

STORY

# Saudi Women Who Fought for the Right to Drive Are Disappearing and Going Into Exile

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BY SARAH AZIZA



Woman driving in Saudi Arabia. Image by Shutterstock. Saudi Arabia, 2018.

**On the evening** of September 26, 2017, 28-year-old Loujain al-Hathloul sat at home in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, eyeing her smartphone. A stream of notifications cascaded down the screen as her social media feeds erupted with messages of shock, joy, and speculation. Moments before, an ordinary Tuesday had turned historic: King Salman al-Saud took to state-run television to issue a stunning royal decree: Saudi women, at long last, would be granted the right to drive. The abrupt announcement, orchestrated in concert with a simultaneous press event in Washington, D.C., and a warm commendation

(<http://www.arabnews.com/node/1168251/saudi-arabia>) from U.S. President Donald Trump, had sent millions of Saudis reeling. For decades, the government had remained intractable on the issue of women's right to drive, siding invariably with conservative clerics who justified the ban on religious grounds. Human rights groups viewed the ban — unique the world over — as an emblem of a broader oppressive stance toward women, and had long called for its repeal. Yet even the most earnest advocates would have thought such a reversal unthinkable mere hours before.

Al-Hathloul, a women's rights activist with thick, dark hair and penetrating brown eyes, had felt her own flood of emotions on that balmy evening one year ago, but surprise was not among them. She'd already had days to process the news, having been tipped off (<https://twitter.com/margheritamvs/status/914485399870881793>) to the coming reform by the Saudi government itself. The phone call from the Royal Court, however, had not been a pleasant one: After informing al-Hathloul of the impending announcement, the government official had instructed her to refrain from making any public comment on the reform, even in praise.



Loujain al-Hathloul. Image from Wikimedia Commons. Saudi Arabia, 2016.

As one of the country's foremost activists, boasting a large and active social media presence, al-Hathloul struggled to abide by the order. Reflecting on the king's decree, her mind cycled through the years she'd spent advocating for the right to drive, among other social and civil rights for women — and the international attention (<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/03/meghan-markle-emma-watson-humanitarian-work>) she'd garnered for the cause. She recalled the 73-day detention she'd served just two years prior, after being arrested for attempting to drive a car inside the kingdom, an experience that had shaken her deeply without deterring her. Images of women — her mother, sisters, fellow activists, and friends — flicked through her mind. The ability to drive would significantly impact their daily lives, from expanded work opportunities to the simple, radical joy of mobility. She even dared to imagine that this policy change was a sign that the Saudi regime might be

open to further, more fundamental reforms. Even with the Royal Court's warning echoing in her ear, the dynamic al-Hathloul itched to express her elation and tentative hope.

She was not the only one under a gag order that Tuesday night. The government had made similar calls to several other women's rights advocates in the preceding days, including two who were abroad at the time, ordering them to remain silent when news of the driving reform broke. "We got the impression that they didn't want activists claiming credit for the change — the message was, this was a top-down decision made by the king, and not a reward for activism," said one human rights advocate, who asked for anonymity for fear of reprisals. Most complied with the orders, although al-Hathloul took a gamble with a single, seemingly innocuous tweet (<https://twitter.com/loujainhathloul/status/912761302761820162>): "Al-Hamduililah" — thank God. Shortly after, she was contacted by a government affiliate, admonishing her to heed the court's instructions.

The ominous phone calls, coming alongside the historic announcement, were emblematic of the strange new moment that activists like al-Hathloul were living. In 2016, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi government had embarked on a massive "Vision 2030 (<http://vision2030.gov.sa/en>)" campaign for "national transformation," promising vast social and economic reform, including expanded rights for women. Never before had the government, traditionally yoked to an ultraconservative religious elite, broadcast such a zealous message of reform. Yet at the same time, the government was increasingly censoring civilians of various political and religious persuasions, arresting critical clerics and moderate journalists alike, and placing increasing pressure on state media to publish pro-government stories, sources inside the Saudi press told The Intercept. Hiba Zayadin, Human Rights Watch's chief researcher on Saudi Arabia, said, "The state was making clear that all the promised reforms were to be accomplished by the state alone, in a top-down manner, on the government's terms."

**Still, as recently** as a year ago, al-Hathloul and those like her held out hope that the state-endorsed push for reform could create conditions for progress on other issues, such as the rights of political prisoners and the kingdom's male guardianship laws, which subject women to the will of their male "custodians" in various areas of social and civil life. "We weren't sure how serious the government was about its promises, but we thought, maybe we can work within the system and use their own words to push for change now," said one woman activist, speaking of last year. "We thought we could present ourselves as allies, to support their work, and maybe they would accept us."

