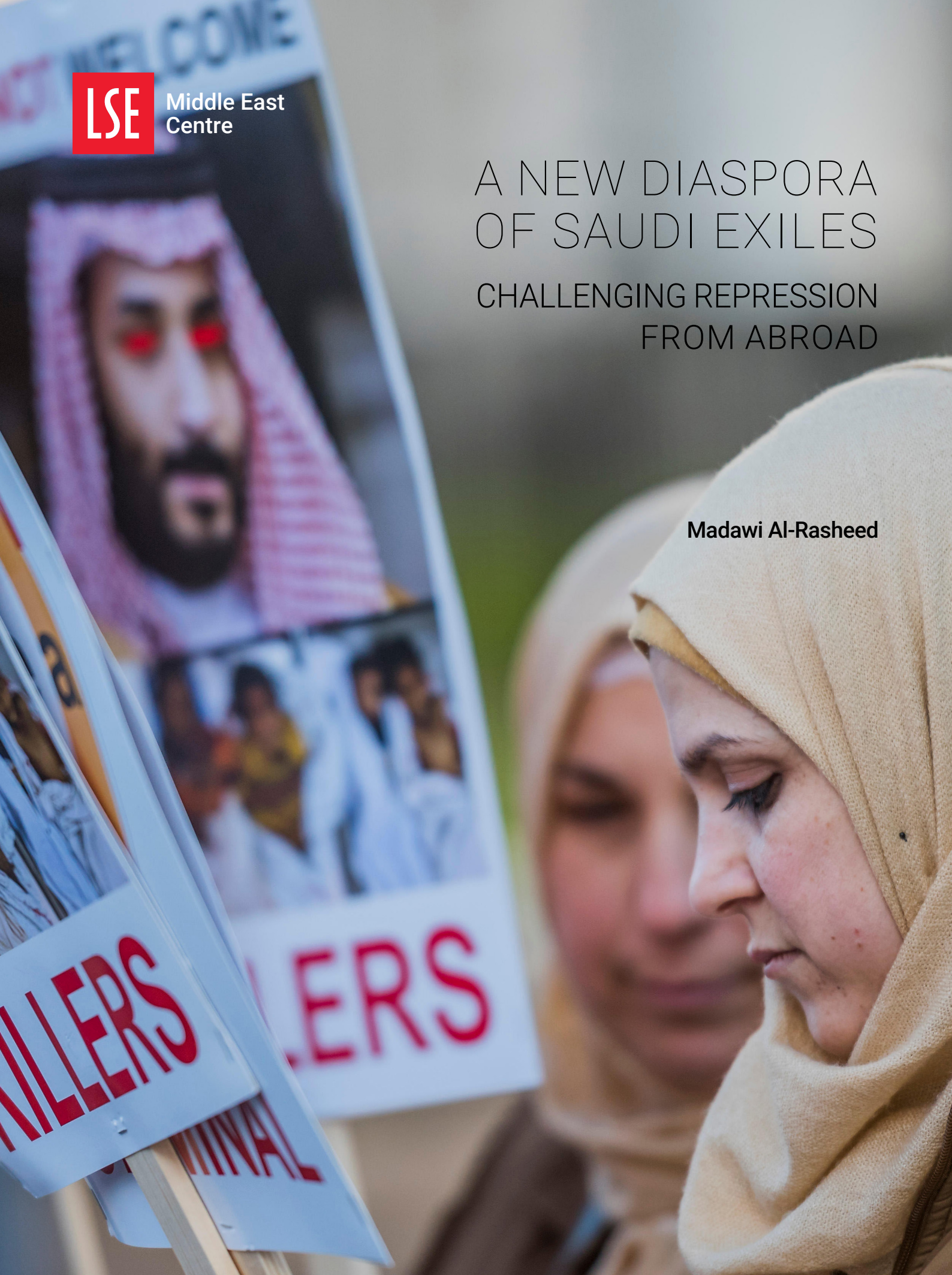




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# A NEW DIASPORA OF SAUDI EXILES CHALLENGING REPRESSION FROM ABROAD

Madawi Al-Rasheed



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A New Diaspora of Saudi Exiles:  
Challenging Repression from Abroad

