

Saudi Vision 2030 and the Challenge of Competitive Identity Transformation in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia's founders inherited a legacy of oil wealth and conservative Islamic ideas in the Islamic world. Conversely, the crown prince seemed uninterested in preserving the heritage and attempted to change the tradition. Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, wishes to transform the state's conservative identity into a more moderate one. A main reason for the transformation is that Saudi can compete with other countries globally in developing various sectors. The crown prince initiated Saudi Vision 2030, a policy to establish a competitive identity and transform Saudi image globally, but that is not easy for Saudi, which is the heartland of religious conservatism and is likely to resist adopting transformation. Based on the statement above, this research explains how the crown prince tried to transform Saudi Arabia's identity and build a different reputation through Saudi Vision 2030 became a contradiction in the Saudi government and society. The transformation and reconstruction of nation branding through Saudi Vision that promotes openness probably could eliminate the image of Saudi identity as a devout Islamic conservative. At the same time, this effort is a way to survive as a global economic actor without depending on the non-renewable energy sector. Finally, this paper found that norms, social and political culture, Saudi Arabia's reputation, and Salman's image hinder the construction of that identity.

Keywords: *national identity, Mohammed bin Salman, competitive identity, Saudi Vision 2030.*

Abstrak

Pendiri Arab Saudi meninggalkan warisan kekayaan minyak dan ide-ide Islam konservatif di dunia Islam. Sebaliknya, putra mahkota tampaknya tidak tertarik untuk melestarikan warisan itu dan telah mempertimbangkan untuk mengubahnya. Mohammed bin Salman, putra mahkota Arab Saudi, ingin mengubah identitas konservatif negara menjadi lebih moderat. Sehingga, Saudi dapat bersaing dengan negara lain secara global dan mengembangkan berbagai sektor sesuai dengan Visi Saudi 2030 yang dipopulerkan putra mahkota. Visi Saudi 2030 sangat penting dalam membangun identitas kompetitif, sementara Saudi adalah tanah yang tidak dapat dipisahkan dari konservatisme dan perlawanan untuk mengadopsi transformasi. Berdasarkan pernyataan di atas, penelitian ini mencoba menjelaskan bagaimana usaha putra mahkota untuk mengubah identitas Arab Saudi dan membangun

reputasi melalui Saudi Vision 2030 justru menjadi kontradiksi di pemerintahan dan masyarakat Saudi. Padahal, transformasi dan rekonstruksi *nation branding* melalui Saudi Vision yang mengedepankan keterbukaan mungkin bisa menghilangkan citra identitas Saudi sebagai Islam konservatif yang taat. Pada saat yang sama, upaya ini merupakan cara untuk tetap bertahan sebagai aktor ekonomi global tanpa bergantung pada sektor energi tak terbarukan. Akhirnya, tulisan ini menemukan bahwa norma, sosial dan budaya politik, reputasi Arab Saudi, dan citra Salman itu sendiri yang menjadi penghambat konstruksi identitas tersebut.

Keywords: *identitas nasional, Mohammed bin Salman, identitas kompetitif, Visi Saudi 2030*

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INTRODUCTION

The Islamic world has noted that Saudi Arabia has been a conservative country since the Ibn Saud established an expansionist political project by consolidating the Arabian tribal community and through religious support from Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab. Thus, the progress of ideas and culture is undeveloped since the government acts decisively prohibits norms outside government regulations. Regardless of this situation, an international competition among countries demands that Saudi adapt and accept the dynamics of globalization, or they will be left behind. The condition that led Saudi to have dynamic reformation in social, cultural, economic, and political (Potter, 2017). However, amid Saudi conservatism, a crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman henceforth, will be mentioned as MBS, offering another picture of the transformation of conservative identity. Known as MBS, King Salman's son became a crown prince in June 2017 and sought the fortune to transform the Saudi (Mabon, 2018). In an interview with The Guardian, MBS said, "*the state of Saudi*

Arabia that adheres to this ultra-conservative concept is not normal for the last 30 years." Indeed, this statement is against conservatism, culture, and traditions in Saudi Arabia. He also said, "*I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam,*" Saudi Arabia's elite royal family spoke about a new idea that emerged in that country (Chulov, 2017). Mohammed bin Salman repeated the idea of moderating Saudi Arabia to change the structure, including changing the country's socio-cultural to reform Saudi identity.

