saudi men) prompted growing concern among Saudi political elites as well as within public commentary. As my theory predicts, however, major Saudi employers criticized efforts at reform in public and lobbied influential royals in private, arguing that Saudization would undercut both aggregate economic growth and marquee infrastructure projects planned for the Kingdom (as well as their own profit margins). In just a few years, Saudi officials reversed course and openly embraced labor-market policies that avoided placing any costs on employers.

Rising Outsider threat: Unemployed Youth

By the end of the 1990s, unemployment among young Saudi men had become a matter of public (and political) concern as never before. Although the Kingdom's aggregate GDP fell considerable in the 1980s as a consequence of falling oil prices, officials expected that the Kingdom's large expatriate workforce would shield Saudi citizens from economic fallout, assuming that any job losses

would fall primarily on expatriates.²⁵⁶ Still, they failed to anticipate that most private-sector Saudi employers greatly preferred to hire low-wage expatriate labor whose workplace demands would be constrained by the strictures of the sponsorship system. By contrast, generous public-sector salaries meant that few Saudis were willing to work at available private-sector wages (or, to put it another way, that few private employers were willing or able to match bureaucrats' salaries). Hence, despite minimal economic growth, the expatriate workforce expanded by over 1.3 million (an increase of nearly 45%) between 1984 and 1989; citizen employment grew by just 137,000 (7%) during this time period.²⁵⁷

Media commentary and official remarks provide clear evidence of elite concern over unemployment; private estimates suggested an unemployment rate among young Saudi men of over 20%.²⁵⁸ In an open letter issued in 1995, none other than Osama bin Laden commented on the phenomenon, criticizing then-King Fahd for “the growing number of the unemployed among the ranks of the youth and the new [university] graduates.”²⁵⁹ Minister of the Interior Prince Nayef was an early advocate of Saudization, organizing periodic security-service raids on firms to assess expatriate workers' legal status.²⁶⁰ The 7th Development Plan (released in 1999) in turn placed clear emphasis on “removing Saudization constraints in the public and private sectors”—with the expectation that nearly 60% of Saudi job-seekers would find employment by replacing expatriates.²⁶¹ Implementing Saudization suffered from both a lack of accurate data and a fragmented regulatory

²⁵⁶ As of 1984, at the outset of the recession, government planners “[did] not contemplate new regulations restricting the stay or employment of individual expatriates.” Ministry of Planning, “Fourth Development Plan” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, February 1985), 85.

²⁵⁷ Ministry of Planning, “Fifth Development Plan” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, December 1989), 125–26.

²⁵⁸ Sean Foley, *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam* (Lynne Rienner Publishers Boulder, CO, 2010), 120.

²⁵⁹ “An Open Letter to King Fahad” in Brad K. Berner, *Jihad: Bin Laden in His Own Words: Declarations, Interviews, and Speeches* (Peacock Books, 2007), 16.

²⁶⁰ Hélène Thiollet, “Migrants and Monarchs: Regime Survival, State Transformation and Migration Politics in Saudi Arabia,” *Third World Quarterly*, 2021, 7–8. A 1994 decree issued by the Council of Ministers nominally required an annual improvement in private-sector Saudization rates, though this provision was rarely enforced. S’ad Al-Dossari, “‘indhār 2-1 [Warning: 2-1],” *Al-Riyadh*, November 6, 2004, <https://www.alriyadh.com/12553>.

²⁶¹ Ministry of Planning, “Seventh Development Plan” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, June 1999), 166.

apparatus spread out over multiple government agencies, however. The General Authority for Statistics (GASat) only began estimating a national unemployment rate beginning in 2000.²⁶² As soon as the first numbers became available, Prince Nayef noted that the percentage of unemployed Saudis was “concerning”—nearly 7% for men, over 15% for Saudi women—with Saudi economists pointing to the potential for unemployment to translate into “economic, social, and security problems.”²⁶³ Still, initial responses tended to favor what Steffen Hertog terms “sledgehammer Saudization” – picking a particular profession (such as taxi drivers, in 2002) and attempting to force employers to hire as many Saudis as possible (or only Saudis) for that position.²⁶⁴ With a limited capacity at the Ministry of Labor (MoL) to monitor and regulate the job market, however, these piecemeal efforts made little progress as unemployment rates increased (Figure 23).



Figure 23: Unemployment rate for Saudi citizens, by gender. Source: Labor Force Surveys, General Authority for Statistics, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

²⁶² Ministry of Planning, 158.

²⁶³ Quoted in Mufrih bin S’ad Al-Haqbani, “Thawābit Sūq Al-’aml Fī Ḥadīth Samū Wazīr al-Dākhiliyya,” *Al-Jazīrah*, August 15, 2000, <https://www.al-jazirah.com/2000/20000815/ec6.htm>.

²⁶⁴ Nahid Ba Shatah, “Al-Batāla Fī al-s’āūdiyya Shirr Lā Mafarr Mīnuhu Fa-Kayfa Nataqīhi?,” *Al-Riyadh*, January 21, 2003, <https://www.alriyadh.com/24599>.

Saudization Attempted and Abandoned

Rising unemployment rates in the early 2000s, despite higher oil prices and a growing Saudi economy, prompted an initial effort by Saudi rulers to force through new efforts at Saudization. With Prince Nayef focused more on the Kingdom's domestic security situation by 2003, his half-brother Abdullah bin 'Abd al-'Aziz (Crown Prince and later King) began to champion efforts to strengthen labor-market regulation under a key technocratic ally—Ghazi al-Gosaibi—within the Ministry of Labor.²⁶⁵ Gosaibi and MoL claimed they would finally enforce Saudization laws on the books since 1994, while a new labor law issued by royal order in 2005 required – among other things – an incredible 75% Saudization rate for all private-sector firms (albeit allowing for “temporary” exceptions).²⁶⁶

Initial Reform Drive

Initial statements by Gosaibi (almost certainly reflecting the calculations of his royal benefactor, 'Abdullah) aligned with public critiques of private sector leaders' opposition to Saudization. In early 2005, Gosaibi publicly criticized “beneficiaries who had arranged their affairs around the present [labor-market] situation, which allows unlimited recruitment [of foreign workers],” in reference to influential businesspersons, and argued that “this group is not ready to accept a logic that contradicts its interests.”²⁶⁷ In order to force the private sector to accept the logic of Saudization, Gosaibi and the MoL used the blunt method of sharply restricting the number of labor permits issued for expatriate workers through the end of 2005—hoping that reducing the overall supply of expatriate labor would induce greater private-sector hiring of Saudi citizens. Driving up the cost of expatriate

²⁶⁵ The key administrative change entailed removing authority over issuing labor permits from the Ministry of the Interior and moving it under the MoL. Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 210–16.

²⁶⁶ “Niẓām Al-ʿaml [Labor Law],” 51 Royal Decree § (2005), Royal Court of Saudi Arabia.

²⁶⁷ Fahad Al-Ghariri, “Al-Qusaibi: Sanaʿal Bil-Baṭāla Ilā Mā Nisbatihi 2-3% Khilāl Khamas Sanawāt [Gosaibi: We Will Reach Unemployment of 2-3% within Five Years],” *Al-Jazirah*, January 3, 2005, <https://www.al-jazirah.com/2005/20050103/ln7t.htm>.

labor held out the possibility of short-term changes in the Saudi labor market without threatening the existing entitlements of public-sector employees.

This view resonates with considerable public commentary over the course of the 2000s, with numerous Saudi academics calling for brute-force approaches to achieving Saudization. As early as 2000, King Saud University Professor Nasser al-Muharib could speak of “many voices that blame the private sector for abandoning its responsibility towards employing Saudi citizens.”²⁶⁸ In discussing drivers of unemployment in Saudi Arabia and the GCC, columnist Saleh al-Sultan likewise spoke of “imported labor... flooding the [Saudi] labor market,” a situation that he argued “required the intervention of the authorities with the aim of protecting national human resources.”²⁶⁹ While these writers at least assumed “good intentions” on the part of Saudi businessmen, others were more direct. In a debate organized by magazine *Al-Yamama* about labor-market policy in 2010, business-administration academic ‘Adnan al-Shiha criticized Saudi private-sector firms for “wanting the field left open for them to pursue profits by any means. They focus on quick profits and obtaining government support.”²⁷⁰ Saudi commentators in this camp pressed for policies that would employ more Saudis at the immediate expense of existing employers, along with state regulatory capacity to enforce such policies. In the same *Al-Yamama*-organized debate, economic commentator Abdulrahman al-Khorayef calling for creating “an administrative apparatus... [with] as wide authority over all private sector... [that] conducts a comprehensive survey of job opportunities.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Private employers’ failure to “employ Saudis is not because of [the graduates’] specializations, but because of the high wages that they ask for compared to what the expatriate workers ask for.” Nasser Al-Muharib, “Fi Dawal Mutaqadimah Yastaqbal Al-Qita’ al-Khas Khariji al-Jama’at Bi-Araf al-Nazar ‘an Takhasusatihim [In Advanced Countries, the Private Sector Accepts University Graduates Regardless of Their Specialization],” *Al-Jazirah*, December 21, 2000, <https://www.al-jazirah.com/2000/20001221/ec18.htm>.

²⁶⁹ Saleh Al-Sultan, “Al-Batala: Athar Wa Sibil Takhfif [Unemployment: Effects and Means of Reducing],” *Al-Riyadh*, December 26, 2005, <https://www.alriyadh.com/118265>.

²⁷⁰ Tawfiq Nasr Allāh, Sāmī Sāliḥ Al-Tatar, and Mohamed Al-Kham’alī, “Wizārat al-’aml wa rijāl al-’amāl: ‘alāqat ta’awun ‘aw tanāfur?,” *Al-Yamamah*, December 11, 2010, 10.

²⁷¹ Economic writer Abdul Rahman bin Nasser Al-Khorayef, qtd in Fahad Al-Marīkhī, “Al-Qadā’ ‘alā al-Baṭāla [Eliminating Unemployment],” *Al-Riyadh*, June 6, 2008, <https://www.alriyadh.com/306734>.

In just a few years, however, Saudi officials reversed course on labor market reforms. In line with my theory's predictions, business leaders publicly and privately criticized reforms as an attack on their interests, cautioning rulers that increased labor costs threatened their ability to deliver on regime priorities: aggregate economic growth and large-scale infrastructure projects. Saudi officials instead signaled a turn to policy alternatives that might alleviate employment in the long run (by reducing young Saudis' job expectations) but that imposed no short-term costs on insiders.

Major Saudi business leaders opposed forced Saudization, privately concerned about the impact on profits but publicly warning that higher labor costs risked undermining the Saudi regime's ability to deliver basic services to citizens. Even minor revisions to the sponsorship system, affording expatriates greater bargaining power over wages, threatened to impose considerable costs on employers when multiplied across thousands of low-wage workers.²⁷² Construction contractors with expatriate-heavy workforces were among the first and most strident voices to criticize Saudization. Members of the Contractors' Committee within the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce voiced their concerns in a round-table meeting with *Al-Riyadh* in 2005. Nasser bin Jarallah, CEO of the mid-sized bin Jarallah Holding Co., told the paper's reporters that Saudization "This means delaying the completion of these projects, and thus delaying the benefits of this development for citizens that our rulers—may God protect them—have desired."²⁷³ This was not just the view of a relatively small outfit, as Jarallah was flanked by the head of the Contractor's Committee and the head of projects for the much larger BEMCO contracting firm.

²⁷² Even a relatively minor change to the sponsorship system in the United Arab Emirates in 2011 resulted in wage increases of around 10% for most workers. Suresh Naidu, Yaw Nyarko, and Shing-Yi Wang, "Monopsony Power in Migrant Labor Markets: Evidence from the United Arab Emirates," *Journal of Political Economy* 124, no. 6 (2016): 1735–92.

²⁷³ Saleh Al-Zayed, "Akbar Qita' Yastaw'ib al-Quwa al-'amila Yashku Min al-Tajahul Wa 'adam al-d'am [Sector That Absorbs the Most Labor Complains of Ignorance and Lack of Support]," March 15, 2005, <https://www.alriyadh.com/47701>.

These concerns did not remain within the contracting sector, but became the subject of repeated lobbying on the part of the Council of Chambers' top representatives. Individual businessmen ran for election to regional Chambers of Commerce in part by pledging to address Saudization policies with Saudi political leadership as early as 2005, butting pressure on the council's leadership to act.²⁷⁴ Several senior representatives of the Council of Chambers, including the entity's then-chairman Abdulrahman Rashed Al-Rashed, also made these arguments directly to 'Abdullah. Afterwards, several Eastern Province businessmen intimated to U.S. diplomats, the King reportedly directed Gosaibi to abandon Saudization targets in four sectors: education, healthcare, industry, and construction, each directly related to state development goals.²⁷⁵ Other commentary sympathetic to the Saudi business community chastised Gosaibi for his confrontational approach, accusing him of trying to "flog the private sector with the stick of the Ministry [of Labor]."²⁷⁶

Gosaibi's subsequent actions indicate a complete rout of efforts to impose Saudization from above, with new policies seeking to socially engineer more competitive Saudi job-seekers. From 2006, the number of expatriate visas issued by the government skyrocketed even as the number of Saudi citizens in the private sector flatlined. By 2008, Gosaibi could still make some reference to possible penalties for companies that failed to achieve Saudization rates but mostly "hoped that companies would meet their goals."²⁷⁷ Behind the scenes, Saudi officials and business leaders explained to U.S. diplomats that Saudization was by now a "dead letter," effectively ignored by

²⁷⁴ "Ep Tribal Family Flexes Its Political and Economic Muscle," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Saudi Arabia Riyadh, December 21, 2005), https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05RIYADH9434_a.html.

²⁷⁵ "A Possible Retreat on Saudization?," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Saudi Arabia Riyadh, June 7, 2006), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06RIYADH4543_a.html.

²⁷⁶ Ibrahim bin Yusuf Al-Malik, "Ghazi Al-Gosaibi Wa Ma'zaq al-s'awada!," *Al-Riyadh*, April 30, 2007, <https://www.alriyadh.com/245810>.

²⁷⁷ Ahmed bin Hamdan and Mohammed Al-Husseini, "Al-s'awada Matlab Dini Wa 'ahad al-Huquq al-Mutaratiba 'Ala Rijal al-'amal Tujah Watanihim [Saudization Is a Religious Demand and One of the Rights of the Nation to Demand from Its Businessman]," *Al-Riyadh*, April 21, 2008, <https://www.alriyadh.com/336402>.

much of the Kingdom's business community.²⁷⁸ While increasing oil revenues may have made it easier for Saudi rulers to put off Saudization goals for another day, contemporary commentary suggests that the business community's lobbying played a critical role in killing off reform. Yousef al-Othaimen, a U.S.-trained sociologist and advisor to the Ministry of Labor, described Gosaibi's efforts to "close the recruitment taps" as encountering "violent resistance that left many in the Ministry of Labor to despair about the future of Saudization."²⁷⁹

Abandoning Reforms

Instead of castigating Saudi employers, Gosaibi and the MoL largely adopted business leaders' preferred policy approach to addressing Saudi employment: improving the "mindset," or work ethic, of young Saudis. Sultan al-Amash, managing director of a Saudi head-hunting firm, portrayed Saudization as a policy that simply "indulged the youth," contending that those unwilling to accept conditions in the private sector were "unworthy of help" from the government.²⁸⁰ Another common approach was to blame Saudi graduates' unemployment on their choices to pursue "theoretical" degrees – i.e. those outside of the hard sciences – that were in limited demand by employers.²⁸¹ In this view, Saudi government officials' attention (and the state's resources) would be better spent improving the country's education system and training programs so that they prepared Saudis to enter the private-sector workforce rather than preparing them for unemployment. Beyond improving the education system, state officials (in this view) should limit themselves to effecting cultural change among young Saudis, cultivating either "real world skills" or a "love of work" among

²⁷⁸ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 217; "Abha 2030: Asir Deputy Gov Discusses Reforms, Saudization," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Saudi Arabia Jeddah, December 15, 2007), https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07JEDDAH512_a.html.

²⁷⁹ Yousef bin Aḥmad Al-'Uthaymīn, "Al-Baṭāla Bayn al-Shabāb al-s'ūdi... al-Thughra al-Maftūha 2-3 [Unemployment among Saudi Youth... the Open Gap... 2 of 3]," *Al-Riyadh*, May 3, 2008, <https://www.alriyadh.com/339526>.

²⁸⁰ Al-Marīkhī, "Al-Qadā' 'alā al-Baṭāla [Eliminating Unemployment]."

²⁸¹ Khalid Al-Husseini, "Yawmiyyat 'atil 'an al-'aml. <<al-Firagh>> Yamla' al-Faragh! [Diary of an Unemployed Person... Emptiness Fills the Emptiness!]," *Al-Riyadh*, October 30, 2010, <https://www.alriyadh.com/572700>.

young Saudis.²⁸² Gosaibi's efforts included memorable personal performances such as joining the cooking staff of a Fuddrucker's restaurant in Jeddah to "combat society's perceptions of some professions," i.e. manual labor or service-sector work.²⁸³ As for business leaders, Gosaibi now cited them approvingly as inspirational success stories: "Without exception, all of the large Saudi merchant families are self-made, and started from scratch - it is an honor for the young man to work with the sweat of his brow."²⁸⁴ MoL advisor Othaimen mirrored Gosaibi's rhetoric in advocating educational policies that would "bring about... change in the mindsets of young people" by highlighting "success stories" of private-sector employment.²⁸⁵ The Saudi business community, for its part, paid "lip service" to the goal of Saudization but otherwise ignored government regulations.²⁸⁶

Youth unemployment remained a policy concern in Saudi Arabia, albeit not a paramount one. Per impressions related to U.S. Embassy officials, Saudi officials close to King Abdullah continued to make piecemeal demands on employers to create jobs for Saudis (or at least pledge to do so) in exchange for new access to state funds.²⁸⁷ U.S. diplomats themselves believed that "developing the Saudi workforce is essential to the long-term stability of the Kingdom."²⁸⁸ The male unemployment rate held at around 7% from 2008-10, slightly lower than it had been at the outset of

²⁸² Ibrahim Al-Shayban and 'Awda Al-Maliki, "Muwatinun Bidun Waza'if... Makanik SIRR! [Citizens without Employment... Your Place Is a Secret!]," *Al-Riyadh*, February 23, 2010, <https://www.alriyadh.com/500889>.

²⁸³ Kamāl Idrīs, "Wazir Al-'aml al-s'udi... Nadil Li-Yawm Wahid [Saudi Labor Minister... Waiter for a Day]," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, June 24, 2008, <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=54&article=476066&issueno=10801#.YXsOBJ7MJPZ>.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁵ Yousef bin Ahmad Al-'Uthaymīn, "Al-Baṭāla Bayn al-Shabāb al-s'ūdi... al-Thughra al-Maftūha 3-3 [Unemployment among Saudi Youth... the Open Gap... 3 of 3]," *Al-Riyadh*, May 10, 2008, <https://www.alriyadh.com/341565>.

²⁸⁶ "Saudization Requirements Hamper Business," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Saudi Arabia Riyadh, November 17, 2008), https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH1708_a.html.

