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ROUNDTABLE

The Limits of Belonging in Saudi Arabia

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On 25 October 2017, the Saudi Arabian regime granted citizenship to Sophia, a humanoid robot developed in Hong Kong. Sophia became the world's first robot citizen. Some of the globe's wealthiest investors, foreign dignitaries, and foremost economists, journalists, and public relations experts celebrated the conferral firsthand. They were guests of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, where they attended the inaugural Future Investment Initiative.[1] Sponsored by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, the forum heralded the regime's renewed commitment to diversify the country's petro-economy, develop its human capital, and increase its global investment competitiveness. The national reform plan, dubbed Vision 2030, dominated the event's discussions. Vision 2030 was an ambitious blueprint that had as its goal nothing short of overhauling everyday life in Saudi Arabia. It entailed revamping bureaucratic capacity, building global gigacities, and opening the country to visitors and investors alike. Developing the tourism and entertainment sectors were key. Through these lucrative socio-technical experiments, the regime hoped to tackle the dire economic, financial, and social challenges it faced. To appeal to the global investor, it framed the reforms in the language of high-tech modernization, sustainable development, and socioreligious tolerance. Sophia, and all the trappings of modernization that "she" embodied, epitomized the ruling class's entrepreneurial vision for a new Saudi Arabia, and in turn, a new global citizen: the naturalized elite as well as the new Saudi Arabian citizen-subject (Fig. 1).

The conferral of citizenship on a female-looking robot in a gender-segregated country that regularly detained and tortured women's rights advocates was a tone-deaf but strategic gesture. It paid lip service to increasing international calls for women's right to drive. It did so while ignoring Saudi Arabian women's decades-long activism to upend structural obstacles to gender equality and abolish patriarchal laws that controlled the minutiae of their everyday lives, not least their inability to confer nationality to their children.[2] Yet the conferral presented the right optics for a country tarnished by its global reputation as retrograde, anti-modern, and hostile to foreigners. Almost everywhere, Saudi Arabia was synonymous with religious extremism and social and political conservatism. More importantly for the non–Saudi Arabian investor, the country also had a dismal record when it came to effective administration, prevention of corruption, and legal protections for foreigners. In the absence of a fair, robust, and transparent legal regime, the kingdom provided an unreliable investment environment. The conferral, a highlight of the extravagant event held at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, sought to upend this image. It made for the perfect spectacle at a forum that centered the country's commitment to privatization, diversification, digital transformation, and technological utopianism. Accordingly, the new Saudi Arabia, digitally oriented and technologically innovative, would belong to the global citizen, Saudi and otherwise. It would be less austere—socially and religiously—and friendlier to women, elite foreigners, and anyone who aligned with the goals of Vision 2030. One of the world's most restrictive frontiers for foreign direct investment would finally open up, promising great financial and economic rewards. During the event, the few foreign investors who had already committed to the development project took to the stage and promoted the lucrative potential of the barely touched investment landscape. Saudi Arabia, it seemed, was finally ready to turn a page and abandon its troubled past.

[1] See "Robot Sophia Speaks at Saudi Arabia's Future Investment Initiative," YouTube video, 25 October 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMrX08PxUNY.

[2] Nora Doaiji, "Saudi Women's Online Activism: One Year of the 'I Am My Own Guardian' Campaign," Issue Paper no. 11 (Washington, DC: Arab Gulf States Institute, 2017), 1–18.

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Figure 1. Robot Sophia introduced to the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh. Screen grab from "Robot Sophia Speaks at Saudi Arabia's Future Investment Initiative," YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMrX08PxUNY.

