

ifa ECP Monitor Country Report

Saudi Arabia

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1. External cultural policy objectives in geopolitical context

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's location between Northern Africa and the Middle East puts it at "the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 7). This is not only a matter of geography: most notably, the country is home to the two holy mosques that count among the most important religious sites of Islam: the Al-Masjid an-Nabawi in Medina and the Al-Haram Mosque in Mecca. As the Hajj, the religious pilgrimage to Mecca, is a central pillar of Islam, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has an important status for Muslims globally (ibid.). Indeed, religious tourism to Saudi Arabia is the second largest source of income for the country – after earnings from oil (Sons, 2018). Moreover, religion has played a major role in Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy portfolio for many years, as the country's self-conception has been closely linked with the propagation of Wahhabism since the foundation of the first Saudi state in 1744 (Alhussein, 2019). As proselytism represents a key component of the Wahhabi doctrine, the country and its religious leaders have long sought to extend their sphere of influence over the Islamic world by exporting financial and intellectual resources (Farouk & Brown, 2021). Donations were made to religious causes all over the world, both by numerous nongovernmental bodies, as well as directly by Saudi government agencies. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, however, these activities were increasingly subjected to international scrutiny (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018). Upon King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's accession to the throne in 2015, the Saudi government tightened regulations on the financial flows leaving the country, which in subsequent years effected a decrease of spending to spread Islam in the non-Islamic world (Alhussein, 2019).

In the period since King Salman assumed power, his son, the Crown Prince and de-facto leader Mohammed bin Salman (widely known as MBS) has driven forth a thorough reorientation and rebranding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This has been accompanied by a fundamental shift in Saudi Arabia's public relationship with the Wahhabi doctrine – both domestically and internationally. Following the exercise of top-down influence, the country's new religious discourse is defined by an ostensibly more moderate stance that makes steps towards interfaith dialogue while distancing the country from radical religious interpretation (Farouk & Brown, 2021). These ideological reforms build on King Abdullah's legacy (2005-2015), who already gave priority to fostering interfaith dialogue. Among other policy reforms, he also founded the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) alongside Spanish and Austrian government officials in 2012. The centre, which was founded in Vienna but moved to Lisbon in 2021, has the mission to foster the peaceful coexistence of religions through dialogue and humanitarian assistance - a mission officially observed by the Holy See (KAICIID Dialogue Centre, 2021). Over the years, the authenticity of the KAICIID's mission has repeatedly been questioned in light of the human rights infractions the Saudi government has been accused of (Hammerl, 2021; Religion ORF, 2021). Whether the center – and MBS' vision of a more moderate religious dialogue – fare better in the next years will likely hinge on their credibility to the public eye.

MBS' plans for the kingdom have extended far beyond Saudi Arabia's international Islamic influence. Nearly all areas of governance are affected by a holistic "Vision 2030" plan, which was introduced in 2016. The agenda consists of 96 strategic objectives centered around three key themes: "A Vibrant Society", "A Thriving Economy" and "An Ambitious Nation" (King-

dom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.). Most importantly, this variety of economic reforms seeks to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy, with the primary purpose of reducing the country's dependency on oil exports amid falling oil prices. By 2030, the kingdom has planned to spend 27 trillion Saudi riyals on these plans (~ €5.9 trillion), of which 10 trillion riyals (~ €2.2 trillion) are composed of central government expenditure. Although the majority of funds for Saudi's economic transformation plan will come from domestic sources, the strategy also budgets more than €442 billion in foreign investment, which would correspond to more than a ten-fold increase of investment annually (Nereim & Abu-Nasr, 2021).

The extensive list of social and economic reforms, certainly also taken in response to the regimes in unrest in North Africa and the Middle East since the "Arab Spring", have appealed to the country's increasingly young population (Manzlawiy, 2019; Alkatheeri & Khan, 2019). Saudi Arabia's campaign has prominently included modernization efforts, including the stronger integration of women in the workforce (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). However, as Saudi Arabia expert Sebastian Sons (2018) notes, "one must not fall into the trap of equating societal relaxations with political ones" (n.p.). Indeed, simultaneous to the country's modernization efforts, including the permission for women to drive cars in 2018, highly publicized scandals are attributed to MBS. In particular, the assassination of Saudi Arabian journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi and the mass arrests of high-ranking officials and members of the royal family have stood out internationally. These instances bring to the fore that Saudi Arabia's undemocratic governance and long record of human rights abuses persist despite – and effectively overshadow – the "Vision 2030" (Freedom House, 2021).