The idea of change is summarized in Saudi Vision 2030, which affects various sectors in Saudi. Saudi Vision is an ambitious master plan which includes three aspects: diversification of the oil-based economy to incorporate technology and tourism, making Saudi Arabia the heart of Islam and Arab culture, and becoming an economic and geographical center connecting the three continents. The roadmap initiated by MBS also purposed to reform Saudi in many aspects, such as technology and the issues of social culture in Saudi society. Today, Saudi people can go to the cinema; women can enter the

stadium to watch football, and they can drive a car without being accompanied by their guardians or relatives (Trofimov, 2019). The phenomenon of social change had never happened before MBS became the crown prince. He said that entertainment and culture are essential to change the standard of living of a Saudi citizen in a short period (Al-Dakhil, 2016). This statement is the foundation of his interest in changing the culture and traditions of Saudi society. Salman emphasizes that Saudi people need to increase their standard of living and is no exception in entertainment and the development of technology and information. The news and statement are a series of changes made by MBS to launch Saudi Vision 2030.

There are three visions in Saudi Vision 2030, i.e., 1) realizing Saudi as the heart of the Arab and Islamic Worlds; 2) Making Saudi the hub connecting three continents; 3) Developing and the investment powerhouse. These visions also include the primary mission as a 'pillar' that focuses on development in Saudi Vision 2030, like a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and motivated nations. Mohammed bin Salman began his career with various reforms focused on economic, political, and social revolutions. At the same time, his vision will become a reference for the kingdom's policy in the near future (Cochran, 2018). However, the expectation that Saudi Vision 2030 will give many changes to Saudi faces obstacles in its implementation. Indeed, this transformation is new ideas that can massively change the previous identity and lead to an internal reaction in the Saudi government and society. The authors assume that domestic, regional, and international issues can reduce its potential to establish a new identity in Saudi.

If Saudi Arabia continues oil and other non-renewable dependencies for the future, it will not last long because fossil resources will run out. In addition, currently developed countries, as destinations of their energy market, are beginning to seek more environmentally friendly energy alternatives, threatening future state revenues sustainability. However, fossil energy has made Saudi Arabia a wealthy country, providing them with a significant financial source. It has improved the standard of living of Saudi people through various subsidy policies. In contrast, these subsidy policies will weigh on their economy if the Saudi people want to continue enjoying the same standard of living even without supporting non-renewable resources.

In fact, Saudi Vision 2030 is the right step for the country's future if it wants to maintain its status as a global economic player. They see the United Arab Emirates as the role model, which first built its image as a more open and seemed liberal among the gulf countries. The problem is that when Saudi Arabia opens a wide economic tap, it means that it has to modernize its conservative policies to moderate, which also means that it will reduce internal support for the Saudi government and society. Thus, Saudi Arabia must also make *nation branding* an effort to rebuild its image, which is already known as a country closed to external cultures, especially Western, and symbolic as an icon of pure Islamic teaching in the Islamic World.

In this paper, by using the constructivism approach, concept of *competitive identity*, and *nation branding*, the author will examine the obstacles of MBS in establishing a *competitive identity*. Using the constructivism approach is significant in investigating the relationship between Saudi

Arabian interaction ideas, social agreements, and Saudi international reputation. The identity construction locates Saudis in a dilemmatic trap; if the program fails, it will trigger domestic chaos and instability that risk Saudi's reputation in the international community. However, if the program succeeds successfully, it will encourage MBS and Saudi to rebrand Saudi with a good image as moderate Islamic states and rise as a global power both in the Middle East and the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mohammed bin Salman began to attract international attention when he became the crown prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The world sees that he would inherit both country's black gold fortune and religious conservatism. However, he came up with various controversial ideas that shocked the international public by proposing Saudi Vision 2030. This issue is interesting since it promises multiple transformations and changes in Saudi in multi sectors, economic, social, cultural, and religious. Therefore the researchers were attracted to examine this phenomenon. Some studies that focused on the Saudi Vision 2030 explain that this project was related to the oil price collapse in 2014 and triggered for Saudi to reform its economic policy (Cochran, 2018; Grand & Wolf, 2020; Hikmah & Abrar, 2019; Kosarova, 2020). The results of the study concluded that creating the idea of Saudi Vision 2030 is an alternative for the country to maintain its status as a mid-tier superpower when fossil energy runs out. This policy was also triggered by fluctuating oil prices which led to economic instability in the country.

Therefore, the Saudi Vision aims to reduce the reliance on oil and look for other vital private sectors as solutions in the future (Young, 2016). Saudi Arabia is

looking for opportunities to develop renewable and sustainable energy (RNSE) to replace oil, such as wind, solar, geothermal, hydro and biomass (Amran et al., 2020). Using RNSE resources can reduce dependence on oil and natural gas while introducing RNSE as a clean resource that can meet the national economy and energy needs. The policies coincide with the growing global awareness, especially in developed industrial countries, to replace fossil energy with more environmentally friendly fuels. If this materializes in the coming decades, it will undoubtedly threaten the Saudi economy, which is heavily dependent on the mining sector.