²⁸⁷ "Saudi 'Gas Prince' Controls the Kingdom's Industrial Development," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Saudi Arabia Dhahran, April 8, 2009), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09DHAHRAN74_a.html.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Gosaibi's reform efforts (over 8% in 2004-5) but trending upwards again by 2010.²⁸⁹ . Domestic media coverage continued to emphasize the looming threat of unemployment up until the advent of the Arab Spring protests. One "investigation" blamed unemployment for crime and general dissolution among Saudi youth, while describing joblessness as "suffocating darkness, a murky future that slowly steals away the lives of young people and undermines the individual abilities that their bitter reality has no use for."²⁹⁰

Popular pressure in favor of Saudization was deflected, rather than amplified, by the Kingdom's limited participatory institutions. In the early 2000s, state-organized "National Dialogue" sessions ostensibly offered a forum for ordinary citizens to voice grievances.²⁹¹ In preparation for a 2008 National Dialogue session on employment in the Kingdom, a majority of participants "emphasized the need to activate the societal responsibility of the private sector" in providing employment to Saudi citizens.²⁹² At the actual "Work & Employment" Dialogue held in 2008, however, what ensued was not substantive bargaining over policy but a stage-managed discussion resulting in a concluding statement that avoided any outright criticism of the private sector. The Dialogue's concluding report highlighted the role of changes to "[Saudi] society's culture" in leading to higher unemployment levels, with a vague policy recommendation of "alignment of education outcomes, training, and the labor market."²⁹³

By late 2010, there was every indication that the Saudi regime had largely abandoned efforts to press for Saudization at the expense of a core constituency – business leaders. The close of 2010

²⁸⁹ Labor Force Surveys, General Authority for Statistics, 2008-2010.

²⁹⁰ Al-Husseini, "Yawmiyyat 'atil 'an al-'aml.. <<al-Firagh>> Yamla' al-Faragh! [Diary of an Unemployed Person... Emptiness Fills the Emptiness!]"

²⁹¹ Thompson, *Saudi Arabia and the Path to Political Change*.

²⁹² Sulṭān Al-'Aḥmarī and S'ad Al Hussein, "D'awa Li-Ḥal Mushkilat al-Baṭāla Wa Mā Sababatihī Min 'amrāq Nafsiyya Wa Mushākil 'Usariyya [Call to Solve the Problem of Unemployment and the Mental Illnesses and Family Problems That Cause It]," *Al-Riyadh*, October 25, 2007, <https://www.alriyadh.com/289020>.

²⁹³ Concluding Statement, "Work & Employment National Dialogue," April 2008, 2.

offered little indication of major changes in Saudi labor-market policy.²⁹⁴ After Ghazi al-Gosaibi passed away in August of 2010, his replacement seemed even less likely to antagonize the Saudi business community. Engineer Adel Faqieh was himself a prominent businessman from Jeddah, initially known for his successes as an executive with the Savola Group, a major firm in the food and beverage sector.²⁹⁵ He was generally understood to favor a close relationship between the state and private-sector leaders, with a background as elected head of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry and then as appointed Mayor of the city of Jeddah. As mayor, he even attracting complaints that he tolerated Jeddah-based businesses enriching themselves through government connections at the expense of ordinary citizens.²⁹⁶ Faqih was not expected to bring radical change; businessman Tariq al-Bassam described the new Minister as somebody who could “find common ground between the national interest, citizens, business leaders” and demonstrate “a language of understanding” between MoL and the business community.²⁹⁷ All seven employers quoted in an *Al-Yamamah* article at the close of 2010 criticized the idea of Saudization by force, arguing instead for long-term policies of training and education to improve Saudi graduates’ suitability for the labor market.

5.3 Regional Regime Failure and Saudi Recalculation, 2011-2012

After the collapse of numerous authoritarian regimes in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-12, Saudi rulers almost immediately returned to the draconian measures they had so recently abandoned in trying to force greater Saudization of the labor force. A wide range of data sources

²⁹⁴ However, Hertog notes that reform efforts in the early 2000s may have eased bureaucratic hurdles for future policy changes by concentrating administrative oversight of labor-market policy within the MoL. Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 218–19.

²⁹⁵ “Majmu’at Safola Tahtafi Wa Tukaram ’Adil Faqieh [Savole Group Honors Adel Faqieh],” *Al-Eqtisadiyah*, November 5, 2010, https://www.aleqt.com/2010/11/05/article_465312.html.

²⁹⁶ “Saudi Arabians Use Facebook to Vent Fury over Jeddah Flood Deaths,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 30, 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/1130/p06s13-wome.html>.

²⁹⁷ Nasr Allāh, Al-Tatar, and Al-Kham’alī, “Wizārat al-’aml wa rijāl al-’amāl: ’alāqat ta’āwun ’aw tanāfur?,” 11.

indicate that the collapse of authoritarian regimes such as Hosni Mubarak's Egypt translated into Saudi rulers' heightened fears of mass unemployment leading to regime-ending mass mobilization. As my theory predicts, these changed perceptions were enduring rather than evaporating as the wave of unrest subsided.

Between late 2010 and mid-2011, Saudi Arabia weathered a wave of uprisings across much of the Arab world through a combination of short-term handouts and support from coalition "insiders." By mid-February, protests had forced Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali into exile in Jeddah while military leaders in Egypt removed President Hosni Mubarak from power following massive street demonstrations; further protests had broken out in most major cities of the Arab world, including in the neighboring Kingdom of Bahrain. While Saudi leaders would eventually back opposition movements against occasional geopolitical antagonists such as Muammar al-Qaddafi's regime in Libya and (eventually) the Bashar al-Assad-led regime in Syria, the potential that even Western-aligned autocrats might be overthrown in mass uprisings appeared genuinely shocking.

Rather than waiting for protests to reach the Kingdom itself, Saudi political elites moved proactively to disincentive rebellion through an incredible range of welfare payments and state subsidies. A February 23 royal order from King Abdullah spelled out handouts ranging from billions in Saudi riyals (SAR) to augment existing housing projects (15 billion SAR for the General Housing Authority, 40 billion SAR for the Kingdom's real estate development fund), to increasing overtime bonuses from 25% to 50%, on down to 10 million SAR for each of the Kingdom's official "Literary Societies" and payouts ranging from 2-10 million SAR for each professional Saudi football team.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ "Awamir Malikiyya: 40 Milyar Li-Sunduq al-'iskan Wa Tathbit Badal al-Ghala' Fi al-Muratabat [Royal Orders: 40 Billion for Housing Fund and Ensuring Cost-of-Living Adjustment for Salaries]," *Al-Riyadh*, February 23, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/607473>.

In a possible nod to potential political danger of Saudis organizing abroad, every single Saudi student studying abroad at the time was incorporated into the King Abdullah Scholarship Program.²⁹⁹ Such royal spending came well in advance of any mass mobilization within Saudi Arabia, although some petitions calling for political reforms had garnered attention online.³⁰⁰ Aggregate government spending in turn trended sharply upwards as Saudi Arabia joined its peer GCC monarchies in directly hiring thousands into the bureaucracy (and particularly the security services), while ultimately pledging over \$100 billion in new social spending.³⁰¹ Key coalition insiders pitched in with actions aimed at warding off any public dissent. The Kingdom's religious establishment, for example, argued strongly against challenging the rule of the Al Saud. "The necessity of obedience in the land of Islam and the heartland of belief is not up for discussion," underscored a Friday sermon following the GCC intervention in Bahrain.³⁰² In recognition of the clergy's support, they were quickly rewarded through amendments to the Kingdom's media law that cloaked senior clerics in the same *lèse-majesté* protections that criminalized any criticism of the Saudi royal family itself.³⁰³

Short-term handouts were backed up by the credible threat of repression through a sharp crackdown on those protests that did materialize. Saudi security services with the MoI as well as National Guard troops made a show of force to deter mobilization in advance, not only patrolling the streets of Saudi cities but joining a GCC-wide effort to deploy military and security forces to

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ The Mass Mobilization under Autocracies Database (MMAD) records just instance of major protest prior to the initial decree—by expatriate construction workers in Mecca demanding pay rather than citizens pressing for political demands. Nils Weidmann and Espen Geelmuyden Rød, *The Internet and Political Protest in Autocracies*. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 39–61; Eda Keremoglu, Sebastian Hellmeier, and Nils B. Weidmann, "Coding Instructions for the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database, Version 3.0," December 18, 2020, <https://mmadatabase.org/>.

³⁰¹ "Labor Market Reforms to Boost Employment and Productivity in the GCC," Report for the Annual Meeting of Ministers of Finance and Central Bank Governors, International Monetary Fund, 5 October 2013. <https://www.imf.org/external/np/pp/eng/2013/100513.pdf>

³⁰² Hamza bin Sulayman al-Tayyar, "Khutba 'an al-Mudhahirat Wa al-Masirat [Sermon on Demonstrations and Marches]," *Al-Riyadh*, March 16, 2011, <http://www.alriyadh.com/614147>.

³⁰³ Muhammad Al-Sulami, "Kingdom Amends Media Laws," *Arab News*, April 29, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110602213143/https://www.arabnews.com/saudi Arabia/article377672.ece>.

Bahrain to help crush protests there. Few protests materialized in the Kingdom's heartland of Riyadh and surrounding areas; on a purported "Day of Rage" discussed on Facebook for March 11, only a single Saudi citizen turned out to protest. Sustained protests within the Kingdom occurred largely in the predominantly Shi'a community of Qatif in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom. Shi'a mobilization was generally demonized as resulting from a foreign plot and met with unrelenting repression.³⁰⁴ There, hundreds of those who were arrested or spoke out risked arrest and prosecution or, failing that, loss of livelihood through being fired from their jobs.³⁰⁵

Connecting Revolution to Reform

Despite the apparently successful suppression of the revolution at home, a wide range of evidence indicates that the collapse of regional autocrats heightening Saudi political leaders' fears of losing power in a future mass rebellion among their own citizens. Saudi rulers interpreted the overthrow of regional autocrats—especially Egypt's Hosni Mubarak—as a clear signal that old strategies for maintaining power might no longer apply. Amid the uprisings, Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef invited a number of influential Saudis to a meeting in order to caution them "Don't compare us to Egypt or Tunisia," though attendees in turn "suspected the prince was merely hiding his anxieties."³⁰⁶ Saudi rulers could no longer assume that US diplomatic support would suffice to keep autocrats in power in the face of popular protests, with one Obama administration official summarizing their perspective as: "Our protector [the U.S. President] is turning against one of us,

³⁰⁴ Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 137–56, <https://doi.org/10.7312/wehr16512>.

³⁰⁵ Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012," *The Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (2012): 628–59.

³⁰⁶ Robert F. Worth, "Unrest Encircles Saudis, Stoking Sense of Unease," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/20/world/middleeast/20saudi.html>; Neil MacFarquhar, "Potential New Saudi Crown Prince Seen as Hard-Line but Pragmatic," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/24/world/middleeast/potential-new-saudi-crown-prince-is-hard-line-but-pragmatic.html>.

and if he does it against Mubarak he's going to do it against me, too."³⁰⁷ Reporters for major US newspapers captured some of these anxieties during reporting trips in 2011, with one Saudi political scientist conveying that "the Saudis [indicating Saudi leadership] do not like this revolutionary wave — they were really scared."³⁰⁸ In terms of foreign policy, these fears were reflected in extensive Saudi investments in counter-revolutionary efforts among countries viewed as potential allies in a geopolitical allies against Iran, shoring up existing regimes and aspiring autocrats in response to what well-connected Saudi commentators deemed "an ill-conceived [US] response to the Arab protest movements."³⁰⁹

Why would Saudi Arabia's political leadership fixate on Egyptian political developments rather than the apparent resilience of monarchical regimes among the Gulf Cooperation Council? A key factor was likely Egypt's close security relations with the United States, which Saudi rulers might have previously viewed as a backstop against regime change. In the months and years that followed, Saudi Arabia showed that it fully willing to weigh in against authoritarian regimes in Libya and Syria, seeing each as an opportunity to help replace an occasional geopolitical rival with a more friendly government. The overthrow of even Western-aligned autocrats proved much more concerning, however. The Obama administration's hesitancy regarding support for Mubarak, and eventually calls for his ouster, showed that U.S. support was not only insufficient to maintain autocrats in power but might even prove contingent on Arab countries' ability to avoid destabilizing popular protest at home. Accordingly, Saudi diplomats and even King 'Abdullah himself lobbied the Obama administration at length to salvage Mubarak's regime or at least ensure an orderly transfer of power

³⁰⁷ Michael Crowley, "Obama's Royal Pain," POLITICO, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/obama-saudi-arabia-iran-royal-family-217385>.

³⁰⁸ Neil MacFarquhar, "Saudi Arabia Scrambles to Limit Region's Upheaval," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/28/world/middleeast/28saudi.html>.

³⁰⁹ Nawaf Obaid, "Amid the Arab Spring, a U.S.-Saudi Split," *Washington Post*, May 15, 2011, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/amid-the-arab-spring-a-us-saudi-split/2011/05/13/AFMy8Q4G_story.html.

to another ruler within Mubarak's orbit.³¹⁰ Additionally, Saudi Arabia itself played an important role as a backstop against rebellion across the region's monarchies and other U.S.-aligned regimes. In Bahrain, Saudi security forces played a direct role in putting down rebellion; more broadly, Saudi Arabia worked within the GCC to extend major aid packages not just to Bahrain, but to other monarchies wracked by protests such as Oman, Jordan, and even Morocco.³¹¹ Even with respect to Yemen, where Saudi Arabia led the GCC in overseeing an ultimately failed political transition rather than fully restoring the ousted Saleh government, Saudi aims were to prevent the collapse of Yemen as a state and to maintain a degree of influence over any subsequent government.³¹² Yet with the United States an unreliable partner in sustaining autocracy, there was no further bulwark against revolution beyond Saudi Arabia in terms of international relations.

At home, elite Saudi opinion quickly focused on the commonalities between the drivers of the Arab Spring elsewhere and the growing numbers of unemployed or underemployed youth at home. While the causes of the region-wide uprisings continue to this day, much initial commentary even among Western media and scholars attributed the outbreak of protests to "the growing grievances of a youth bulge without adequate employment."³¹³ As before the Arab Spring, Saudi newspapers discussed the policy challenge of youth unemployment within the Kingdom, albeit now typically noting that the Kingdom's youth unemployment rate was "higher than it is in Tunisia,

³¹⁰ Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, "Allies Press U.S. to Go Slow on Egypt," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2011, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/world/middleeast/09diplomacy.html>.

³¹¹ Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis* 56, no. 1 (2012): 96–104; Steinberg, "Leading the Counter-Revolution."

³¹² Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, "Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy," Briefing Paper (Chatham House, May 1, 2011), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2011/05/yemen-saudi-arabia-and-gulf-states-elite-politics-street-protests-and-regional-diplomacy>.

³¹³ Michael Hoffman and Amaney Jamal, "The Youth and the Arab Spring: Cohort Differences and Similarities," *Middle East Law and Governance* 4, no. 1 (2012): 169; Filipe R. Campante and Davin Chor, "Why Was the Arab World Poised for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (2012): 167–88.

Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon.”³¹⁴ Even where state-regulated media outlets effectively took a victory lap in noting the lack of political upheaval within Saudi Arabia, writers highlighted unemployment as a policy area where public policy might need to improve. Tariq Al-Homayed, then-editor of Saudi-owned newspaper *Asbāq Al-Amsat*, called the lack of mass protests on the Kingdom’s would-be “Day of Rage” a “day of silent allegiance from the people to their leadership,” before going on to mention domestic jobs creation as a key policy area in need of domestic reforms.³¹⁵

In-depth considerations of potential future regime change in Saudi Arabia from this period cite youth unemployment as the primary catalyst for political change. Saudi writer Fouad al-Farhan, for example, is representative of a generation of Saudi bloggers, typically more liberal-minded, who began to offer some criticisms of the Kingdom’s power structures through online discussions in the early 2000s.³¹⁶ In a January 2012 post looking back on the events of the Arab Spring, Farhan concedes that the ruling family appeared secure (for the time being) due to the support of a sturdy coalition of elite businessmen, tribal leaders, the country’s religious establishment, and even liberal “cultural elites” in deterring or dissuading dissent.³¹⁷ Yet Farhan also observes that a “frightening increase in youth unemployment” poses a critical challenge to the continuation of this stability,

³¹⁴ “Al-Mamlaka Tahtal al-Martaba al-Thaniyya ‘ala Mustawa al-Sharq al-‘awsat Wa Shamal Ifriqiyya Fi Nisab al-Batala [Kingdom Occupies Second Place in the Middle East and North Africa for Unemployment Rates],” *Al-Riyadh*, September 5, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/664739>.

³¹⁵ Tariq Al-Homayed, “Al-s’audiyya... Yawm al-Bay’a al-Samita [Saudi Arabia... Day of Silent Allegiance],” *Asbāq Al-Amsat*, March 12, 2011, <https://archive.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=612174&issueno=11792#.YmcQsNrMJPZ>.

³¹⁶ Hammond, *The Islamic Utopia*, 201–2. Islamic Utopia, 201-202; In one post from 2007, for example, he dismisses the efforts of a Saudi Minister of Commerce to appear critical of the “greed” of some Saudi merchants, referring to them as “mere statements aimed at absorbing the anger of the street.” Fouad Al-Farhan, “Za‘m al-Farazdaq ‘an Sayaqtul Mirb’a: Wazir al-Tijara al-s’udi Yaqul Bi-‘anuhu Sayahmina Min Jash’a al-Tujjar [Farazdaq Claimed He Would Kill Mirb’a: Minister of Commerce Says He Will Save Us from Merchants’ Greed],” September 25, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071209164911/http://www.alfarhan.org/archives/102>. <https://web.archive.org/web/20071209164911/http://www.alfarhan.org/archives/102>.

³¹⁷ Al-Farhan, “Fī Al-s’ūdiyya, Matā Sataqūl al-Hukūma Ana Fahimtukum? [In Saudi Arabia, When Will the Government Say I Understand You?].”

particularly as the existing “pillars” of the Saudi regime will no longer be able to deter or dissuade Saudis from mobilizing as they once did:

Whenever youth unemployment reaches a critical level, while corruption continues to grow in the face of weak official resistance, and escalate restrictions on freedoms, and all this happens with the blessing or silence of the four institutions, then people will become more convinced that these four institutions are part of the problem... Then, the state will live a year just like those that happened in empires and states before us throughout history, and before our eyes around us in the glorious [year of] 2011.³¹⁸

Rising youth unemployment thus forms the core catalyst for political change in Farhan’s model of Saudi politics: the Saudi regime will be unwilling to offer political reform to compensate for policy failings until it is far too late. While Farhan had mentioned the “national danger” posed by unemployment prior to the Arab Spring uprisings, only after the Arab Spring did he connect rising unemployment to potential political change within the Kingdom.³¹⁹

These ideas—connecting the shock of the Arab Spring to the threat of mass unemployment, while identifying labor-market reforms as a political solution—circulated not only in elite discussions outside of government, but among advisors to Saudi government institutions and officials themselves. A 2011 consultancy report, authored primarily by Saudi sociologist Mona AlMunajjed, called explicitly for “a new [GCC] paradigm for dealing with and engaging youth,” warning that “the Arab world is witnessing unprecedented turmoil in the form of youth uprisings and protests... These events underscore the dissatisfactions of young people.”³²⁰ Minister Adel Faqieh likewise indicated at a May, 2011 press conference that “we must all realize that the Saudization has become

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ For example, in February of 2011 Farhan notes that he considers “corruption and its pervasiveness as a national danger no less dangerous than terrorism and the rampant unemployment.” Fouad Al-Farhan, “Hawl Karithatayy Jeddah Wa Al-Huwar al-Kuhmasiyy m’a al-’amir Khalid al-Faisal [On Jeddah’s Two Catastrophes and the Five-Way Dialogue with Khalid Al-Faisal],” February 6, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110914145347/http://www.alfarhan.ws/?p=178>.