For al-Hathloul, this hope would be short-lived. Beginning on May 15, 2018, just weeks before the end of the ban on female drivers, the government began a series of arrests targeting prominent activists. Al-Hathloul was among the first to disappear into custody, along with Eman al-Nafjan and Aziza al-Yousef, fellow advocates for human rights and reform. Simultaneously, photographs of the women began to circulate on local media and online, accompanied by state accusations of treason and collusion with foreign governments. A hashtag, #AgentsofEmbassies (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/may/21/further-arrests-saudi-arabia-womens-rights-activists-driving-ban>), went viral, as did speculations that al-Hathloul was a Qatari operative intent on harming the Saudi state.

The arrests were the latest example of a new and expanding tactic in Saudi Arabia of the state using anti-terrorism laws to silence dissent. "In the past few years, there has been an increasing trend of using nationalist rhetoric and accusations of terrorism to squelch anyone who might question the state," said Zayadin. Such allegations allow for the authorities to hold people for months without trial and prosecute them in the so-called Specialized Criminal Court, where they could face heavy sentences for nonviolent crimes. "We've seen it used against conservatives and liberals alike," Zayadin added, citing a slew of arrests in September 2017 during which the government rounded up (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-arrests/more-arrests-in-apparent-saudi-campaign-against-critics-activists-iduskcn1bn2tu>) a group of clerics, academics, and journalists under

similar charges (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/15/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-arrests.html>) of treason. (The Saudi embassy in Washington did not respond to a request for comment.)

At the end of June, the world applauded as women in the kingdom claimed their right to drive for the first time. Meanwhile, al-Hathloul and her colleagues remained incommunicado. Just three days later, Hatoon al-Fassi, a prominent professor of women's history and longtime advocate for reform, was taken into custody on unknown charges. The following month, two more well-known female activists, Samar Badawi and Nassima al-Sadah, were arrested, despite having largely halted their organizing and online activities after witnessing the crackdown on their peers.

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In the meantime, other activists fell silent or, along with a growing number of conservatives, academics, journalists, and businesspeople, quietly left the country. “There’s a feeling now that, even if you’re not an activist, just having an opinion is dangerous,” said one human rights advocate, who left the country to avoid detention. “Right now, I don’t have any hope for activism inside the kingdom.” Like many of the activists in this story, The Intercept is withholding the human rights advocate’s name and identifying details at their request, in order to protect them and their family.

Zayadin said the clampdown has been unlike any seen before in Saudi Arabia. “The scope and severity of these crackdowns is really unprecedented,” she said. “Even people outside the kingdom are scared to speak their mind. All the momentum for a grassroots reform movement that was built over recent years has been halted.”

As a result, less than two years into the government's 24-year plan to reform the kingdom, positing it as a progressive peer among the world's liberal democracies, the frontiers of Saudi dissent have shifted almost completely abroad.

**Saudi Arabia, one** of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies, has never offered much in the way of civic engagement. Even so, the kingdom has seen numerous, if marginal, movements for political reform in the course of its 86-year history. Since at least the 1970s, academics and organizers, many of them women, have quietly nurtured a network of "salons," using private homes as gathering places for political and intellectual discourse. The first mass demonstration for women's right to drive came in 1990, when 47 women drove cars in the streets of Riyadh. More recently, smaller collectives, such as the "Jeddah Reformers (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2007/02/07/saudi-arabia-free-detained-advocates-reform>)," the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, the Union for Human Rights, and the Adala Center for Human Rights, emerged to promote civil rights and government accountability.

These activists, and many of their loved ones, have paid heavily for their cause. Women who participated in the 1990 driving demonstration, known ever after as "The Drivers (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid=97541372>)," faced detention followed by years of social stigma and professional setbacks. Other organizers endured harassment, arrest, incarceration, and even corporal punishment. Groups like the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association were declared illegal by the state. Meanwhile, periodic uprisings from the country's Shi'ite minorities repeatedly led to violent showdowns with state security forces.