Madawi Al-Rasheed

## About the Author

**Madawi Al-Rasheed** is Visiting Professor at the LSE Middle East Centre and a Fellow of the British Academy. Since joining the Centre, she has been conducting research on mutations among Saudi Islamists after the 2011 Arab uprisings. This research focuses on the new reinterpretations of Islamic texts prevalent among a small minority of Saudi reformers and the activism in the pursuit of democratic governance and civil society. The result of this research project, sponsored by the Open Society Foundation Fellowship Programme, appeared in a monograph entitled *Muted Modernists* (London: Hurst/OUP, 2015). Her latest books are *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era* (London: Hurst/OUP, 2018) and *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst/OUP, 2020).

## Abstract

Although Saudi Arabia has generated waves of exiles throughout its modern history, the recent diaspora is different in its diversity, demographic profile and aspirations. The repression that accompanied the rise of current Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has pushed feminists, young students, secularists, Islamists and others to flee the country in search of safe havens in the US, Europe, Canada and Australia. Based on ethnographic research across several diaspora locations, this paper traces the diversity of the young cohort of exiles who are currently seeking to counter domestic repression from abroad. It focuses on digital activism, for example Twitter, that is also used by the regime to amplify its popularity and propaganda. From abroad, exiles try to counter regime narratives about promised prosperity, freedoms and opportunities. As social media has become more controlled and even dangerous for critics at home, exiles insert their voices to assert their rights as citizens, hoping that this activism will put pressure on the regime to allow political participation.

Exiles also began to institutionalise opposition to the regime through the creation of several institutions in the diaspora. The paper surveys a sample of such institutions that serve the immediate needs of the diaspora and create solidarity across generations and locations. The paper assesses the challenges and prospects for the success of political activism from abroad.





## Introduction

The exodus of Arab nationalists and leftists in the 1950s, followed by the Shi'a and Sunni Islamists in the 1980s and 1990s, is well-documented in the literature on Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup> But since the rise of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman to power in 2017, a new wave of exodus began, with large numbers of Saudis seeking asylum abroad, now fleeing the country in search of freedom. The Arab uprisings of 2011 and the Khashoggi murder in 2018 were turning points in the modern history of the country. Intolerance of dissent and repression of activism produced a nascent Saudi exodus of educated dissidents in search of safe havens in the US, Europe, Canada and Australia. This incipient Saudi diaspora is in the process of establishing a degree of cohesion to overcome generational, educational, social and ideological differences.<sup>2</sup>

The duality of reform and repression under the new regime of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has consolidated diaspora politics among a new generation. This new generation have been promised social liberalisation and economic opportunities. This has also opened channels for dissent, but this is now only possible from abroad. Employing new communication technologies, such as social media, the Saudi diaspora seeks to challenge repressive conditions at home. This exercise in active citizenship is undertaken while those who remain at home use anonymous names to contribute to critical debates about the country's future under bin Salman. At home and abroad young men and women exercise their civic rights by becoming virtual. Whether the diaspora will succeed in bringing about change at home remains to be seen.

Their online activism has seen these young men and women dubbed a 'Twitter nation' or 'Hashtag generation', but since 2016 the diaspora has been creating institutions that seek to overcome the limitations of virtual advocacy. The paper examines some recent examples, such as the human rights organisation Al-QST, Diwan London, the Annual Diaspora Conference (*mutamar al-mahjar*) and the National Assembly Party (*hizb al-tajamu al-watani* or NAAS), a daring political party founded in 2021 that calls for democracy in Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overall history of this period, see Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Research for this paper draws on interviews with Saudi exiles in the US, Canada, the UK, Germany, and Australia between 2018–20.