³²⁰ Mona AlMunajjed and Karim Sabbagh, “Youth in GCC Countries: Meeting the Challenge,” Ideation Center Insight (Booz & Company, August 2011), 9.

a pressing national necessity rather than simply a choice.”³²¹ One former MoL employee later concurred that “[Unemployment] had the priority back then because of the unrest in neighboring countries, so we had to come up with policies that would employ Saudis as much as possible at that time.”³²² Saudi academics studying the Kingdom’s labor market, also observed a clear link between regional revolution and domestic reform. Mohamed Ramady, an economist at the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, observed an “added sense of urgency for [Saudi] national policy markers” following the events of the Arab Spring.³²³ A subsequent study of MoL policymaking by Saudi economist Ala’a Bakur emphasized that MoL “was conscious from the time of the 2011 uprisings that the balance of power between governments and people was changing,” while matter-of-factly asserting that government policy changes on citizens’ behalf “only occurred because of the growing threat of revolution.”³²⁴

³²¹ ‘Ali Al-Jabril, “Al-‘Aml Tutliq Birnamij Nitaqat Min 3 ‘Alwan Lil-Had Min al-s’Awada al-Wahmiya Fi al-Qita’a al-Khas [Labor Launches Three-Color Nitaqat Program to End Phantom Saudization in the Private Sector],” *Al-Eqtisadiyah*, May 9, 2011, http://www.aleqt.com/2011/05/09/article_536140.html.

³²² Former senior employee, Ministry of Economy and Planning, 19 January 2018. Quoted in Andrew Michael Leber, “Resisting Rentierism: Labor Market Reforms in Saudi Arabia,” in *The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf*, POMEPS Studies 33 (Project on Middle East Political Science, 2019), 37.

³²³ Mohamed Ramady, “Gulf Unemployment and Government Policies: Prospects for the Saudi Labour Quota or Nitaqat System,” *International Journal of Economics and Business Research* 5, no. 4 (2013): 477.

³²⁴ Ala’a Bakur Alshaikh, “Citizen Participation in Saudi Arabia: A Study of the Ministry of Labour,” *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 1 (2019): 114–15.

5.4 Sustained Policy Reforms, 2011-2019

Shifting threat perceptions among Saudi rulers and political insiders led to the swift adoption and continued enforcement of new Saudization reforms. Chief among these new reforms was the Nitaqat (“Ranges”) program, first presented by Minister of Labor Adel Faqieh in May of 2011, coming into effect in September of the same year. The program established colored “ranges” for each firm’s to meet in order to achieve one of several Saudization ratings: red (not compliant), yellow (below desired Saudization rating), and green (fully compliant with Saudization).³²⁵ The specific percentages required to achieve each rating varied by sector; failure to maintain a Saudization percentage in the green zone in turn affected firms’ access to other government services. By the end of 2012, the Nitaqat policy was joined by a new “expat levy” that taxed employers for each expatriate worker under their employment (for all firms where more than 50% of employees were non-Saudis).³²⁶

These reforms not persisted in putting pressure on employers but even expanded as many of the Arab Spring’s democratic transitions began to stall out by 2013; in July of that year, a military coup removed the democratically elected Egyptian president (Mohammad Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom & Justice Party) just short of a full year in power. Elsewhere, pro-democracy movements were met with overwhelming repression (Bahrain) or descended into outright civil war (Syria, Libya, and eventually Yemen), resulting in “a bitter litany of failed uprisings, halting or reversed “transitions,” and autocratic continuity.”³²⁷ Even limited protests inside the Kingdom, mostly among the Shi’a Saudi communities in the Eastern Province governorate of Qatif,

³²⁵ Al-Jabril, “Al-‘Aml Tutliq Birnamij Nitaqat Min 3 ‘Alwan Lil-Had Min al-s’Awada al-Wahmiya Fi al-Qita’a al-Khas [Labor Launches Three-Color Nitaqat Program to End Phantom Saudization in the Private Sector].”

³²⁶ Asma Alsharif, “Saudi Businesses Fear Impact of New Fees for Foreign Workers,” *Reuters*, December 5, 2012, sec. Energy, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-arabia-labour-idINL5E8N20G020121205>.

³²⁷ Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds, “Tracking the “ Arab Spring”: Why the Modest Harvest?,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (2013): 43.

were largely contained after months of a heavy security presence.³²⁸ If the announcement of the Nitaqat program and related policies was simply an effort to distract Saudi citizens amid the threat of revolutionary contagion, there was little reason for Saudi rulers to actually follow on trying to nationalize the Saudi workforce.

My theory implies, however, that the regime failures of the Arab Spring should permanently alter policy priorities in surviving autocracies. Even the restoration of authoritarianism in Egypt, under General and then President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, should not have reassured Saudi rulers that they were immune to the threat of mass unrest. Even if a mass uprising failed to lead to a democratic transition in Saudi Arabia, this might still lead to the permanent removal of the Al Saud royal family from power in favor of some other form of authoritarian rule, just as Egyptian authoritarianism under Sisi represents a very different constellation of rulers and insiders than the late Mubarak regime.³²⁹ Accordingly, the information shock of watching Mubarak and other autocrats fall should spur not just King ‘Abdullah and his advisors but even subsequent rulers to prioritize getting jobs for Saudi citizens. Additionally, we should observe greater public support for the policy of Saudization among the Kingdom’s major family firms, even if some try to blunt the impact of the new policies on their own business operations.

A wide range of data over the course of 2011-2019—including interviews with Saudi firms and bureaucrats, media statements and commentary, labor market statistics, and regulatory changes to Nitaqat and related programs—testify to a new and enduring policy consensus within Saudi ruling circles in favor of Saudization, regardless of its costs to private-sector employers or the overall economy. Considerable evidence indicates that Nitaqat’s Saudization quotas were implemented

³²⁸ Toby Matthiesen, “The Local and the Transnational in the Arab Uprisings: The Protests in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province,” in *The Silent Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Gulf States*, ed. Khawla Mattar and May Seikaly (Gerlach Press, 2014), 120–24.

³²⁹ Bruce K Rutherford, “Egypt’s New Authoritarianism under Sisi,” *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 2 (2018): 185–208.

across a wide range of firms and sustained over time, with successive rulers and ministers of labor continuing to ramp up pressure on private-sector firms to hire Saudi citizens. This data also indicates diminished resistance to Saudization among private-sector employers despite aggregate losses at the time of reforms, subsequently sustained by sectoral divisions regarding firms' ability to meet increasing Saudization quotas. I also provide circumstantial evidence that Saudization reforms were associated with more favorable views of Saudi politics and policymaking among unemployed Saudi men (relative to those with jobs).

Policy Outcome: Sustained Reforms

From 2011 onwards, Saudi government officials not only rhetorically signaled its intent to hold private-sector firms accountable for citizen jobs creation but backed up these claims through robust enforcement of Nitaqat quotas. This led to clear gains for Saudi citizens in seeking private-sector employment and greater protection from private-sector job losses for Saudis even amid the post-2015 economic downturn. Improved monitoring and enforcement capacity within the Saudi MoL and related state agencies, a development backed by top Saudi political figures, contributed to sustained imposition of Saudization quotas as well as periodic crackdowns on firms' efforts to sidestep quotas. Numerous firms reported significant Saudization pressure while demonstrating new redoubled efforts to recruit and retain Saudi employees.

Throughout this time period, public statements and policy amendments by Saudi government officials all indicated greater pressure on the private sector to deliver jobs to Saudi citizens. As early as March 5, 2011, Adel Faqieh insisted that new Saudization policies would emphasize "the rights of the local people" while ensuring that non-compliant firms "will be punished."³³⁰ Months later, he warned that Nitaqat would be used as "a weapon if the private sector

³³⁰ Andy Sambidge, "Saudi Officials Plan Stricter Rules on Expat Employment," *ArabianBusiness.com*, March 5, 2011, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/saudi-officials-plan-stricter-rules-on-expat-employment-384841.html>.

does not move a little on the matter of employing Saudis,” while emphasizing that the business community played no role in the program’s design.³³¹ Subsequent policy announcements regarding Nitaqat and Saudization have largely favored Saudi job-seekers or existing employees in the private sector. These announcements have included higher Saudization quotas, new fees for employing expatriates, and new penalties for businesses’ efforts to sidestep Saudization requirements. Rather than consistently erring on the side of employers in labor market regulations, Saudi policies now attract criticisms from the IMF and Western economic research centers that they risk going too far in forcing Saudization on the private sector, potentially under-cutting private-sector growth in the process.³³² By 2019, after several years of reduced government spending and an overall economic slowdown, the MoL was still only willing to grant very targeted exemptions to new labor-market regulations, generally to firms that had already demonstrated clear progress on Saudization efforts.³³³

³³¹ ‘Ubayd Al-Sahīmī, “Wazīr Al-’aml al-s’ūdi: Idhā Lam Yataḥarak al-Qitā’ al-Khās... Fasanushahar Silāh <<nitāqāt>> [Saudi Labor Minister: If the Private Sector Doesn’t Move... We Will Flash the Sword of Nitaqat],” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, June 2, 2011, 11874 edition; Muhammad Al-Ḥaydar, “Wazīr Al-’aml: Rijāl al-’a’amāl Lam Yashtarātū Muqābil d’amihim Lil-s’awada [Labor Minister: Businessmen Did Not Set Conditions for Its Support for Saudization],” *Al-Riyadh*, March 27, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/617723>.

³³² International Monetary Fund, “Selected Issues,” IMF Country Report, August 2018, 29–45.

³³³ For example, visa fees were selectively waived for firms that had demonstrated progress towards Saudization or that were in export-oriented industrial ventures. Marwa Rashad, “Saudi Allocates \$3.1 Billion to Help Companies with 2017-18 Expat Fee Hikes,” *Reuters*, February 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-expats-idUSKCN1PX2H4>; “Saudi Arabia Waives Fees on Expats Working in Industrial Sector,” *Reuters*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-economy-industrial-idUSKBN1W91WU>.

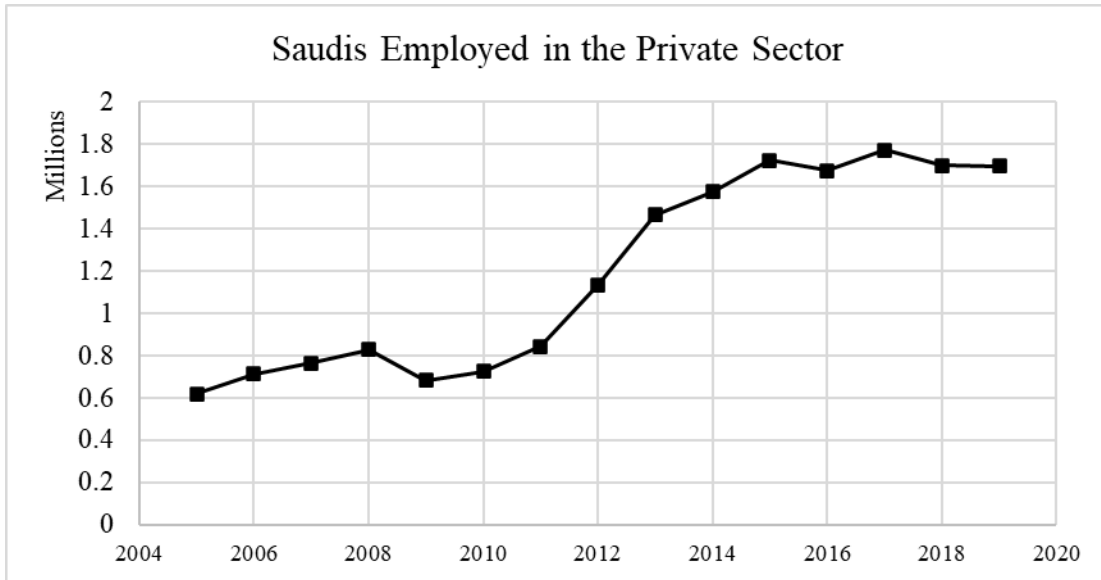


Figure 24: Total number of Saudi citizens employed in the private sector. Source: Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority Annual Statistics.

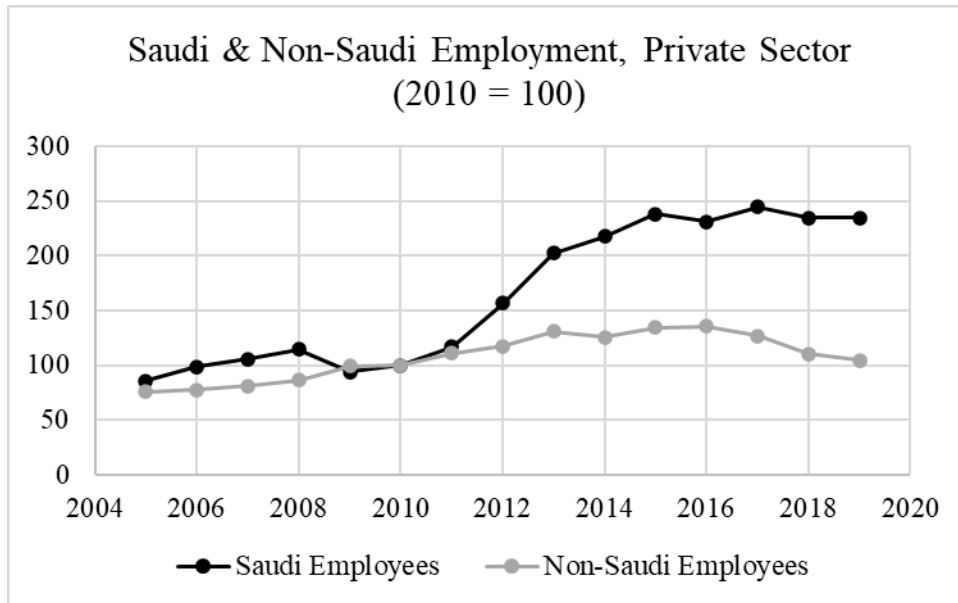


Figure 25: Change over time in number of individuals employed in the public and private sectors by nationality; 2010 values = 100. Source: Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority Annual Statistics.

Available statistics indicate that strong rhetoric translated into actual implementation of the new Saudization plan, generating real gains for Saudi employees in the labor market; the number of Saudi citizens in the private sector nearly doubled between 2010 and 2015 (Figure 24). In the first 16 months of Nitaqat’s implementation (July 2011 through October 2012), the policy resulted in Saudi

job gains of around 93,000, or 30% of private-sector jobs added during this time period.³³⁴ The MoL made even grander claims about the program's effectiveness, crediting the program with all 250,000 private-sector job gains for Saudi citizens between July 2011 and July of 2012.³³⁵ Per data from the Saudi Arabian monetary authority, the number of Saudi citizens in the private-sector workforce more than doubled between 2011 and 2015, outpacing the growth in expatriate labor (Figure 25). As a result, the aggregate Saudization rate for the Saudi private-sector workforce increased from about 11% at the time of the Nitaqat reforms to nearly 17% by 2015. Despite an economic downturn from 2016 onwards, precipitated by budget cutbacks due to falling oil prices, Saudi employers generally retained Saudi employees while sharply reducing the number of expatriate employees. In hard-hit sectors such as the construction industry, Saudi and Saudi-based firms laid off around 25% of their Saudi employees between 2015 and 2019 compared with over 35% of their expatriate employees (1.35 million individuals). Saudi jobs numbers increased in other sectors over the same time period; the number of Saudis engaged in wholesale and retail trade increased by over 4% even as the number of expatriate employees dropped by over 25% in 2015-2019.

Statements by firm executives and outside observers in contemporary media articles as well as my own interviews testify to perceptions of more stringent enforcement of Saudization, even among relatively large and well-resourced firms. In an 2012 interview with *Al-Yamamah* on a roundtable regarding the impact of Nitaqat, Saudi economist Zayid al-Hassan observed that “the Ministry [of Labour] has dropped the carrot and now uses [only] the stick in dealing with the private sector, by forcing Saudization upon it.”³³⁶ Likewise, one mid-level official at the Ministry of

³³⁴ The policy also resulted in an enormous drop in expatriate hiring, with Nitaqat leading to the departure of an enormous 846,000 private-sector workers during this time period. Jennifer R. Peck, “Can Hiring Quotas Work? The Effect of the Nitaqat Program on the Saudi Private Sector,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 9, no. 2 (2017): 340–43.

³³⁵ “Nitaqat Expanded,” Arab News, August 13, 2012, <https://www.arabnews.com/nitaqat-expanded>.

³³⁶ Tawfiq Nasrallah and Sāmi Sāliḥ Al-Tatar, “Al-Fajwa al-Mutazāyyida Bayn <<Niṭāqāt>> Wa al-Qit’āt [The Growing Gap between Nitaqat and the Sectors],” *Al-Yamamah*, January 21, 2012, 12.

Economy and Planning later contended that there would have been “no changes” in the private sector’s hiring practices “if Nitaqat didn’t exist.”³³⁷ While some firms initially understood the Nitaqat reforms as simply a government effort to talk up the need for Saudization, with little real change, after years of consistent monitoring and enforcement it had “become [the] reality” for human-resources offices across the Kingdom.³³⁸ An expatriate executive with a mid-level contracting firm noted that while there was “always talk of Saudization [since the 1980s]” beginning in 2011 there was “a sense that they were really going to sink their teeth into it.”³³⁹ The seriousness of the imposition of Nitaqat is further indicated by the fact that large numbers of Saudi businesses simply closed down in the years after the program was imposed rather than comply with the costs of Saudization. Per research by Jennifer Peck, the initial imposition of the quotas led around 11,000 firms to exit the Saudi market in the program’s first 16 months of operation.³⁴⁰

Failure to meet Saudization quotas brought immediate challenges for firms as access to other government services became increasingly contingent on demonstrating Saudization compliance. The chief mechanism of enforcement was a sharp limit on expatriate visas that firms could apply for while in the “red zone”—i.e., below sector-specific Saudization quotas. Firms that could demonstrate Saudization compliance faced other administrative hurdles, such as difficulty renewing licenses with the Ministry of Commerce to operate in the first place. Interviews with human-resources managers and firm executives later in the 2010s indicated considerable efforts to meet Saudization goals in order to avoid being hit with these penalties. For example, even amid a string of complaints about Nitaqat—it “screwed us—a Saudi manager at a labor-intensive construction firm described a dedicated “pipeline” program their firm had launched in partnership with a local

³³⁷ Author interview, Ministry of Economic Planning official, October 11, 2018.

³³⁸ Author interview, fast-food chain human resources manager, August 14, 2017.

³³⁹ Author interview, logistical supply company, August 16, 2017.