Mohammed Nurunnabi (2017), who investigates the transformation of an oil-based economy into a knowledge-based economy in Saudi Arabia, finds that to develop the national economy, Saudi should develop —human capital, innovation, Information, and Communication Technologies (ICT), economy, education, and employment. He also finds that the policy has made positive progress and successes over the last few decades. However, he does not deny that some areas must to be addressed if Saudi Arabia attempts to develop economy-based knowledge (Strožek, 2014 in Nurunnabi, 2017). He further argues that the policies and judicious funds will contribute to faster socio-economic development in any country, including Saudi. Nurunnabi's said that Saudi Arabia's policy has gradually brought about faster change than the economy's reliance on oil. Unfortunately, this discussion did not specifically address how the obstacles to this policy are on the social and political sides in Saudi Arabia.

However, Saudi Vision 2030 is not only changing economic resources but also implying social changes. This change

challenged the social agreement in the kingdom for decades, as the Saudis people had previously enjoyed material comforts in return for their loyalty to the regime (Chara, 2018). Indeed, this situation can potentially threaten the country. Although the change through the Saudi Vision 2030 policy has occurred and will undoubtedly get a reaction from the Saudi community, according to Cochran (2018), it is inseparable from the support of the elite in the Saudi Kingdom. He said that MBS convinced the king and the elite that the Saudis needed reform, and this support might never have occurred before, as it is signaling a new era in the country.

Another research focuses on gender issues since it relates to the effort of Saudi Arabia's branding image. Zeina Tohme Adaime's writing, titled "Gender Gap Impact on Nation Branding, Image, and Building: Case Study from the Arab World." He raised the point that countries like Saudi, which have a reputation for being extremely conservative, especially towards women, try to show more genuine and active participation in the international society (Adaime, 2019). This action is linked to the Saudi brand image comprehended as the new global hegemony. Indeed, the West accused Saudi of violating human and women's rights in numerous cases. Therefore, they should revise a negative reputation. However, if we look more clearly at this issue, various cases are just a difference in values and standards between the Arab world and the West. According to the Saudi Arabian government, these restrictions forms also protect their values and norms. While the other study investigates the gender transformation from a positive point of view, which means the government recognizes women's contribution and roles to Saudi's development (Hardiyanti &

Yuniati, 2021). At the same time is locating women in a strategic position in the Saudi vision. In contrast, Ikran Eum argues that Saudi does not mean developing women's rights but more to overcome their contribution economically and reinforce MBS leadership (Eum, 2019). Saudi Arabia brings a new image of women and displaces Wahhabi rules towards a more moderate Arab nationalist.

Like Adaime, Hala Zayed Alsaaidi (2020) also investigates the state's image from different perspectives. He argued that Saudi Arabia was doing *national branding* to represent itself in the international community by following global trends through social media, such as Twitter. He also found the use of Twitter to be very effective in promoting social, political, economic, and other ideas about Saudi to the outside world (Alsaaidi, 2020). Muhammad Khan (2019) shows that for a long time, Saudi has been trying to expand its influence regionally and globally through cultural diplomacies. Saudi is active in many soft power activities, such as the involvement of higher education institutions, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations. (R Alkatheeri & Khan, 2019). Thus, the ideas comprehended in the soft power act indirectly become a foundation for strengthening Saudi Vision 2030 as an implementation of a *competitive identity*.

Several studies above explain that before Saudi Arabia launched Saudi Vision 2030, the Saudi government gradually tried to convince the public about internal change in Saudi. These studies show that the Saudi Vision 2030 has impacted various sectors in Saudi Arabia. Although the main objective is to be independent of fossil fuels, Saudi Arabia must also carry out some political transformations and influence the political sectors, society, and culture. Meanwhile,

the research results by Abdullah R. Alkatheeri and Muhammad Khan (2019) show the opposite: the identity transformation process had happened long before Mohammed bin Salman popularized Saudi Vision 2030.

Adapting to global changes, Saudi Arabia attempts to survive in international politics by playing a more aggressive role and proving Saudi Arabia's efforts to have a more positive image. However, these studies have not explored the obstacles to implementing Saudi Vision 2030. Following the academic gap, this paper attempts to complete the analysis. After all, when a country tries to establish specific policies, it will encounter obstacles, especially from conservative circles. Saudi's implementation of Islamic law reinforces this situation, and any controversial policy can be seen as a deviation from Islamic teachings. However, Saudi Vision 2030 is not only concerned with the economic issue but how the conservatism culture can accept the idea. The problem is whether the change started by the Saudi royal family per se will also lead to a rejection from the state itself. Since it has pros and cons for the internal government and the society, Saudi should rearrange the purpose of making a modern Islamic state and consider the image gained from the transformation. Considering these changes, Saudi can situate its position as a non-secular country.