## A Comparative Perspective

The experience of the current Saudi diaspora resembles that of previous exile groups in the Middle East, most notably the Iraqi diaspora in the 1990s and the Iranian student protest movement in the 1960s. As with the exiled Iraqis, Saudis reproduce their ideological and sectarian divisions from home while maintaining the semblance of unity against repression. Exiled Iraqis reinvented their opposition to Saddam Hussein in ways that reflected their ideological, sectarian and ethnic identities: the Shi'a focused on the narrative of *mathlumiyya* (discrimination against a majority governed by a Sunni minority); Kurds invoked their ethno-regional nationalism to denounce the rule of Arab Baghdad; Sunni and Shi'a Islamists clung to different trends within political Islam; while secular leftist parties (such as the Iraqi Communist Party) remained on the margins.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the Saudis in exile tend to reproduce their own domestic divisions along sectarian, regional and ideological lines. Old Islamist exiles are apprehensive about new young democratic activists and highly suspicious of the equally old Shi'a opposition. New separatist voices calling for regional autonomy in the Hijaz and the eastern province coexist with transnational Islamism, Salafis, moderate Muslim Brotherhood activists, and the growing recent liberal and democratic voices among students.

Many young students who had been sent abroad on government scholarships during the reign of King Abdullah (2005–15) shifted to engaging in anti-regime activism in 2011. Their dissent resembles the Iranian student movement of 1930–79.<sup>4</sup> Iranian leftist students mobilised across Germany, France and later the US to challenge the Shah's regime, contributing among others to his downfall in 1979.

In the Iraqi, Iranian, and recent Saudi case, one common thread emerges. Repressive regimes pursue their dissidents at home and abroad with fierce determination to eliminate their voices. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 attests to how far the crown prince is prepared to go to silence exile opposition voices. But the mixed outcomes of exile politics in the Iraqi and Iranian cases show the uncertain prospects that can be expected from mobilisation abroad. The Iraqis failed to destabilise Saddam Hussein's regime without international support. The subsequent US-led invasion in 2003 was the catalyst that brought his downfall. The Iranian student movement succeeded only upon the advent of mass mobilisation inside the country, where other forces – the Islamists – joined the struggle against the Shah's regime.

While it is too early to predict the trajectory of Saudi exile activism, it is currently clear that the international community is not willing to lend support to the exiles, and there is no mass movement on the ground visibly active in seeking to topple the regime. The specific conditions of the country, the mood of the international community, and the limited experience of domestic mobilisation are important to determine whether exile politics succeed or fail.

<sup>3</sup> Loulouwa Al-Rachid, *L'Iraq de l'embargo à l'occupation : déperissement d'un ordre politique* (1990–2003) (Paris: Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers Inc., 2001).

I adopt a definition of diaspora as ‘a social-political formation, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as of the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries’.<sup>5</sup> Unlike voluntary diasporas, the Saudis exiles are those who are directly or indirectly forced to leave the country. With so many prisoners of conscience incarcerated, unexplained disappearances, suspicious deaths in detention, and an unusually excessive number of executions, beheadings, and even crucifixions,<sup>6</sup> Saudis began to flee the country in great numbers. While it is difficult to precisely estimate the extent of this new diaspora, an unpublished regime report forecast that there will be around 50,000 exiles abroad in the near future.<sup>7</sup> They seek refuge in the US, Canada, Australia, Europe, Arab countries such as Lebanon, and in Turkey. The latter recently emerged as a temporary destination for exiles seeking permanent residence in a third country.

Many young Saudis remain politically ‘dormant’ in their host countries, fearing retaliation by the regime against their families at home, or the confiscation of their assets and financial investments in Saudi Arabia. The recent repression has compelled them to come out and openly declare their opposition to the regime.

Since 2015, older Islamist activists have joined earlier exiles who had sought asylum in the 1990s in Western capitals.<sup>8</sup> They were followed by a new cohort of students who had been sent on government scholarships to study abroad but feared to return if they had been vocal on social media against the regime. Many young men and women in their twenties left the country immediately after the murder of Khashoggi. This paper relies on ethnographic research and interviews with exiled activists as solid statistical data is not available. The geographical distribution of exiles across many countries, coupled with a lack of information on Saudi asylum seekers in host societies, make it difficult to give an exact figure. Furthermore, many Saudis remain in exile without applying for asylum immediately after arriving at their destination. This makes it difficult to reach a definite figure about the magnitude and scale of the diaspora.

