

SAUDIS ANNOUNCE IMPORTANT NEW REFORMS TO EMPOWER WOMEN — NOT ENOUGH, BUT NOTEWORTHY.

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Important news out of Saudi Arabia: the Kingdom last week announced a series of sweeping reforms aimed at empowering women.

It's not nearly enough, but these are noteworthy and important moves after a toxic and painful year in Saudi Arabia.

Some thoughts.

In 2017 and 2018, at the direction of His Majesty King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, (MBS), the Saudis embarked on a series of high-profile and quite positive social and economic reforms that richly captured global attention and praise.

Unfortunately, the effect of these reforms was seriously marred by the Kingdom's crackdown on dissent and political activity.

Then, all reform in the Kingdom came to a screeching halt after the heinous and unconscionable murder of Saudi dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in October 2018. The Royal Palace became consumed by the international firestorm over the murder and could focus on little else.

MBS has denied ordering the murder. Still, 11 Saudi officials were arrested, indicted and charged in Riyadh with murdering Khashoggi. Five Saudi officials currently face the death penalty. The U.S. also rightly imposed sanctions on 17 Saudi officials for their alleged involvement in the horrific plot.

Many questions remain over who ordered the murder and why. The Kingdom's reputation in Washington and many world capitals has taken a catastrophic hit. And many commentators have openly speculated that MBS might be removed from the line of succession and his Vision 2030 blueprint for reform might be scrapped altogether.

That said, last week provided significant evidence that MBS still has his father's confidence and that the Vision 2030 reforms are once again moving forward.

The following are excerpts from a message sent to me by a senior Saudi source:

“You may have seen the reports about the Kingdom's decision to remove the obstacles on women's mobility. I wanted to make sure that you saw (the details)... This decision affirms the Kingdom's commitment to its vision in realizing the full potential of Saudi women, and their full integration into our society. This is driven by our leadership's belief that the empowerment of women is a central pillar of Vision 2030, that we cannot move forward if half of the population does not enjoy equal rights before the law, and that our development goals are unattainable without gender equality.”

“This decision, significant as it may be, is only one part of the long line of decisions that demonstrate our leadership's commitment to the empowerment of women under Vision 2030 and improving the quality of life for all people in the country,” the source added.

“These reforms so far have included sweeping reforms to empower Saudi women, (such as)....”

- Independence. At age 22, women (and men) are free to work and travel without approval of a guardian.
- Equality. Women are guaranteed equal protection and equal pay in the workplace.

- Status. Women can finally be considered “head of the household” according to the law.
- Empowerment. Women can now fully and independently manage legal and business affairs.

Reuters provided more details on the extent of the reforms:

- “Saudi Arabia has allowed adult women to travel without permission and granted them more control over family matters, further eroding a heavily criticized male guardianship system at a time of heightened scrutiny over its human rights record.
- “A series of royal decrees published by the official gazette on Friday stipulated that a Saudi passport should be issued to any citizen who applies for it and that any person above the age of 21 does not need permission to travel.
- “The amendments to regulations also grant women for the first time the right to register child birth, marriage or divorce and to be issued official family documents and be eligible as a guardian to children who are minors....
- “Riyadh has long endured international censure over the status of women, who rights groups say are often treated as second-class citizens under rules requiring them to get the consent of a male guardian for important decisions throughout their entire lives, regardless of age. Muna AbuSulayman, a prominent Saudi influencer and a former talk show host, took to Twitter along with thousands of Saudi women to celebrate what many described as a new era. ‘A generation growing up completely free and equal to their brothers,’ she said, referring to the freedom to travel.....”

I have been deeply grieved by the events of the past year in Riyadh. We may live in an imperfect world and have to make imperfect choices, but we must always urge our friends and allies to do better.

Justice must be done in the Khashoggi affair.

Innocent Saudis who have been unfairly and unnecessarily imprisoned should be released promptly. Why undermine smart reforms with repressive moves impossible to explain to the very governments, CEOs and investors needed to help the Kingdom advance?

Reforms to dramatically improve social, economic and religious freedom for all Saudis should be accelerated, consistent with Vision 2030 objectives. True reform is the only way forward.

And given the growing Iran threat, and the importance of fighting terrorism and making regional peace, the U.S.-Saudi alliance should be strengthened. This will be easier to accomplish if Washington sees Riyadh making much more progress on the reform front in the last half of 2019.
