



POLICY BRIEF

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: Through the Lens of the Modernization Theory

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Executive Summary

This paper is valuable for policymakers and Middle East scholars, as it both validates and challenges Vision 2030's approach, providing a nuanced, theory-grounded analysis rarely seen in the existing literature. It demonstrates how Saudi Arabia's economic diversification, infrastructure investments, and technological advancements align with Western modernization models, challenging the traditional rentier state paradigm.

The paper provides updated empirical data, including GDP growth, FDI inflows, and infrastructure spending, to validate the success of Vision 2030's economic policies. It showcases that Saudi Arabia has transitioned from a subsistence status into a Western-style economic powerhouse, providing evidence from mega economic and technological projects to ensure that the research is factual and informative.

At the same time, the paper challenges the trend of Westernisation affecting Saudi modernization, a contribution rarely found in existing literature. The analysis covers the contradiction between Mohamed Bin Salman's (MBS) MBS's liberalization and anti-religious freedom practices, underscoring problems in the wider modernization model. Instead, I argued that religion and traditional values in general, can fuel development, exemplified by the revenues of Saudi religious tourism. This argument on the indigenization of development is part of a growing discourse on the need for bottom-up development processes.

Introduction

In 2016, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) has embarked on an ambitious socioeconomic program, known as Vision 2030 to transform the declining Saudi economy. This vision seeks to reduce the state's dependency on oil revenues, encourage sustainable economic growth and create a thriving society. This vision has been proven effective in enhancing various economic sectors, including technology and infrastructure development. Overall, this adoption of a Western-based economic model shows the close linkage between Vision 2030 and the modernization theory (Khoirunnisa, 2024).

The Modernization Theory is a sociological approach that claims development success only through simulating Western practices. This developmental trajectory emphasizes the role of foreign aid, free-market policies and overall capitalist economic systems in societal transformation. Moreover, it argues that the elimination of societal norms is conducive to the full realization of development. This assumption has led the theory to be portrayed as a form of Western centrism (Perera, 2024).

However, the trend adopted by MBS was heavily criticized by Saudi conservative factions, since it was viewed as a departure from Riyadh's long-standing adherence to traditional Islamic values. This aligns with the cultural critique of modernization theory. (Hamed, 2018).

Thus, the following paper assesses the effectiveness of the modernization theory in evaluating the developmental path of Saudi Arabia post-2015. This paper argues that while modernization theory has influenced Saudi Arabia's development under MBS and contributed to significant economic and technological progress, it has also led to a disconnect from the country's cultural and social fabric. The rapid adoption of Western-inspired reforms under Vision 2030 has created a cultural clash, destabilizing traditional Saudi norms and values. These cultural liberalization policies were resisted by Saudi conservative groups, highlighting the need to integrate Islam in the Saudi developmental experience.

Accordingly, this paper relies on a qualitative approach, including academic articles, to evaluate the Saudi developmental outcomes. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section explores the main literary debates on modernization theory. The second section theorizes the modernization theory. The third section introduces Vision 2030. The fourth section highlights the role of Vision 2030 in boosting Saudi economic growth. The fourth section examines the technological progress achieved by the vision. The fifth section underscores the cultural backlash on modernized policies by the government.

Literature Review

Proponents of Modernization Theory

The modernization-based model of development has been subject to extensive debates. Proponents of the modernization theory base their arguments on the historical development of Western states. Thaha and Galib (2022) argued that Walt Rostow, one of the main scholars of the

modernization theory, traced the developmental path of former colonizers. The British and the French models of development capitalized on the accumulated wealth from the colonized world. Post-WWII, Western states such as Germany and the Netherlands relied on foreign aid at early stages of development to become economically independent later. In this context, Rostow (2013) claimed that this Western experience should represent the model for developing nations' aspirations.

Consequently, these development patterns underscore economic development as the fundamental factor in evaluating developmental outcomes. Hout (2016) investigated the functional specificity in the labor of modernized nations and the role of education as a prerequisite of development. For modernists, education is the primary driver of development, as it fosters modern secular values and enhances economic productivity. (Lee, 2025). Furthermore, Foltyn (2013) cited the Polish experience in adopting a free-market economy and democratic reforms post-1990. Poland's investment in national infrastructure in addition to economic reforms programs premised upon privatization made Poland an economic powerhouse. Foltyn presented a real-life example of the ability of states' transformation from traditional to fully developed status.

