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THE GENUINE AND CONTEMPORARY SAUDI ARABIA

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) often appears to be a country of exorbitant luxury, inexhaustible oil deposits, staunch conservatism, and irresistible extremism. Alongside this, many believe that the country's population is shackled by unwavering social and legal norms and burdened with strict religious dogma.

However, these assertions are completely opposite to the objective reality. These common and 'convenient' stereotypes have been shaped in our society for decades and are still widely circulating in the media space, openly distorting the image of the Middle Eastern country.

For example, we are told that women in Muslim countries, particularly in the KSA, have no rights and must be completely subservient to the male members of the family. There is also an unreasonably widespread misleading portrayal of Saudi society: some people dwell in the desert, without the amenities of civilisation and in extreme squalor, while others possess incomparable and excessive wealth and do not restrain themselves in any whims and fancies. What is particularly striking is the widespread perception of a high level of radicalism in the country, rejection of religions other than Islam and a deep affinity for the idea of 'terrorism'. Accordingly, the KSA is associated with a dangerous crime rate and particular risks for foreigners there.

Throughout my stay in the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, I have repeatedly been convinced of the bias and obsolescence of such perceptions. Furthermore, the ongoing globalisation has pushed this country to undergo fundamental systemic transformations: social liberalisation, institutional reforms, economic diversification, etc. The state is modernising, adopting best international practices, and successfully transforming its social institutions.

Economy

According to the International Monetary Fund, the KSA demonstrated the fastest economic growth among the G20 countries in 2022. The overall economic growth rate was 8.7% due to an increase in oil revenues and expansion of the non-oil sector, driven by private consumption and ongoing reforms under the Saudi Vision 2030.

The key objective of this ambitious project is to diversify the country's economy and drastically reduce its oil dependence. By 2030, the Kingdom intends to increase the share of exports in non-oil gross domestic product (GDP) from 16% to 50%. In addition, the programme promotes the development of high-potential sectors of the economy and encourages investment.

With a view to broadening its diversification prospects and increasing employment opportunities, Saudi Arabia has developed the In-Kingdom Total Value Add programme aimed at developing strategic industrial and economic areas.

The government is actively developing the mining sector by creating a network of industrial towns, introducing a special investment regime, and improving the logistics infrastructure.

Saudi Arabia also manifests increased attention to environmental issues. The Kingdom has expanded the renewable energy sector by introducing the Saudi Green and Middle East Green Initiatives to protect the environment and overcome climate change. The programmes aim to reduce carbon emissions in the region by increasing the share of renewable energy to 50%, planting 50 billion trees (including 10 billion in the Kingdom) and expanding the area of nature reserves. And in 2021, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the KSA Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud declared the country's intention to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2060.

The state is putting a considerable part of its efforts into enhancing its attractiveness to foreign audiences, particularly through tourism and entertainment. The country has established a fund for developing the tourism industry, launched the expansion of digital services, simplified the conditions for obtaining a tourist visa, and set out to open tourist sites. Thus, the Kingdom aims to increase the share of tourism revenues in GDP to 10% and create several million jobs by 2030.

The game industry is noticeably evolving as well. As of 2022, there were approximately 23.5 million gamers, making up around 70% of the Kingdom's young population. Esports industry development is expected to provide 39,000 jobs and yield at least USD 13.32 billion to the GDP by 2030.

The country is actively implementing the Saudisation policy, which pertains to an increase in Saudi nationals' share in the labour force. In 2022, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development of the KSA launched the Tawteen 2 programme, which aims to create 170,000 jobs in tourism, manufacturing, health-care, transport and logistics services, real estate and construction, etc.

The country's leadership counts on strengthening the information technology component of economic growth. Saudi Arabia is creating the necessary innovative technological infrastructure, namely economic cities, research centres, laboratories, educational institutions, etc.

Society

In September 2019, the Kingdom commenced to welcome tourists from 49 countries, including Ukraine. This is truly a historic moment for a conservative society that had long wavered whether to open itself and its country to the world. Today, Saudi citizens embrace foreigners, representatives of other religions, beliefs, traditions, and cultures with open arms and hospitality.

As liberalisation permeates all aspects of everyday social life, it has also affected the status of women. Nowadays, they are getting more and more employment opportunities: in 2021, women accounted for 36% of the country's total labour force, ten years ahead of the scheduled term. In 2019, women were allowed to serve in the KSA Armed Forces, and in 2021, the first group of female soldiers was trained. Women are gradually filling high-level leadership positions, such as Deputy Foreign Minister for Public Diplomacy, Deputy Minister of Tourism, and Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Ministers. Furthermore, in 2023, the first Saudi female astronaut, Rayyanah Barnawi, contributed to space exploration by taking part in a mission to the International Space Station.

In 2018, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud issued a decree granting women the right to drive vehicles. That was one of the most high-profile events that drastically changed the perception of Saudi women in society, particularly among its male part. In 2022, the Personal Status Law came into force, empowering women with custody of children and expanding the regulatory framework intended to protect the rights and interests of minors.