The state's severity is made all the more terrifying by its arbitrary enforcement. Saudi Arabia lacks an official constitution, relying instead on a diffuse, and malleable, constellation of religious rulings — "fatwas" — alongside royal decrees. For most of the kingdom's history, the penal code has been likewise ad hoc (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/03/24/precarious-justice/arbitrary-detention-and-unfair-trials-deficient-criminal>), allowing the state to prosecute activists and

dissenters as it saw fit. “Until recently, there were no clearcut guidelines about crime and punishment,” said one Saudi journalist, who asked not to be named in order to protect their family. “It was terrifying to get taken in for political reasons. There was a feeling that anything could happen to you.” (In recent years, the government has instituted some piecemeal regulations guiding the adjudication of particular crimes, but these broadly defined laws still leave much to interpretation.)

Yet while the state has always been intent on suppressing political protest, the past several years have seen a severe turn. In 2008, subject to pressure from American anti-extremism efforts in the region, the Saudi government established a Specialized Criminal Court tasked with prosecuting terrorism cases. Soon after, rights groups began raising concerns (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/27/saudi-arabia-abolish-terrorism-court>) that the court was being misused to prosecute nonviolent dissidents. These fears grew with the passage of the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, in 2014, which leveled harsh punishments for a wide range of expansively defined crimes. Waleed Abu al-Khair, the first activist to be convicted (<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/saudi-arabia-free-human-rights-lawyer-waleed-abulkhair-abu-al-khair>) under these expanded laws in 2014, was sentenced to 15 years in prison and a 15-year travel ban after speaking out about human rights and signing a petition critical of the government.

Since the imposition of the 2014 law, the government has expanded its counterterrorism mandate, most recently in a 2017 amendment (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/23/saudi-arabia-new-counterterrorism-law-enables-abuse>) that transferred much of the special court’s prosecutorial powers from the Ministry of Interior to newly created offices that report directly to the king. The latest version of the law, like its predecessors, encompasses a wide array of vague offenses, such as “disturbing the public order of the state” and “exposing its national unity to danger.” It also criminalizes any portrayal of the king or crown prince which, directly or indirectly, “brings religion or justice into disrepute.” The law also allows for a pretrial detention of up to 12 months with unlimited renewal, while curtailing a detainee’s right to legal counsel. In May 2017, a United Nations



report declared (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/newsevents/pages/displaynews.aspx?newsid=21585&langid=e>) Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism laws to be in violation of international human rights standards for its "criminalization of a wide spectrum of acts of peaceful expression."

**The government invoked** these anti-terrorism laws when it detained al-Hathloul for the first time (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/26/world/middleeast/saudi-antiterrorism-court-to-try-women-held-for-driving.html>) in 2014. The young woman was arrested one winter day at the Saudi-United Arab Emirates border while attempting to drive a car into Saudi Arabia. Al-Hathloul, then 25, along with her 33-year-old companion Maysaa al-Amoodi, were the first women to be threatened with prosecution under the Specialized Criminal Court and remained in state custody for 73 days. "This was a wake-up call for us," said one activist who was close to the women. "We expected some backlash for our activism, of course, but we thought it would be interrogation, maybe — not prison. But after that, we started to feel that at any moment, the government could make us disappear."

Sobered, many activists moved their organizing completely online, often using pseudonyms to screen themselves from the state. A few online campaigns emerged. In 2014, activists on Twitter launched the hashtag #IAmMyOwnGuardian, among others, calling for the end to the kingdom's repressive male guardianship laws. The petition garnered over 14,000 signatures, which activist Aziza al-Yousef printed and delivered in person to the Royal Court. Arriving with the document in hand, she was sent away and told to mail the petition by post, which she later did. In 2015, women organizers launched another petition, "Baladi," or "my country," to push for the right for women to participate in municipal elections. The request was eventually granted, but several prominent women activists, including al-Hathloul, were explicitly banned from running.

Despite the snubs, and although the hyperlocal elections offered little in the way of real-world impact, the victory was still taken as a symbolic win for the movement. "For a while, we were seeing some changes happening, very small, but still

happening,” said one female organizer, who now lives overseas. Overall, however, activists report an increasing sense of fear, saying that previous workarounds, such as hedging their critique in the language of moderation, nationalism, and reform no longer ensures their safety. “We used to think if we presented ourselves as allies to the government, wanting to work with them, we would be safe,” said the organizer. “But that changed after the rise of Mohammed bin Salman.”

In some cases, the government targeted the family members of accused dissidents, one longtime activist told *The Intercept*, including placing them under travel bans. “The travel bans are one less-known form of state suppression,” said Zayadin, of Human Rights Watch. “The government will often block activists or their family members from leaving the country, and some don’t find out about this until they reach the airport.” Others who took part in salons, academic clubs, or other organizing spaces reported being monitored by government operatives, or receiving harassing phone calls warning them to cease their activities.