Saudi women, supposedly empowered by the crown prince under his new policy to end gender inequality, have also fled the country in recent years. In exile, they can participate in the diaspora’s public sphere and debate without too much effort. Social media allows diaspora women to engage in conversations they would be unable to at home except in authorised spaces and under the control of the regime. New media has proved to be an enabling tool for the diaspora, but also a curse at home. In the diaspora, social media allows Saudi women to regroup, organise lobbying activities, and disseminate criticism

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Since Muhammad bin Salman came to power, there has been a significant rise in executions. Figures tripled in Saudi Arabia from 65 in 2021 to 196 in 2022, the highest recorded by Amnesty in 30 years. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/death-penalty-2022-executions-skyrocket/> (accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> On the exodus of Islamists, see Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).



back to the homeland. The unexpected and unprecedented phenomenon of the ‘runaway girls’ drew attention to the plight of women and the emerging Saudi female diaspora, thanks to social media.<sup>9</sup>

While Saudis at home face repression when they engage in national politics and forge cross-ideological, gender, sectarian, and tribal solidarities, circumstances render the emerging diaspora united by common repression. Members seek out novel solidarities based on their own needs as exiles. According to Gabriel Sheffer, in such situations a degree of cohesion emerges within those groups, and group cohesion is founded on the primordial, cultural and instrumental elements in their collective identities. Saudi exiles immediately realised that ‘survival, continuity and prosperity of diasporas, their common sentiments and sense of unity must overcome generational, educational, social, and ideological differences and gaps that always exist within diaspora groups’.<sup>10</sup>

Journalist Jamal Khashoggi suffered the loneliness of exile in Washington D.C., and the pain of dislocation and estrangement from his own family in the homeland, according to his fiancée.<sup>11</sup> After his relocation to Washington, his wife divorced him, and he became estranged from his two sons. At the age of fifty-nine he reached out to young exile Omar al-Zahrani in Canada in the hopes of forging intergenerational solidarity and unity to further collective mobilisation and advocacy across the two countries. When interviewed in 2020, al-Zahrani described the intimate relation he and Khashoggi had developed when the latter moved to Washington. Al-Zahrani was able to talk about this relationship only after Khashoggi was murdered.

While social media allowed easy transnational organisation and advocacy, in addition to being a tool in the hands of the regime for its own propaganda and spying on dissidents, the diaspora is yet to use it successfully to win the battle for greater freedoms, dignity, and justice. Caution should be exercised against an overemphasis on these new solidarities as schisms within the diaspora resurface, either because of divisive strategies by the regime or because members of the diaspora themselves maintain their own ideological orientations, often refusing to compromise and forge overarching solidarities.

Early regime attempts to divide the diaspora started in the 1990s when Saudis masquerading as opposition figures infiltrated the Islamist Committee for Legitimate Rights in Saudi Arabia and precipitated a schism between its two exiled activists, Saad al-Faqih and Muhammad al-Massari, a rift that has yet to heal.<sup>12</sup> In 1993, King Fahd reached out to the Shi‘a opposition in London and succeeded in bringing back several well-known

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<sup>9</sup> Since 2014, the scale of the ‘runaway girls’ phenomenon pushed Saudi-owned media to report on it. See <https://english.alarabiya.net/perspective/features/2014/01/11/Runaway-girls-a-disturbing-trend-in-Saudi-Arabia> (accessed 25 May 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics*, p. 80.

<sup>11</sup> Khashoggi appeared to be very active during his exile in Washington, but according to his fiancée, he was lonely as he was cut off from his children in Saudi Arabia. Interview with Hatice Cengiz, 14 June 2019. Full details of Khashoggi’s life during his exile are in Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*.

<sup>12</sup> See Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*.

activists.<sup>13</sup> This precipitated another schism within the Shi'a opposition between those who refused the terms of the reconciliation and those who accepted to relocate to the homeland. In the 1990s it was easy to break up the unity of exiles simply because of sectarian affiliations that revolved around their ideological identity as Islamists. The schism between the exiled Sunni and Shi'a Islamists perpetuated a divide that was difficult to bridge until the present day.