For many Saudi Arabians, this first-of-many public relations spectacles did not signal the deep break with the past the regime was claiming. It either promised more of the same or cosmetic changes to long-standing structural problems in a system that had long privileged white-collar expatriates. Average Saudi Arabians were not the target of these reform initiatives. They would continue to suffer high unemployment rates, the erosion of social safety nets, deteriorating living conditions, and US-supported authoritarianism.[3] That the 2017 forum was convened amid a countrywide campaign of repression that featured the indefinite detention of Saudi Arabians from all walks of life was exactly the point. The spectacle, after all, was not just intended for an outside audience. It had a two-pronged message. On the one hand, as part of a global rebranding campaign, it whitewashed the regime's structural violence, authoritarian policymaking, and utter disregard for the Arabian Peninsula's inhabitants. On the other, it relayed a firm message to a domestic audience: Saudi Arabian voices did not matter. The new vision for the country, legitimated by most external spectators and benefactors, was simply not up for debate. Saudi Arabians were regularly summoned as statistics and categories in the broader aims and language of Vision 2030 and its strategic objectives: creating a vibrant society, empowering youth, developing human capital. But they were never consulted on any of the vision's top-down programs. In fact, the regime actively excluded them from planning processes and summarily dismissed their aspirations. Many were even imprisoned or otherwise disciplined for sharing their views and expert advice or for questioning the feasibility of, or need for, some of the proposed policies.

The spectacle delineated the boundaries of a reconceptualized national identity. Those who belonged to the new, still patriarchal nation were to remain cheerleading spectators of the regime's national blueprint for a new Saudi Arabia. This was so even if the blueprint determined, and was detrimental to, their own presents and futures. As bystanders prevented from writing their own histories, good Saudi Arabians were those who worked (assuming they could secure a job), followed the new religious ethic prescribed by the regime, obeyed the increasingly oppressive rules, and blindly endorsed the regime's agenda. Good Saudi Arabians also paid taxes—an austerity measure first introduced in 2018—but expected no added benefits in return, let alone political representation.[4] As such, the conferral on Sophia reified the archetype of the good citizen: obedient, politically passive, and economically productive. If the new Saudi Arabia strengthened legal protections for elite foreigners, both residents and investors, it diminished what few safeguards were available to Saudi Arabians themselves (not to mention working-class expatriates). Just like Sophia—with her precarious legal status as a "robot citizen"—they would have little to no

[3]Rosie Bsheer, "How Mohammed bin Salman Has Transformed Saudi Arabia," *The Nation*, 21 May 2018, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/how-mohammed-bin-salman-has-transformed-saudi-arabia; Jim Krane and Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The 'New' Saudi Arabia, Where Taxes Triple and Benefits Get Cut," *Forbes*, 13 May 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/thebakersinstitute/2020/05/13/the-new-saudi-arabia-where-taxes-triple-and-benefits-get-cut/#351f72372a22.

[4]"Lawa'ih wa-Anzimat Nizam Daribat al-Qima al-Mudhafa," *Um al-Qura*, 28 July 2017, https://www.uqn.gov.sa/articles/1501187155033127200.

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recourse to the law. This was certainly the archetype that successive regimes had long promoted. In the new era, however, it received a "softer," entrepreneurial, and more secular veneer, one that captured global audiences and, importantly, aimed to attract global capital.

Across the country, however, life took on a rhythm of its own. Saudi Arabians were not the automatons the regime (and much of mainstream media and academia) made them out to be. Rarely do lived realities conform to national imaginaries, let alone to the abstract theoretical models that have sought to normalize these imaginaries. Saudi Arabia was no different. Economic indicators, hailed as the sine qua non of conventional understandings of the Gulf, were never sufficient measures of Saudi political desires, as some theoretical models such as rentier state theory would like us to believe. According to the latter, the regime has historically bought off the loyalties of Saudi citizens with oil wealth in what is better known as the "authoritarian bargain" or the equivalent to "no taxation, no representation." Yet, since the establishment of the state in 1932, Saudi Arabians have demanded political participation and representation, either within the al-Saud regime or in opposition to it, regardless of the state of the economy. As in many other regional states in the 1950s and 1960s, many protested US imperialism and Saudi authoritarianism, called for egalitarianism and Arab unity, and demanded the nationalization of oil.[5] Calls for constitutionalism, political rights, social justice, religious and legal reform, and women's rights, among other things, marked later decades of the 20th century.[6] These calls have only multiplied since the turn of this century. They cut across all sectors of society, across class, region, gender, and sect. Public debates on politics, economics, culture, and society even thrived during the so-called liberal period (*infitāḥ*) of the early 2000s under Abdullah, first as crown prince and then as king.

