THE EVOLUTION OF SAUDI ARABIA'S GOVERNANCE MODEL UNDER PRINCE MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN

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Abstract. This article analyses how Saudi Arabia's governance model changed under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) between King Salman's accession in 2015 and 2026. It asks whether the evidence points to a change of regime type or to a reconfiguration of authority within the existing monarchical order. Using a chronological analysis of formal acts (royal orders, decrees, and institutional restructurings) along three dimensions succession and dynastic power-sharing, executive architecture, and legitimacy and accountability the article finds that authority moved from consensus-based, family-wide rule towards a vertical line ending in the crown prince. By 2022 he chaired the Council of Ministers, the economic and security sub-cabinets and the board of the Public Investment Fund. This centralisation was formalised largely through existing institutions (the Allegiance Council, royal orders, a prime-ministerial appointment made as an exception to the Basic Law) and was paired with a performance-management apparatus built around the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. Legitimacy shifted towards a state-centred nationalism and social liberalisation, while accountability remains the most contested dimension: rights organisations document an intensified crackdown and record executions, and Saudi authorities reject key allegations. The article concludes that the model is best described as managerial centralisation within a monarchy.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, governance, succession, centralisation, Vision 2030, Council of Economic and Development Affairs, Public Investment Fund.

Introduction. When King Salman acceded to the throne in January 2015, Saudi Arabia entered a period of institutional change faster than any since the oil boom of the 1970s [16]. Within days the new king dismantled a large part of the existing council structure and placed his son, Mohammed bin Salman, at the head of the new economic bodies. By 2022 the son was crown prince and prime minister. Assessments of this trajectory diverge sharply. Supporters and officials present it as modernisation and efficiency; critics describe it as an unprecedented concentration of personal power and a rights crackdown. The aim of this article is not to settle that normative dispute but to describe, from the record of formal acts, what changed in the way Saudi Arabia is governed.

The scholarly starting point is Hertog's account of the oil-era state: leading princes carved out institutional domains they could dominate, agencies worked in silos and coordinated poorly, and networks of brokers and beneficiaries populated the bureaucracy [25]. Brown (2017) argued that the changes after 2015 build on a long trend towards centralisation of royal power, and cited Lacroix's conclusion that a vertical line of power ending in MBS had replaced the horizontality and consensus-seeking of the earlier

system [17]. Lacroix's interlocutors among MBS's supporters, in contrast, attributed the push for centralisation to a wish for efficient decision-making [17]. Kinninmont (2017) analysed Vision 2030 as a renegotiation of the Saudi social contract. These studies were written early in the process; the later steps (the 2022 premiership, the codification of laws, the 2025–2026 external shocks) have received less systematic attention in one analytical frame. This article addresses that gap.

Methods. The study uses chronological process-tracing of formal acts (royal orders, decrees, council restructurings) and compares the institutional arrangement before and after each act. Three analytical dimensions are applied: (1) succession and dynastic power-sharing; (2) executive architecture, meaning who chairs which decision-making bodies; (3) legitimacy and accountability, meaning the stated basis of authority, social and legal reforms, and the treatment of dissent. External alignments are examined as a stress test of the model.

Sources are of four kinds: official texts and institutional pages (the National Transformation Program, the Public Investment Fund); research institutes and academic work; rights organisations (Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and partners); and news agencies reporting decrees of the Saudi Press Agency. Contested claims are attributed to those who make them, and the Saudi government's position is included where it was publicly stated.

Limitations. Decision-making inside the royal court is opaque; formal acts are visible but their motives are not. Several decrees are known through secondary reporting. Figures on executions and detentions come from rights organisations and cannot be independently verified here. The article does not assess policy effectiveness or make normative judgements, and developments in 2026 are still unfolding.

