

## Saudi perestroika



Chibli Mallat

**C**hange is coming at an unprecedented pace in Saudi Arabia, long the kingdom of silence and gerontocracy. The economic crisis that has hit Riyadh is turning structural, with the falling price of oil and few prospects of getting back to the \$100 a barrel mark, a costly war in Yemen and reverses on the Syrian battlefield.

The Saudi Binladin Group let go more than 75,000 employees and, in Beirut, staff members who depend on direct Saudi financial support have gone months without being paid.

Saudi Arabia is on the defensive after what it perceives as betrayal by the United States. Relations between Washington and Riyadh have not been so strained since the discovery of oil by American prospectors in 1938 and the agreement, signed in 1945 by King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud and US president Franklin D. Roosevelt, gave birth to the political-economic alliance between the two countries.

The nuclear accord between Washington and the Shia mullahs in Tehran is only the visible tip of the iceberg. More worrying for the Saudis is the energy independence developed by the United States since President Barack Obama took office. Today, agreements dating back almost a century are hanging by a thread.

The monarchy has reacted in two ways. The first, the traditional way, is defensive and war-like. Since last summer, Riyadh has been governed by a war cabinet whose number one enemy is expansionist Iran. With Adel al-Jubeir in the Foreign Ministry and the king's son, Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, in Defence, the gloves are off.

The Saudis have not said their last word on Syria and in Lebanon and across the region, the Shias are in their sights. Hezbollah has been officially branded as a terrorist organisation by the Gulf Cooperation Council. The execution in January of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, acclaimed as a moderate and the symbol of the oppression of the Shia region of the Eastern province, shows the extent of the intolerance towards all dissidence.

The other reaction is more intelligent. The kingdom is opening



A Saudi girl plays in the sand dunes near Buraydah, 400km north-west of Riyadh.

up as never before. In the political arena, where the two young leaders of Foreign Affairs and Defence have jettisoned the customary robot-speak for intelligent interviews in which they appear to think before opening their mouths. The government has been shuffled intelligently and redundant portfolios amalgamated. The cabinet has unveiled Vision 2030, promising profound social and economic change within 15 years with the Saudi citizen as the focus.

To avoid being dismissed out of hand, the Saudis must deliver – and steps towards Saudi-style *perestroika* are being taken at a surprising pace. The end of the unacceptable brutality of the *matawi'a*, officially known as the Committee to Support Virtue and Prevent Vice, has been decreed out of order.

The *matawi'a* are no longer permitted to arrest or even harass citizens on the street. Anyone who is not a woman cannot understand the daily humiliation dealt out by these vulgar, brutal men who strike anyone deemed to fall short of their idea of what constitutes acceptable public behaviour.

For the moment, the ridiculous ban on women drivers still stands but looks increasingly untenable for the government.

A degree of scepticism is in order. Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* destroyed the Soviet Union. The leaders of Saudi Arabia know that its citizens will not be able to be treated as dispensable once the oil era is over. In the detail of the change and its rhythm will lie their success or failure.

The imposition of a value-added tax at 5% is a step in the right direction but reform needs to go further, restoring the balance between citizens' taxes and government responsibility. Auctioning part of Aramco planned for the announced sovereign fund of \$2 trillion, which would be the largest such fund in the world, is not the right way forward. It again ignores the citizen as the main source of wealth.

An analysis of the legal situation in the kingdom bodes better for the future, with fundamental reforms that are more encouraging than lofty intentions. The kingdom's aversion to codes is well known.

Yet since 2000, more than a dozen have been promulgated in Saudi Arabia, including the regulation of a legal profession that had no recognition until then and civil and criminal procedure laws. A reworking of bankruptcy law, whose centrepiece dates to 1965, is awaited eagerly; with the oil-induced collapse of companies, it is urgently needed.

Most important, and for the first time in its 100 years of history, Saudi Arabia has published thousands of rulings issued by the kingdom's courts, decisions that hitherto have been largely secret for failure of a sanctioned reporting system. Saudi law is being normalised and, with this normalisation, and the lead taken by its young wolves, at least the kingdom is no longer the epitome of silence and gerontocracy.

**Chibli Mallat** is an international lawyer and law professor. His latest book, *Philosophy of Nonviolence*, Oxford University Press, 2015, builds on the "Arab spring" to develop an efficient theory of radical change.

“Change is coming at an unprecedented pace in Saudi Arabia.”

## A new Arab House of Wisdom?



Bernd Debusmann

**G**ood news from the Arab world is an increasingly rare commodity but there are exceptions. Take the United Arab Emirates, where a determined drive is under way to close the knowledge gap with the West and restore Arab learning to its past glory.

The aim is to re-establish the House of Wisdom, which flourished in Baghdad in the Arab world's golden age. From 800 to 1500, the Arab world had no rivals in the study of science and philosophy and fostered discoveries from algebra to optics. Arabs established the world's first universities and hospitals. It is an era largely forgotten and ignored in the West.

The Emirates' lofty goal was articulated a decade ago by the rulers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the second-largest and most flamboyant of the seven emirates that make up the country. In

Abu Dhabi, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan has launched a 10-year initiative to turn Emirati citizens into habitual book

readers.

According to the national survey that preceded the programme, 70% of Emiratis do not read books, the average Emirati household owns just 20 books and half the country's students are not in the habit of regular reading. A national reading law to be promulgated this year is meant to increase the reading rate to 80% among students and 50% among adults by 2026.

One of the ways to reach that aim is to establish public libraries and book cafés in shopping malls where Emirati families spend much of their leisure time. Another is to deliver "knowledge bags" to new parents with a selection of books to read to their children so they develop reading habits early.

While Abu Dhabi officials are putting the final touches on the reading law, construction is under way in Dubai on what will be the biggest library in the Arab world. In line with the Dubai government's penchant for spectacular, attention-grabbing structures, the library will be in the shape of an enormous open book. It will eventually hold 4.5 million books, 2.5 million of them digital.

Municipality planners forecast that the library will attract 9 million visitors a year – more than the annual 2 million who pay to be lifted to the observation deck of the

nearly 830-metre Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

A few days before Abu Dhabi went public with the reading initiative, Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, launched the Dubai Future Foundation, a research institution backed by a \$270 million endowment intended to hasten the return of the golden age.

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“Arabs and Muslims established the House of Wisdom in the ninth century to serve as a global model, be a beacon for the sciences and a home for innovators from all over the world,” Maktoum said. “Today, we are in dire need of a House of Wisdom for the 21st century, to recapture the past glories, keep up with modern changes, shape the future and innovate to serve humanity.”

As ambitious goals go, this

belongs very high on the list, more so because it is pursued by the leaders of a country as young as the UAE – at 44 years old, a mere toddler – whose founders had little formal education. In 1972, when Ras al-Khaimah joined six other emirates to form the United Arab Emirates, the new country had just 45 university graduates.

Progress has been swift. Today, there are 108 universities and colleges in the Emirates, which has been allocating between one-fifth and one-quarter of federal government spending on education over many years. The country's literacy rate – 94% – ranks above that of the traditional seats of Arab learning – Iraq, Syria and Egypt. But lifelong readers they are not. Yet.

Here is a figure that shows there is a long road towards a new House of Wisdom: Between 1901 and last year, 26 organisations and 874 individuals won Nobel prizes; only ten have gone to Arabs not part of the diaspora, including the Tunisian Dialogue Quartet, which won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize.

**Bernd Debusmann** is a writer on foreign affairs based in Washington. He has reported from more than 100 countries and was wounded twice while covering the civil war in Lebanon.

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