With the 2011 Arab uprisings, a wave of repression swept over Saudi Arabia, halting the liberalization of the previous decade. Yet popular activism and organizing continued. From Islamists, secularists, and liberals to conservatives, feminists, and regionalists, different activists and opposition groups strove for the Saudi Arabia they envisaged and longed for. They separately called for transparency, accountability, and civil, economic, social, political, religious, and gender reforms. These efforts further expanded even as Salman ascended the throne and made it clear that resistance would not be tolerated. Yet so pervasive were expressions of dissent and opposition to the new regime's agenda that the king and crown prince went to great lengths to silence all forms of popular expression, including moral advice (*naṣīḥa*). Not only did the regime criminalize criticism of state policies, such as the Saudi-Emirati war in Yemen and both countries' belligerent posture toward Qatar. It also criminalized silence: public figures had to express fealty to the king and his son by publicly praising all their programs. Not doing so landed some in prison. The regime did not stop there. It indefinitely detained or disappeared dozens of Saudi intellectuals, activists, bureaucrats, religious scholars, writers, and businesspeople while placing others under house arrest or on no-fly lists. Relatives in Saudi Arabia were punished for the perceived transgressions of a family member outside the country. As domestic calls for political and economic reform, social justice, and women's rights continued apace, so did the regime's repressive tactics.

Unlike Sophia's widely viewed and celebrated naturalization spectacle, Saudi Arabians' stories of struggle, hope, suffering, and loss remain largely untold, glossed over by a well-oiled public relations machine that was enlisted in defense of the new order. King Salman's regime increasingly relied on Washington-based think tanks, lobbyists, and media conglomerates to whitewash its crimes in Yemen and inside Saudi Arabia.[7] Yet a slate of high-profile arrests of some of the country's political and

[5]Rosie Bsheer, "A Counterrevolutionary State: Popular Movements and the Making of Saudi Arabia," *Past and Present* 238, no. 1 (2018): 233–77.

[6]Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of the Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 3 (1999): 295–315, and "Networks of Dissent: Islamism and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Current History* 101, no. 651 (2002): 22–29; Toby C. Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shiʿa Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, No. 2 (2006): 213–33, and "Crude Ecology: Technology and the Politics of Dissent in Saudi Arabia," in *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War*, ed. Gabrielle Hecht (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 209–30; and Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[7]Lee Fang, "Inside Saudi Arabia's Campaign to Charm American Policymakers and Journalists," *The Intercept*, 1 December 2015, https://theintercept.com/2015/12/01/inside-saudi-charm-campaign, and "Saudi Arabia Continues Hiring Spree of Lobbyists, Retains Former Washington Post Reporter," *The Intercept*, 21 March 2016, https://theintercept.com/2016/03/21/saudi-arabia-continues-hiring-spree-of-lobbyists-retains-former-washington-post-reporter. See also US Department of Justice,

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economic elites in November 2017 made headlines and alarmed global capitalists. They were locked up at the same Ritz Carlton Hotel mere weeks after the Future Investment Initiative forum was convened. This shakedown of the country's wealthiest and most powerful figures saw the transfer of billions of dollars into the crown prince's personal coffers. Investors retracted temporarily, nervous that the same could happen to them. But the potential financial returns were too tempting for many. Eventually, they accepted the regime's framing: this was an anti-corruption campaign that was necessary for the success of Vision 2030. Reports that some of these and other detainees were tortured, sexually assaulted, or murdered while in detention did not shake the regime's image worldwide.[8] For a while, it seemed like the murder of journalist and longtime al-Saud loyalist-turned-mild-critic Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 would. If the murder foregrounded the violence and oppression that the regime unleashed on Saudi Arabians, it did so only fleetingly. That the unprecedented negative attention the murder elicited globally did not translate to serious repercussions for the Saudi regime instilled utter fear among Saudi Arabians everywhere. Despite the world's seeming indignation, it was just a matter of time before global political, financial, and social elites lent the regime their unconditional support once again. Such support was all the more crucial at a time of heightened political opposition and economic precarity.