Table 1: Economy of Saudi Arabia

	2019	% change since 2015
Population (millions) / ranking	34.3 million / 41 st	31.7 million / 8 %
GDP ranking	18 th / €1.5 trillion	23 rd / €1.39 trillion / 8%
GDP per capita	€43,877.11 / 41 st	€44,636.29 / -1.7%
Education economy (%GDP)	7.8% (2015)	
R&D economy (%GDP)	0.815% (2013)	

Sources: World Bank, 2019; OECD, 2020; The World Bank, 2013

With a population of 34.4 million, Saudi Arabia ranks 41st globally, having experienced a population growth of 8% since 2015. The country's abundant oil reserves have significantly added to the kingdom's wealth. Saudi Arabia's GDP ranking therefore considerably outranks its population: with a GDP of €1.5 trillion in 2019, the country takes 18th place. However, in terms of GDP per capita, often a measure to comprehend a country's standard of living, Saudi Arabia once again places in the middle range of the index.

Table 2: Saudi Arabia geopolitical and geo-economic position

	2019	2015	
Hard power rank	17 th (2021)	-	↑
World trade ranking	23 rd	23 rd	-
Soft power rank	-	-	-
Diplomacy rank	30 th	28 th (2016)	↓

Sources: Global Firepower, 2021; Lowy Institute, 2020; Portland, 2019

Both in 2015 and in 2019, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was not listed among the Soft Power 30, a system that ranks countries based on indices relating to digital matters, culture, enterprise, engagement, education, and government (Portland, 2019). Its hard power, on the other hand, improved its standing relative to the rest of the world. From no listing in 2015, the country scaled the list to 17th place in 2021 (Global Firepower, 2021). In contrast, the Saudi diplomacy index score deteriorated slightly between 2016 and 2019 – from 28th place to 30th – despite an absolute increase in diplomatic posts abroad (Lowy Institute, 2020).

Table 3: Government spending on ECP fields as a % of total outlays

	2019	% change since 2015
Education	18.9%	-

Saudi Arabia's spending on education amounted to 18.9% of total government spending in 2019, making it the largest budget item in the country's annual budget. Consistently high public investment in education is connected to the hope of increasing overall employment and reducing the existing wage and skill gap in the country. Similarly, it is asserted that this spending on Saudi Arabia's education sector feeds directly into the country's labor market outcomes, thereby placing this spending in the context of the country's economic diversification plans (KPMG, 2020).

2. External cultural policy: an overview

For the implementation of Saudi Arabia's vision, a well-coordinated soft power campaign is imperative, as the strategy necessitates attracting talent and investment from abroad in order to bolster the economy (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). In turn, the reforms and innovations associated with the country's modernization course have become the most important asset in its public diplomacy (Manzlawiy, 2019). Saudi Arabia's deliberate use of cultural and educational pillars in foreign policy goes back to the reign of King Abdullah, who has kicked off a number of schemes that shape the kingdom's international engagement to this day (Alkatheeri & Khan, 2019). The policy course in favor of soft power assets was intensified by MBS, who, under the guidance of King Salman Bin Abdulaziz, created Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education (Beckett, 2019). This new policy course has also included the opening for certain political foundations in the country, with foreign national