³⁴⁰ Peck, “Can Hiring Quotas Work?” 341.

technical college to provide a steady number of Saudi technicians.³⁴¹ “You have to pony up with [the] Saudization program with vigor or you will be out of business,” noted another expatriate human-resources manager with a mid-size contracting firm.³⁴² Even smaller firms relied on more bespoke methods to attract and retain sufficient Saudi labor to remain viable. One ride-share driver mentioned working as a de facto head-hunter for a mid-sized electronics outlet in Riyadh circa 2017, where he would “meet with 70 [job-seekers] and take one, or 100 [job-seekers] and take one.”³⁴³

Although Saudi businesses attempted to circumvent the new regulations, Saudi rulers in turn backed new investments in state capacity to monitor the labor market and enforce labor laws. In particular, labor-intensive businesses attempted to manipulate Saudization quotas by hiring expatriates under the table (*tasatur*, or “concealed” Saudization) and by putting Saudi citizens on the payroll but with no defined jobs (*al-s’awada al-wahamiyya*, or “ghost” Saudization). Beginning in 2012, senior political figures in the Saudi Council of Ministers (nominally headed by King ‘Abdullah but chaired by then-Crown Prince Salman) laid the groundwork to address these issues by sanctioning coordination between MoI security services and a newly augmented MoL labor-inspector task force.³⁴⁴ This new enforcement capacity was displayed dramatically in several “corrective campaigns” launched over the course of 2013-2015, aiming to crack down on undocumented expatriate workers as well as those in “concealed” employment with non-compliant firms. Over the next two years, MoL inspectors and MoI security services claimed to have arrested and deported hundreds of thousands of these undocumented workers through a combination of workplace inspections and

³⁴¹ Author interview, human resources manager, construction firm, August 8, 2017.

³⁴² Author interview, logistical supply company, August 16, 2017.

³⁴³ Author field notes, July 28, 2017.

³⁴⁴ ‘Abd al-Salaam Al-Baluwi, “T’adilat nidhamiyya tasnid li-*««Dakhiliyya»»* dhabt al-’aqubat bi-*««al-’umala al-sa’iba»»* wa al-mushaghalin al-mutasatarin wa al-naqilin lahum [Legal amendments permit Interior to apply regulations on absent workers, those in cover-up labor, and those trafficking in them],” *Al-Riyadh*, May 19, 2012, <http://www.alriyadh.com/737182>; “Wizarat al-’aml tutliq biramij tadribiyya li-ta’hil al-mufatashin al-midaniyyin wa al-’idariyyin wa al-qiyadiyyin [Ministry of Labor launches training program to prepare field inspectors, administrators, and leaders],” *Al-Riyadh*, September 7, 2012, <https://www.alriyadh.com/766030>.

checkpoints on major Saudi roads and highways.³⁴⁵ These corrective campaigns again proceeded regardless of their effect on specific Saudi businesses, with an MoL report indicating that tens of thousands of firms closed by the end of 2013 due to Saudization pressure.³⁴⁶

The MoL also worked to combat “ghost” Saudization both through regular inspections of job sites and by progressively demanding that specific job categories be held by Saudis. MoL officials threatened fines and denial of government services if labor inspections failed to turn up Saudi employees listed in firms’ records, with actual inspections documented by independent reporting from international media outlets.³⁴⁷ While the most common image of MoL enforcement was of labor inspectors going door-to-door in small shops questioning local managers, efforts to combat ghost Saudization or other manipulations also targeted larger and better connected firms, albeit rarely by name. In 2017, for example, the MoL publicly warned large businesses (500-2,999 employees) and “giant” firms (3,000+ employees) of the need to demonstrate accommodations for various disabilities if they claimed to employ Saudi individuals with disabilities.³⁴⁸ This suggests an effort to combat a practice of hiring “ghost” Saudi employees with disabilities for extra credit under Nitaqat’s regulations, given as these individuals counted a hiring four regular Saudi citizens for the purposes of calculating Saudization quotas. For all firms, the increasing digitization of a wide range of government services over the course of the 2010s also made it harder for individual firms to

³⁴⁵ Hind Mustafa, “Questioning Nitaqat: The Saudi Job-Nationalization Program,” *Al Arabiya English*, December 18, 2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/business/economy/2013/12/18/Questioning-Nitaqat-the-Saudi-job-nationalization-program->.

³⁴⁶ P.K. Abdul Ghafour, “Nitaqat: 200,000 Firms Closed Down,” *Arab News*, August 5, 2014, <https://www.arabnews.com/news/611896>.

³⁴⁷ Ibrahim Naffee, “Heavy Penalties for Hiring Female ‘Ghost Workers,’” *Arab News*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/633201>; Margherita Stancati and Donna Abdulaziz, “Saudi Arabia’s Economic Revamp Means More Jobs for Saudis—If Only They Wanted Them,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabias-economic-revamp-means-more-jobs-for-saudis-if-only-they-wanted-them-1529420902>.

³⁴⁸ Abd al-Rahman Al-Misbahi, “Al-’aml tuhadhir al-’amlaqa min takhfid dhuwayy al-ihdiyyajat min 4 ’amal ila wahid [Labor warns giant firms of lowering those with disabilities from equivalent of four workers to one],” *Okaz*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.okaz.com.sa/economy/na/1558170>.

avoid meeting Saudization goals, as access to a wide range of government services was directly linked to firms' Nitaqat rating calculated from information on file with the MoL.³⁴⁹

Ruler's Perceptions: Addressing Unemployment First and Foremost

The Saudization drive was underpinned by Saudi political elites' overriding concern with mass unemployment from 2011 onwards. Nitaqat was widely understood by a variety of stakeholders as putting pressure on the private sector to address these fears by increasing—or at least demonstrating effort to increase—job opportunities for Saudi citizens. Businessman Ahmed Halabi, even while disparaging the policy as an unrealistic imposition, remarked to *Al-Yamamah* that “the Ministry is trying, through this program, to demonstrate its seriousness in providing job opportunities to Saudi youth.”³⁵⁰ Allusions to the role of Saudization in encouraging social (or political) harmony continued to appear even a decade on from Nitaqat's inception. In discussing the challenges of hiring staff, an expatriate hotel manager explained that “Saudization [is based on the idea that] people who do something with their [i.e. work] do less stupid things with their ideas.”³⁵¹

While the uprisings were still playing out, this concern with unemployed Saudis was clearly indicated by the establishment of the Hafiz (“Incentive”) program to offer financial support to Saudi job-seekers. As recently as 2008, Labor Minister Gosaibi had dismissed the idea of offering stipends job-seeking, cautioning that aid recipients might simply “be satisfied with this support and sit in their homes” rather than venturing out to find jobs.³⁵² On February 24th of 2011, however, King ‘Abdullah ordered the establishment of a new “insurance program for unemployed citizens” with a particular focus on “temporary financial aid for young job-seekers”—over and above one-off

³⁴⁹ Author interview, logistical supply company, August 16, 2017.

³⁵⁰ Nasrallah and Al-Tatar, “Al-Fajwa al-Mutazāyida Bayn <<Niṭāqāt>> Wa al-Qit’āt [The Growing Gap between Nitaqat and the Sectors],” 13.

³⁵¹ Author interview, 5-star hotel manager, Riyadh, January 29, 2020.

³⁵² Hamdan and Al-Husseini, “Al-s’awada Matlab Dini.”

handouts decreed the previous day.³⁵³ Underscoring the overriding concern with *youth* unemployment, the program initially offered benefits only to those aged 20 to 35 (albeit subsequently expanded to cover job-seekers as old as 60). One advisor to the royal court pointed to the importance of the Hafiz in pinpointing exactly which demographics were hit hardest by unemployment, including “age, education level... and geographic distribution”—useful information for rational policymaking, but also for identifying sources of potential discontent.³⁵⁴ *Al-Riyadh* journalists framed Hafiz as offering the Saudi state additional leverage in minimizing the potential for “criminality among young (male) Saudis—whether by providing the unemployed with income or by threatening to cut off funds in the event they committed a crime.”³⁵⁵

Statements by Saudi commentators who moved in elite circles, potentially reflecting private discussions, further suggest that Saudi rulers were motivated by fears over the future political consequences of unaddressed unemployment. Several years after the Arab Spring uprisings, for example, Saudi banker Ali Shihabi (a conservative political commentator with close ties to royal circles) emphasized “unemployed or underemployed” (male) Saudis as a key political threat to the Saudi monarchy:

Radical antigovernment scholars and clerics who want to grab political power will need to recruit to their cause the foot soldiers required for any revolutionary endeavor... The cannon fodder for revolution will come from among the millions of unemployed or underemployed, bored, sexually frustrated, bitter young men roaming the vast urban spaces of the country.³⁵⁶

³⁵³ “Iqrar ‘iana Maliyya Mu’aqata Lil-Shabab al-Bahith ‘an al-‘aml Fi Itar Hal ‘Ajil Wa Marhali [Order for Temporary Financial Assistance to Youth Looking for Work in Framework of Urgent Solution],” *Al-Riyadh*, February 24, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/607523>.

³⁵⁴ Ahmed Al-Issa, “Birnamij Hafiz [Hafiz Program],” *Al-Riyadh*, June 26, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/645431>.

³⁵⁵ Muna Al-Ḥaydarī, “Mashrū’ <<Hafiz>>.. Mu’ādilat al-Baḥṭh ‘an Wazīfa Wa Tahsin Salūk b’ad al-‘āṭilīn [Hafiz Project... Compensate Job Searching and Improve Behavior of the Unemployed],” *Al-Riyadh*, April 20, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/625204>.

³⁵⁶ Ali Al Shihabi, *The Saudi Kingdom: Between the Jibadi Hammer and the Iranian Anvil* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2016), 63.

Like commentary in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Shihabi's monograph connected the threat posed by unemployed (male) Saudis not merely to their growing numbers but due to the diminished capacity of core regime supporters (in this case religious clerics) to deter mass mobilization.³⁵⁷ In a series of 2016 commentaries on the proposed Vision 2030 policy changes, prominent and well-connected Saudi media figure Jamal Khashoggi likewise emphasized the need for policies to continually prioritize citizens' employment, especially for young Saudis: "every [Saudi] university graduate believes he or she has a right to work, and will grow angry if he or she does not obtain it."³⁵⁸ Khashoggi's main policy recommendation was an even stricter enforcement of Saudization, calling for a continuation of the crackdown on the firms' "concealed" unemployment. Such a "war on *tasatur*," he argued, would "bring the nation into balance economically, politically, and socially."³⁵⁹

The emphasis on jobs creation survived the death of King 'Abdullah in 2015 and the subsequent rise to power of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS). Amid a range of ambitious goals within the National Transformation Program (NTP), a set of nation-wide "key performance indicators" (KPIs) that accompanied the Vision 2030 plan, the top national priority mentioned was the creation of some 450,000 private-sector jobs for citizens (while curtailing the growth of public-sector jobs).³⁶⁰ Initially, the Crown Prince suggested that Vision 2030 and the NTP would form part of a pro-business, neoliberal agenda that decreased the role of the Saudi state while envisioning a greater role for the Saudi private sector. Yet in a 2016 interview with *The Economist*,

³⁵⁷ Referring to the idea that Saudi society poses no threat to its rulers due to a "somnolence" born of religious obedience and strong social norms of conformity, Shihabi cautions that "emerging indicators suggest that the Saudi state's reliance on an indefinite continuation of this [social] somnolence may be unwise," referring in turn to the work of Pascal Menoret (2011) on male rebellion among Saudi youth. Al Shihabi, 68–70.

³⁵⁸ Jamal Khashoggi, "Ru'iyat Muwatin <<2030>>... al-Wazifa [Citizen's Vision 2030... Employment]," *Al-Hayat*, October 16, 2016, <https://kuttab.cc/wp/2016/10/16/رؤية-مواطن-2030-الوظيفة/>.

³⁵⁹ Jamal Khashoggi, "Ru'iyat Muwatin <<2030>>... al-Harb 'ala al-Tasatur Wa al-Mutasaturin [Citizen's Vision 2030... War on Concealed Labor and Those Who Practice It]," *Al-Hayat*, October 24, 2016, <https://kuttab.cc/wp/2016/10/24/رؤية-مواطن-2030-الحرب-على-التستر-والمتستر/>.

³⁶⁰ The National Transformation Program, a collection of key performance indicators launched in 2016 and framed as part of the Vision 2030 project, called for the creation of some 450,000 private-sector jobs for citizens by 2020 as its top national priority. "National Transformation Program 2020" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Vision 2030, April 2016), 11.

even as MBS promoted a pro-market overhaul of the Kingdom's bureaucracy and economy he nevertheless referred to "ten million jobs that are being occupied by non-Saudi employees that I can resort to at any time of my choosing [to create jobs for citizens]."³⁶¹ The Crown Prince warned that if he was unable to create sufficient jobs through new investments in the Saudi economy, the government would be "forced to exert pressure on the private sector... [as in] the Saudization program."

Whatever the broader underpinnings of the Crown Prince's ideology, he both retained an overriding concern with the political risks posed by Saudi unemployment and the belief that Saudization would be overriding rather than accommodating the policy demands of the private-sector elite. International media coverage of Vision 2030 economic reforms, for example, has highlighted the Crown Prince's sustained commitment to workforce nationalization. "[The Crown Prince is] just going to keep pushing [Saudization] as his main priority," a former high-level Ministry of Commerce official told the *Financial Times* in 2019. "Every time someone suggests, 'your Royal Highness, should we slow down and ease the process,' he says, 'no, this is a priority and we have no more time to slow down.'"³⁶² Additionally, where the previous circle of officials around King 'Abdullah was merely willing to put greater pressure on business leaders to meet Saudization goals, MBS completely disregarded the potential for any meaningful backlash from this constituency. Most dramatically, he orchestrated the mass arrest of numerous prominent businessmen and other officials in early November of 2017, and their subsequent detention in the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh.³⁶³

³⁶¹ "Transcript: Interview with Muhammad Bin Salman," *The Economist*, January 6, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/01/06/transcript-interview-with-muhammad-bin-salman>.

³⁶² Andrew England and Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia: Why Jobs Overhaul Could Define MBS's Rule," *Financial Times*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/fc240c0e-29fb-11e9-88a4-c32129756dd8>.

³⁶³ Those detained included several top executives of the Binladin Group, property developer Fawaz Al-Hokair, Saleh Kemal of the Dallah al-Barakah Group, and—in a separate act—Sa'ad al-Hariri, Prime Minister of Lebanon and head of

Even as MBS consolidated power, policies continued to reflect an elite political consensus that the private sector be compelled to support Saudization targets. A new Minister of Labor, Dr. ‘Ali Ghafis, did just that in early 2017 by raising quota levels for Saudi firms across all sectors.³⁶⁴ While King Salman later ordered Ghafis to be replaced with the head of Riyadh Chamber of Commerce, Ahmed Al-Rajhi of the Al Rajhi banking and trading family, this did little to moderate the Saudi government’s approach towards Saudization. Prominent figures within the Saudi Council of Chambers system initially hoped that Al-Rajhi would take a more conciliatory approach to the nationalization of jobs, concentrating more on training programs.³⁶⁵ Instead, Al-Rajhi’s tenure has been marked by repeated announcements of the complete Saudization of new professions, ranging from dentistry to customer service positions.³⁶⁶ Separate discussions with Ministry of Labor analysts as well as business-association analysts in Riyadh in 2018-19 each indicated that MoL bureaucrats were at pains to secure “quick wins” in terms of jobs growth, at times leading Saudi officials to sacrifice plans for long-term economic growth in pursuit of up-front jobs gains.³⁶⁷ “

This focus on jobs gains has gone hand-in-hand with extreme sensitivity among MoL senior officials to any accusation that they might be backing off a commitment to Saudization. In 2019, for example, the Saudi daily newspaper *Al-Riyadh* publicly criticized what it deemed the MoL’s failure to aggressively pursue Saudization in the hotel industry.³⁶⁸ Shortly thereafter, Labor Minister Al-Rajhi

the Saudi Oger contracting firm. Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020), 186–202.

³⁶⁴ “Rafa’a nisabn al-s’awada bi’Nitaqat’ li-tawfir 3 milayin wadhifa [Raising Nitaqat percentages to provide 3 million jobs],” *Al-Arabiya*, March 21, 2017, <https://www.alarabiya.net/aswaq/economy/2017/03/21/السعودية-تتجه-لرفع-نسب-التوطين-ببرنامج-نطاقات-في-سبتمبر>.

³⁶⁵ Muhammad umaydan, “Al-qita’ al-khas: ta’yin <<al-Rajhi>> waziran lil-‘aml yad’am shurakat al-qita’ayn al-khas wa al-‘am li-tahqiq ‘ahdaf al-ru’iyya [Private sector: appointment of Al-Rajhi as Minister of Labor supports partnership of public and private sector for the Vision],” *Al-Riyadh*, June 3, 2018, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1685545>.

³⁶⁶ “Tawtin mihnata <<tabib al-‘isnana>> tadrijiyyan fi al-s’udiyya [Gradual nationalization of dentistry professions in Saudi Arabia],” *Al-Arabiya*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.alarabiya.net/saudi-today/2019/11/25/توطين-مهنة-طبيب-أسنان-تدر-يجياً-في-السعودية>.

³⁶⁷ Field notes, Riyadh, January 16, 2018 & October 29, 2018.

³⁶⁸ “Bisabab qiyada ajnabiyy... s’awadat fanadiq al-mamlaka la tusir ‘ala al-masar al-sahih [Because of foreign executives... Saudization of hotels not on the right path],” *Al-Riyadh*, June 17, 2019, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1761226>.

issued new regulations calling for more aggressive Saudization efforts in luxury to hotels, which *Al-Riyadh* claimed as a victory for its public influence.³⁶⁹ This exchange coincides with a 5-star hotel manager's comments that while the MoL had "been a bit more lax" in the immediate years prior to 2019, so long as hotels were otherwise in compliance with Saudi labor laws, they had recently become "more strict around [Saudization] requirements."³⁷⁰ Human-resources managers have in turn complained that new regulations were imposed by fiat without any prior consultation with businesses, making it hard to keep pace with Saudization requirements. "How can businesses make an informed decision [and] invest in the future strategy they need to put in place?"³⁷¹ However, the MoL's inflexibility appears designed to pre-empt any charges that it was not holding firms to account; at one point MoL sources denied that the Ministry was even *studying* the impact of expatriate fees on private-sector growth, let alone considering cancelling these fees.³⁷²

³⁶⁹ Ahmed Al-Ghawi, "Qirar tawtin qiyadat al-fanadiq al-kubra yusahih masar s'awadatiha al-mutasadi' [Decision to nationalize managers of biggest hotels corrects crooked path of their Saudization]," *Al-Riyadh*, July 31, 2019, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1769013>.

³⁷⁰ Author interview, manager, 5-star hotel, Riyadh, January 29, 2020.

³⁷¹ Author interview, military training contractor human resources department, Riyadh, August 13, 2017.

³⁷² IMF Country Report No. 18/264, August 2018, 40-41; Alaa Shahine, "Khashoggi Effect or Oil Pinch? What to Watch in the Saudi Budget," *Bloomberg*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-17/khashoggi-effect-or-oil-pinch-what-to-look-for-in-saudi-budget>.

Insiders' Response: Initial Acceptance, Eventual Weakness

In the aftermath of the Nitaqat program's announcement, heads of major family firms as well as leading representatives in the Chambers of Commerce network publicly endorsed the effort to pursue Saudization reforms. While criticisms of the policy were initially confined to building contractors who feared declining profits amid rising labor costs, top leaders within the Council of Chambers were initially reluctant to amplify these criticisms. When these representatives *did* seek new policy concessions from Saudi rulers they were generally unsuccessful.