The growing atmosphere of fear prompted some to leave the country, including Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and former newspaper editor, who said he began facing scrutiny after publishing articles in favor of the widespread popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring. “The government made clear they weren’t happy with me then,” said Khashoggi, a 59-year-old Jeddah native whose penetrating eyes had grown weary in recent months. We spoke several times during the summer of 2018, his decisive voice edged with remorse. “There was always a gentlemen’s agreement between the state and media — we published certain things or kept other things out of the press — and it went along pretty smoothly,” he said. “But then we started seeing more direct pressure on journalists to only publish pro-government stories. Some people were asked to sign loyalty pledges. Some people were banned from writing or had their columns taken down. Things got worse for the activists, too, or people with critical opinions. The government was sending a message that if you’re not with us, you’re against us.” Khashoggi relocated to the United States in June 2017. Al-Hathloul’s colleague, al-Amoodi, also moved abroad shortly after being released from prison.

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Yet the Saudi state’s efforts to suppress dissent appear to extend far beyond the nation’s borders. Numerous Saudi activists who sought refuge in the United States and Europe have reported receiving phone calls from the Saudi embassies in their host countries. The calls included requests for the activists to report to the embassy for undisclosed reasons. “I would never go,” said one activist who received one such summons. “Who knows what would happen? I’m afraid they would deport me.” (Since 2015, three Saudi princes who had criticized the royal family also disappeared ([https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/magazine-40926963?\\_\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/amp/magazine-40926963?__twitter_impression=true)) while abroad, and are believed to have been forcibly returned to the kingdom).

Such fears were surely on Khashoggi’s mind on October 2, 2018, when he approached the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Khashoggi was seeking documents necessary to marry his Turkish fiancée, Hatice, who requested that her last name be withheld. According to Hatice, before entering the consulate at about 1:30 p.m., Khashoggi instructed her to call the Turkish authorities if he did not return. She waited outside the consulate until after midnight, but Khashoggi never appeared. The Saudi government denied detaining the dissident, claiming that he exited the premises on his own accord. Security footage obtained by Turkish authorities show no sign of Khashoggi leaving the consulate, but the New York Times reported (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/03/world/middleeast/khashoggi-saudi-journalist-istanbul.html>) that several diplomatic vehicles have been seen entering and exiting the compound. Khashoggi’s whereabouts remain unknown.

**Today, the Saudi streets** are awash with a heady mixture of hope, bewilderment, and, for some, a burgeoning patriotism. Most Saudis agree, with varying levels of excitement or dismay, that their country is living through a moment of profound change — a message the government itself aggressively promotes. State-sponsored

billboards, street signs, and social media campaigns tout slogans of national pride and the promise of a Saudi Arabian renaissance embodied by Vision 2030, the government's vast agenda to reform Saudi's economic and social life. From malls to hotel lobbies to airports, regal artwork depicts the state's founder, King Abdulaziz, alongside the current monarch King Salman, who in turn is often flanked by his heir-apparent, 33-year-old Mohammed bin Salman.

Bin Salman, or "MBS," has presented himself as the architect of the kingdom's promised renewal since announcing Vision 2030 in April 2016. Since then, the crown prince has rapidly consolidated power, undercutting traditional governing protocol, firing dozens of government-appointed officials, and directing abrupt changes in the economic, labor, and religious sectors. Some of the changes have reversed decadeslong conservative norms, such as the decision to allow women to drive and attend sporting events, or the opening of cinemas and concert halls. Seeking to encourage a more diverse and engaged local workforce, the crown prince has overseen programs to incentivize companies to hire Saudis, alongside new policies to curb the country's massive migrant workforce. In pursuit of foreign capital, MBS has eased regulations on outside investments, courted tech giants such as Amazon and Apple, and announced plans for a futuristic robotic-driven city, Neom.

One pillar to Vision 2030 is the rehabilitation of Saudi Arabia's image abroad, which has long suffered from associations with religious extremism and gender-based oppression. In a series of much-celebrated interviews with the Western press in 2017, MBS popularized the idea that he was "restoring" Islam in the kingdom to its real, moderate roots. The crown prince also promised that the change would be swift. "We won't waste 30 years of our life combating extremist thoughts; we will destroy them now and immediately," he said

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>). In apparently keeping with this promise, the government has silenced many of the country's conservative religious figures, most notably in a

spree of arrests last September (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/15/saudi-arabia-prominent-clerics-arrested>) that included several prominent clerics, and the scaling-back of the once-feared religious police.

