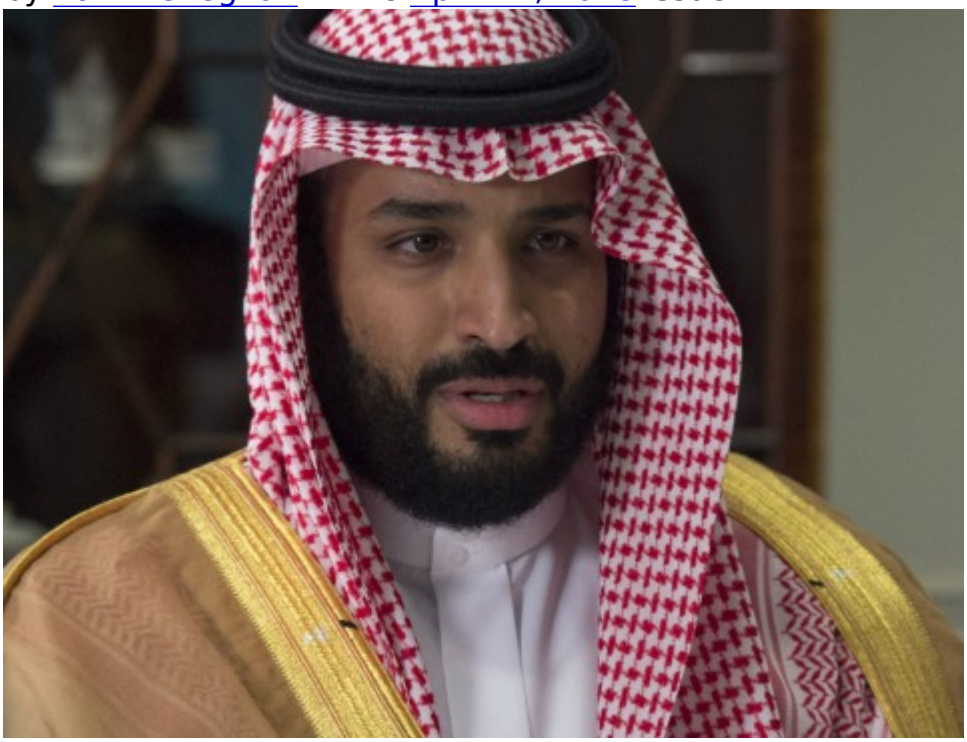
Mohammed bin Salman's reforms bolster interfaith efforts

The Saudi crown prince’s Vision 2030 program includes rolling back the religious hierarchy’s power over domestic and foreign policies.

by Tom Heneghan in the April 11, 2018 issue



Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia

Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi Arabian crown prince who could reign for decades if he takes over as planned from his elderly father, King Salman, is raising hopes that the tight grip of the ultraconservative religious establishment on the country is loosening.

The 32-year-old prince, who went on diplomatic tours of Europe and the United States in March, has said he wants to return his country to “a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions.”

Staunchly conservative Saudi Arabia, which prohibits the construction of churches and synagogues, has long been anything but moderate in religion. Especially in recent decades, it has enforced strict limits on women's rights, banned cinemas and other public entertainment, and tightly controlled religious activity by any faith other than its official Wahhabi Islam.

Since 2016, that situation has been changing under the crown prince's Saudi Vision 2030 reform program that aims to wean Saudi Arabia from its economic dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and roll back the ultraconservative religious hierarchy's near-veto power over domestic and foreign policies.

This cautious opening has been a boon to the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna, an international organization with Saudi Arabia, Austria, and Spain as its sponsors and the Holy See as a "founding observer."

"King Salman and Prince Mohammed have a strategy to move Saudi Arabia ahead, and we are benefiting from this," said Faisal bin Abdulrahman bin Muaammar, the center's secretary general. "The support we are getting from King Salman and the crown prince is unlimited, financially and politically."

In an interview with the *Guardian*, the crown prince said that Saudi Arabia had turned ultraconservative in reaction to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in nearby Shi'ite Iran and has not been "normal" since then. Riyadh has tightly policed its puritanical Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam at home and exported it to Muslim communities abroad by bankrolling mosques, imams, and schools that many Western governments suspect may have spread extremist views.

In recent months, the kingdom has reined in its notorious religious police, reopened its once-banned movie theaters, and announced women would soon be able to drive. It is still very conservative, but it is starting to evolve.

Lebanese Maronite patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rahi said he discussed the reform plan with the crown prince in November. The patriarch's trip to Riyadh was itself a rare act of openness for Saudi Arabia, which hosts Islam's two holiest sites and bans the public practice of other faiths.

"It will take time, and it won't be easy," said al-Rahi, an Eastern Rite Catholic who is also a cardinal. "But the fact that a patriarch is invited by the king and treated like a

head of state is already a sign that things are changing."

David Rosen, a rabbi who is on the organization's board of directors, said he also expected to be invited to Saudi Arabia.

At a recent conference at the Vienna interfaith center, senior Middle Eastern Islamic leaders—such as the grand imam of Mecca and the heads of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation—backed the goal of "promoting peaceful coexistence and common citizenship." That wording implies equal rights for religious minorities, not the second-class *dhimmi* status that was supposed to protect them in Muslim societies.

Kowthar Musa Alarbash, a Saudi blogger and member of Majlis as-Shura, the kingdom's advisory council, said the Saudi Vision 2030 program "sped up some legislation that might have taken 50 to 60 years to see the light."

"Nowadays, the moderate voices are much louder than the extremist voices," she said. "There will always be opposition, but it won't have the same effect as it would have had years ago because the moderate voices are the louder ones now."

An Arab Christian cleric, requesting anonymity to avoid appearing overly critical, welcomed the Saudi reforms but insisted they had to be seen in context.

"Remember, this is the 21st century, and they're just getting around to talking about letting women drive," he said. —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on March 26, appears in the print edition under the title "People: Mohammed bin Salman; Faisal bin Abdulrahman bin Muaammar."