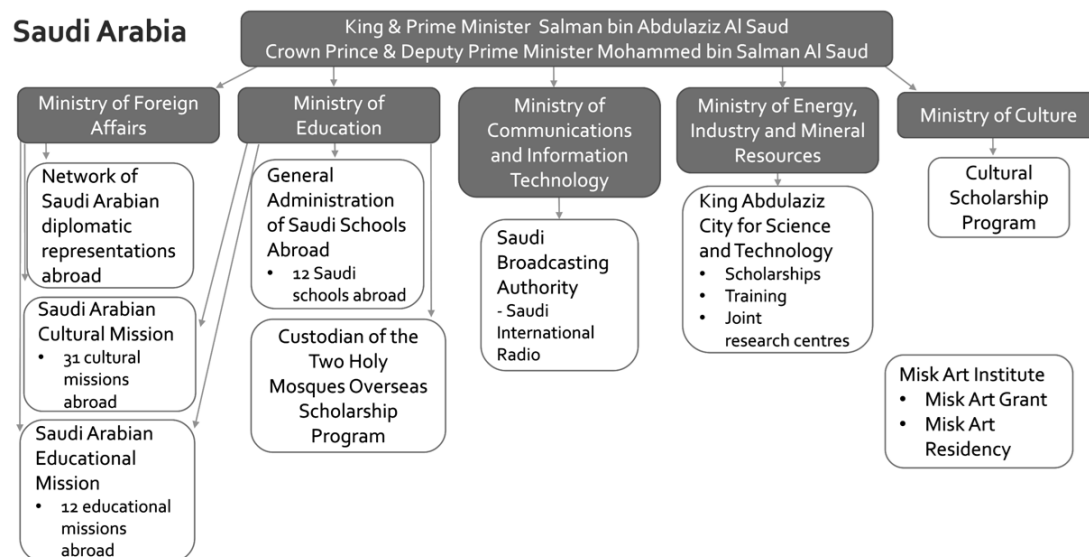
cultural institutes like the Alliance française and the Goethe-Institut expanding their presence in Riyadh (Sons, 2018).

Table 4: Key ECP Statistics for Saudi Arabia

	2019
Number of countries with ECP activities	34
Total number of institutions abroad	31
Total number of FTE staff engaged in ECP activities	-
Government financial support (€ million)	> 3,500
Total expenditure of all ECP operators (€ million)	> 3,500
Comparative ECP ranking	medium

In order to project its soft power assets and enhance the competences of the Saudi citizens to benefit the local economy, education is the primary tool of Saudi Arabia's ECP¹. Whether it be through its international secondary schools, its academic scholarship programs, training opportunities abroad or teachers on educational missions, the programs available demonstrate a clear investment in the instruction of knowledge about Saudi Arabia abroad and thorough education of Saudi students.

Figure 1: Institutional map of Saudi Arabia's ECP



¹ Although it could be argued that Saudi Arabia's use of development aid abroad, for instance in the Balkans, can be interpreted as attempting to gain influence through the connection with fellow Muslim citizens. The line is particularly blurry – and controversial – when development aid comprises the rebuilding of schools and mosques (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., 2018).

Cultural relations are predominantly organized through governmental actors, as the central government oversees the external approach. However, Saudi Arabia's ECP is distributed across a few government bodies and agencies. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees the kingdom's diplomatic relations abroad and thereby the provision of the cultural attachés or "cultural missions", as they are also called. These points of contact abroad are further imperative for the smooth functioning of Saudi Arabia's scholarship programs, as they pose an important link between students abroad and their homeland (Pavan, 2020). The Ministries of Education and of Culture supervise their disciplines' respective programs institutions, namely the deployment of teachers abroad and promoting global cultural exchange. The latter mission is now supported by the work of the Misk Art Institute.

The target of Saudi Arabia is prominently the Muslim and Arab world, which the kingdom is central to due to the location of the holy sites on its territory. The country's vision repeatedly refers to the importance of Islamic values, appealing not only to its domestic audience but also to Muslim populations abroad. In particular, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been a close partner of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. In addition, "Vision 2030" states that the country "will use [its] strategic location to build [its] role as an integral driver of international trade and to connect three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 13). Beyond this emphasis, the United States is an important trading partner and priority destination for Saudi ECP efforts, with numerous scientific collaborations and a strongly institutionalized academic exchange mission.