Undeterred, the regime proceeded with its detention and silencing campaigns and further expanded its repression toolkit. In addition to imprisonment, torture, execution, and house arrests, the regime began to punish Saudi Arabians who did not toe the regime line in new ways. In a widespread but rarely discussed practice, the regime forced banks to divert clients' funds to nondescript accounts, generally assumed to belong to the crown prince. Executives of local branches of foreign banks who tried to push back against these orders were threatened with prison and deportation for refusing to do so. Saʿeed al-Zahrani, who worked for the Banque Saudi Fransi, has recently shown that the regime also froze the private funds of activists and wealthy individuals under the guise of counterterrorism and the prevention of money laundering until they agreed to a government-mandated settlement.[9] In a more severe and alarming practice, the regime punished those Saudi Arabians who remained outspoken with what some call civic, administrative, or legal death. It stripped over a dozen Saudi Arabians residing in the country (that I know of) of their citizenship rights. With a stroke of a pen, they lost access to financial, educational, medical, bureaucratic, institutional, and other state services. At the same time, they could neither work nor leave the country. They exist in a liminal space, somewhere between life and death. This severe sanction—more common in some other Gulf states—wholly unmade their social world and rendered them dependent on the good graces of relatives and friends for their daily survival.

The regime simultaneously heightened state centralization, bureaucratization, and organization and dramatically boosted its investments in policing and digital surveillance technologies. Everyone was surveilled, at all times. In this political economy of muscular hyper-national (re)making, enforcement of the national imaginary took on an ever-stricter meaning. Whereas the "morality police" once assumed the role of disciplining the nation, the regime now deployed the full force of its bureaucratic and security apparatuses to terrorize the population into submission. Ultimately, the regime was able to choke what little domestic space was left for popular expression. Some acts of defiance and opposition regularly surface inside the country. One example is that of ʿAbd al-Rahim al-Huwayti, who in April 2020 resisted Saudi government eviction orders and courageously criticized the building of one of the planned gigacities—NEOM—partly on his tribe's historic lands in the northwest.[10] He then refused to surrender when

"Exhibit A to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as Amended [for BGR Government Affairs]," 15 March 2016, https://efile.fara.gov/docs/5430-Exhibit-AB-20160315-53.pdf, and "Exhibit A to Registration Statement Pursuant to the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as Amended [for Squire Patton Boggs]," 20 September 2016, https://efile.fara.gov/docs/2165-Exhibit-AB-20160920-67.pdf.

[8]"Saudi Arabia: Allow Access to Detained Women Activists; Report of Fourth Activist Tortured," Human Rights Watch, 6 December 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/06/saudi-arabia-allow-access-detained-women-activists.

[9]Saʿeed al-Zahrani, "Kayfa Tamma Sirqat Amwal Muʿtaqili al-Ritz fi al-Saʿudiyya," Yaqadha Channel, 14 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNM2C0KSwuA&feature=youtu.be.

[10]The name NEOM is meant to signify a new future by combining the Greek *neo* with the letter *m* from the Arabic word for future, *mustaqbal*.

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security forces raided his home.[11] For doing so, al-Huwayti was shot dead. For the most part, however, the regime succeeded in foreclosing the landscape of domestic dissent. If in the past some Saudi Arabians managed to make their voices heard through formal and informal channels and to hold public and semi-public debates on controversial topics, those inside the country were overwhelmingly silenced. The relationship between rulers and ruled, which historically exhibited some degree of buy-in as well as rare moments of negotiation, accommodation, and compromise, now rested predominantly on extreme violence and the threat thereof.

As Salman's reign of terror replaced the already oppressive status quo, the landscape of popular and activist struggle adapted. Those who could began to leave the country for education and employment opportunities abroad. Those who could not—women in particular—risked life and limb to escape, with many seeking asylum in countries willing to take them in, Australia and Canada primary among them. Almost overnight, students and other Saudi Arabians who were outside of Saudi Arabia when Khashoggi was murdered were no longer able to return home. Some were informed as much. Others feared a text message, a comment on social media, a phone conversation, an old article—all of which once passed without notice—would now get them or their families in trouble. This turned out to be a well-founded fear, as several Saudi Arabians who returned were indeed detained. Some remain in regime custody. Many among the budding community of exilic Saudi Arabians became even more energized, politicized, and defiant. They created transnational networks of solidarity in which some began to organize and mobilize against the regime, specific policies, or the overall direction of development.