Initial concessions from insiders took the form of offering public support for Saudi rulers during the region-wide Arab Spring protests, and voicing approval of new Saudization policies in their immediate aftermath. During the region-wide mobilization of the Arab Spring itself, a large number of the Kingdom's largest private enterprises—including the two giant contracting firms Saudi Oger and the BinLadin Group—offered immediate handouts of two months' salaries to their own Saudi employees in explicit support of royal orders that granted the same to public-sector Saudi employees.³⁷³ Additionally, even before the Nitaqat program was announced representatives of the Kingdom's Chambers of Commerce played up the “efforts undertaken by the private sector... to share in the process of employing [Saudis].”³⁷⁴ This initial support in turn translated into tacit acceptance of new Saudization quotas. A Riyadh Chamber of Commerce board member, speaking as part of an *Al-Yamama* roundtable in early 2012, claimed Nitaqat was “a pioneering program for ending [Saudi] unemployment,” with most other business owners cited as part of the article offering

³⁷³ For example: “<<Saudi Oger>> Tusarraf Muratab Shahrāyṅ Wa Tuhādīd Hadan ‘adna Li-Rawatīb Muwazafīha al-s’audiyyīn [Saudi Oger Pays out Two Months’ Salaries and Sets Minimum Wage for Saudi Employees],” *Al-Riyādh*, March 20, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/615429>; “Ratīb Shahrāyṅ Li-Mwazafīy Sharīkat Abu Nayyan [Two Months Salary for Employees of Abu Nyan Companies],” *Al-Riyādh*, March 23, 2011, <https://www.alriyadh.com/616189>.

³⁷⁴ Sāmī Sālīḥ Al-Tatar, Tawfīq Nasrallah, and Mohāmed Al-Kham’alī, “Al-Batala: Hal Bada’ al-Mu’ashīr Fī al-Tarajū? [Unemployment: Has the Rate Started to Go Down?],” *Al-Yamāmah*, May 14, 2011, 13.

at least some support for the reforms.³⁷⁵ Prominent businessman and Saudi royal Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal cooperated directly with the MoL in 2011-2012 to frame support for Saudization as part of Saudi companies' social obligations to the Kingdom. Speaking in particular about giant contracting firms, he told *Al-Riyadh* that "the time has come for them to pay back a small part of what they have gained... even if there are costs, the private sector the directives of His Royal Highness's government in the area of Saudization."³⁷⁶

Even as the MoL's monitoring and enforcement capacity increased, well-placed representatives from the private sector offered only modest criticisms of the implementation of labor-market reform. To be sure, the new Saudization policies did attract periodic criticism from construction contractors and the committees representing their interests within the Council of Chambers system. Yet despite contractors' suggestion in 2011-12 that Nitaqat might "threaten to bog down major development projects" through its effect on construction contracting, even these complaints generally called for a lower Saudization percentage rather than calling for scrapping the system entirely.³⁷⁷ Nor did any of the Saudi Chambers of Commerce or prominent businessmen attack the aim of more rigorous Saudization enforcement publicly. Per one Saudi researcher, whose career spanned the Ministry of Economy and Planning as well as the Council of Chambers network, over the course of the 2010s major businesses more generally dialed back public complaints about a lack of government support in favor of saying: "please take us in hand, we want to be [working] in

³⁷⁵ Nasrallah and Al-Tatar, "Al-Fajwa al-Mutazāyida Bayn <<Niṭāqāt>> Wa al-Qit'āt [The Growing Gap between Nitaqat and the Sectors]," 13.

³⁷⁶ "Al-'Amir Al-Walid: qirar 200 riyal shahriyan 'ala kul muwwadhaf ghayr s'audiyy thaman saghir yadfa'hu al-muwatin lil-watan [Prince Al-Walid: Decision of 200 riyals a month for each non-Saudi employee a small price for a citizen to pay for his homeland]," *Al-Riyadh*, December 4, 2012, <http://www.alriyadh.com/789702>.

³⁷⁷ Fahad Al-Thunayyan, "<<Al-'aml>> tabda' tatbiq al-'qubat 'ala al-manshaat al-nitaq al-'ahmar... wa al-muqawilun yahtajun [Labour begins to apply punishments on establishments in red zone... and contractors protest]," *Al-Riyadh*, November 26, 2011, <http://www.alriyadh.com/686193>; Mohammed Tami Al-Awayd, "Muqawilun yutalibun bi-hay'a tahmiyhum min al-itihamat wa tuhasib al-mas'ulin 'an ta'athur al-mashari' al-hukumiyya [Contractors demand agency to protect them from accusations and hold officials accountable for delays in government projects]," *Al-Riyadh*, December 14, 2011, <http://www.alriyadh.com/691619>.

this area with the government!”³⁷⁸ Hence while a panel within the Chamber-organized Riyadh Economic Forum (REF) raised concerns over Saudization policies in 2013, it did so in quite conciliatory language in calling for greater cooperation between the MoL and the private sector. An accompanying policy report identified aspects of Nitaqat that deserved “review and recalibration” but mainly recommended that the MoL target its Saudization efforts on management and specialist positions.³⁷⁹

Evidence suggests that muted criticism regarding Nitaqat was not simply due to specific carveouts for an inner circle of truly favored companies. Representatives from one particular firm, Abdullah A.M. Al-Khodari Sons Co., complained to Reuters and other English-language news outlets throughout the early 2010s about the impact of Saudization policies on their profits.³⁸⁰ While Al-Khodari’s roughly 17-20,000 employees left it a smaller company than the Kingdom’s largest contracting firms (with the Binladin Group reportedly employing around 200,000 expatriate and Saudi employees at its peak), the firm and its CEO Fawwaz Al-Khodari were still important players in the Saudi business community with close ties to power.³⁸¹ Fawwaz Al-Khodari held prominent positions in the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce as well as the national-level Council of Chambers, service as the vice president of each organization’s contractors’ committee.³⁸² Khodari

³⁷⁸ Author interview, Ministry of Economic Planning official, October 11, 2018.

³⁷⁹ This was the first time the REF addressed workforce nationalization policies. “Siyasat Al-’aml Wa Tawtin al-Waza’if Fi al-Qita’ al-Khas [Labor Policies and Workforce Nationalization in the Private Sector],” Study (Riyadh Economic Forum, December 9, 2013), 102.

³⁸⁰ Al-Khodari received government contracts of over 100 million riyals by 2012, indicating it was in the top echelon of contracting firms registered with the Council of Chambers in terms of size and capacity for projects. Wael Mahdi, “Al-Khodari Sons Wins \$36 Million Contract From Health Ministry,” *Bloomberg*, January 1, 2012, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-01-01/al-khodari-sons-wins-36-million-contract-from-health-ministry>; Saud Almutairi et al., “Procedures and Issues within the Contractors Classification System in Saudi Arabia,” *Journal for the Advancement of Performance Information and Value* 9, no. 2 (2017): 80.

³⁸¹ Size of Al-Khodari Group mentioned in other citations. For size of Binladin group, see: “Saudi Builder Binladin Terminates 50,000 Jobs: Newspaper,” *Reuters*, April 29, 2016, sec. Business News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-construction-binladin-idUSKCN0XQ1XD>.

³⁸² See biography at “Man huwa Fawwaz ‘Abdullah al-Khodari? [Who is Fawwaz ‘Abdullah Al-Khodari?],” Man Hom, accessed July 26, 2022, <https://manhom.com/شخصيات/فواز-عبدالله-الخطري/>.

complained to local and international press about the impact of Saudization on workers' profits throughout the early 2010s, after being rebuffed by government agencies both in a personal capacity and in lobbying the government through the contractors' committee. While the government offered private pledges of eventual compensation for newly imposed fees on expatriate workers, Khodari voiced unease over having to wait on the government to process some form of compensation rather than offering concessions up front. "these levies you have to pay up front, whereas compensation, you never know when it's going to come, so actually the cash outflow is hitting you day by day."³⁸³ By 2014 Al-Khodari claimed to the English-language *Arab News* that expat levies and other Saudization measures had eroded as much as 50% of the company's profit margin on contracts.³⁸⁴

Even when leading figures in the private sector *did* try to contest Saudization policies as a collective, their remaining access to Saudi decision-makers afforded them diminished influence over policy choices. In early 2013, for example, a Council of Saudi Chambers delegation secured a meeting with then-Crown Prince Salman to try and reverse the monthly MoL expatriate levy of SAR 200 (over \$600 annually per worker) on firms with less than 50% unemployment. Yet while Salman was unwilling to more than ask the Council to prepare a further study on the levy's intended impact, defending the fees by referring to "the need to protect national interests"—ensuring Saudi citizens' employment.³⁸⁵ Not only were the fees not eliminated, but beginning in 2017 the Saudi government expended the monthly fees further to SAR 400 in 2018 (nearly \$1300 annually) and again to SAR 800 in 2019 (over \$2,500 annually). This loss of policy influence has been further underscored in the MBS era, most prominently in the arrest of several prominent businessmen and the effective

³⁸³ "Al-Khodari: Labor Fee Impact May Last for a Few More Quarters," *Arab News*, September 13, 2013, <https://www.arabnews.com/news/464399>.

³⁸⁴ "Al-Khodari May Double Capex to Handle Big Projects," *Arab News*, October 24, 2014, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/649146/amp>.

³⁸⁵ P.K. Abdul Ghafour, "Expat Levy to Add SR60bn Economic Burden on Saudis," *Arab News*, January 17, 2013, <https://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/expat-levy-add-sr60bn-economic-burden-saudis>.

government seizure of major Saudi-owned corporations such as the Saudi Binladin Group and MBC, a major media conglomerate.³⁸⁶ Thus far, he also appears to be bypassing the existing Saudi private sector in efforts to transform the Kingdom’s economy, relying instead on centrally controlled state institutions such as the sovereign wealth fund known as the Public Investment Fund.³⁸⁷

In the long run, the design of Nitaqat also contributed to long-run acceptance of the program by drawing a clear distinction between compliant and non-compliant firms. Firms specializing in higher-skills, higher-wage positions that more easily attracted Saudi employees, or that were able to put in place large-scale training programs, increasingly enjoyed a competitive advantage against firms unable or unwilling to make similar investments in training and recruitment. In offering full-throated support for renewed Saudization efforts in 2012, for example, Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal touted his own firm’s supposed 93% Saudization rating.³⁸⁸ [Something about Khodari adjusting before oil prices dropped?] By 2018, Saudi investment advisors were therefore quite bullish on large-scale “blue chip” companies—such as electronic-appliance outlets eXtra and Jarir—to address Saudization requirements through increasing investments in training programs, out-competing smaller, outlets.³⁹⁰ Human-resources managers from several mid-sized franchises interviewed in in 2020 (>200 employees each) found that Saudization requirements were “easily” met, “possible to meet” or at worst “a bit high for [the] nature of our business” (this from a fast-food chain).³⁹¹

³⁸⁶ Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*, 200–202.

³⁸⁷ Vivian Nereim, “The Making of Saudi Inc.,” *Bloomberg*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-07/making-saudi-inc-how-mbs-drove-the-sovereign-wealth-fund-s-oil-fueled-takeover>.

³⁸⁸ “Prince Al-Walid: 200 riyals a month.”

³⁸⁹ “Al-Khodari May Double Capex”; Marwa Rashad, “INTERVIEW-Saudi Building Sector Faces Tough Times Ahead - Al-Khodari,” *Reuters*, November 19, 2015, sec. Oil report, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-economy-al-khodari-idINL8N12U4GY20151119>.

³⁹⁰ “Saudi All Industries Sector,” Investment Research, Al-Rajhi Capital, March 28, 2018: pg. 4.

³⁹¹ Author interview, fast-food chain human resources managers, Riyadh, March 9, 2020.

5.5 Conclusion

The evidence presented here aligns with my argument that autocrats undertake difficult policy reforms when reminded of the long-term risks of abiding by the policy status quo. Prior to the Arab Spring uprisings, Saudi rulers were aware of long-run challenges associated with rising citizen unemployment but were unwilling to override the opposition of influential business owners to rigorously enforce private-sector Saudization. Almost immediately after the fall of regional autocracies, however, unemployment became an immediate concern for Saudi officials; they quickly adopted the very policy reform they had just abandoned (Figure 26). Aptly summarizing this shift in time horizons, businesswoman Rania Salama complained to *Al-Yamamah* in January 2012 that the MoL “is now [only] presenting short-term solutions. We might hear over the next year or two that a large number [of citizens] were employed, but has it solved the long-term problem of unemployment?”³⁹² Business leaders grumbled about renewed costs, but initially muted their protests and later discovered that they had sharply reduced leverage with which to attempt to reverse regime policies. While the Saudi regime is far from “solving” unemployment entirely, Saudi rulers’ perceptions of unemployment an overriding political challenge—regardless of changes in political leadership, bureaucratic personnel, or economic conditions—brings with it the need to demonstrate constant short-term gains.

³⁹² Nasrallah and Al-Tatar, “Al-Fajwa al-Mutazāyyida Bayn <<Niṭāqāt>> Wa al-Qit’āt [The Growing Gap between Nitaqat and the Sectors],” 15.

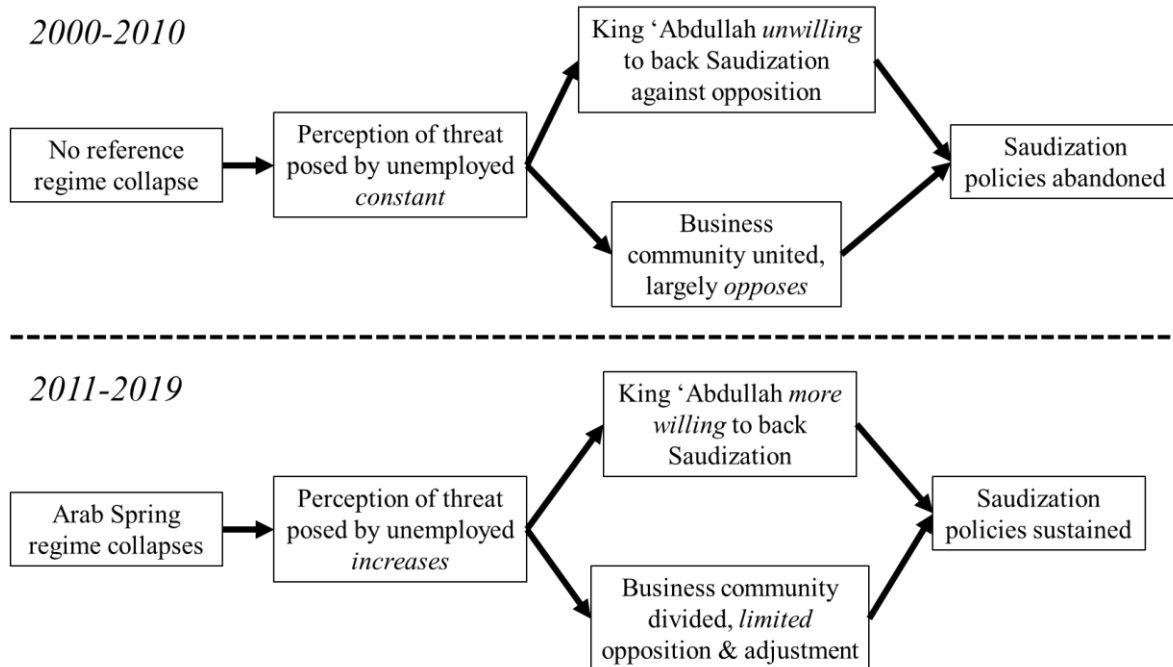


Figure 26: Summary of policy changes, 2000-2010 and 2011-2019.

Alternative explanations of authoritarian policymaking do not fare as well in explaining the motivations for rulers to undertake reform, or the means by which they render policy reforms credible. “Winning coalition” models of authoritarian politics imply that the failure of Saudization prior to 2011 represents a best-case scenario for authoritarian efforts at policy reform—a quiet retreat in the face of counter-mobilization by insider lobbying, in this case the Kingdom’s “captains of industry,” instead of risking destabilizing elite conflict by forging ahead with reforms. If private-sector elites were truly part of an immutable winning coalition for the Saudi regime, then their policy prerogatives should have been secure after the Saudi regime endured the regional turmoil of the Arab Spring uprisings. The signal sent by regional regime failure, however, explains why from 2011 onwards Saudi rulers prioritized efforts to address mass unemployment—or at least to *attempt* to address mass unemployment—over and above the demands of private-sector employers.

Furthermore, Saudization policies have been sustained not by political reform or continuous mobilization from below, but by these same altered threat perceptions among the Kingdom’s

political elite. The Saudi regime imposed labor market reforms by fiat, not as the result of popular discontent signaled through protests or parliaments (Table 5). Demonstrations that did emerge, most notably among Shi'a communities in the Kingdom's Eastern Province, were ruthlessly crushed by the Ministry of the Interior. While Saudi citizens in the Eastern Province, including many Shi'a Saudis, no doubt benefited from Saudization policies there is little indication that protests resulted in stricter enforcement of Saudization in the Eastern Province as a result.³⁹³ Limited forums for popular participations, such as the National Dialogue conferences, may have permitted citizens to express grievances but ultimately did little to alter the balance of class power between different social constituencies. Given the ease with which the Saudi regime reneged on past promises to take limited steps towards democratic practices, the visible and verifiable payouts of job-seeker benefits and enforcement of Saudization quotas likely served as a more reliable indicator of Saudi rulers' policy priorities. As a result, policy reform on its own appears to have been somewhat effective in signaling a credible commitment to job-seekers, at least among Saudi men.

Table 5: Summary of alternative explanations compared with case evidence.

	Disconfirmed due to...
Winning Coalition	Rulers overruling insiders
Demand for Redistribution	Reform sustained <u>despite</u> repression of dissent
Political Institutions	Existing institutions too limited to press demands; no new political institutions accompany reform

Ultimately, the Saudi labor-market reforms indicated a diminished stature for “big business” within the Saudi ruling coalition over the course of the 2010s. While the Vision 2030 reforms of MBS ostensibly called for the private sector to play a greater role in the Saudi economy, in practice

³⁹³ Private-sector employment of Saudi citizens increased by around 94% in the Eastern Province between 2011 and 2014, below the average for the rest of the Kingdom (126%). The same was true looking only at male employment (an increase of 69% for the Eastern Province relative to 74% for the rest of Saudi Arabia).

this has meant bringing “business-style” corporate practices to a new generation of state-owned enterprises—financed by state entities such as the Public Investment Fund—rather than reaching a newfound political accommodation with pre-existing Saudi business leaders.

More case-specific explanations of Saudi labor-market regulation also struggle to explain the trajectory of reforms. While it is true that limited administrative capacity for monitoring and enforcement of reforms undermined previous efforts at reform, Saudi state institutions proved adaptable under considerable political pressure from rulers.³⁹⁴ The MoL quickly implemented an online system for monitoring the workforce of Saudi firms and acquired greater enforcement capacity to directly monitor firms’ compliance with stated Saudization achievements. State capacity was downstream of political intent, not a hindrance to it. Finally, the Saudi regime’s redoubled efforts to pursue Saudization were largely independent of energy markets. While the pre-2011 abandonment of reforms might be explained in part by increasing resource rents—permitting more direct hires of Saudi citizens through expansion of the state bureaucracy—Saudi rulers in turn backed the imposition of the Nitaqat program just a few years later, in the middle of the same commodities boom. While the massive drop in oil prices over the course of 2014 (from around \$93/barrel to ~\$49/barrel) afforded private-sector employers a brief reprieve from *additional* Saudization measures, Saudi policymaking continued to ramp up pressure for hiring Saudis through the end of the decade.