3. Fields of ECP

3.1. Culture and the arts

Saudi Arabia's understanding of culture and the arts as a subfield of ECP, as well as a policy field in general, has changed in recent years and marked a shift for a conservative society dominated by clerical views. This has also resulted in the Saudi government lifting several of the restrictions it had imposed on the culture and entertainment sector for decades – perhaps most notably exemplified by the Saudi ban on movie theatres, lifted in 2017 after 35 years (Chbbab, 2017). In line with this change, the very creation of the new Ministry of Culture in 2018² has put Saudi arts and culture in a global context, as the ministry's inaugural vision statement comprises "the creation of opportunities for global cultural exchange" (Ministry of Culture, 2019a, p. 6). This also comprises making the products of this exchange available in Arabic, in order to benefit fellow Saudis (ibid.). In the arts, too, the Saudi government takes an approach through the means of education. One of the very first programs announced by the new Ministry of Culture was the Cultural Scholarship, aimed at allowing Saudi students to study their artistic crafts, which include "archeology, design, museums, music, theater, filmmaking, literature, languages, libraries, architecture, visual arts, and culinary arts" (Ministry of Culture, 2020). Recipients may pursue these disciplines at recommended renowned universities abroad at the undergraduate, graduate or PhD level³.

Moreover, the Ministry of Culture supported three Saudi artists in their participation in the Bienal sur, the art biennale of South America in 2019. Although the number seems more than

² The field of culture was previously encompassed in the Ministry of Culture and Information.

³ Results about the outcomes of this program are not available yet.

modest in comparison with grand artist support schemes present in other countries, government support for Saudi artists to participate presents a meaningful step for the kingdom's budding cultural sector (Ministry of Culture, 2019b). An even further step followed when the Ministry of Culture announced the creation of 11 new cultural authorities, working domestically, as well as internationally (although the details of this international engagement are not yet clear). The new authorities will be in the Ministry of Culture's portfolio yet retain financial independence. They will span the fields of literature, publishing and translation; fashion; film; heritage; architecture and design; visual arts; museums; theatre and performing arts; libraries; music; and culinary arts (Ministry of Culture, 2019a).

The Ministry of Culture is further complemented by a newly formed non-governmental entity with a cultural mission. Already in the year of his appointment, MBS created the artist-led Misk Art Institute, financially supported by the Misk Foundation, likewise newly established. Next to the support of local artists, the creation of a large arts center in Riyadh and the representation of Saudi Arabia at La Biennale di Venezia, the institution's mandate is also to "enable international cultural diplomacy and exchange" (Misk Art Institute, 2021c). Among the measures to achieve this vision is the Misk Art Grant, endowed with 1,000,000 Saudi Riyal (approx. €223,000), for which Saudi as well other Middle Eastern and North African artists are eligible to apply (Misk Art Institute, 2021a). In addition, the institute offers Misk Art Residencies, which are open for international and local artists to spend in Riyadh, or on an international exchange program, "tailored in partnership with global art institutions to offer Saudi artists an opportunity to develop their creative practice in international settings" (Misk Art Institute, 2021b). Nine visual artists and one curator can participate in this program per cycle (ibid.). MBS' creation of the Misk Art Institute (and the philanthropic Misk Foundation) is another step taken in the context of "Vision 2030", which is why 70 percent of its employees are female (Artforum, 2018). Perhaps this is also the reason that its creation was generally positively received internationally (Gronlund, 2020).

Beyond these newly established programs and government bodies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees a network of Saudi Arabian Cultural Missions abroad. These are tasked with social, educational (explained in more detail below) and cultural functions. Their cultural work abroad is organized on an individual level based on the local landscape (The Saudi Cultural Bureau in Germany, n.d.). The work is closely tied to the cultural associations founded by scholarship students abroad – highlighting once more the importance education and scholarships hold in Saudi Arabia's ECP portfolio (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, n.d.). Furthermore, it expresses a prioritized target for these missions: Saudi citizens currently studying abroad. Indeed, many of the cultural missions do not even have websites available in the host country's language. In 2021, 31 such cultural missions exist, each staffed with a cultural attaché and their respective team. Often, their area of responsibility exceeds their location. For instance, the German attaché oversees eight additional countries (Ministry of Education, n.d.-b).

