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## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN PRINCE MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN'S SAUDI ARABIA?

After the Galatasaray-Fenerbahçe match scheduled to be played in Riyadh shortly before kick-off was canceled due to the Atatürk shirt crisis, all eyes turned back to Saudi Arabia.

How should we analyze this crisis in Saudi Arabia, which has recently been in the spotlight for some unusual steps for the kingdom, such as hosting Halloween celebrations and music festivals? Was Saudi Arabia opposed to the Atatürk picture because of its old religious rigidity?

In fact, we still don't know exactly what happened in this crisis. The Saudi side, in particular, did not comment too much and only said, "The crisis broke out because the protocol was not respected."

To understand the football crisis, perhaps we need to understand the nationalist winds in Saudi Arabia. Or maybe the crisis has broken out for an unexpected reason. But in any case, we need to look for answers to the question of what is going on in Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia.

### **The four pillars of transformation with MbS**

On June 21, 2017, with the elevation of Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the position of Crown Prince, a major social and economic transformation began in Saudi Arabia.

This transformation is based on four pillars centered around Saudi Arabia's vision 2030, which is based on reducing its dependence on oil and diversifying its economy.

EVALUATION NOTE

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The first of these pillars is the rise of nationalism. Second, the political transformation shaped by the rise of technocratic cadres to the position of the ruling elite. Third, an economic transformation that aims to transform the post-oil economy into a developmentalist model. And finally, the religious-political transformation, shaped by a more moderate religious interpretation, limiting Wahhabism.

These transformations, which aim to transform the country into a major geopolitical power, are actually complementary processes.

As part of these processes, the government has launched many so-called mega projects. The employment of women and youth as part of these projects inevitably brings about social change.

From this perspective, we can say that Saudi Arabia is reinventing nationalism as it moves towards a modern nation-state. But of course, Saudi nationalism has its own characteristics that are different from Western nationalism.

### **Saudi-type nationalism**

One of the most prominent features of this distinctive nationalism is the relationship with religion.

In Saudi Arabia, religion, i.e. Islam, and the Saudi identity (Arabness) have always been intertwined. The kingdom has prioritized its position as the "protector of Islam" over its national identity as "Hadim al Hameyn". The relationship between the state of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism since its founding led to a distinctive form of religious nationalism. Accepting Wahhabism became synonymous with national identity and those who rejected it were ostracized. Especially after the Iranian Revolution, Saudi rulers benefited from this religious nationalism to build a collective identity based on the piety of the people against the external enemy.

However, after September 11, this religious nationalism had to undergo a serious questioning. In addition, the economic crisis, rising unemployment, and the social and economic processes that necessitated change in the face of an oil-dependent rentier economy showed that the rigid, dogmatic and woman-excluding Wahhabi nationalism could not go any further.

Thus, the reform process began to take shape after the appointment of Prince Mohammed b. Salman as the crown prince, taking into account the social demands of the Arab Spring. In this process, in order to build a new nation-state, a serious history and identity rebuilding process began to shift from Wahhabi religious nationalism to a more nation-based nationalism.

### **Return to the history of the nation**

In the new historical narrative, the content of national victory began to change. The narrative shifted away from the Mecca and Medina of Islam and the struggle between Tawhid and Shirk to other geographies.

Ancient archaeological sites such as Madain Saleh and Al-Ula, previously ignored and neglected because they were considered icons of blasphemy in the pre-Islamic era, have

become a new source of national pride. Developing tourism in ancient civilization sites across the country is now seen as part of the new Saudi national project.

The heavy religious tone in the city of Diriyah, once imagined as the meeting point between Mohammed b. Saud and Mohammed b. Abdul Wahhab, has begun to change. In 2019, a \$64 billion project to reconstruct the old capital, called Diriyeh Gate, was launched. Festivities, dances and concerts have replaced the old religious images of Diriyeh. Having erased the old Wahhabi memory, the city became the center of a new narrative of nationhood.

The story told to generations of Saudi schoolchildren that the Saudi State was established in Diriyah by an agreement between Muhammad b. Saud and Muhammad b. Abdul Wahhab was nullified by a decree signed by King Salman on February 22, 2022. With this decree, Wahhabism was relegated to a secondary role in the history of the kingdom. The sovereign moved the founding of the state 17 years before the story of this meeting, to 1727, the year the emir of Diriyah ascended to the throne. The King invited the Saudi nation to celebrate the anniversary of this enthronement, February 22, as "Foundation Day". Thus, the founding ideology of the Saudi State turned from religious nationalism to nationalism of nation.

This turn began to encompass and utilize not only history, but also music and the entertainment industry.