Critics of the Modernization Theory

On the contrary, Critics argue that the modernization theory confronts many limitations. Andre Frank's argument on the global power imbalances that were consistently reproduced by modernization processes, was further reflected in other writings (Conway & Heynen, 2024). For example, the theory does not view inequality as a significant barrier to development. Fatah et, al. (2025) criticized the theory's overemphasis on economic growth as the main indicator of development. They advocated for a broader concept of development that entails factors such as social equity, human well-being, and sustainability.

Aivas (2022) supports this argument. He states that despite significant improvements in Tanzanian economic sectors, 49 % of Tanzanians cannot access basic necessities, in addition to 36 % of the people living in poverty. This showcases the need for a holistic development approach.

Other critical studies examined the politicization of the theory. Mbah and Ojukwu (2019) expose the Western bias embedded within the theory. They argued that the Cold War geopolitical context influenced the literary development of modernization theory. The foreign assistance program promoted by the theory aimed at attracting developing nations into the Western bloc. Similarly, Nu'uman (2024) claimed that the Western political, social and cultural contexts are different from their Non-Western counterparts. He presented a comparison between European values based on individualism and materialism vis a vis the African values such as fraternity and spirituality.

Thus, this paper attempts to bridge the gap between the two approaches. In light of the modernization theory, this paper argues that Saudi Arabia has undergone rapid economic and technological advancements under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman since 2015. However, cultural liberalization policies have caused a departure of Saudi conservative values, leading to resistance movements.

Theoretical Framework

Modernization theory contends a linear developmental trajectory by which societies evolve from a traditional status into a developed one. Walt Rostow presented five major stages of development: *The traditional society*, *Pre-condition for take-off*, *The take-off stage*, *Self-sustaining growth*, and the Stage of high mass consumption. In other words, societies transform from substance economies to high-welfare ones through internal capital accumulation and investments in infrastructure projects, technology adoption, and foreign-financed sectors (Rostow, 2013).

Therefore, the theory provides a path for traditional societies to acquire characteristics similar to those in developed societies. (Mbah & Ojukwu, 2019).

This new social order is based on three main indicators of development, namely, technological advances, industrial growth, and economic progress. First, Gabriel Almond focused on political modernization and role of education and civic culture, leading to industry growth. I.e. Almond argues that education is a prerequisite for this industrialization. Rostow highlighted the role of technical assistance in developmental programs. Accordingly, developed nations should assist their underdeveloped counterparts via technical transfers required for their development. Overall, the developmental success of the state is determined by its export levels and macroeconomic performance (Mbah & Ojukwu, 2019). Thus, the state should focus on economically motivated developmental schema.

Nevertheless, the theory's alienation of religious values does not address the role of religion in different developmental experiences such as Saudi Arabia. Thus, the paper assesses the Saudi contemporary economic and technological progress as well as its disconnection from traditional values (Nu'uman, 2024).

Vision 2030

In April 2016, The Saudi Council of Ministers launched Saudi Arabia's vision 2030. The vision is centered primarily around two main pillars, namely, *the creation of a vibrant society* , and *establishing a thriving economy*. First, this vibrant society should endorse modern values in the context of “modern Islam”. MBS stressed the urgent need to return to “moderate Islam” in 2016, implying his intention to decrease the role of Islam in Saudi society. This meant that dominant Saudi Islamic traditionalism among the Saudi public is being largely challenged by the government. Simultaneously, the vision emphasized the importance of entertainment activities and

stresses raising household spending on culture and entertainment from 2.9% to 6% (Al-Jazeera, 2016; Kumar & Albashrawi, 2022).

Accordingly, the first pillar corresponds to modernization assumptions. Viewing conservative ideas and, particularly, religion as a barrier to development aligns with modernist ideas. Furthermore, the increased entertainment goal reflects the high-mass consumption stage of modernized transformation. Modernists would argue that the Saudi population might reach a level of welfare where people can access luxuries due to massive production.

Secondly, the thriving economy objective focuses on economic diversification and providing a business-friendly environment for foreign investors. The vision highlights the role of advanced infrastructure in attracting foreign investment. For example, the Vision targets placing three Saudi cities among the world's top 100 cities. It is also determined to raise the percentage of foreign direct investment in GDP from 3.8% to the global average (5.7%). Therefore, it entails the modernist emphasis on urbanization through referring to infrastructure development. It also includes the modernist argument that foreign direct investment enhances developmental levels (Al-Jazeera, 2016; Kumar & Albashrawi, 2022).