³⁹⁴ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 185–222.

Still, Nitaqat has not proved a panacea for the Saudi labor market, particularly in recent years. A decade into implementation, Nitaqat's brute-force approach to Saudization is meeting with diminishing labor-market returns, indicating limits on the ability of quotas alone to generate new Saudi jobs. Despite the political utility of Nitaqat in signaling political support for a "Saudi-first" labor market, complete with a clear metric of policy "success" (the Saudization rate), labor-market regulation on its own cannot generate jobs. Although the overall Saudization rate trended upwards throughout the 2010s (with roughly 20% of private-sector jobs held by Saudis in 2020, compared with just 10% in 2010), since 2015 this shift has been driven by the departure of expatriate workers more so than jobs gains by Saudi citizens. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of Saudi jobs in the private sector grew by an average of just 2.8% a year, even as more than 2 million expatriate workers seemingly left the Saudi labor market entirely. At the same time, considerable rhetorical encouragement on the virtues of entering the private sector has done little to shift Saudi citizens' preferences regarding work in the private sector. In my own 2020 survey of labor-market attitudes among working-age Saudis, public-sector employment remained the main preference of over 80% of respondents, regardless of age (Figure 27). Respondents indicated that their preference was primarily due to government employments' greater job security (44% of those preferring public-sector work) and higher salary (31% of those preferring public-sector work).

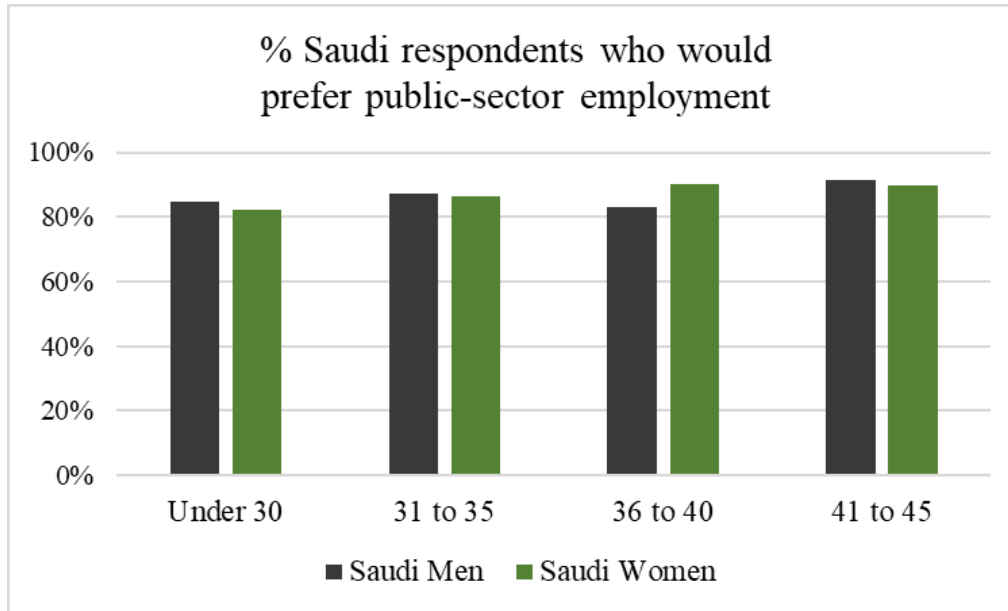


Figure 27: Percentage of respondents favoring public-sector employment, Oct. 2020. Based on original survey of 2,732 Saudi respondents aged 45 or younger.

Still, self-reported views on Nitaqat among Saudi citizens remain high, even if evidence from surveys and focus groups suggests some ambivalence towards the policy. Over 70% of respondents (employed and unemployed alike) to my 2020 survey reported that Nitaqat “helped” or “somewhat helped” employment in providing jobs for Saudi citizens their region; very few felt that the policy had a “negative effect” on Saudi job opportunities. Focus groups were more divided on Nitaqat’s utility, however. Some participants across each group noting positive effects for the program even as others suggested it made very little difference on firms’ behavior.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁵ A focus group with Saudi female job-seekers suggested that only “some” benefited from Nitaqat, such as those with specialized skills such as in engineering. Riyadh, February 17, 2020. Among focus groups with Saudi male job-seekers, at least one participant in each group acknowledged that there was “pressure on companies” (Ha’il, February 9, 2020) to hire Saudis, that might “force them to do good things” (Riyadh, March 1, 2020), but that firms still did not invest in their Saudi employees’ skills.

Chapter 6

Information Shocks & Authoritarian Policy Reforms

6.1 Introduction

While qualitative empirics demonstrate the plausibility of redistributive reforms as authoritarian coalition-building, case study approaches entail a considerable tradeoff of external validity in favor of internal validity. There are sound reasons to be skeptical of generalizing from theory built off patterns of policymaking within one of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies, whose economy relies on one of the world's largest reserves of natural-resource wealth, and whose heterogeneous state structures have been described by one scholar as "fourteen centuries of history rolled up into one bureaucratic behemoth."³⁹⁶ Furthermore, the example of regional development indicates that an influx of resource revenues can enable certain kinds of policy reform, even if a subsequent bust can lead rulers to renege on past promises. I therefore complement the process-tracing of policy reform in Saudi Arabia with a large-n, cross-national comparisons of policy reforms under authoritarianism. For my large-n sample, I utilize a global dataset of authoritarian regimes in Svobik (2012) that covers all such regimes (136 countries) from 1946 to 2008.³⁹⁷

In Section II, I introduce the data sources and variables used for statistical analysis. Section III presents my main empirical findings. Section IV concludes.

³⁹⁶ Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, 271.

³⁹⁷ The dataset of global autocracies in Geddes et al. excludes a number of smaller autocracies that can nevertheless provide a meaningful reference point for regional peers. Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (June 2014): 313–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714000851>; Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*.

6.2 Data & Models

Dependent Variable

I further measure autocrats' adoption of policy reforms using two global datasets, each of which indicates a clear policy gain for a mass constituency at the expense of an insider constituency. While each of these policies is substantially different from the county-specific policies addressed in my case studies, the same theoretical logic should apply in determining when rulers choose to redistribute benefits or other privileges from insiders to outsiders.

First, I focus on land reform, as a classic example of a policy change with clear redistributive consequences for rural constituencies (typically peasants). Albertus' global dataset of land reform covers all major instances of land expropriated below market value for the purposes of redistribution, including the postwar time period.³⁹⁸ *Land Reform* is a binary variable taking the value 1 for years of ongoing land reform, with all other years taking a value of 0; I modify this to only code the initial year of land reform as 0. To complement this analysis, I likewise account for countries' introduction of various *Labor Reform* policies utilizing the Social Policy Around the World (SPAW) dataset.³⁹⁹ SPAW indicates the introduction of assorted workplace benefits: sick leave, worker's compensation for workplace injuries, unemployment insurance, and pensions.⁴⁰⁰

While each of these policies represents an example of an example of redistribution, I seek to only count policies that come at a cost to a notable insider constituency. I therefor code as 1 each instance of policy change where redistributive policies were enacted occurred against the interests of an insider constituency for the regime. For land policies, I code instances of policy reform regimes

³⁹⁸ Albertus, *Autocracy and Redistribution*, 266–303.

³⁹⁹ Knutsen and Rasmussen, "The Autocratic Welfare State."

⁴⁰⁰ Following Knutsen and Rasmussen (pg. 676–77.), I consider maternity leave and family allowance policies—included within the SPAW dataset—to be covered by a different logic than straightforward redistribution and hence do not include these policies within my analysis.

enacted land reforms despite relying on “agrarian elites, including rich peasants and large landowners” in elite classifications of regime characteristics by the Varieties of Democracy dataset. For labor policies, I measure instances of policy reform based on whether regimes extend new benefits to mass worker constituencies despite being noted as relying on “business elites” to remain in power. I code the introduction of each policy as 1, with all intervening years coded as 0. In my main analysis in this chapter, I combine my analysis of both policy adoptions to maximize the power of my regression. The resulting number of policy reforms is small: 32, or less than 1% of country-years in my sample (compared with 185 regime failures, or 4% of country-years).

Independent Variable

My main explanatory variable is a lagged measure of *Regional Regime Failure*. I use the organizational divisions of the World Bank to delineate various world regions: Latin America, the Middle East & North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and Central Asia (within this dataset, largely the countries of the former Soviet Bloc), South Asia, and East Asia & Pacific.⁴⁰¹ For each country at each year within the dataset, I count the number of regime failures among other countries in the same region during the previous year, excluding short-lived interim governments as well as regimes ended by foreign invasion or civil war. Doing so effectively lags values of RRF by one year, which I do so to account for the time it would take a ruler or ruling elite to observe regime failures and translate changed views into policy changes. I consider two alternative measures as robustness checks. First, I consider a binary measure of RRF which takes on a value of 1 if there were any regional regime failures in the previous year and 0 otherwise. Additionally, I consider whether *Any Regime Failure*—in other words, the failure of all authoritarian regimes in the world in a given year—is associated with an increased likelihood of adopting redistributive reforms.

⁴⁰¹ “The world by region,” The World Bank, 2017. <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdcatlas/archive/2017/the-world-by-region.html>

I also control for whether a given country itself underwent an authoritarian regime change within a given year or the previous year; I further exclude these years entirely in robustness checks.

Control Variables

I include a number of control variables to account for rival explanations for policy change under authoritarianism. To provide an accurate test of whether sustained *Mobilization* from below can prompt redistributive reforms, I utilize the NAVCO 2 database of mass-mobilizing campaigns during this time period. I code country-year observations of *Mobilization* as 1 for years where a regime faces a mass-mobilizing demanding regime change, significant institutional reform, or policy change.⁴⁰² I do not lag this variable as I would expect policy change stemming from mobilization to come during domestic mobilization, as a policy concession. While this approach makes it difficult to untangle the causality of policy concessions and domestic mobilization, a null finding would still case doubt on an elective affinity between protest and policy reform under authoritarianism.

To account for the claim that *institutions* facilitate policymaking and other concessions, I focus in particular on elected, national-level representative bodies in line with existing work on the role of legislatures in authoritarian policymaking.⁴⁰³ I include a binary variable coded 0 for regimes that have either no legislature or only an appointed legislature, and 1 for all other country-year observations.

To account for possible “rentier state” policy reforms, I include a measure of *Oil & Gas rents per capita logged* to account for whether costly policy changes might be forestalled or prompted by

⁴⁰² I exclude campaigns demanding territorial secession or institutional autonomy due to evidence that these campaigns drive very different political dynamics under authoritarian regimes Ferdinand Eibl, Steffen Hertog, and Dan Slater, “War Makes the Regime: Regional Rebellions and Political Militarization Worldwide,” *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2021): 1002–23.

⁴⁰³ Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*; Jennifer Gandhi, Ben Noble, and Milan Svolik, “Legislatures and Legislative Politics without Democracy,” *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 9 (2020): 1359–79; Scott Williamson and Beatriz Magaloni, “Legislatures and Policy Making in Authoritarian Regimes,” *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 9 (2020): 1525–43.

resource windfalls. Throughout, I control for the possibility of policy reforms as a simple function of greater wealth or economic growth by including measures of *GDP per capita logged* and *Growth*.⁴⁰⁴

I additionally include a number of variables to account for specific empirical predictions about the timing of autocratic reforms. While an imperfect measure of the kind of open, intra-elite conflict specified in small-n case studies, I utilize the instances of a failed coup attempt as a binary indicator of *elite conflict* within a country's regime.⁴⁰⁵ While this likely undercounts many instances of elite conflict, it provides some indication of when factional infighting threatens to spill into public view. Per my analysis of domestic mobilization, I do not lag this variable to account for the fact that new policy appeals should come as part of an elite struggle rather than in response to this struggle. I code for the existence of an *Economic Crisis*, and the possibility that this might drive efforts at policy change, by including a dummy variable coded 1 if "the lagged two-year moving average of economic growth (per capita) is less than -2%" in a given year following Geddes et al. (2018: 188).⁴⁰⁶ I also consider this possibility of redistributive reforms resulting from the mobilization requirements of an *Interstate War* utilizing a dummy variable coded 1 for years when a given regime was involved in an international war.⁴⁰⁷

Finally, following scholarship on the region-specific evolution of welfare states in the post-war era, I include fixed effects by region to account for unobserved region-specific factors that might make the adoption of various reforms either more or less likely.⁴⁰⁸ I also include a linear, quadratic,

⁴⁰⁴ E.g. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy1," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105; Paglayan, "The Non-Democratic Roots of Mass Education."

⁴⁰⁵ Waldner, *State Building and Late Development*; Eibl, *Social Dictatorships*. Data from: Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, "Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 2 (2011): 249–59.

⁴⁰⁶ Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes*; Geddes et al., *How Dictatorships Work*.

⁴⁰⁷ Scheve and Stasavage, "The Conscription of Wealth"; Kenneth Scheve and David Stasavage, "Democracy, War, and Wealth: Lessons from Two Centuries of Inheritance Taxation," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (2012): 81–102. Data from the Correlates of War project. Meredith Reid Sarkees and Frank Wayman, *Resort to War: 1816-2007* (Cq Press, 2010).

⁴⁰⁸ Massoud Karshenas and Valentine M. Moghadam, *Social Policy in the Middle East: Economic, Political, and Gender Dynamics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, *Development, Democracy, and Welfare States: Latin*

and cubic time trend to account for any time-varying propensity to adopt particular redistributive reforms, though my results are robust to use of year fixed-effects or the exclusion of time effects altogether.

Throughout, I model policy adoption using logistic regressions, with standard errors clustered by country.

6.3 Empirical Findings

If my theory is correct, we should observe RRF casting doubt on the ruling strategies of proximate autocrats who retain power, making it more likely that they break with the policy status quo in pursuit of redistributive reforms. Model 1 supports this in showing that reference regime failure is associated with a greater likelihood of adopting either land or labor reform.⁴⁰⁹ Interpreting the logistic coefficients in Table 6, moving from the minimum value of 0 reference regime failures to the media value in the dataset to the 95th percentile of values (3 regime failures in the same region) is associated with a roughly 2% increase in the likelihood of a regime adopting redistributive reforms, all else being equal (~0.4-5.7% at 95% confidence intervals). Figure 28 indicates the predicted probability of a given authoritarian regime in the MENA region adopting redistributive reforms with all other variables held at their median values.

Among possible alternative explanations, domestic mobilization is, if anything, associated with a lower likelihood of regimes adopting policy reforms, although neither variable is distinguishable from a null relationship at the ($p < 0.10$) level (Model 2). However, the existence of a competitive legislature within a regime (Model 3) is associated with a greater likelihood of adopting

America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe, Development, Democracy, and Welfare States (Princeton University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691214153>; Melani Cammett et al., *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 159–97.

⁴⁰⁹ This association is robust to alternative specifications of RRF as a binary variable, as shown in Model 1, **Error! Reference source not found.** in the Appendix.

policy reforms at the ($p < 0.01$) level. Regimes with competitive legislatures are also roughly 2% more likely to adopt policy reforms in a given year (~0.4-5.4% more likely at 95% confidence intervals). However, natural resource rents are negatively associated with the likelihood of adopting policy reforms, albeit only at the ($p < 0.10$) level. Moving from no oil income per capita to the 95th percentile of this value (over \$7000/capita in 2010 dollars) is associated with a given regime being around 1.5% less likely to adopt either reform. While economic crises, elite conflict, and interstate war are each positively associated with the adoption of policy reforms, none is distinguishable from a null relationship at the ($p < 0.01$) level.

Table 6: Logistic regression of the adoption of successive reforms on explanatory variables. Standard errors clustered by country.

	Dependent variable:							
	Policy Reforms							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
RR Failure _{t-1}	0.442*** (0.112)							0.334** (0.164)
Mobilization		-0.502 (0.749)						-0.436 (0.805)
Legislature			1.677*** (0.509)					1.674*** (0.594)
Fuel rents p.c. (logged)				-0.234* (0.132)				-0.191* (0.115)
Economic Crisis _{t-1}					0.296 (0.524)			0.667 (0.616)
Elite Conflict						0.172 (0.559)		0.255 (0.569)
Ongoing War							1.094 (0.723)	1.155** (0.518)
GDP p.c. (lagged)	-0.242 (0.364)	-0.238 (0.355)	-0.261 (0.382)	-0.067 (0.367)	-0.240 (0.387)	-0.282 (0.381)	-0.235 (0.363)	-0.071 (0.325)
Growth	0.028 (0.040)	0.022 (0.042)	0.028 (0.045)	0.042 (0.050)	0.056 (0.037)	0.032 (0.043)	0.026 (0.043)	0.081** (0.038)
Fails	0.302 (0.527)	0.366 (0.508)	0.274 (0.518)	-0.017 (0.761)	0.423 (0.555)	-0.299 (0.785)	0.323 (0.518)	0.120 (0.653)
Constant	-3.579 (2.749)	-3.174 (2.665)	-4.038 (2.879)	-4.770 (2.986)	-2.079 (3.124)	-3.254 (3.064)	-3.434 (2.728)	-6.195** (2.870)
Time trend	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Region FX	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3,956	3,956	3,956	3,670	3,630	3,594	3,956	3,129
Log Likelihood	-159.554	-162.275	-154.292	-131.207	-152.607	-153.016	-161.745	-113.717
Akaike Inf. Crit.	347.109	352.551	336.584	290.413	333.214	334.033	351.489	267.434

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

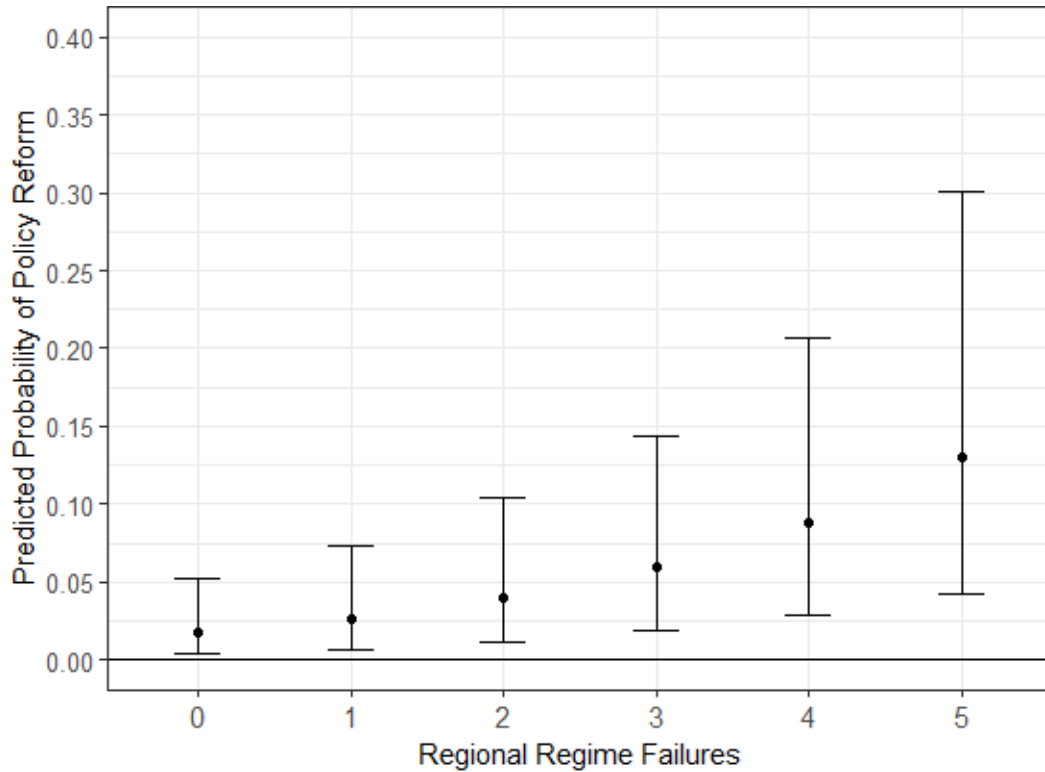


Figure 28: Predicted Probabilities of adopting policy reforms by number of reference regime failures.