In addition to well-known and expected strategies to undermine the exiles and their diasporic politics, the regime uses specific methods to cut the diaspora from the homeland at the level of family and the country generally. According to many exiles interviewed in London, group punishment of their families in Saudi Arabia is very common. Travel bans, imprisonment, and interrogations of those family members and friends left behind are frequent, and exiles narrate their own guilt and agony over what has befallen their kin in Saudi Arabia as a result of their flight. Family members who send money to support their young sons and daughters in exile are severely punished, and the flow of support from exiles to needy family members at home is equally curtailed. A London exile, who sent his mother a small sum of money to support her, tells of how she was immediately arrested. Children as young as four years old are banned from travel to join their fathers abroad and are often returned from the airport by immigration officers in the Kingdom. While many of these cases are reported by global human rights organisations, only an ethnographic approach of this kind can provide a panoramic view of what the regime has done to family members whose children have fled abroad. Some exiles prefer to remain silent as they fear further repression against their own kin who remain inside the country.

The regime exerts pressure on family members to disown their sons and daughters who have sought asylum abroad, thus breaking family units and precipitating long-lasting estrangement from relatives. Saudi television occasionally shows clips of families of exiles disowning their children while renewing their allegiance to the regime. All these measures prompt the Saudi diaspora to seek solidarity and establish an organisational framework abroad to alleviate the heavy price its members pay, despite the regime branding itself as a force for reform.

The regime unsurprisingly uses social media to target the diaspora, with accounts specialising in tarnishing the reputation of exiles and condemning them as immoral traitors. The sheer volume of the messages makes it difficult to monitor all accounts as the regime's capacity to spread messages surpasses that of researchers or the exiles concerned. Regime trolls on social media, especially Twitter, flood the virtual space with descriptions of the diaspora as an insignificant coterie of jihadis or immoral feminists. The 'closet jihadi' label is meant to frighten Western host countries and deprive the diaspora members of safe havens. Such accusations aim to warn host governments about the 'danger' of Saudi exiles. As this diaspora hails from a state still considered an important ally and partner of Western countries, the paradox arises of the diaspora choosing to settle in the same countries that support and empower the regime that has pushed them to take the difficult

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<sup>13</sup> On the Saudi Shi'a, see Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent, and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

decision to leave. But ‘whether by their nature diaspora are aggressive and dangerous or whether essentially they are defensive, in which case it would be unjust to regard them as inherently harmful to their host countries’,<sup>14</sup> the regime continues to vilify them. The diverse Saudi diaspora is aware of the accusations and tries hard to prove its innocence, especially in its activism and social media engagements.

The narrative that women exiles are immoral feminists is directed towards the homeland, where the exodus of women in particular exposes the myth of the reformist prince determined to empower and protect women. According to an exile in Sydney, being described as a ‘fallen’ woman seeking immoral pursuits in the West creates an everlasting rift between society and exiled women, and between exiles and their own families.<sup>15</sup> The label also tarnishes the reputation of fathers and brothers whose girls flee, who then face the loss of social capital, honour, and prestige. This is intended to act as a deterrent against future exodus. As young girls escape, they leave behind male relatives who ‘lose face’. The latter are expected to disown their daughters to re-establish their honour and be able to face society again.

The diaspora naturally and unsurprisingly emerges in the regime discourse as a collection of traitors who had ‘sold’ their souls to enemy governments, thus casting doubt on their loyalty to their homeland. Enemy governments allegedly sponsoring the diaspora are as diverse as the regime’s conflicts with neighbouring states. Such conflicts have become prolific and persistent under the crown prince. In the 1990s the regime accused Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Qatar of sponsoring and empowering the Saudi opposition in exile. Since 2015 and the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi government has identified Turkey, Iran, and Qatar as countries supporting the diaspora and its emerging organisational activities. In all these accusations that flourish in Saudi media, diaspora exiles are depicted as outside the body of the nation, newly branded under the populist nationalism of the crown prince.<sup>16</sup> They, however, respond to negative branding by calling themselves *soudiyun fi al-mahjar*, Saudis in the diaspora, thus emphasising their belonging to the ethno-Saudi nation.

During the 2011 Arab uprisings there were positive assessments of social media’s ability to mobilise and organise people. Writing in the aftermath, I acknowledged its connectivity and networking but remained sceptical about its mobilisation potential in Saudi Arabia: ‘the euphoria surrounding the new communication technology, social networking, and virtual connectivity proved its limitations in the Saudi context. On a practical level, it seems that the state was able to manipulate such electronic networks and control the outcome.’<sup>17</sup> As the emerging diaspora has no choice but to rely heavily on social media, this scepticism remains valid in 2023. The diaspora can undermine regime propaganda

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<sup>14</sup> Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics*, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with the author, Sydney, October 2018.