Economic Progress

The Saudi government launched mega infrastructure projects in consistence with Vision 2030. According to Burke and Abuljadayel (2024), these projects amounted to 1.3 trillion dollars by the end of 2024 aimed at promoting economic diversification and attracting foreign investment. MBS launched the National Infrastructure Fund to finance these infrastructure constructions in 2021. For example, the \$28.7 billion Neom City, launched in 2021, is to become a hub for industrial complexes and renewable energy projects. Moreover, the Line City, located near the Red Sea, aims to attract 15 % of global trade by 2030 (Błocian, 2024; Leaders Magazine, 2021). In addition, The

Saudis initiated, one of the world's largest solar farms, Al Shuaibah, Mecca province to generate 70 % of the state' energy mixture from renewable sources by 2030. Finally, according to the World Population Review (2025), Saudi Arabia has ranked 30 on the quality of roads index with nearly 5/7 points. Overall, Saudi Arabia has spent 40-50 billion dollars on infrastructure from 2015-2025 annually (Leber, 2025).

Modernists are likely to support this infrastructure development. Constructing new roads and cities is in line with the preconditions for take-off specified by Rostow. The Saudi economy cannot move from a substance economic status to an export-led economic powerhouse without investing in large industrial complexes, trade routes , and energy diversification initiatives. Global infrastructure hub (n.d.) reported that the great majority of Saudi spending is allocated to industries development and job creation as Riyadh is preparing the economic base to takeoff via well-founded industrial bases and urban planning models.

As per the modernization proposition, advanced infrastructure attracts foreign investment. For instance, foreign and joint investments, valued at 96 billion dollars, contributed to 37 % of the total industrial sector in May 2023. Moreover, 200 international companies established their regional headquarters in Riyadh. The Public Investment Fund (PIF)'s assets peaked, from 152 billion dollars in 2016 to 925 billion dollars in 2024 (Leber, 2025; Saudi Press Agency, 2024). Eventually, the Saudi developmental experience sheds light on the positive correlation between infrastructure and foreign investment flow.

Consequently, these massive infrastructure projects coupled with growing investments have enhanced the Kingdom's economic standing across various metrics. For example, the Saudi GDP increased from 666 billion dollars to 1.07 trillion dollars in 2023 (World Bank, n.d.). Additionally, Saudi Real GDP growth increased from 1.6 % in 2016 to 7.6 % in 2022 and 4.5 % in early 2025.

(IMF, n.d.). The exports levels witnessed a significant leap from 203.5 billion dollars to 305.3 billion dollars between 2016 and 2024 (Trade Map, n.d.). Thus, from a modernization perspective, The Kingdom is following the economic independence strategy and pursuing levels of production similar to Western economies.

Technological Advancements

MBS has sought to capitalize on technological capabilities to serve the economic and industrial applications. The Saudi government supervised mega digital infrastructure projects. For example, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman College seeks to promote the cyber-security and AI market. STC's *AI Innovation Hub* aims to develop 5G-powered AI applications, particularly in cybersecurity and smart city management. These projects contributed to 50% of deep-tech startups focusing on AI and IoT. Thus, technological advancements are essential for the Kingdom's economic success (Bignell, 2022; Kevin & Duska, 2025).

Flowing foreign investments extended into the technology sector. For example, the Saudi government established partnerships with international technology giants such as Google, Amazon and Oracle to enhance the state's technical capacity and train local talent. There is an established target to create one programmer in every 100 Saudi nationals by 2030. This investment in education aligns with Almond's notion of education-driven development (Bignell, 2022).

Furthermore, in 2022, Saudi Arabia invested over \$6.4 billion targeting future technologies and entrepreneurship. The 1-billion-dollar *Aramco Prosperity Fund* finances transformative startups. J&T Express Group invested \$2 billion with eWTP Arabia Capital in advanced logistics and distribution facilities. These programs showcase the role of technical transfers in the development process (Bignell, 2022; Kevin & Duska, 2025).

These investments have led to technological booming in the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia has become the largest technology market in the MENA region. The Saudi technology sector is worth 40 billion dollars. This means that Saudi Arabia has moved to the drive to maturity stages, where there is an expansion in technology adoption. Eventually, AI-driven solutions drive the economic diversification strategy specified by both Vision 2030 and broad modernization agendas (Bignell, 2022).