Robustness Checks

I undertake further robustness checks to test the validity of my argument (Table 8). First, a binary indicator of reference regime failure remains positively associated with the adoption of policy reforms (Model 1). Reference regime failure remains positively associated with the adoption of policy reforms even when I drop all instances of a regime undergoing regime failure in the year immediately prior to the adoption of reforms (Model 2), to account for the possibility of a spurious correlation between regime failures in the same region and the adoption of reforms.

Given that my cases are based on processes of policymaking in Saudi Arabia, subsequent models seek to ensure that my statistical models are not driven largely by this one case or those with similar characteristics (monarchical institutions, resource wealth and lack of national-level legislature). Accounts have argued that the MENA region’s monarchies are particularly adept at forming collective perceptions of threat as well as organizing policy concessions to various social

constituencies.⁴¹⁰ Excluding either Saudi Arabia or all of the MENA monarchies does not affect my findings, however, as RRF remains positively and significantly associated with policy reform adoption (Models 3 & 4).

Additionally, simply controlling for the existence of a legislature or resource wealth may not fully capture the effect of authoritarian institutions on policymaking; RRF may only be associated with new policies in regimes with considerable resources to support the implementation of new policies, or in closed authoritarian regimes that lack meaningful forums to concede policies to potential opposition as contentious issues arise. In interacting the RRF with regimes' access to natural resource wealth, "rentier" regimes are if anything *less* likely to adopt reforms in the wake of an information shock from reference regime failure, indicating that access to additional resources is not a prerequisite for adopting reforms. However, the presence of a semi-competitive legislature is likewise associated with (if anything) a lower likelihood of adopting reforms in the wake of a reference regime failure, although the association is substantively indistinguishable from a null relationship. While this suggests that while such institutions might help forestall the need for policy change during a regime crisis (or alternatively, prevent decisive action), they are not necessary for such policy reforms to occur.

⁴¹⁰ Menaldo, "The Middle East and North Africa's Resilient Monarchs"; Yom, "Authoritarian Monarchies as an Epistemic Community Diffusion, Repression, and Survival During the Arab Spring."

Table 7: Logistic regression of the adoption of successive reforms on explanatory variables. Standard errors clustered by country.

	Dependent variable:					
	Policy Reforms					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Sample	Full	Drop Own Failure	Drop KSA	Drop Monarchy	Full	Full
RR Failure _{t-1} (binary measure)	1.083*** (0.389)					
RR Failure _{t-1}		0.354** (0.154)	0.444*** (0.113)	0.456*** (0.109)	0.640*** (0.199)	0.614*** (0.217)
Fuel rents p.c. (logged)					-0.122 (0.157)	
RR Failure _{t-1} x Fuel rents					-0.198* (0.106)	
Legislature						1.933*** (0.607)
RR Failure _{t-1} x Legislature						-0.252 (0.271)
GDP p.c. (lagged)	-0.223 (0.362)	-0.208 (0.396)	-0.213 (0.367)	-0.420 (0.398)	-0.085 (0.377)	-0.237 (0.395)
Econ. Growth	0.023 (0.039)	0.042 (0.045)	0.028 (0.039)	0.016 (0.046)	0.038 (0.049)	0.032 (0.043)
Own Failure	0.346 (0.517)		0.292 (0.526)	0.343 (0.542)	0.100 (0.749)	0.270 (0.513)
Constant	-3.942 (2.719)	-5.079 (3.095)	-3.774 (2.771)	-2.144 (2.946)	-4.970* (3.014)	-4.785 (3.033)
Observations	3,956	3,702	3,898	3,596	3,670	3,956
Log Likelihood	-159.312	-142.348	-159.189	-136.207	-127.909	-151.352
Akaike Inf. Crit.	346.623	310.696	346.378	300.414	287.817	334.703

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6.4 Conclusion

Cross-national analysis of the adoption of policy reforms provides evidence that information shocks—modeled here as reference regime failure—represent a generalizable cause of policy reforms in authoritarian regimes. Among other potential explanations, quasi-democratic institutions such as a semi-competitive legislature are associated with a higher likelihood of adopting policy reforms. Still, even within these more competitive regimes, reference regime failure remains associated with an increased likelihood of adopting policy reforms.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This project has investigated the origins of redistributive policy reforms under authoritarian regimes. Although existing literature on authoritarian policymaking emphasizes that autocrats establish set policies that benefit key insider constituencies in exchange for political support, long-term socioeconomic changes can threaten these arrangements by stoking grievances among marginalized outsiders. I find that authoritarian policy reforms are driven by rulers' efforts to resolve a reformer's dilemma: steering between the mounting risks of an untenable status quo and the potential for destabilizing backlash from existing supporters. Rulers are more likely to resolve this dilemma in favor of extending new benefits to outsiders when presented with a credible signal of future, unmanageable mobilization from this group. Authoritarian regimes govern changing societies, and—at times—reform public policies accordingly.

7.1 Main Findings

Chapters 4 and 5 of this manuscript examined the origins of attempted policy reforms in Saudi Arabia—with respect to regional development policies and labor market reforms—and the reasons why these reforms were sustained or abandoned over time. Chapter 6 extended this analysis to consider authoritarian regimes' adoption of costly labor and land reforms against insiders' interests across a global sample of postwar autocracies. I find that autocrats face a policymaking tradeoff that I term the reformer's dilemma: deciding whether to court new sources of support by adopting redistributive policy reforms, or to prioritize the loyalty of existing supporters by upholding existing policies. As regimes age, the status quo is not always the safest bet. Socioeconomic changes

can increase the de facto power of groups marginalized under the status quo or weaken the ability of existing supporters to sustain the incumbent regime. Still, even weakened political “insiders” retain the potential for foot-dragging or destabilizing mobilization against a would-be reformer, threatening to replace them with a rival directly or otherwise hobbling a ruler’s performance. While the threat of backlash militates against reform efforts in the short term, clear signals of insider weakness as a source of support or outsider strength as a threat to the regime—such as the failure of autocracies in the same region—can push rulers to ignore these political constraints in pursuit of more sustainable policy arrangements.

In Chapter 4, regional development policy indicates what happens when rulers’ advisors are able to identify potential grievances stemming from past policy choices, but no information shock signals a political need to address these concerns. A faction of Saudi technocrats specialized as urban planners were able to lobby Crown Prince ‘Abdullah on the need for addressing spatial inequalities inside the Kingdom, but beyond changes to official planning documents little changed while Saudi rulers were constrained by limited access to new resource revenues. Beginning in 2005, after ‘Abdullah took office as King of Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom entered a period of sustained, large resource revenues, new policy announcements stressed efforts to address underdevelopment in peripheral regions of the Kingdom’s North and South. However, when confronted with a drop in resource revenues, Saudi rulers reverted to form and abandoned these “balanced development” policies, concentrating economic planning on opportunities in core regions of the Kingdom.

Saudization reforms initially appeared destined for the same fate. Despite being championed by Crown Prince and then King ‘Abdullah in the early 2000s, initial faltered in the face of counter-lobbying by the business community; the Saudi regime instead opted to try and address unemployment through expanded hiring in the Saudi bureaucracy. In 2011, however, prominent

collapses of closely related regimes (US-aligned, long-lived autocracies) during the Arab Spring led Saudi rulers to re-evaluate the potential for mass mobilization at home, highlighting the potential grievances of unemployed and underemployed Saudis. To forestall such a rebellion, King ‘Abdullah and his successors adopted (and enforced) more stringent Saudization policies that favored Saudi job-seekers and private-sector employees; well-connected Saudi employers muted their objections in the short term and either adapted or were side-lined in the longer term. Subsequent policymaking ratcheted up pressure on local firms to hire Saudi citizens or face costly penalties. In further cross-national analysis, I find that regime failures in the same region were likewise associated with an increased likelihood of adopting new policy reforms.

In case studies as well as cross-national comparisons, I compared the theory presented here to alternative explanations, both those skeptical of the existence of substantive policymaking under authoritarianism and those offering general explanations for changes in authoritarian distribution. A theory based on the constraints of the reformer’s dilemma had more explanatory power than arguments that autocrats cater to a fixed “winning coalition” at all costs or offer substantive policy concessions to quell domestic mobilization. While I find that that substantial resource revenues afforded Saudi rulers the financial leeway to experiment with different policies, resources booms did not automatically translate into enduring policies favoring outsider constituencies in case studies or in cross-national regressions. Finally, while cross-national comparisons leave open the possibility that semi-competitive legislatures and other forms of participatory institutions provide an alternative pathway for policy reforms, case studies from Saudi Arabia show that these institutions are not necessary for policy reforms to occur.⁴¹¹

⁴¹¹ See also Williamson and Magaloni, “Legislatures and Policy Making in Authoritarian Regimes.”

7.2 Project Contributions

This project makes substantive contributions to our knowledge of policymaking in contemporary Saudi Arabia and theoretical contributions to the study of authoritarian policymaking writ large. In substantive terms, this project draws on a wide range of qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate the existence of redistributive policy reforms in Saudi Arabia, explain the origins of these policies, and explores the reception of these policies among various Saudi constituencies. These data show Saudi rulers' and policymakers' awareness of the tradeoffs inherent in public policy (i.e. the creation of policy "winners" and "losers") and demonstrate the material impact of policy changes among different Saudi constituencies. Existing accounts of the political economy of authoritarianism in Saudi regime have neither drawn on the breadth of evidence deployed in this study nor considered the long-term effects of the Arab Spring uprisings on Saudi domestic policies outside of repression.

This project's primary theoretical contribution lies in offering a framework for investigating authoritarian policymaking and a novel theory of redistributive policy reforms within this framework. First, it presents a new explanation for why authoritarian policymaking frequently (but not always) tends towards policy stasis, arguing that autocrats fear backlash from existing political supporters but lack certainty as to whether these constituencies truly constitute a "winning" coalition of support. Second, it presents an original argument as to how incumbent autocrats might address socioeconomic change through policy reforms rather than mounting repression or democratization. While most rulers govern in the short term, the perceived risks of inaction can come to rival the risks of reform in the minds of autocrats. I identify regime change in regional autocracies as a particular event that makes the shadow of the future loom particularly large but leave open the possibility that other events can foment such change.

The argument advanced here is important given that prevailing understandings of authoritarianism suggest either policy stasis in the face of change, or constant and costless recalibration of policies in line with the latent power of particular constituencies. While I agree with winning-coalition accounts that the interests of existing supporters can check efforts at policy reform, I argue that rulers are not as certain of the “winning” nature of these coalitions, nor supporters as certain to risk destabilizing backlash in all cases, as these narratives would suggest. At the same time, I find that greater protests or mobilization may not result in major policy action from incumbent rulers, given that they increase short-term reliance on existing supporters and risk a cascade of further concessions. Instead, this project depicts authoritarian policymaking as a proactive effort to *build* new forms of political support, rather than a reactive process of sustaining existing forms of political support. It also encouraged an emphasis on the evolution of public policies over time within particular regimes to complement an existing focus on cross-national variation between different autocracies. I hope that this encourages more direct study of policy outcomes and policymaking under authoritarianism. Despite great strides in understanding that authoritarian regimes *can* originate redistributive policy proposals, at rates comparable to or even surpassing their democratic peers, we have only begun to explain the timing of these changes.

This project also provides an alternative approach to capturing the empirical measurement of an authoritarian “coalition.” My findings point to the difficulty of identifying the makeup of coalitions as currently conceptualized in many accounts, as constituencies *necessary* or *sufficient* to maintain a given ruler or regime in power.⁴¹² In this project, I instead focus on constituencies who enjoy regular access to policymaking processes under authoritarianism, whether through or outside of formal representative institutions. To the extent that coalitions endure under authoritarianism, my

⁴¹² Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*, 2003, 51; Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*, 3.

approach emphasizes them as a malleable strategy for rulers to remain power rather than a fixed rule for retaining power according to which they govern. Saudi rulers themselves appear uncertain as to whether a given constituency is truly necessary to achieve their political aims, as recently evidenced most dramatically with respect to the Saudi Crown Prince's efforts to sideline the Kingdom's religious establishment.

In terms of practical implications, this project offers a pessimistic assessment of the ability of domestic protests to remake national policy absent regime change. In Saudi Arabia, the regime has expanded its repression of domestic critics even as it offers more mass policy benefits. Still, efforts to maintain a limited public sphere for debate of issues—whether by influential individuals within autocracies or democratically governed security partners such as the United States—can at least facilitate the development and discussion of redistributive policy solutions that might be implemented in a crisis. An additional practical implication of my findings is that the collapse of authoritarian regimes may prove a boon to surviving regimes, leading them to not only adopt new tactics of repression, but new policies that address some existing grievances within their societies. Saudi public opinion during this time offers some limited evidence that rulers might benefit from addressing policy grievances among outsiders.⁴¹³ Accordingly, regimes that survive the collapse of their peers may emerge from crises with a new lease on life.

Relation to Vision 2030 Reforms

In terms of practical implications for the Saudi of Saudi politics, while a full accounting for the origins and (thus far) successful implementation of new social policies under the Vision 2030 reforms is beyond the scope of this dissertation, findings provide insights into some potential drivers of these changes. The concept of the reformer's dilemma calls attention to the fact that the

⁴¹³ I provide some speculative assessments of Saudi views regarding the reforms discussed in my case studies in the Appendix.

effectiveness of religious clerics' legitimation of Al Saud rule had likely weakened substantially by the 2010s. In an Arab Barometer survey conducted in Saudi Arabia in early, shortly before the Saudi regime would rely in part on religious appeals to maintain order during the uprisings, only around 30% of Sunni respondents agreed that religious leaders "should have influence over government decisions." During fieldwork, even Saudis in small, outwardly conservative rural townships complained about the oppressive presence of the Saudi religious policy.⁴¹⁴

Initial accounts of MBS' rise to power, including interviews the Crown Prince and his advisors gave to Western media, indicate an awareness of these changing dynamics and an effort to convey the possibility and indeed the need for social reforms as part of a broader project of consolidating the support among various insider constituencies. In a 2015 conversation with *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, for example, MBS emphasized the "different" perspective of Saudi citizens under 30. Friedman's main takeaway was that the Crown Prince aimed to downplay a reliance on tribal or religious legitimation, aiming instead to "build [the regime's] legitimacy around performance, not just piety or family name."⁴¹⁵

Statements by MBS and officials within his inner circle from this time period further indicate a further conviction that social policy change was both important for maintaining political order and feasible due to demographic changes. In a 2016 interview with Saudi broadcaster Al Arabiya, part of the Crown Prince's initial effort to "sell" the Vision 2030 plan to Saudi audiences, MBS spoke of new policies supporting entertainment as a way to improve Saudi citizens' standard of living:

When we talk about entertainment and the standard of living, the income level in Saudi Arabia is one of the best in the world, but what is the problem?

The problem is that there are no tools to spend this income in a way that will reflect on the Saudi's well-being in life. Other countries have lower levels of income and

⁴¹⁴ Author interview, schoolteacher, Haroob (Jizan region), October 12, 2018.

⁴¹⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, "Letter From Saudi Arabia," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2015, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/25/opinion/letter-from-saudi-arabia.html>.

economic statuses, but the standards of living are good because there are good recreational and cultural opportunities, and a good environment that allow the citizens, whose incomes are low, to spend the money and enjoy doing so.

Entertainment and culture are very important to change the standard of living of a Saudi citizen in a short period of time.

Latter comments by the initial (and short-lived) head of the General Entertainment Authority Ahmed Al-Khatib give a further indication that new social policies were counting on true hardcore “conservatives” constituting only a small part of Saudi society. Reiterating the claim that most Saudis under 30 supported social liberalization, he told Reuters that he was counting on the fact that “the majority [of Saudis] are moderate” and that he was counting on this “80% of the population” to accept and support policy changes.⁴¹⁶ He further added that more conservative Saudis could simply “stay home” if they did not like new entertainment offerings—remarks that not only went unreported in Saudi media at the time but that Khatib officially repudiated as being a “mistranslation” after they stirred up some concerns at home.⁴¹⁷

At first glance, MBS appears to have parlayed public-opinion insights into a kind of information shock within the halls of power in Saudi Arabia, winning over elite allies (including even his father, King Salman) by conveying shared perceptions of these demographic changes. In a 2017 interview with the *Washington Post*'s David Ignatius, officials aligned with MBS shared the results of private opinion polls suggesting that “85% of the public, if forced to choose, would support the government rather than religious authorities on policy matters.”⁴¹⁸ While references to “religious authorities” were dropped in translations of the interview for local Saudi media outlets, the fact that

⁴¹⁶ “Saudi Entertainment Chief Sees Cinemas Returning, Eventually,” *Reuters*, April 27, 2017, sec. Entertainment News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/saudi-entertainment-idINKBN17T2WZ>.

⁴¹⁷ “Saudi Entertainment Chief: My Reuters Interview Was Misunderstood,” *Al Arabiya English*, April 30, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2017/04/30/Saudi-entertainment-chief-My-Reuters-interview-was-misunderstood>.

⁴¹⁸ David Ignatius, “A Young Prince Is Reimagining Saudi Arabia. Can He Make His Vision Come True?,” *Washington Post*, April 20, 2017, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-young-prince-reimagines-saudi-arabia-can-he-make-his-vision-come-true/2017/04/20/663d79a4-2549-11e7-b503-9d616bd5a305_story.html.

the question was even asked suggests efforts to convince others in private that the religious establishment had limited utility as a source of social control but also limited leverage in seeking to counter-mobilize against reforms. Journalists' reconstructions of MBS' rise to power further emphasized his use of social-media surveillance technologies to gather and convey a sense of public sentiment towards potential policies, building on several years in which Twitter was framed as almost a "parliament of the people" for Saudi citizens.⁴¹⁹ These appeals may even have been effective in convincing senior clerics to not stand in the way of reforms—albeit backed up by the credible threat of loss of privileges that come with high office, or the length detentions that have befallen political activists with the potential to either challenge the pace of reform or demand it proceed yet faster.⁴²⁰ Actions by senior religious clerics whose tenure precedes the Crown Prince's rise to power indicate an awareness that their own leverage in demanding policy reforms is now quite limited.⁴²¹

7.4 Limitations

This research project's focus from Saudi Arabia serves to anchor theoretical discussions of authoritarian policymaking in concrete cases of policy reform, yet in turn imposes limitations on the generalizability of my findings. While cross-national statistical comparisons in Chapter 6 offer evidence of a general association between the nearby regime failure and authoritarian policy reform, these statistical models cannot establish the precise mechanisms that drive this association. Furthermore, focusing only on available datasets of labor and land reform results in a quite limited number of overall policy reforms under authoritarianism. Medium-n studies of policymaking in

⁴¹⁹ Hope and Scheck, *Blood and Oil*, 59–67.