It is no secret that religion is an integral part of the life of Muslims. Moreover, Islam encompasses every aspect of social life, and the spiritual relationship of believers with the Almighty is a special and private sacrament. Saudi citizens are no exception: not for an instant do they forget about religious precepts and canons. At the same time, such a responsible and particularly sensitive attitude to Islamic teachings does not mean intolerance of other religions. On the contrary, studies of freedom of religion show a positive Muslims' perception of the idea of religious diversity and the broad integration of other cultures into the Saudi social environment.

In this regard, the King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue proves to be effective, promoting respect for diverse cultural manifestations while preserving national unity and promoting communication at the state and international levels.

The role of the forum on Common Values among Religious Followers, which took place in Riyadh in 2022, cannot be overestimated. For the first time in the history of the Kingdom, representatives of the five major world religions attended the event: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The forum's main goal was to identify values shared by religious followers and to find ways of strengthening understanding, cooperation, and solidarity.

International agenda

The KSA is steadily developing its image of a regional leader committed to stability and security in the Middle East and demonstrates independence in addressing local threats and challenges. This is especially apparent in the Saudi-Iranian normalisation process of 2023, which was intended to bring the long-standing confrontation to an end and reduce tensions. The next step was the renewal of diplomatic relations with Syria, resuming its full membership in the Arab League and rejoining the Arab family. Despite the international community's objections, Saudi Arabia stepped up to lead this process. Over the past few years, cases of restoring ties with certain countries in the region, including Qatar and Türkiye, have become just as noteworthy. And in 2023, official Riyadh resumed diplomatic relations with Canada, which positively boosted the Kingdom's image among Western audiences.

The country demonstrates palpable flexibility in finding helpful partners and forging situational alliances to overcome regional crises. Another manifestation of Saudi diplomacy was a joint attempt with the United States to settle the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan, which threatens to escalate into a regional instability zone and therefore requires collective efforts to eliminate undesirable consequences.

The KSA's diplomatic strategy is guided by the principle of multidirectionality and multilateralism. The country is trying to broaden and diversify its external ties by intensifying cooperation with regional and global actors.

Ukraine, on the other hand, is pretty much concerned about the dynamics of bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Saudi leadership has taken a position of positive neutrality, cooperating with both Ukraine and Russia and separating the issues of political and economic agenda. Riyadh's proactive cooperation with Moscow in areas of tangible practicality, in particular in the context of OPEC+, cannot pass by unnoticed. Jointly regulating the oil market, establishing trade and investment ties, and developing high-level communication, Saudi Arabia underscores its position: business as usual.

Significance for Ukraine

The Russian full-scale invasion and the concomitant consequences forced Ukraine to reconsider its foreign policy in the Middle East.

In 2022, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy had three calls with Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud. In February 2023, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the KSA, Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, paid the first-ever visit to Ukraine in the history of Ukrainian-Saudi diplomatic relations. In May, the President of Ukraine visited the Kingdom for the first time while in office and participated in the Arab League Summit, to which our country was invited for the first time as well.

In February 2023, the Kingdom provided Ukraine with two humanitarian aid packages in the amount of USD 410 million. The support of Ukraine at the international level by the leadership of the Middle Eastern country was equally important:

the KSA voted for the main resolutions of the UN General Assembly condemning russian aggression against Ukraine and demanding its immediate cessation.

Ukraine is closely monitoring the economic growth, social transformation, and cultural enrichment of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, both countries are intensively looking for mutually beneficial modes of interaction.

Of course, our state's most valuable asset is its people. The potential of Ukrainian human capital is acknowledged worldwide. Our country has repeatedly proved its technological and innovative leadership, particularly in the IT, information infrastructure, medicine, production of goods and rendering services. On the other hand, the KSA is rapidly modernising and upgrading its technological capabilities, as well as implementing numerous promising megaprojects that require qualified support. The Kingdom should consider Ukrainian specialists who will manage to qualitatively meet its needs given their experience and expertise.

Ukraine appreciates the fruitful trade and investment cooperation with the Kingdom in the agricultural sector. This is a competitive component of the Ukrainian economy and an essential element of domestic soft power that promotes Ukraine's image as a food centre of the world.

Ukraine and the KSA also share common concerns regarding the challenges and threats to food security of especially vulnerable countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East posed by russian aggression. Our state is interested in the Kingdom's engagement in the international community's efforts to stabilise food supplies and create the necessary security guarantees in the Black Sea region.

A pressing issue for our country is the post-war economic recovery and restoration of its investment potential. Relevant opportunities and projects will not only pave the way for Ukraine's revival but also contribute to the national success story. In this regard, the international community and each of its members has a chance to demonstrate the power of international law, its institutions and principles. Moreover, the KSA's participation in this process as an influential actor in the diplomatic arena will bring practical and reputational benefits.

The prospects for cooperation between Ukraine and Saudi Arabia are immense. Strengthening relations with a major actor in the Middle East will significantly enhance Ukraine's positioning in the region and consolidate the coalition to counter russian aggression. No less promising is the development of the economic component of Ukrainian-Saudi relations: the dynamic economy of the partner country will open up wide horizons and potential for mutually beneficial trade and investment cooperation.

The main point to conclude: through internal transformation, economic growth, and successful regional diplomacy, the Kingdom has shaped its credibility as a country that can create a springboard for the implementation of the Ukrainian peace formula. This is a priority for Ukrainian diplomacy, and we entertain hopes that, together with the KSA, we will succeed in restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.