Arts and culture also play a role in highlighting the attractiveness of Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination. Already, the Hajj has a significant draw and accounts for millions of tourists every year (a magnitude that has warranted religious pilgrimage its own ministry: the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah). However, the expansion of tourism and diversification of reasons to visit the country is embedded in Saudi Arabia's strategic plan for the next years. Beyond the creation of new capacities to accommodate tourists in the country, Saudi Arabia also seeks to attract them by promoting its cultural heritage. Accordingly, the kingdom pursues the goal to

double the cultural heritage sites listed at UNESCO by 2030⁴ and expand investments into its domestic museum landscape to make it internationally competitive (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Table 5: Key statistics on culture and the arts

	2019	2015
Number of countries present	31	-
Number of institutes	Cultural Missions ⁵ : 31	
Number of artists in exchange programs	3 ⁶	-

Sources: Ministry of Education, n.d.-a; Ministry of Culture, 2019

3.2. Language

One of the 16 dedicated subsectors of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture, which will shape the country's approach to cultural governance in the coming years, is Language and Translation (Ministry of Culture, 2019a). The promotion of the Arabic language also factors into Saudi Arabia's engagement abroad. This is achieved through the Saudi "Educational Missions" abroad. In 2017, these missions were dispatched to twelve countries with the vision to spread Islamic culture and the Arabic language (Ministry of Education, 2017a). The "missions" consist of Saudi teachers being sent to the respective countries to teach – 297 teachers in total. By far the majority of these teachers are sent to Bahrain, where 211 teachers were sent (ibid.). Although the division of labor of these teachers is not clearly specified, the fact that Arabic is already Bahrain's official language indicates that language often constitutes only a secondary function of these teachers. Bahrain is followed by the Maldives (33 teachers), Niger (14 teachers) and Burkina Faso (14 teachers) (ibid.).

Table 6: Key figures on language promotion

	2019	2015
Number of countries where courses are offered	> 11	-
Number of candidates for Arabic language qualifications	ALPT (Arabic Language Proficiency Test): ?	-
Number of language teachers	297 ⁷	-

Source: Ministry of Education, 2017

⁴ In 2016, there were four sites overall. One additional site was already listed since the launch of the Vision (UNESCO, 2018).

⁵ The mandate of these missions is often divided between cultural and educational/advisory tasks.

⁶ This number refers to the artists supported to travel to the Bienalsur, rather than artists participating in an exchange programme.

⁷ This refers to the number of teachers sent abroad through the Saudi Educational Missions Abroad.

3.3. Primary and secondary education

Saudi Arabia's General Administration of Saudi Schools Abroad, located within the Ministry of Education, oversees the countries twelve international schools in twelve foreign countries. Most of these (five overall) are located in Asia, where there are schools in India, Malaysia, China, Pakistan and Indonesia. Notably, none of Saudi Arabia's schools are located in Oceania or South America and both Sub-Saharan Africa and North America only possess one school each (in Djibouti and in the United States). These twelve schools are fairly large on average: together, they attract a total of 4458 students (372 per school on average). Approximately half (51%) of the overall student body is Saudi, while the rest is composed of various international students (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a). These institutions target the children of Saudi employees or scholarship recipients and prepare them for the study at prestigious institutions abroad (Ministry of Education, n.d.-c).

Saudi Arabia's own schools abroad actually decreased in size in recent years, as many institutions – including nearly all branches in Europe – were closed in the last few years. The communicated reason for these closures is the already-distinguished education institutions in these countries, which render Saudi schools unnecessary. However, this official explanation has been contested and budget cuts are deemed more likely (Dörries, 2016). In addition to Saudi Arabia's very own schools, the General Administration of Saudi Schools Abroad further keeps track of a list of international schools abroad (spanning the entire globe and several hundred institutions), which are accredited with the Saudi Ministry of Education for Saudi students (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a). Overall, this creates a wide network for Saudi dependents abroad to receive an education on the Saudi government's terms; attracting international students does not appear to be a priority.

Table 7: Key figures on primary and secondary education

	2019	2015
Number of countries	12	17
Number of schools	12	20
Number of students	4558	-

Sources: Ministry of Education, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d.

3.4. Tertiary education and science

Going back to the 1950s, when Saudi Arabia became the home to the first university on the Arabian Peninsula, the kingdom has invested in higher education as a priority area for its international interaction. Scholarship-based schemes to study abroad have been a part of this strategic priority since the 1920s and were particularly important before the Saudi Arabian higher education capacities were advanced enough to accommodate its domestic students (Pavan, 2020). The most notable program to study abroad is the program often known under the name "King Abdullah Scholarship Program", now renamed "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Overseas Scholarship Program" (ibid.). The program pursues the mission to "raise the country's human resources and competences to a level where they can effectively compete at the world level and therefore serve as an important resource for Saudi universities and the

public and private sectors” (Saudi Arabian National Portal, n.d.). The current iteration of the program, commenced in 2015, has reframed the scholarship conditions to make them more academically rigorous, both in terms of the students admitted, as well as the overseas institutions selected (Saudi Arabian National Portal, n.d.). Amid falling oil prices and budget cuts, the stricter requirements are also intended to reduce the overall number of scholarship recipients.