Alexander Wendt proposed constructivism in a book titled "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: Socio-political construction of power." Wendt explains that the system contains agent-structure inter-subjectivity and that ideas are central to the continuity of the system. If the ideas in international relations change, so does the system. Following Wendt, the constructivists explain the formation of identity and the building of the national

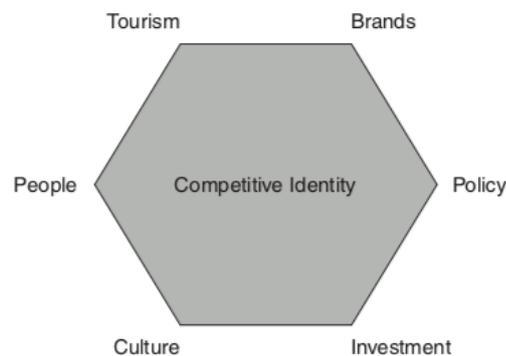
image. National identity is considered an enormously interesting and important issue to discuss in international relations. There are three main assumptions related to constructivism: 1) the actor as the primary unit of analysis; an actor who becomes the unit of analysis examines the ideas; 2) the main structures of the system are inter-subjective that it could be described as how the interactions between the Saudi structure and the actors who have ideas, that is MBS. The inter-subjective relationship then produces new constructions; 3) the identity and interests of the state are an essential part, and the social structure constructs that; in this context, the Saudi structure is constructing its interest.

Alexander Wendt opposes the assumptions of neorealism and neoliberalism that identities and interests are predetermined or absolute. In constructivism, identity is not something natural or given but something that is formed, developed, constructed, and changed through interaction (Wendt, 1999). Constructivism emphasizes the importance of the social dimension in international relations by referring to the factors of norms, values, rules, cultural identity, and linguistic symbols as determinants of character in international relations. Christian Reus-Smit believes that agents (actors/characters) form each other in this context as their dimension. Thus, the existence of norms, cultural values, and linguistic symbols can create identities, interests, and intentions. Still, these structures will not be effective without the actors' efforts (actors/characters) to achieve them (Reus-Smit, 2005). Constructivism observes the construction of MBS as the Saudi elite and towards an identity that could influence the structure of the state, which can have internal and external impacts on Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, this study also uses the concept of *competitive identity*. *Competitive identity* investigates how a country forms a distinctive brand that becomes its image and identity. *Competitive identity* is the term Simon Anholt (2007) used to describe the synthesis or fusion of brand management or, in this case, national brands with public diplomacy combined

with other variables such as trade, investment, and tourism and export promotion. The *competitive identity* is a new model for increasing national competitiveness globally. It can explain the characteristics of a country that can compete in a globalized world in globalization based on six main aspects.

Figure 1. The Hexagon of Competitive Identity



Source: Simon Anholt, *Brand New Justice* (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 2003) in Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity, The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities, and Regions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), page 26.

Anholt outlines six cores of competitive identities: tourism, culture, brands, people, politics, and investment. In these six aspects, a country can shape and establish its competitive identity through public diplomacy and national brand management. He said that competitive identity could have a positive impact on the country. In constructing a competitive identity, a country's reputation is essential; the open relationship with other countries will also indirectly create their reputation (Anholt, 2007). For example, tourists indirectly promote the countries they visit others with free promotions tourism. If they share with the public their satisfaction while they are tourists, this will create a strong nation branding.

The state's construction of competitive identity also applies to the brand aspect. The branded products can act as ambassadors of a strong image of a country. While through cultural exchange and cultural activities, including sports teams, famous artwork, work of poets, writers, and filmmakers build the reputation of a nation, both positive and negative. Then, in the political aspect, for example, the famous leaders must keep their behave.

Anholt also said that an international reputation is essential in building a competitive identity. Many countries are competing to create a good environment, which aims to get a positive response from the international community. On the other hand, a bad reputation makes it difficult to convince the other party. Therefore, the

government must build a good reputation because the state's image, institutions, companies, and the community depend significantly on the created image. These activities advance the economy, politics, and society, reflecting all parties' spirit, and will. Therefore, MBS's efforts to build an international reputation and create innovations are integral to Saudi Vision 2030. He also revealed that when talking about competitive identity, it cannot be separated from what is built into the structure of society, "*the people themselves are a brand that reflects the genuine of the community* (Anholt, 2007). While these six aspects are also a way to create *nation branding* and convince the international society (Anholt, 2013), the identity builds the education, abilities, and aspirations of the society itself. Identity ultimately makes the state what it is imagined. It can create tourism, business, cultural exchange, and social and political potential. Without the role of society, the natures and unique abilities are just an empty scene.