<sup>16</sup> On Saudi populist nationalism, see Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*.

<sup>17</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, ‘Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring’, in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (eds.), *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2017), pp. 143–58.

but it is not yet capable of instigating real mobilisation on the ground in the homeland. In fact, many exiles now hesitate to call from abroad for real mobilisation, similar to the limited calls for protest in 2011. As that episode led to many Saudi protesters being shot by security forces in the Eastern Province and the arrest of others elsewhere when they responded to calls from outside, many in the diaspora now consider it unethical to call for protest from the relative safety of their host countries. However, on their social media networks, they pledge to amplify and support any protest that takes place on the ground at home.

### A Twitter Nation

Free public debate, political representation, and independent media had always been limited, but they vanished completely under the rule of the new crown prince. Deprived of the right to civil resistance, demonstrations, sit-ins, and peaceful protest, Saudi society found refuge in social media. Its diverse fragments became active participants on social media from Twitter to YouTube. Saudis registered their presence as engaged vocal citizenry with their own creative ideas, criticism, and contribution to debates about domestic, regional, and global issues. Since 2011 both men and women activists have used social media to launch campaigns against gender inequality in general and to demand the lifting of the ban on driving and the abolition of the guardianship laws. Saudis highlighted prevalent unemployment and housing shortages and campaigned for salary increases. They publicised the plight of abused women and underage marriages to draw attention to the failure of state institutions to provide safe shelters for girls who leave their homes after being subjected to physical and sexual violence. By 2015 a new phenomenon known as the ‘runaway girls’ had become hotly debated as young girls fled the country and sought safe refuge abroad. The girls and their supporters used social media to draw attention to this new trend, which emerged under the rule of a crown prince who pledged to empower women. Social media allowed the globalisation and amplification of Saudi women’s causes. Saudi activists themselves reached out to global media to publicise their causes, and in return received platforms to air their grievances and amplify their plight. This was a clear case of what Lisa Wynn and the Saudi street artist Ms Saffaa call the appropriation and transnationalisation of their struggles,<sup>18</sup> leading to greater regime scrutiny and repression at home. Global media exerted sufficient pressure resulting in the freeing of several women activists held in prisons since 2018, and pressurising the regime to release a small number of critics from prison.

If Saudis in the diaspora and at home are truly a Twitter nation, their activism takes the form of creating hashtags to spread virally. Saudi youth in the diaspora practice hashtag hijacking, known in the cybersphere as the practice of ‘Bashtag’, to create a counter-public to that of the regime. Members of the hashtag generation often select a hot topic and gather supporters and contributors to its hashtag. They measure their own success by focusing on the trending of their statements and messages. They quickly abandon a suc-

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<sup>18</sup> Personal communication with Lisa Wynn and Ms Saffaa, Sydney, October 2018.

successful hashtag campaign to move to the next. Before the crown prince came to power in 2017, Saudis had already practiced launching hashtag campaigns under such titles as ‘Salary is not Enough’, ‘I am my own Guardian’ and ‘Free Political Prisoners’. Some of the most successful digital activist campaigns in their capacity to go viral were the 2008–9 and 2014 campaigns that followed flooding in Jeddah after heavy rain, when bridges and infrastructure collapsed, all attributed to the corruption of officials in municipalities and urban development projects.