Although both male and female students participate in the program, 73 percent of participants are male – indicative of a country that has been slow to introduce many rights for women (Allahmorad & Zreik, 2020). Beyond creating bilateral relationships by sending students to countries abroad, the Scholarship Agency, located in the Ministry of Education, also seeks to enhance the professional performances of Saudi students. This once again demonstrates the program’s ties to the country’s economic outcomes and corresponding diversification and employment plans (Ministry of Education, n.d.-d). The “Your Job is Your Mission” path connects scholarship recipients with employment in either the public or private sector in connection with their participation in the program. Moreover, the program has been diversified to include specific tracks in relevant and sought-after fields (Saudi Arabian National Portal, n.d.). To date, more than 198,221 students and their dependents were supported through this scheme (since its restructuring in 2015). Its financial weight is similarly large: the scheme was allocated €3.5 billion in 2019 (Ministry of Finance, 2018).

The administration of students sent abroad is complemented by the aforementioned Saudi Arabian Cultural Missions in the respective host countries. These stations function as important advisory and cultural links for scholarship recipients. This close supervision of the supported students abroad may also serve an additional function: to ensure that Saudi students return to Saudi Arabia after completing their education (Pavan, 2020).

In line with a reduction of scholarships available abroad, Saudi Arabia is now scaling up the educational offer at home. After the creation of international branch campuses on Saudi Arabian soil had long been prohibited, this ban, too, was lifted in 2019. This re-orientation has now motivated the Ministry of Education to attract the attention of international higher education institutions (Salama, 2021). MBS’ decision is expected to increase competition in the local education sector and correspondingly raise the quality of higher education courses offered (Al-Kinani, 2019). Even without international branch campuses, Saudi universities already appear to have an international draw: Despite the substantial scholarship programs offered by the Saudi government, the number of inbound and outbound students is fairly balanced. In 2019, there were 73,216 international students in Saudi Arabia, among whom the most frequent countries of origin were Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Jordan. This number is only slightly exceeded by the 77,406 outbound students, who have favored the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland and Germany as their top destinations (UNESCO, n.d.).

Table 8: Key figures on tertiary education

	2019	2015
Number of countries	~51	-
Number of universities / colleges abroad	0	-
Number of domestic universities / colleges	43	-
Number of students		
Number of foreign students	Inbound: 73,216 Outbound: 77,406	Inbound: 73,077
Number of students at trans-national higher education (TNE)	- ⁸	-
Number of government scholarships awarded	More than 196,221 to date (since 2015)	-
Budget	> €3.5 billion (2018) ⁹	-
Government financial support	€3.5 billion (2018)	-

Sources: Allahmorad & Zreik, 2020; UNESCO, n.d.; Ministry of Finance, 2018

Saudi Arabia's science and technology-sector is governed by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. This ministry's engagement with the international science community is primarily guided by the mission to make Saudi Arabia's CIT sector internationally competitive and to draw in foreign direct investment to stimulate the growth of local industries (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2020). In this function, Saudi Arabia's promotion of science and research abroad is invariably tied to one of the fundamental goals of "Vision 2030", namely the diversification of the country's income (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The corresponding ambition to scale up Saudi Arabia's knowledge economy has resulted in large investments in scientific institutions and collaborations in recent years.

If scientific publications may be used as a metric, these programs have already borne fruit: Saudi Arabia's international research publications have increased significantly in the last years (Nature Index, 2020). This can also be attributed to an increase in research institutions and universities: while there were 8 universities in 2002 (Shehatta & Mahmood, 2016), there are now 43 private and public universities in Saudi Arabia (Allahmorad & Zreik, 2020). This step is also framed in the ambition to drive forward the Saudi research and development outcomes, most notably through the further improvement of local universities. The Ministry of Education has quantified this goal by planning to place at least five Saudi universities in the top 200 global university rankings. This comprises a significant internationalization of their offer,

⁸ Saudi Arabia has only permitted the opening of foreign branch campuses on Saudi Arabian soil and is now in the process of acquiring potential interested international parties. Saudi Arabia's universities do not have any branch campuses abroad.