Results

1. Chronology of key institutional acts

Table 1. Key acts shaping the governance model, 2015–2026

Date	Act	Significance for governance
29 Jan 2015	About a dozen councils and committees abolished; Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA) and Council of Political and Security Affairs (CPSA) created	Economic and security policy gathered in two sub-cabinets; MBS chairs CEDA
24 Mar 2015	Oversight of the Public Investment Fund (PIF) moved from the Ministry of Finance to CEDA	Sovereign wealth fund placed under the economic sub-cabinet
Apr 2015	Muhammad bin Nayef named crown prince; MBS deputy crown prince	Succession line altered
21 Jun 2017	MBS named crown prince (31 of 34 Allegiance Council members); Muhammad bin Nayef relieved of all posts	Vertical succession within the king's line
Nov 2017 – Jan 2019	Anti-corruption campaign: 381 people summoned; settlements of over USD 100 billion reported	Discipline of elites; asset recovery (contested)

Date	Act	Significance for governance
2016 – Aug 2019	Religious police lose arrest powers; cinemas reopen; women drive (June 2018); women over 21 may obtain passports and travel without a guardian (Aug 2019)	Social liberalisation
22 Feb 2022	First Founding Day, dated to 1727	Nationalist historical narrative
8 Mar 2022	First codified Personal Status Law	Codification; criticised by Human Rights Watch
27 Sep 2022	MBS appointed prime minister, as an exception to Article 56 of the Basic Law; Khalid bin Salman becomes defence minister	Crown prince becomes head of government
18 Nov 2025	Washington visit: Strategic Defense Agreement, major non-NATO ally status, F-35 approval	External alignment
Aug 2026	Council of Ministers re-formed under MBS with its existing members	Continuity of the arrangement

2. Succession and dynastic power-sharing

The 2015 succession already departed from precedent: King Salman replaced his half-brother Muqrin as crown prince within about three months, naming his nephew Muhammad bin Nayef as crown prince and his own son as deputy. On 21 June 2017 a royal decree removed Muhammad bin Nayef from the succession and from the interior ministry, replacing him with his nephew Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef; the Allegiance Council endorsed the change by 31 of 34 votes [3]. Days earlier a decree had restructured the prosecution system and removed Muhammad bin Nayef's oversight of criminal investigations. Brown observed that the Allegiance Council appeared to certify the king's choice rather than constrain it [17].

The anti-corruption campaign launched on 4 November 2017 is the most debated episode. The attorney general reported that 381 people were summoned and that settlements exceeded USD 100 billion [4]; later reports counted 87 settlements, eight refusals and 56 people still under investigation. MBS called the campaign shock therapy for the economy and described claims that it was a power grab as ludicrous, saying many of those detained had already pledged loyalty to him [22]. Critics, including The New Arab, called it a shakedown. The government did not publish the allegations or settlement details, so it is impossible to establish how much corruption was punished or whether the headline figure is realistic [13].

The 2022 appointment completed the formal picture. A royal order named the crown prince prime minister "as an exception" to Article 56 of the Basic Law and the Cabinet Law, a post traditionally held by the king [5, 14]; the king continues to preside over cabinet meetings he attends [20]. In August 2026 a royal order re-formed the Council of Ministers under the crown prince's chairmanship with its existing members [2]. H1 is therefore supported: consensus-based family rule has given way to a vertical line, and the change was implemented through royal orders, the Allegiance Council and Basic Law exceptions, not by abolishing those institutions.

3. Executive architecture: managerial centralisation

The 29 January 2015 restructuring replaced a large number of councils (reports count between 11 and 14) with two sub-cabinets under the Council of Ministers [11, 16]. MBS, then also defence minister and head of the Royal Court, chaired CEDA [16]. He later took over the CPSA as well, after replacing Muhammad bin Nayef as crown prince [10]. He chairs the Supreme Council of Saudi Aramco, created in

2015 [29], and the board of the PIF; the PIF's own leadership page lists him as Crown Prince, Prime Minister, Chairman of CEDA and Chairman of the PIF [37]. The PIF reported assets under management of about USD 925 billion at the end of 2025 [1].

At the same time, the model was built with an explicit delivery apparatus. The National Transformation Program described a governance model in which CEDA, a National Center for Performance Measurement (Adaa), a Delivery Unit and a project management office translate Vision 2030 objectives into programmes with key performance indicators. According to a World Bank presentation, Adaa coordinates performance measurement across more than 250 government entities and feeds quarterly reports to CEDA. The effectiveness claims in that presentation are self-reported and are not assessed here.