Many in the West have been eager to embrace MBS's narrative; New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman lauded (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>) the crown prince as embodying "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at last." Many Saudis, too, proclaim their delight at MBS's promise and express their relief at the country's new, moderate image abroad. Roughly 70 percent of the Saudi population is under 30 years old and tend to be particularly receptive to the promises of Vision 2030. "For the first time in my life, I'm proud to be a Saudi," said Nadia, a 28-year-old Riyadh native, whose last name is being withheld by The Intercept. "My whole life, I've had to bear that burden of 9/11 whenever I travel abroad. That was what we were known for — but now, suddenly, it's cool to be Saudi."

**Behind the carefully** curated optics, however, MBS's execution of his agenda has upended the kingdom's traditional distributions of power. "The king has always been the most powerful person in Saudi Arabia, but he's always ruled through a complex system of mechanisms and councils, and in some kind of consensus with princes, businessmen, and religious leaders who met behind the scenes," said Rami Khouri, a senior fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School and professor at the American University of Beirut. "But what MBS has done is centralize power in every major sphere of life into his own two hands. He has control over political affairs, religious, economic, oil, military, social, media affairs. He controls the levers, directly or indirectly, of every major dimension of life. All the rules have been changed unilaterally."

"Unlike his predecessors, who have consistently jailed activists and dissenters, MBS is now pre-emptively locking up those who might, in the future, oppose him in some way."

This has allowed the crown prince to institute drastic reforms in what feels like lightning pace, but, Khouri added, “With this kind of top-heavy rule, there is no room for political or civil discourse. MBS doesn’t want any accountability, and he has made clear he wants to be 100 percent in charge of the narrative.” This, Khouri speculated, is the real reason behind the gag orders and arrests. “Unlike his predecessors, who have consistently jailed activists and dissenters,” Khouri said, “MBS is now pre-emptively locking up those who might, in the future, oppose him in some way.”

The diversity of those targeted is striking, encompassing dozens of conservative religious elites, as well as progressively minded figures such as al-Hathloul. Though the state has continued to use anti-terrorism laws to justify the detentions, the lock-up of al-Hathloul and the other May arrestees was among the most aggressive the country has seen yet, said Zayadin. “In this case, you saw an active smear campaign, linking these activists to foreign governments, especially Qatar,” she said. “This seems unprecedented, to be splattering the women’s faces with the word ‘traitor’ across the front pages of the media. It’s dangerous and stigmatizing. It seems like a push to end their careers in activism or keep them in jail a very long time.” In other arrests, however, no reasons are given, with detainees simply vanishing into the penal system’s inscrutable folds. Such cases are on the rise, added Zayadin. Earlier this year, Human Rights Watch reported (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/06/saudi-arabia-thousands-held-arbitrarily>) a rapid increase in arbitrary detentions, with over 2,000 new cases between 2014 to 2018.

This new sense of vulnerability has all but halted any grassroots movement for reform. “People spent years slowly building momentum around causes related to social, civil, and political rights, and for the moment, it appears to be all but squashed,” said one activist, now living abroad. “It’s very disheartening.” She continued, “The cost has become too high for most of us — there’s a sense that anything could happen if the government decides to target you. We see human rights groups pointing the finger at Saudi after each arrest, but nothing happens.

Saudi Arabia is even on the Human Rights Council!” — a reference to the kingdom’s seat on the U.N. body. “With no outside pressure, why would the government change?”

**There are those** who defend the government’s heavy-handed approach. Many Saudis, in private conversation, expressed approval of mass arrests of religious conservatives and for the state’s ostensible corruption purge. “I mean, if [MBS] hadn’t gotten rid of those clerics before allowing women to drive, for example, Twitter would have been a mess,” said one 31-year-old male banker, his animated speech weaving between Arabic and English. “These kind of changes have to come top-down. If we waited for society to be ready on its own, we’d never see women driving, we’d never see these changes.” I interviewed him in a Jeddah cafe, where he sat across from me, dressed in a traditional white thobe — the traditional ankle-length Saudi garment — and sporting an Apple Watch. “A few years ago, I could never have sat with a female friend like this in public,” he said, gesturing to the room. Around us, several co-ed clusters of young Saudis leaned over egg-shaped table tops crowded with iced coffees. “We would have been terrified of the religious police. But now, things are changing almost day to day. And while it’s confusing, it’s also very exciting for us.”