In addition, this paper also uses the idea of *nation branding*. According to Joseph Nye, *nation branding* is considered closer to the meaning of soft power. The concept of soft power is the 'power of attraction' to create work that the people of other countries attract to the works. Hence, *nation branding* can be another option in building a country's positive image in some instances. Coltman also stated that *nation branding* could be done with several approaches. The state began to regulate the brand, which was initially a commercial activity, and then made an effort to build, change, or protect its international reputation. *Nation branding* is a form of an effort by a country to develop its national image. Within the framework of theory and practice, *nation branding* aims to measure, build and manage the country's

reputation. *Nation branding* is based on the observation that a country's brand image is as important as the success of the country's products and services sold in the global market (Lee, 2011). *Nation branding* is becoming essential for every country in an era of globalization full of competition in attracting investment, tourists, and foreign aid. The concept of *nation branding* emphasizes that each country has different characteristics from other countries.

Both the construction of the *nation branding* and the competitive identity of Saudi Vision 2030 cannot be separated from the dilemma of maintaining its identity as the world's middle superpower; on the one hand, this is related to the national security of Saudi Arabia. This construction is connected to the three major elements of the Saudi vision: a diversified oil-based economy that incorporates technology and tourism, Islamic culture and Arab culture, and an economic and geographical center connecting the three continents. According to Suryohadiprojo (1997), national security consists of two approaches: safety and well-being. The wellness approach to achieving national resilience comes from the nation's ability to foster, manage and develop national potential and strength in community, country, and state prosperity. Fairly and proportionately (Agus, 2015). While at the same time, the government reassures that all policies related to Saudi Vision 2030 will be carried out by adhering to Islamic principles, Arab values, and Saudi national traditions" (Maddy-Weitzman & Brandon, 2017).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method and descriptive analysis. It examines and describes how a new identity is constructed

in Saudi Arabia and its obstacles. In addition, this research is a descriptive analysis and explains the ideas of MBS as a significant factor influencing Saudi Arabia's policy. Analyzing data and linking it to theories and concepts to obtain clear and understandable depiction results. The data collected in this study used library studies from the online media content, documents, interview documents, and histories of Saudi transformational activities by MBS, such as the Web Saudi Vision 2030, the Saudi government web, and others.

This paper also uses qualitative data, a process of research and understanding based on social phenomena and problems faced by humans. Therefore, the analytical technique used in this paper to describe the author's theme is thematic analysis, which is a systematic approach involving themes or patterns contained in qualitative data (Creswell, 2009) to answer the existing problem formulation using relevant theories.

Saudi Arabia's Identity Transformation

Saudi vision 2030, conceptualized by MBS, is a long-term policy to establish and develop multi sectors in Saudi. The policy was to diversify the economic sector, which was still rallying on the oil sector. Saudi Arabia has been reliant on the oil sector as a source of state revenue in supporting state prosperity. Indeed, the oil sector is an asset directly managed by the state without any foreign intervention. It is also a profitable sector to conserve political status and maintain the status quo. Indeed, the oil sector has much to do with Saudi culture's legitimized ideas of Islamic conservatism. However, MBS is optimistic that Saudi

Arabia can withdraw its dependence on the oil sector by trying to invest in more sustainable resources. Indeed, historically Saudi Arabia has also existed without the oil sector for centuries.

He conveyed the ideas in an interview with Al-Arabiya, "If we go back to history, oil is undoubtedly beneficial for Saudi Arabia, but we know that Saudi Arabia was a country that was founded before oil, and there is a wrong perception that Saudi Arabia wants to throw away oil. It was not" (Al-Dakhil, 2016). He emphasized that this policy does not mean Saudi will ultimately leave the oil sector for its profit is beneficial to finance the development and realize Saudi Vision 2030. Furthermore, MBS also stated, *"we want to increase the benefits of oil for industry and others, and also generate other opportunities from the oil sector to diversify our economy."*

Therefore, according to MBS, Saudi Arabia should seek new and renewable sources of income other than oil by creating a private sector and cutting bureaucracy. Indeed, to realize the idea, MBS promised to limit Wahhabi's power and implement social changes such as opening cinemas across Saudi, allowing music concerts, letting women drive, and issuing tourist visas. He also promised to create a moderate Saudi Arabia more moderate (Rick, 2017). Indeed, these discourses will not be influential if Saudi Arabia maintains a conservative system and culture related to Wahhabi ideology. This discourse shows that MBS intends to transform its identity to survive amid globalization and become part of the international community.