The globalizing of Saudi dissent shifted the sociopolitical struggle almost exclusively to the online sphere. Whereas in the past most Saudi Arabians lodged their online critiques of the regime in measured and subtle form, especially when using their real identities, they were now increasingly confrontational and uncompromising. The repressive arm of the state may have terrorized many Saudi Arabians into silence, especially those residing in the country. But for many exiles, the loss of homeland—temporary as they hoped it would be—helped tear down the wall of fear. They became more vocal in their critiques, publicly discussed controversial subjects, and supported online campaigns that exposed regime transgressions, from financial mismanagement to bureaucratic corruption. As online activism escalated, so did regime countermeasures. The latter invested heavily in cybersecurity, digital surveillance, and offensive hacking tools, which became evident in the various attempts to infiltrate the activist networks worldwide. As Marc Owen Jones powerfully shows in his contribution to this roundtable, the regime also relied on thousands of automated or semiautomated accounts to regularly flood social media with propaganda and pro-Saudi misinformation campaigns—or platform manipulation—to sway public opinion.

Along with these measures, the regime heightened its promotion of a secular nationalism whose making and monumentalizing at sites of heritage Salman had managed since the early 1990s in an attempt to strengthen Saudi national identity.[12] The regime began to stoke nationalist fervor and pitted Saudi Arabians against each other. Toxic hyper-nationalism and facile polemics covered the pages of the press and various social media platforms as vulgar nationalists were deployed to counter all attempts to expose or challenge state policies and practices. Saudi Arabians were even called on to aid law enforcement by remaining vigilant in defense of the nation. They were now expected to inform on each other and report those who did not conform to the so-called new nationalism. They could even do so through *Kulluna Amn* (We Are All Security), an app whose motto captures the spirit of the day: *al-muwāṭin rajul al-amn al-awwal*. This roughly translates to "security starts with the (male) citizen." Attributed to the late defense minister Nayif ibn Abdulaziz, the gendered motto, which discounts women as citizens, was repurposed in the Vision 2030 era to deepen the already Manichean world Salman's regime has produced. Empowered for the first time, those few who actually endorsed the regime ideologically or thought of it as a necessary evil for the establishment of a more secular state had free reign to silence those they disagreed with. In this highly divisive atmosphere, they became the gatekeepers of the new Saudi Arabia.

[11]Nadda Osman and Mustafa Abu Sneineh, "Saudi Activist's Killing Exposes Local Tensions over Neom Construction," *Middle East Eye*, 16 April 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tribal-activist-reportedly-killed-protesting-saudi-neom-megacity-project.

[12]Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

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Once Salman's regime consolidated its power—all the while censoring the increasingly oppressive domestic scene from the world's view—it embarked on a glossy public relations campaign that advertised Saudi Arabia as one of the world's foremost tourism destinations. The country's tourism infrastructure had been under development since the 1990s. Subsumed into Vision 2030 since 2016, it was now ready for the world to experience. As the regime prepared to launch its first ever tourist visa in late 2019, it solicited global social influencers and enticed them with lavish all-expenses-paid trips to visit all corners of the kingdom. The influencers obliged. Tone deaf, they flooded social media for weeks on end with highly curated photos that promoted the country and whitewashed the regime's crimes at a time when so many Saudi Arabians themselves could not return. To add insult to injury, the regime adopted new residency and naturalization programs, or golden visas, that targeted wealthy foreigners only. In an unprecedented and welcome gesture of goodwill, the regime also extended citizenship to 50,000 refugees and granted identification cards to another 800,000.[13] But the millions of workers and decades-long residents of Saudi Arabia—sometimes second and third generation—were not privy to Saudi nationality. They remained subject to the country's volatile and increasingly expensive employment visas. In a country with a circumspect national, racial, gender, and class hierarchy, it was no surprise that the regime institutionalized what many still refer to colloquially as the foreigner complex, or *ʿiqdat al-ajnabī*, which benefited certain non–Saudi Arabians over everyone else, citizens included. Being a particular kind of foreign economic agent (wealthy, and preferably white) was now an officially privileged category. This "premium resident," a noncitizen who may have never set foot inside the country, could now call Saudi Arabia home.

[13]"Kingdom Granted Citizenship to over 50,000 Displaced People," *Saudi Gazette*, 11 October 2019, https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/579608.

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