⁴²⁰ HRW, "The High Cost of Change: Repression Under Saudi Crown Prince Tarnishes Reforms" (Human Rights Watch, November 4, 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/04/high-cost-change/repression-under-saudi-crown-prince-tarnishes-reforms>.

⁴²¹ Yasmine Farouk and Nathan Brown, "Saudi Arabia's Religious Reforms Are Touching Nothing but Changing Everything," in *Islamic Institutions in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-Option, and Contention*, ed. Frederic Wehrey (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021), 30–31.

more closely aligned regimes—not only MENA-region autocracies, but communist regimes in the late 1980s and post-Soviet regimes in the 1990s and 21st century—might prove a more appropriate empirical strategy for testing my theoretical claims.

Other limitations have emerged from the findings of the project itself, suggesting potential scope conditions. On the one hand, my investigation of Saudi policymaking in the 21st century suggests applicability to other country contexts; instead of a Kingdom of atomized individuals, or a state apparatus that has fully substituted “spending for statecraft,” I find evidence of coherent policy debates both inside and outside of state agencies with clearly identified policy winners and losers. However, it is hard to fully rule out that Saudi rulers’ access to considerable resource wealth—and relatively capable state institutions—conditioned their willingness to undertake policy experimentation. Autocrats who lack the financial leeway to serve as insurance for any policy “mistakes,” or who are not reasonably certain that their policy priorities can even be implemented, might be far more wary than Saudi rulers of embarking on risky policy reforms. In line with my initial discussion of scope conditions, suggests that theory developed from Saudi cases is more likely to travel to cases of authoritarian regimes with access to capable states and considerable centralized state funds: the rentier states and socialist or Ba’athist regimes of the Middle East and North Africa; communist and post-communist regimes in East and Central Asia as well as Eastern Europe; and the more durable counter-revolutionary “leviathans” of Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, and to some extent Indonesia).

7.5 Questions for Future Research

Discussion of my project’s contributions and shortcomings highlights several possible avenues for future research. In terms of further data collection, further investigations might pursue a “medium-n” comparison of political insiders, elite threat perceptions and key policy outcomes for

authoritarian regimes before and after a “wave” of regime challenges and collapses. Candidates for such a study include MENA autocracies that survived the Arab Spring intact (including Algeria, Sudan, and the region’s monarchies), post-Soviet republics that survived the tumult of the early 2000s Color Revolutions, or communist regimes that survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such a study could help bridge the gap between the fine-grain case studies and cross-national regressions employed here, identifying whether elite threat perceptions and public policies shifted in predictable patterns across cases or were largely confined to Saudi Arabia as a *sui generis* case.

A further empirical question is just what authoritarian regimes learn in observing the overthrow of regime within the same region. For this project, I have made the simplifying assumption that reference-regime failures unilaterally incentivize incumbent rulers to adopt reforms. However, these events contain—and convey—far more information than a simple green light to proceed with policy changes. At a basic level, the takeaways for surviving autocrats may depend on whether their less-fortunate peers collapsed amid their *own* efforts at redistributive policy reform; if reform is seen as bringing about collapse, this is hardly an endorsement of the need for further change. For example, the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 amid the wide ranging policy changes of the White Revolution appears to have demonstrated to Saudi rulers the importance of retaining the support of religious clerics at all costs, curtailing limited steps towards social liberalization.

Finally, there is a theoretical question of whether information shocks affect regimes differently when they govern with limited representative institutions. While existing studies have tied authoritarian distribution levels to changes in electoral outcomes under competitive

authoritarianism,⁴²² focusing information shocks suggests that some election outcomes may send a stronger signal than others in encouraging such autocrats to adopt policy reforms.

⁴²² Michael K. Miller, "Elections, Information, and Policy Responsiveness in Autocratic Regimes," *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 6 (2015): 691–727.

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Appendix: Local Views on Regional Development

Utilizing public-opinion responses from the World Values Survey, Arab Barometer, and Arab Opinion Index on the extent to which policies and policymaking “represent” ordinary citizens, I constructed a time-series of views ranging from 2004 until 2016.

Views on Regime Across Regions

In terms of observing regional views, five regions were sampled in surveys throughout this time series: ‘Asir (in the South), Tabuk (in the North), Riyadh, Mekkah, and the Eastern Province.⁴²³ The views of residents during this time period indicate at best a mixed outcome for the Kingdom’s “balanced development” drive in terms of mass views: residents of ‘Asir grew *less* likely to feel that the Saudi political system represented their views as the balanced development program unfolded, even as Tabuk residents’ appraisal of the Saudi political system improved alongside sentiment in the capital region of Riyadh and at times even surpassed it (Figure 29). This may reflect the fact that Tabuk was one of the regions that most converged on the rate of development in Riyadh per the metrics used above (converging on 7 out of 11 indicators), while ‘Asir converged the least of any region (3 out of 11 indicators). However, there is also no clear backlash among Riyadh residents in the early years of “balanced development”; Riyadh residents’ self-reported views of the regime only increase across the available time series.

⁴²³ I combine the Arab Barometer poll from 2010 and the AOI poll from 2011 as Tabuk residents were not sampled in the Arab Barometer poll; views for other regions are similar across the two time periods, however.

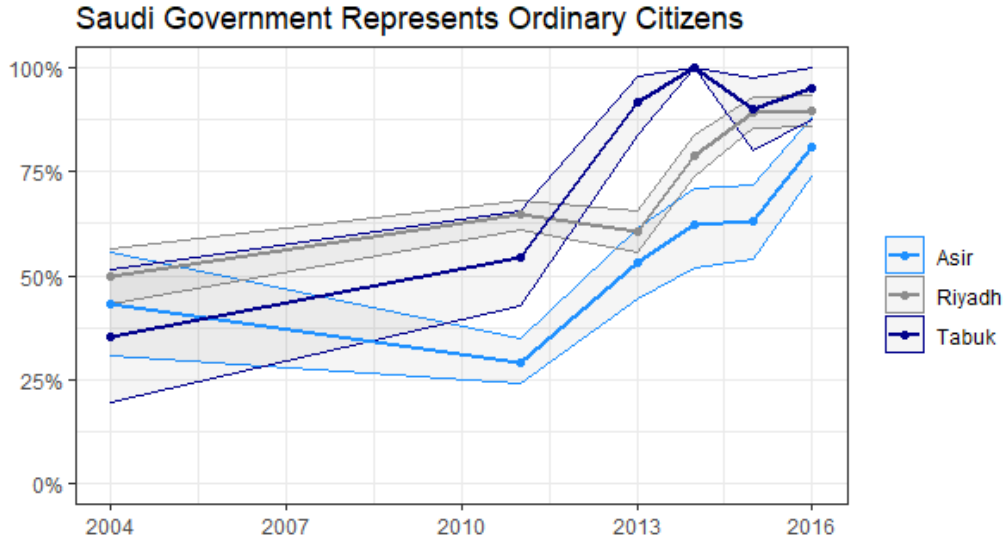


Figure 29: Percentage of respondents from each region who indicated that the Saudi political system represented citizens' views. Only Riyadh, Tabuk and 'Asir are shown for the sake of clarity.

To get a sense of whether changes in the 2005-2010 time period persist in local memory, I draw on from questions from an original survey fielded in October to November of 2020. This poll covered three regions (Riyadh, Jazan and Ha'il) in full, while also including smaller samples (~150 respondents) of major cities such as Jeddah (Mekkah region), Dammam (Eastern Province) and Buraidah (Qassim region, slightly north of Riyadh). The survey asked respondents which year they considered a “turning point” for their region, as a means of understanding whether interview subjects’ focus on 2005 as a major economic turning point generalized to populations at large. Respondents overwhelmingly identified one of the past few years as a “turning point” for their region, with a median response of “2018” for every region or city (Figure 30).⁴²⁴ This indicates that, for younger Saudis, some combination of greater individual focus on the recent high-profile Vision 2030 reforms and considerable pressure to identify the Vision’s reforms as a major turning point for

⁴²⁴ The median value for each region is the same regardless of whether I drop responses that noted “2020” as a turning point, due to the global pandemic.

the country, regardless of region. Taken together, these views point to limited memory of anything in the pre-2015 era generating lasting change in Saudi Arabia, whether in the core regions of the country or the periphery.

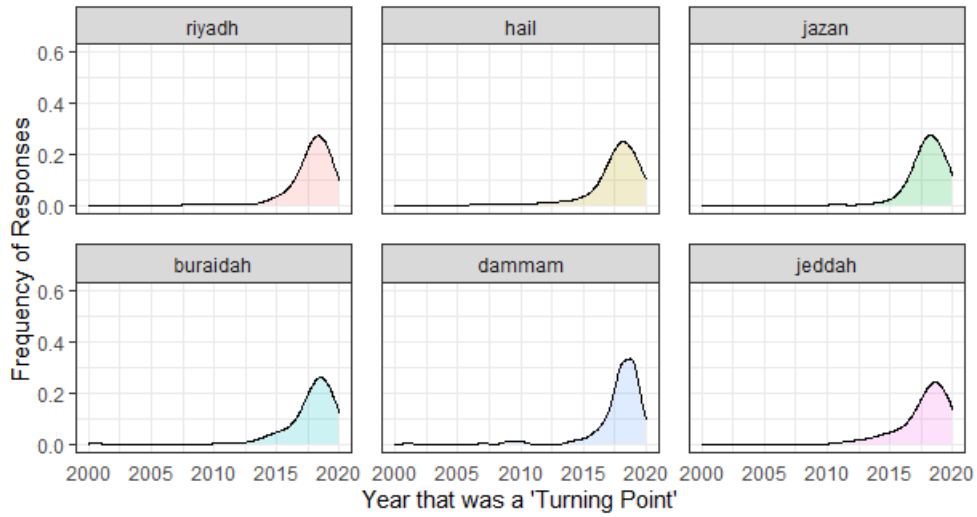


Figure 30: Responses to the question "what year do you consider a turning point for your region," density plot by year.

Views on Regime by Employment Status

In the initial years of the new Saudization push, the considerable economic costs associated with Nitaqat and other policies were clearly offset by real gains in terms of Saudi employment. Ironically, given the greater concern with male unemployment, this was particularly true for Saudi *women*; for many firms, the cost of complying with the Kingdom's gender-segregation policies proved less onerous (or violations less risky) than a failure to comply with Saudization quotas.⁴²⁵ Between July of 2011 and February of 2013 (when a second phase of Nitaqat was instantiated) the overall "Saudization rate" of the Saudi private sector rose from around 9.6% to 15.8%, with considerable econometric evidence indicating that Nitaqat was directly responsible for much of this increase.

Extant public opinion surveys provide suggestive evidence that the Nitaqat program addressed some grievances among Saudi job-seekers, albeit only among Saudi men. Again, combined World Values Survey (WVS), Arab Barometer (AB) and Arab Opinion Index (AOI) data provides time-series data of Saudi citizens' self-reported views on the extent to which Saudi policy or politics represented citizens.⁴²⁶ I begin with the baseline observation that, pre-reform, unemployed Saudi men were less likely than their employed peers to report believing that "all people" or "ordinary citizens" were represented by Saudi politics. If the implementation of Nitaqat, and stricter Saudization more broadly, succeeded in convincing job-seekers (even partially) that Saudi rulers were newly committed to addressing unemployment, then we should observe a narrowing or even the complete disappearance of this gap. Furthermore, this change should be driven by a relative improvement in male job-seekers' self-reported sentiments towards the regime (rather than the

⁴²⁵ Conrad Miller, Jennifer Peck, and Mehmet Seflek, "Missing Women, Integration Costs, and Big Push Policies in the Saudi Labor Market," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 14, no. 2 (2022): 51–77.

⁴²⁶ For WVS data, I use a question that asks whether respondents agree that the country is run for "all people" rather than "a few large interests." For AB data, I use a question that asks whether respondents believe that "political leaders are concerned with the needs of ordinary citizens." The question used from AOI surveys is whether respondents agree that "Domestic economic policy expresses the opinion of citizens in my country."

indiscriminate immiseration of all citizens). By contrast, it is not clear that Saudi women in the labor market (either employees or job-seekers) would react to Nitaqat in the same way, given the extent to which Saudi social discourse cast employment as a particularly male imperative (and unemployment as a particularly male problem).⁴²⁷

The combined time series shows that following the imposition of Nitaqat, we no longer observe a gap between unemployed and employed Saudi men's self-reported sentiment towards the Saudi regime (Figure 31). In 2011 and earlier, unemployed Saudi men were around 20-40% less likely than employed Saudi men to report feeling represented by regime politics and policy. From 2013, however, not only did all Saudi men's appraisals of regime "representativeness" improve substantially, but unemployed Saudi men's appraisals effectively converged on employed men's views.⁴²⁸

This dynamic might reflect preference falsification, with greater regime repression post-2011 encouraging all Saudi citizens to voice positive sentiments towards the regime regardless of their views. Evidence against this, however, is the fact that Saudi women's self-reported views demonstrate the opposite dynamic. Although employed and unemployed Saudi women report similar appraisals of regime policymaking prior to reforms, post-2011 Saudi female job-seekers were less likely than female employees to feel that economic policy reflected citizens' preferences (64%

⁴²⁷ Saudi female job-seekers did benefit substantially from the imposition of Nitaqat labor reforms, as many employers invested in accommodations for female employees to meet Saudization quotas (i.e. by being able to recruit from a wider pool of Saudi candidates). Still, the MoL went out of its way to assure potential critics that Nitaqat was in no way geared towards encouraging female employment. "Al-'aml: la siḥa li-iḥtisab al-mar'a birajulayn fi 'al-s'awada' [Labour: No truth to counting women as two men in 'Saudization']," *Al-Eqtisadiyyah*, December 24, 2008, https://www.aleqt.com/2008/12/24/article_176873.html.

⁴²⁸ The increase in general might result from either greater preference falsification due to post-Arab Spring repression or genuinely more positive assessments of the regime due to perceptions of potential insecurity post-Arab Spring and the poor track record of the region's democratic transitions over the course of the 2010s. Melani Cammett, Ishac Diwan, and Irina Vartanova, "Insecurity and Political Values in the Arab World," *Democratization* 27, no. 5 (2020): 699–716; Amaney A. Jamal and Michael Robbins, "Why Democracy Stalled in the Middle East: Economic Despair and the Triumph of the China Model," *Foreign Affairs* 101 (2022): 22.

versus 74%). This might reflect the fact that, despite considerable pressure to employ Saudis and greater acceptance of Saudi women in the workplace, Saudi women continued to face considerable difficulty in securing full-time jobs with adequate pay in the Kingdom's starkly gender-segregated workplaces. Hence while the male unemployment rate declined from 2011 to 2015 (from 7.4% to 5.3%), the unemployment rate for Saudi women remained high at around 33% throughout the time period in question.

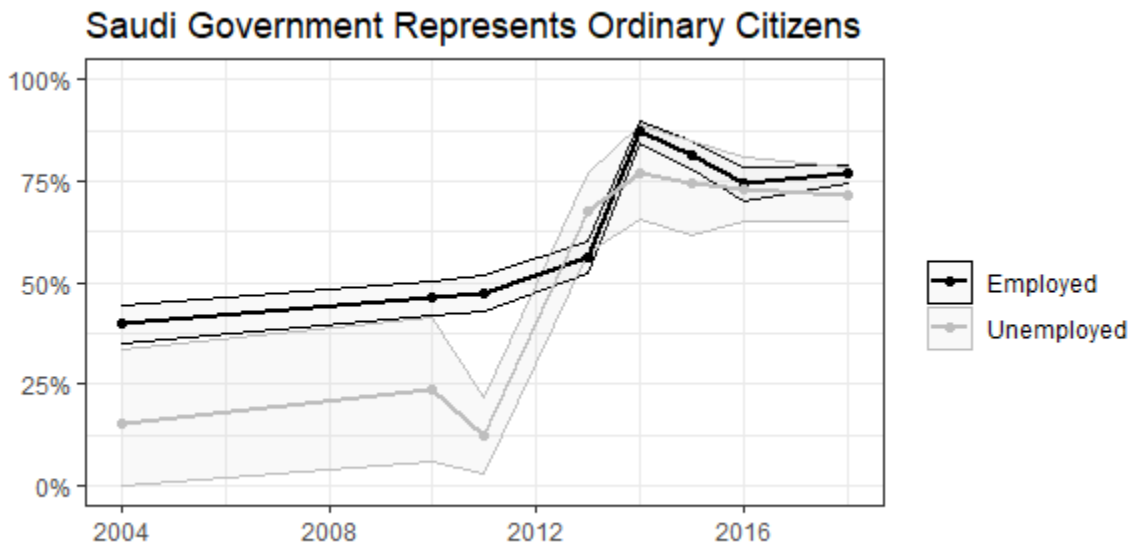


Figure 31: Male Saudis' perceptions of the government "representativeness" by employment status, 2004-2018. Shaded area represents 90% confidence intervals.

Table 8: Linear probability model (OLS) regressions of belief in Saudi regime's "representativeness" on explanatory variables. Regressions include only respondents who were employed or who reported looking for work (unemployed).

Sample	Dependent variable:					
	Agree: Political System Represents Citizens					
	All	Saudi Men	Saudi Women	All	Saudi Men	Saudi Women
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Unemployed	-0.086*** (0.011)	-0.286*** (0.047)	0.015* (0.009)	-0.054** (0.027)	-0.243*** (0.054)	0.045 (0.030)
Post-2011	0.293*** (0.047)	0.286*** (0.047)	0.316*** (0.063)	0.305*** (0.054)	0.305*** (0.053)	0.311*** (0.076)
Unemployed x Post-2011	0.024 (0.017)	0.263*** (0.057)	-0.115*** (0.021)	0.018 (0.032)	0.241*** (0.068)	-0.104*** (0.033)
Male	0.016 (0.022)			0.035 (0.023)		
Income sufficient (vs. "Can save")				-0.027 (0.021)	-0.009 (0.019)	-0.070* (0.041)
Income insufficient (vs. "Can save")				-0.197*** (0.041)	-0.173*** (0.042)	-0.250*** (0.042)
College degree				0.037 (0.032)	0.032 (0.031)	0.050 (0.041)
Riyadh				0.120* (0.068)	0.154*** (0.051)	0.062 (0.115)
Age: 25-34				-0.052*** (0.017)	-0.048** (0.019)	-0.051 (0.038)
Age: 35-44				-0.040 (0.032)	-0.035 (0.027)	-0.044 (0.053)
Age: 45-54				-0.012 (0.030)	0.001 (0.027)	-0.044 (0.052)
Age: 55+				-0.034 (0.036)	-0.002 (0.033)	-0.168 (0.105)
Constant	0.443*** (0.036)	0.465*** (0.018)	0.428*** (0.052)	0.476*** (0.048)	0.494*** (0.035)	0.499*** (0.094)
Observations	6,504	4,577	1,927	6,291	4,437	1,854
R ²	0.082	0.086	0.078	0.117	0.117	0.128
Adjusted R ²	0.081	0.085	0.076	0.115	0.114	0.123

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01