It is undeniable that some Saudis, including many women, now enjoy greater rights and privileges than they have in recent history. It is also true that many are genuinely unaware of the state’s crackdowns on activists, said the Saudi journalist source. “Most of those arrests don’t make it on the public’s radar,” they said. “And when they do, the words ‘traitor’ or the suggestion that they are foreign agents is enough to scare people off the subject.” The state’s newly muscular presence in Saudi life further discourages people from political speech, the source went on. “There’s a paradox now that people are more socially free — they can go to the movies and, in some places, mix with the opposite gender — but they are more afraid than ever to speak their minds about the government,” the source said. “Especially with the war on in Yemen” — where a Saudi-led coalition has fought a

brutal and heavily criticized three-year war — “there’s a new pressure to be patriotic. There’s a sense that things are very delicate right now. If you bring up political topics, you’ll see everyone go silent.”

**Outside the kingdom**, some Saudis are attempting to consolidate a resistance. A constellation of college students, exiled activists, academics, bloggers, and human rights advocates work to keep the issues of political repression in the eye of the international community. “We have to redefine what success means for activists, for now,” said one organizer in self-imposed exile. “The government is waging a PR battle, so we are attempting to do the same. We are trying to get the Western media and world leaders to see what is happening to human rights there, to put some pressure on MBS.” In many ways, these tenacious few represent the last significant counternarrative to MBS’s broadcast image of unfettered forward progress.

Their presence abroad also raises the question of the regime’s missed opportunity. By driving out diverse voices and pre-emptively silencing dissent, Saudi deprives itself of the ingenuity and vitality of many of its own. Domestically, too, the aggressive crackdowns are a risk: To accomplish the national transformation it seeks, Saudi Arabia will need the whole-hearted engagement of its vastly young population — a generation that may be turned off or driven away by government overreach.

Yet the government so far appears unfazed by criticisms and has enjoyed relative immunity in the wake of each crackdown. After a cursory flurry of attention following the arrests of al-Hathloul and others in May 2018, international interest in the cases waned and subsequent arrests attracted little attention. In one exception, the government of Canada very publicly took the Saudi government to task in early August, following the arrests of Badawi and al-Sadah. Since then, the two countries have exchanged a series of increasingly drastic reprisals, but the Saudi government remains unapologetic. “As long as MBS has the support of world powers like the United States, the UAE, and Israel, I don’t think he’s going to



change,” Hala Aldosari, a fellow at Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, said in a phone interview, her voice firm but strained. “Yet the activists and their allies feel they must continue doing what they can.”

Rami Khouri, too, is skeptical of the activists’ chances, but added that the volatility of MBS’s reign leaves many things open to question. “It’s hard to talk about what MBS might do — like Trump, he’s very bold, but inexperienced, and has a lot of power,” Khouri said. “So the question of what kind of opposition could emerge, especially inside the kingdom — that cannot be answered yet. It’s possible that there will be none. Historically, a lot of people get used to authoritarians and can put up with a lot — especially if there’s no mass atrocities and if their basic daily needs are maintained and improved.”

Increasingly, MBS’s future has been pinned on the success or failure of his economic agenda — and this may be the case for the future of political expression in the kingdom, as well. “Right now, there is some hope, some willingness to accept and follow MBS, even if there’s a sense that he’s being heavy-handed, because people are hopeful that he can improve their financial well-being, their quality of life,” said the Saudi journalist.

The clock, however, is ticking. Some have begun to question the ability of the crown prince to deliver on his many lofty promises. Already, key components of the economic reform plan are in serious doubt — including the much-touted public offering of Saudi’s Aramco oil company. “If, a few years from now, people feel like they are still in the same position, or worse, economically, they might be less willing to put up with MBS,” the journalist added. Khouri agreed: “The social reforms — like concerts, like driving — have excited and distracted people for a time. But in the end, man doesn’t live by bread and concerts alone. Human beings want to be human beings. They want access to the totality of life, to have a voice, to be respected, to have a say in their own lives.”

If, in the meantime, the government continues its crackdowns on all dissent, it may find itself rebuffed by the same Western audiences it hopes to entice. “Going after civil society in such an aggressive way, MBS is shooting himself in the foot,” said

Aldosari. “Maybe, when he was just arresting clerics, the Western world didn’t care. But arresting women, elderly people, respected academics, all of them nonviolent — this is a direct contradiction of his rhetoric of modernization and openness. And he can’t stop everyone who wants to criticize him. The world doesn’t work that way anymore. Even if he throws all the activists in jail, they started a work that will continue. It cannot be stopped.”

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