Figure 2. The Grand Theme of Saudi Vision 2030



Source: Saudi Vision 2030 Document
 (<https://vision2030.gov.sa/download/file/fid/417>)

The image above is taken from the official Saudi government, which shows three pillars, namely 'the heart of Arab and Islamic worlds, the investment powerhouse, and the hub connecting three continents as the big theme of Saudi Vision 2030 (Arabia, 2020). Through these three pillars, MBS attempts to construct a new identity of Saudi as a modern, advanced, open country. Mohammed bin Salman has gradually transformed Saudis into a cultural transformation, from rigid and conservative Islam to open and moderate Islam. He realized that Saudi Arabia needed the *nation branding* of moderate Islamic identity to gain credibility from the international community. Through this program, MBS has formed a competitive identity in Saudi Arabia and a series of national planning, policy-making, and development programs. The construction country's image is an internal affair, and the government should be responsible for the program. Therefore, the competitive identity should not be influenced by the outsider. The crown prince then quickly formed a team consisting of ministers and expert staff to be responsible for realizing the Visual Realization Programs (VRPs) program. These eleven programs include public fund investment, housing, *Doyof Al*

Rahman (Hajj and Umrah service management), community capacity development, quality of life, national transformation, privatization, health transformation, financial sector development, and National Industrial Logistics and Development (NIDPL).

By analyzing the 11 aspects of the VRPs, it follows the concept of forming a competitive identity suggested by Anholt, for it has accomplished the criteria of 6 driving aspects as main pillars, namely tourism, brands, policy, investment, culture, and people. Practically, Mohammad bin Salman has been able to integrate six pillars of competitive identity through Saudi Vision 2030. Further, some MBS activities reflect the six aspects of the competitive identity. In the tourism sector, VPRs from the national transformation program is in control of developing tourism in Saudi Arabia. This significant role is supported by funds from MBS in amounts up to \$810 billion (Al Amir, 2020). Surely, MBS hopes that foreign tourists visiting Saudi Arabia will inform the international world that Saudi Arabia does not have scary and strict regulations. Mohammed bin Salman is also motivated to increase investment in tourism by building various attractive facilities to attract foreign

tourists. The red sea project is a vivid picture of the prince's desire. This tourist destination offers luxury resorts and freedom for foreign tourists without worrying about strict Islamic prohibitions, such as a ban on wearing bikinis (Hodgetts, 2017). In addition, MBS also develops sustainable tourism and forms a coalition with the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), which consists of the countries creating an emission-free tourism sector with the ultimate goal of achieving zero or no carbon emissions (Agency, 2021).

Another act of establishing a competitive identity is MBS's attempt to buy an English football club, Newcastle United, for £300 million for an 80 percent stake (Diario AS, 2021). Although the brand originated from the West, Newcastle United is more famous and well-known than Aramco, a football group known by only specific communities. This consideration is might because Aramco provides benefits for the world's oil consumers only. However, it gives no significant benefit, for it is unknown widely. The acquisition provides value to Saudi because it made Newcastle's financial support depend on the country. In addition, it signals that Saudi is open to other cultures, even Western.

Meanwhile, in terms of policy, Saudi Arabia has benefited from international attention to controversial policies in giving women a bit of freedom. A policy which considered culturally taboo was enforced against conservatism. In his interview with *The Economist* (The Economist, 2016), MBS stated that after decades of investment in women's education has not yet increased their participation in development. In the end, Saudi women think that the education

they pursue is only for social status, not for productive work. Therefore, through a new policy, MBS initiated an era of openness and equality for women. Saudi Arabia began to provide opportunities for women to have a career and develop themselves with their male counterparts. Indeed, the success of Saudi Vision 2030 requires experts of both men and women as a step to work equally and advance Saudi Arabia. The policy of empowering women politically and economically has benefited in reducing the drastic gap between men and women and also detaching patriarchal culture, which tends to discriminate against women's rights. The problem is whether the role of women in Saudi is to accomplish the requirements of Saudi Vision 2030, in which their participation is peripheral or, conversely, substantive, women's participation is still debatable.

Another significant step in describing the process of identity transformation is MBS's determination to build a landmark as a symbol of that transformation. In 2018, he implemented the Giga project, which requires huge funds. There are four main projects in the Giga project, namely: 1) NEOM Project, which is a future city project; 2) Red Sea Project, is a luxury tourism development that offers an exclusive experience for the global community; 3) Qiddiya Project, is a project that has a socio-economic objective and to promote economic diversification and open new professional paths while enriching the living standards of Saudi youth; 4) ROSHN Project, a project specializing in real estate and community development, which aims to increase the homeownership rate among Saudis by up to 70% (Public Investment Fund, 2022).