⁹ This refers to the government allocation for the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Overseas Scholarship Program".

most notably by creating a new framework for international collaboration (Ministry of Education, 2017b). The Saudi Ministry of Education still has a long way to go towards this very ambitious goal, however – the Times Higher Education Ranking (2021) does not yet list any Saudi universities among the top 200.

Besides Saudi Arabia's universities, a fundamental player in the transformation to a knowledge economy is the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST). This government organization is structured as a hub of science and innovation in the capital city of Riyadh. Its diverse range of scientific and technological disciplines is frequently examined in the context of international best practices and research achievements to put the Saudi output in comparison with international standards. To invest in the continuing education of its researchers, the KACST offers specific scientific international scholarships, as well as opportunities for training abroad. In 2018, 239 of these scholarships were awarded for advanced training in 12 countries (most frequently in the United States and in the United Kingdom). In addition, a variety of training abroad schemes were offered to a total of 1245 Saudi researchers (King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, 2019). The selection of international partner countries mirrors an analysis of Saudi Arabia's co-authored scientific publications, which finds that the United States and Egypt were the most frequently selected partners (Shehatta & Mahmood, 2016). In addition to its support for individual researchers, the KACST is also an important collaborative partner for research institutions. As of 2018, the organization has invested in 14 joint research centers worldwide. These are dedicated to individual competences, such as the Center of Excellence for Earth and Space Science. Most of which partnered with renowned research institutes in the United States, among them Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, 2019).

Table 9: Key figures on science and research

	2019	2015
Number of countries	King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST): 12	-
Number of institutes	- ¹⁰	-
Number of researchers / staff	> 157 ¹¹	-
Number of projects	> 14	-
Number scientists in exchange programs	KASCT Scholarships: 239 KASCT Training: 1245	-

Source: King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, 2019

¹⁰ The KACST offers financial support to 14 joint research centres, all of which are in the United States or in the United Kingdom.

¹¹ This refers to the total number of employees listed by the KACST, not only those involved in international programming.

3.5. Foreign Media

In Saudi Arabia there is no freedom of the press, as news publications as well as radio and television broadcasts are heavily censored to exclude political, religious, or human rights themes (Freedom House, 2020). Nevertheless, the country has a young and increasingly digital population: in 2020, 84.1 percent of Saudi Arabians used the Internet, even though content and speech are strictly censored (Schlumbohm et al., 2020; Freedom House, 2020). Therefore, traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, radio and TV channels, have been complemented by a growing online presence and web news reporting. For instance, the online news outlet Arab News, though a private company, has contributed to the Saudi image abroad as the first English-language Saudi news outlet, founded in 1975 (Arab News, n.d.).

Broadcasting – both in the form of TV and in the form of radio – is organized through the Saudi Broadcasting Authority. Subordinate to the Ministry of Information, the media network oversees several international radio stations aimed at representing the country – and thereby the center of the Islamic world – abroad. Therefore, the channels have been considered both a medium for representing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as well as Islam abroad since 1949. The broadcasts are available in 10 languages: French, Urdu, Farsi, Bangladeshi, Turkestan, Swahili, Somali, Indonesian, Pashto, Turkish. While these stations are broadcast to 62 countries, the stronger geo-strategic ambition is associated with Saudi Arabia’s Al Arabiya network (Al-Rajhi, 2020).

Although Al Arabiya is majority-owned by the Saudi government, the network is based in Dubai’s media city in the United Arab Emirates, where it was created in 2003. Alongside its Qatari competitor Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya is among the most prominent regional media corporations in the Middle East (Kosárová, 2020). The corporation quickly expanded and created a global footprint with news correspondents’ offices in 40 cities (Najjar, n.d.). Its web reporting is additionally available in English, Arabic, Farsi and Urdu (Al Arabiya, n.d.). Although several US presidents, like President Obama, agreed to an interview with the TV channel, the network’s reporting is considered biased by Saudi interests and its creation is traced back to the creation of a pro-Saudi counterweight to Al Jazeera in the Arab world (Behraves, 2014; Kosárová, 2020).