Cultural Disconnection

MBS criticized the rigidity of the Wahabi interpretations of Islam that shaped the religious discourse of the Saudi state since 1770s. In an interview with Al-Arabiya (2021), He stated “We are returning to what we were—a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world.” This moderate Islam influenced the educational curricula through removing extremist content such as denunciations of Jews and Christians. Moreover, the government dismantled the religious police (*Hay'a*), responsible for enforcing strict Islamic dress codes in 2016 (Hamed, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2016). This means that MBS is pushing the Saudi culture away from centuries of Islamic traditionalism as per the modernization argument.

Pursuing liberal policies that clash with deeply rooted societal norms is in accordance with the modernist assumptions. For example, MBS abolished the ban on Women's right to vote and drive. In 2019, the Council of Ministers ended the guardianship law, granting women full autonomy from their male guardians. Moreover, the Saudi government lessened the authority of the religious clerics over educational curricula (Bandar, 2024). While these reforms seem to serve the well-being of the Saudi society, they are imposed on the Saudi public. James Scott’s argument on the risks of sweeping social engineering should be considered by Saudi policymakers (Leber, 2025).

Thus, this one-size-fits-all cultural formula can be viewed as a major critique of the Kingdom's vision and the modernization approach in general.

This imposition has caused cultural backlashes from conservative segments of society. The decision to lift the ban on music concerts, cultural festivals and mixed-gender gatherings in 2018 has led to conservatives' outrage. Religious scholars such as Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omari faced imprisonment due to their criticism of the government's policies in the same year. Sheikh Safar al-Hawali clearly denounced this decision, arguing: "Public concerts and dancing are not part of our traditions nor our religion. They bring only shame and sedition (*fitnah*).” Thus, the government imprisoned the Sheikh (International Commission for Jurists, 2019; Radwan, 2019). In addition, King Salman issued an arrest decision for 13 members of the ruling dynasty over connection with Islamist groups in 2017. Furthermore, reports showcase the complicity of MBS in murdering the Saudi Arabian Ambassador Jamal Khashoggi. The latter advocated for integrating Islam in politics in an essay published at Washington Post (Fishere, 2019; Hamed, 2018; Takeyh, 2017). In general, these social reforms were resisted by conservative factions due to their entrenched Islamic and cultural values.

This persecution of the clerics reveals two crucial limitations of the modernization approach. First, cultural changes should be initiated based on a bottom-up approach and not vice versa. Secondly, imposing modern practices on the Saudi public itself contradicts modern values such as freedom of choice and freedom of expression. Therefore, MBS is applying selective modernization.

Ultimately, the modernization approach does not address the role of religion in boosting development. This argument is reinforced by the idea that religious tourism is the main reason behind the enormous increase in Saudi tourism revenues. Mecca, Muslim city of Pilgrimage,

witnessed 60 % increase in tourists and 40 % in tourists' spending. Meanwhile, Jeddah, the city responsible for Pilgrimage's processing, accounted for an additional 5.5 percent of increased visits and nearly 11 percent of increased spending. Overall, the number of Umrah visits increased by 50 % compared to 2019 levels (Leber, 2025; Saudi Press Agency, 2025). Thus, Saudi developmental experience should take into consideration its cultural heritage for a comprehensive view of development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that Saudi Arabia's vision 2030 reflects the developmental path of the modernization theory. The paper investigated the two main pillars of the vision including its societal and economic factors. Through massive infrastructure projects and flowing foreign investments, Saudi Arabia enhanced its economic performance. The paper assessed the state's economic activity through analyzing the economic indicators such as GDP, GDP growth and exports levels. This comes in line with the economic growth metric stressed by the modernists.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia has become a technological hub due to constructions expansions as well as investments from technological giants in this field. Education also played a major role in driving technical advancements in the state. In general, this aligned with the role of investments and technological transfers in boosting the state's economic position.

In contrast, Vision 2030 imposed Western lifestyles on the Saudi population through a top-down approach. Music concerts and cultural festivals were resisted by the conservative segments of society. The subsequent political persecution of these religious figures such as Awad al-Qarni and Sheikh Safar al-Hawali showcased the non-modernity of the Saudi modernization. Ultimately, the

state should consider the role of its Islamic position in driving its development policies such as the growth of religious tourism.

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