### **The nationalist language of poetry and music**

For centuries, poetry in the Arab world has been used to address political issues, conflicts, tribalism, and nationalism. In the country where popular programs like "Million Dollar Poet" are produced, and which forms the foundation for popular songs in the Gulf region, poetry has also had its share in the transformation of Saudi Arabia.

Recently, it was widely circulated on social media that King Salman b. Abdulaziz could not hold back his tears while watching a poetry recital accompanied by the traditional Ardah dance with him and the crown prince during a celebration ceremony.

One of the songs that has gained a lot of popularity in the country is "Ash Salman", sung by two of the best-known nationalist pop singers, Abdullah and Rashed Al Majid, whose lyrics include eulogies such as "Long live Salman, he has enriched the world and made the country rich".

It is worth noting that Turki Al Sheikh, a childhood friend of Crown Prince MbS, advisor to the Royal Court and more recently head of the General Entertainment Authority, has a special place in the rise of such nationalist songs.

Saudi Arabia's music transformation is not limited to local songs, of course. The country recently made international headlines with a dynamic concert series that accompanied the star-studded Formula E racing event in Diriyah. The event featured international artists such as Enrique Iglesias, Amr Diab and the Black-Eyed Peas. Men and women danced together in crowds. In one of the last concerts of the event, David Guetta, one of the most influential names in the electronic dance music stage, performed an electronic version of "Ash Salman".

## **Nationalism “loading”**

In Saudi Arabia, the winds of nationalism and modernization have taken away most of the powers of the religious police, which enforce dress codes and monitor public morality. Halloween was celebrated for the second time in Saudi Arabia this year.

Opened by King Salman b. Abdulaziz in 2018, Qiddiya has hosted many outdoor adventure activities, as well as theme parks, race tracks, concert and entertainment venues.

With the new social order, Saudi Arabia, which has an educated, young and dynamic population, is shedding its rigid, conservative identity and creating a nationalist youth that is committed to Saudi nationalism, individualized and open to the world.

What Mohammed b. Salman is actually trying to do is to get rid of 30 years of sediment. According to Salman, what has happened in the last 30 years does not represent the real Saudi Arabia. He expressed this view in an interview with the Guardian newspaper, saying:

"After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, people wanted to replicate that model in different countries, and Saudi Arabia was one of them. We didn't know how to deal with it, and the problem spread all over the world. It's time to get rid of it." The Guardian previously cited him as saying: "We're just going back to what we were following, a moderate Islam open to the world and open to all religions."

Mohammed b. Salman's call for "moderate" Islam also led to the purging of Salafi clerics, commonly known as "sahwa" clerics, who were willing to question the regime and had ties to global Islamic networks. The prince succeeded in building a religious space that severed all ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sahwa movement and jihadist groups. He kept a core of loyal Salafists inside and expelled or imprisoned the others. In this way, he removed the grounds to question the legitimacy of his reforms.

The Crown Prince's social reform efforts do not completely deny the importance and constitutive value of religion. On the contrary, the Crown Prince argues that later "extremists" distorted the teachings of Muhammad b. Abdul Wahhab and Sheikh Abdul Aziz Ibn Baz (1912-99). He cleverly reconstructs the tradition for his own reforms, reducing extremism and radicalization to the state of emergency that accompanied the Iranian Revolution.

Sunni Islam remains an important part of Saudi Arabia's national identity and the legitimacy of the ruling family. The kingdom still maintains its religious protectorate, presenting itself as the owner of the two holiest sites for Muslims. But it is doing all this in a core sphere, while rebuilding and transforming Saudi Arabia in the wider social environment. In this way, it is both suppressing internal dissent and presenting a new Saudi nationalism to a new generation of young people in the wider community.

Many of these revolutionary changes will be completed in "Saudi Vision 2030", a plan to complete Saudi political, economic, educational and cultural transformation. Saudi Arabia seems to be very close to that breakthrough, and indeed Saudi Arabia has a dynamic that will change the region in the future.

Now you may ask, why were they so uncomfortable with Atatürk?

## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN PRINCE MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN'S SAUDI ARABIA?

I think we should look for the reason in Saudi nationalism. When they say "Ash Salman" (Long live Salman), I think the picture of a leader across from him may have disturbed the Saudis societally. Saudis want to see one picture in their country: King Salman and Crown Prince Salman.

Saudi nationalism is still in its early stages. It is best to wait for it to mature. But it is certain that they need a new religio-politics for this nationalism. Turkish modernization could be a source of inspiration for Mohammed b. Salman in this respect. For this to happen, the Saudis need to stop antagonizing the Turks for their founding ideology and reposition the Republic of Turkey as a friend and ally.