4. Legitimacy: from religious-dynastic to nationalist-developmental

The social and cultural changes were substantial. Religious police were stripped of arrest powers, cinemas reopened after a long ban, the ban on women driving ended in June 2018 [15], and since August 2019 women over 21 can obtain passports and travel without guardian permission [26]. Human Rights Watch welcomed the 2019 reforms but noted that they coincided with an intensified crackdown on dissidents, activists and independent clerics [26]. In March 2022 Saudi Arabia issued its first codified Personal Status Law, which officials called progressive; Human Rights Watch concluded that it enshrines male guardianship [27].

The official narrative of origins also changed. A decree of January 2022 created Founding Day on 22 February, dating the first Saudi state to 1727, the accession of Muhammad bin Saud in Diriyah, rather than to the 1744 alliance with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab [24]. Analysts read this as a nationalism that ties citizens directly to the ruling family and reduces the clerical role in the founding story [24]. Arab Center Washington DC argues that the alliance with the official religious establishment remains intact and that the promised return to moderate Islam also serves to centralise power by removing independent religious voices [8]. These are interpretations by analysts; the factual core is that the state has re-defined its historical and religious reference points while social liberalisation proceeded without a corresponding opening of political participation. This is consistent with the first part of H3.

5. Accountability and rights: the contested dimension

This dimension is where accounts differ most. In February 2021 the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessed that the crown prince approved an operation to capture or kill the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. Saudi Arabia rejected the assessment as negative, false and unacceptable. In 2025 Human Rights Watch, citing Reprieve, reported at least 241 executions by 5 August, on course to exceed earlier records, and noted that Saudi law requires the king or crown prince to approve executions [28]. A joint statement by Freedom House and other organisations cited a record 345 executions in 2024 and argued that the death penalty is being used to suppress peaceful dissent [21]. The article has not found an official Saudi response to these specific figures, and they cannot be independently verified here. What can be said is that the review of formal acts shows no new institutional checks on executive authority, while the rights organisations describe a narrowing of the space for dissent. This supports the second part of H3.

6. External alignments as a stress test

Foreign policy under MBS combined confrontation and de-escalation. The 2017 blockade of Qatar was ended by the Saudi-led AlUla agreement in 2021, and on 10 March 2023 Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed in Beijing to restore diplomatic relations [18]. In November 2025 a Washington visit produced a Strategic Defense Agreement, major non-NATO ally status and approval of F-35 deliveries [6]; analysts noted that this status does not carry treaty-like guarantees [7], and rights groups urged Washington to press the crown prince on human rights [21]. In 2026 the regional war with Iran tested the model: Chatham House described

the closure of the Strait of Hormuz as a key threat to Vision 2030 and noted Riyadh's reluctance to join the war directly and its lobbying against escalation [19]; in an August call with President Trump the crown prince stressed the priority of dialogue [12]. Without access to internal deliberations, the article draws only a limited conclusion: external policy is visibly conducted through the crown prince personally, and the 2026 shocks bear directly on the development strategy that his authority is meant to deliver.

Conclusion

The record of formal acts supports a qualified answer to the research question. Between 2015 and 2026 Saudi Arabia did not change its regime type, but authority was reconfigured within the monarchy.

First, succession moved from family-wide consensus to a vertical line, carried out through the Allegiance Council, royal orders and a premiership granted as an exception to the Basic Law. Second, the executive architecture combines concentration at the top with a performance-management apparatus built around CEDA, which can be described as managerial centralisation. Third, legitimacy shifted towards a state-centred nationalism and social liberalisation, while accountability remains contested: rights organisations report an intensified crackdown and record executions, the government rejects key allegations, and the evidence reviewed shows no new institutional checks.

The arrangement therefore rests heavily on the continued concentration of decision-making. Its performance will be tested by the fiscal and security pressures of 2026, and by how formal succession arrangements are managed over time. Promising directions for further research include systematic data on ministerial turnover and on the real scope of the Allegiance Council, an assessment of whether the performance-management system changes policy outcomes, and a comparison with the Emirati model of centralised rule.

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