Figure 3. Giga Project



*Source: Project Investment Fund, the Government of Saudi Arabia
 (<https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/Pages/OurInvestments-GigaProjects.aspx>)*

The project promises potential investments proposed to fund multi changes in Saudi Arabia. Each of the four Giga Projects has a role in introducing a new identity and will physically symbolize the new Saudi identity shortly. However, to succeed in the idea, MBS must guarantee that all development plans have no severe obstacles. In addition, MBS has to accomplish his responsibility as the initiator of identity transformation to maintain a positive Saudi identity and reputation. Through Saudi Saudi new branding can compete internationally. Indeed, that is still impossible and outlandish in terms of succeeding the ideas in the near future, for Saudi has many barriers to going beyond the ideas.

The global changes require Saudi Arabia to perform transformations, which will impact its identity. However, the Saudi public can't express it openly regarding political issues; it may put them in danger since the government imposes conservative Islamic rules. However, a different view occurred when MBS, the crown prince, proclaimed the identity transformation through Saudi Vision 2030. This situation may suggest a double standard within the

Saudi government, but logically and concerning the country's future existence, Saudi Vision 2030 is slowly being accepted, especially with the support of the Saudi royal power.

Saudi Barriers in Saudi Vision 2030

Although MBS directly initiated and introduced Saudi Vision 2030, it does not mean that the program will be accepted entirely by the Saudi society and the Islamic World; it has multiple internal and external barriers. While, the internal barrier comes from the internal aspects of the Saudi Kingdom. When the idea is succeeded and realized according to the target, it will threaten the existing norms and culture. In addition, it will build new norms and culture within the Saudi government structure, including changes in its society. The main obstacles came from the religious scholars who joined the As-Saud Dynasty and founded the Saudi Kingdom from the beginning. From a historical point of view, As-Saud Dynasty and Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab have successfully united Saudi Arabia and proposed conservative Islamic teachings as the state's political ideology. To this day,

Wahabism has a powerful influence on the power structure and Saudi society. Indeed, Islamic teachings with the ideas of conservatism continue to grow within the kingdom, together with the scholars. Thus, when MBS declared Saudi Vision 2030, he received opposition from those who accused him of breaking the tradition. He was also accused of changing conservative ideas and transforming them into modern ones (Farouk & Brown, 2021).

The clerics of religious scholars and *fuqaha* have traditionally supported the power of political institutions in Saudi Arabia. The practice of mutual relationship is based on the history of thought by the two founding figures, namely As-Saud as the ruler and Wahhab as the religious supporter who confirmed the power through religious legitimacy. Until now, such a combination has made a scholar considered an educated person with highly respected knowledge and has a significant position within the community. Therefore, the policy and substantial change through the Saudi Vision 2030 got pros and cons from the Ulama because many projects are considered to violate Islamic teachings. This refusal became an obstacle to the realization of Saudi Vision 2030 and was one of the reasons for MBS's massive arrest of the clerics who opposed his open policies. Even in 2021, the government arrested numerous clerics in Saudi, such as Sheikh Abdullah Basar, Sheikh Saud Al Funaisan, Saleh Al Tabib, Sulaiman Dweesh, and Sheikh Salman Al-Awdaa. Those arrested are popular clerics with hundreds to millions of followers across the country and are highly respected by Saudi society. These religious figures were arrested because of their voices criticizing the government in the public sphere, in science councils, and on social media. (CNN Indonesia, 2021).

Despite multiple religious issues, Saudi oil wealth can be a trap for the country's future. Economic dependence on the vast oil sector has made the country well-prosperous since the discovery of its abundant oil field resources in 1973. The prosperity made the royal members enjoy a luxurious life without hard work. Nevertheless, the kingdom members also obtain various benefits; the Saudi government also provides subsidies for the needs of the Saudi people. The subsidy made the people rely on compensation and the government for a living. Unintentionally, it impacts low productivity levels and slowly becomes a lifestyle for most Saudi people (Alseghayer, 2013). If this dependence continues, it will significantly impact the sustainability of Saudi development. Indeed, Saudi Vision 2030 needs a workforce relying on human resource development.

To achieve the ambition, MBS must find a way to change the Saudi people's perspective and embed a work ethic for independent life. Saudi Vision 2030 requires citizens with critical thinking, mobility, and work skills. Mohammad bin Salman stated this on the Saudi Vision 2030 website, *"together, we will continue building a better country, fulfilling our dream of prosperity and unlocking the talent, potential, and dedication of our young men and women"* (Arabia, n.d.). The accomplishment of Saudi Vision will provide a different scheme for receiving aid and subsidies for the society, mainly due to the privatization of several sectors and the overhaul of the oil sector. With economic diversification, the oil sector will stop providing free assistance, so people who depend on government subsidies will get impacted and try to find other alternatives to achieve their needs. Therefore, there is no better solution than increasing

community skills and developing human resources to support Saudi Vision 2030.