Table 10: Key figures on foreign broadcasting

	2019	2015
TV: Al Arabiya		
Number of countries broadcasted to	- ¹²	-
Number of languages	Website reporting: 4	-
Number of channels	1	1
Audience / weekly (million)	36 million	-

¹² While we know that Al Arabiya targets a pan-Arab audience and functions as a competitor to the Qatari media corporation Al Jazeera, no official counts of the countries catered to are available in English.

	2019	2015
Digital & social media audience (million)	Website: 20 million/month <u>Social media:</u> Twitter: 14.6 million Facebook: 26 million Instagram: 3.2 million	-
Budget (€ million)	-	-
Radio: Saudi International Radio		
Number of countries broadcasted to	62	-
Number of languages	10	-
Number of channels	-	-
Audience / weekly (million)	-	-
Digital & social media audience (million)	-	-

Sources: Naar, 2020; Al Arabiya, n.d.; Al-Rajhi, 2020; Najjar, n.d.; Kosárová, 2020; Twitter; Facebook; Instagram

4. Challenges and future outlook

Saudi Arabia's global ambitions are inextricably tied to the domestic goals. As MBS seeks to diversify the country's income, Saudi Arabia has invested in several highly innovative projects that enhance the country's image abroad. The country demonstrated great speed in the creation of these new programs and government bodies. New policies have shown that we may expect a clear upward trajectory for Saudi Arabia's ECP involvement and proven that the country is willing to invest great resources in order to enhance its regional standing and attract foreign capital. This quest has also seen a historically closed culture taking steps towards opening. Especially since Saudi Arabia already has a long-standing infrastructure to accommodate for Hajj travelers to the country, the profile as a tourist destination is a logical consequence of MBS' vision, which goes hand in hand with the expansion of the domestic entertainment and culture infrastructure.

Although the Saudi government has made it clear that the assets of soft power are important to its "Vision 2030", the tools applied are frequently centered around education, which is only an extension and perhaps expansion of the economically-focused policy course to date. However, in order to signal the change that Saudi Arabia envisions domestically on an international platform, the country must expand the pillars of Saudi ECP beyond scholarships. For instance, no institutionalized possibilities exist for exporting Saudi culture as a way to attract investment. Similarly, Saudi Arabia does not report any programming or expenditure to offer Arabic courses in European, North American and most Asian countries, which could be essential targets to attract foreign capital. The "Vision 2030"'s pledges in the foreign policy arena are limited, particularly in consideration of the importance attributed to the diversification of

the economy and the attraction of foreign investment. This part of the strategy will have to gain much more clarity in the further “Vision Realization Programs”.

Lastly, it remains abundantly clear that understanding “Vision 2030” as modernization for its own sake would be a mistake. On this issue, the Saudi journalist Ekleer Badr Sallam notes that “Saudi Arabia balances its desire to achieve public diplomacy goals with the need to remain true to its religious and cultural traditions” (2018). Indeed, while the recent policies and ambitious plans undertaken by MBS have already altered the face of Saudi Arabia – and are likely to do so even more in the coming years – the stabilization of the regime is a motivation that looms above all else. This is also the regime that has scaled up the number of political imprisonment and executions, which reached record highs in 2019, at the same time as implementing its vision (BBC News, 2021). While the intensified engagement of soft power assets may still attract the favor of some countries, Saudi Arabia’s pervasive reputation of human rights abuses may prove to be a roadblock that the country cannot bypass among other states. Saudi Arabia’s now growing diaspora abroad is adding to the critical accounts of a darker truth behind MBS’ media-intensive “Vision 2030” campaign (al-Rasheed, 2019). Especially since MBS has been accused of arranging the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, collaboration projects with Saudi Arabia have therefore lost some of their international standing (Gronlund, 2020). In the aftermath of the event, several universities in the United States came under pressure for working with Saudi funds (Day & Binkley, 2018). This underscores the importance of the Saudi image for the successful implementation of its strategy. Whether international scepticism or closer ties towards Saudi Arabia will prevail in the end is yet uncertain.

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