In doing so, the worst condition will come if Saudi Arabian people still expect subsidies from the government without increasing productivity. The condition will seriously impact the future of Saudi Arabia. The growing population and the low quality of human resources will become a problem and a severe burden to the government. Indirectly, the condition will significantly impact the formation and development of Saudi competitive identity. Therefore, community development and human skills must be prepared, and MBS's planning must be socialized and campaigned. Through this condition, the community can accept the transformation to participate in a significant role and contribute to the transformation process when it is started.

However, the external obstacles as a problem in realizing Saudi Vision 2030 are MBS's image and Saudi's reputation in the international world. Indeed, a state's reputation is changeable, sometimes, it is positive, but it can be harmful simultaneously. In addition, MBS's reputation as a potential Saudi leader was still questioned; this is the due publication of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which said that MBS was involved in the murder case of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Istanbul Council in October 2018 (Harris et al., 2018). Jamal Khashoggi is a Saudi journalist for the Washington Post who frequently criticizes MBS's leadership and the current state of Saudi Arabia. Jamal Khashoggi's critical content in the media allegedly became the trigger for MBS to take drastic decisions, and he was eliminated from the journalist. News of the assassination of Khashoggi was condemned as a violation of human rights, and it directly impacted the reputation of MBS and the Saudis. Massive

coverage of the Western media about the Khashoggi incident is undoubtedly a concern for Saudis because it can affect the identity transformation process and become a consideration for investor countries to invest in developing programs in Saudi Vision 2030, such as VRPs and the Giga Project.

CONCLUSION

The modern Saudi Kingdom combines Islamic conservatism continued in the Arabian Peninsula and the vast wealth of black gold, making the country a symbol of an exclusive and prosperous monarchy. Conversely, Saudi bears multiple issues of democracy, human rights violations, gender equality, et cetera. Probably, for the reason of prosperity, the country and its people enjoy many subsidies from abundant oil resources. On one side, the regime uses religious doctrine as a robust political control. Therefore, the socio-political situation in Saudi could be relatively stable compared to the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, which was surprised by the Arab Spring in 2010. However, the crown prince, MBS, recognized that Saudi Arabia could not always depend on oil. As oil was no longer the central pillar of the economy, the country should seek alternative sources for its sustainability. In doing so, the country's development concerns state income and foreign investment. It means Saudi Arabia must begin to open multiple issues with the international community. Accepted or denied, Saudi must be part of the global community which means Saudi Arabia must commit to supporting democracy, upholding human rights, and women's education. The problem is how to succeed in the idea if the country's political culture of conservatism remains strong. The conservatism that devalues women's rights

in education and public space will still be an international concern. From a Wahhabi point of view, various restrictions on women are a kind of protection for their position. However, the international norm, which incidentally upholds western values, assumes that various restrictions are a form of violation of women's rights. Therefore, it is appropriate for MBS to include such issues in the main agenda of Saudi Vision 2030.

The Saudi Vision 2030 policy that calls for openness and equality is not an easy task to succeed, not only because it has much to do with the transformation of Saudi conservative identity but also with the rooted culture of Saudi Arabia. The explanation mainly comes from religious leaders who think openness will lead Saudi Arabia away from Islamic values. Indeed, the strict culture will not change the image of Saudi's identity. Conversely, in the future, when oil is no longer the primary economic sector, the Saudis may lose their leading livelihood sector if they lose the momentum to seek a sustainable source. Therefore, according to MBS, one solution to maintaining prosperity in Saudi is through Saudi Vision 2030.

Fundamentally, Saudi vision 2030 is directed at transforming the internal identity of the country but also rebranding its image of Saudi in the international world. This condition is due to the negative reputation of Saudi Arabia, which is often associated with human rights violations. The efforts made by MBS in increasing tourism, brand, policy, investment, culture, and society to realize Saudi Vision 2030 are accessible for building a *competitive* Saudi identity. Likewise, flourishing a new civilization in the country will always be pros and cons and resistance to the movement. Indeed, some people are skeptical that Saudi Vision 2030 is just an

outlandish target. Conversely, young Saudis hope they will not return to the pre-oil era, and the Saudi vision will continue beyond 2030 (Thompson, 2021). Therefore, on the one hand, the Saudi Vision 2030 policy has received a positive response, especially from the western countries, due to the accepted western norm and values in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula. Practically, any ideas that change the old policy will certainly trigger pros and cons. Although Saudi Vision 2030 has been progressively realized through several policies, the world's perspective on Saudi Arabia's identity is still the same. Today, Saudi Arabia is still perceived as a country with conservative values and culture due to several internal and external obstacles that directly or indirectly affect the transformation of Saudi identity itself.

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