But after 2017 the plight of prisoners of conscience of all persuasions – Islamists, feminists, and others – became a dominant theme. Young men participated in and amplified the campaign to free feminist activists such as Lujain al-Huthloul, and support the runaway girls. In September 2019, they launched a campaign named *Sanatayn ala Itiqalat September*, to mark the two-year anniversary of the regime’s detention campaign targeting feminists, Islamists and liberals. They countered the hashtag celebrating the crown prince’s birthday and undermined the official digital euphoria associated with this virtual celebration. They also mocked official hashtags such as ‘Saudi Arabia is Great’, ‘Saudi Arabia for Saudis’, and ‘Saudi Arabia First’, all launched to promote loyalty to the crown prince and spread a hyper-nationalist discourse. As the regime produces new hashtags to enforce loyalty and securitise the online sphere, young dissidents ‘bashed’ the effort with their subversive messaging. For example, *Kuluna Amn* (‘We are all security agents’), tweeted by the chair of the MiSK foundation, Bader al-Asaker, during the National Day celebrations in 2019, was meant to mobilise ordinary Saudis to involve themselves in domestic security. However, dissidents were quick to mock such slogans in their counter-messaging. The satire is exemplified in Ghanim al-Dosari’s shows, in which he uses simple language interspersed with piercing humour and cartoon-like images. His regular online show is akin to the popular British programme *Spitting Image*.<sup>19</sup> As the regime hashtag ‘Saudi Arabia is Great’ began to trend, Saudi activists abroad appropriated it and launched their own Twitter account with the same name to demonstrate a different perspective on how the country can be great while emphasising the centrality of justice as the foundation for real greatness.

Saudi hashtag activism aspires to achieve many individual and collective goals. Saudis register their presence, albeit virtual, when they contribute to hashtags critical of the regime. By choosing the subject, they seek to publicise a problem through viral trending, which is then visible domestically and globally. They accompany the hashtag with messages, inserting their own narratives outside the traditional, heavily censored public sphere, such as state print, visual, and online media, university clubs, literary private salons, public forums, and book fairs – all extremely hostile to alternative opinions, let alone criticism of regime policies. They also seek to achieve solidarity with others in support of specific causes, reaching out to like-minded people and creating a virtual community of peers who share their concerns. Their messages and hashtags can reach a critical mass among a young diaspora population with no historical or contemporary experience, or memory

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<sup>19</sup> Ghanem al-Dosari’s satire channel is available at: <https://youtube.com/@GhanemAlmasariir> (accessed 26 May 2023).



of, exile, dislocation and alienation. Those abroad embark on learning and training themselves in advocacy and contentious digital politics in order to mobilise others.

Those who have been forced to flee repression at home and the prospect of imprisonment for simply expressing dissenting opinions register their presence online, hoping to continue to be relevant to their country and its youth. As young people concerned with the public good and progressive change, much of their efforts surround the cause of freeing political prisoners. They further highlight corruption cases, draw attention to failing social services, and also expose the Saudi regime's many military and diplomatic interventions in the Arab world that led to derailing the impulse towards democracy in 2011. Saudi youth in exile also seek to reach a global audience for support and sympathy, while naming and shaming their regime and other governments that partner and ally with it. They puncture the official narrative about the new era of reform and prosperity. Their online activism is important as the regime strives to eliminate dissenting voices that undermine the official narrative, with many Saudis detained simply for critical opinions online. In 2022, student and Twitter activist Salma al-Shehab was detained immediately after she returned from Britain to visit her family during university holiday, subsequently being sentenced to 34 years in prison by the Specialised Criminal Court for her tweets in support of human rights. Saudi diaspora youth try to demonstrate solidarity with their compatriots across tribal, regional, and sectarian divides, an objective that is not always easy to achieve either at home or abroad.

By naming the crown prince and senior officials, and by highlighting contradictions and scandals, activist youth counter the regime's official narrative about the well-being of the Saudi nation and its propaganda of newfound prosperity. They focus particularly on the regime's new hyper-nationalism, especially that expressed online, and offer a nuanced, alternative interpretation of nationalism (*wataniya*). They insist that citizenship must be based on inclusion rather than exclusion and repression. They call for equal opportunities, and above all for respect for the citizens' freedom of conscience. They specifically criticise regime policies in whose formulation and implementation they have played no part, thus rejecting the so-called 'top-down revolution' of the crown prince.

Can youth activism in support of specific issues eventually lead to general political change? There may not be an easy and conclusive answer. In the last decade, Saudi hashtag activism has had mixed outcomes. In some rare cases it has prompted the amendment or even reversal of certain government policies. Increasing the salaries of public-sector employees, the termination of fuel subsidies, and threatened cuts in social benefits were all partially abandoned by the crown prince after hashtag campaigns flooded the Twittersphere. This alerted the regime to how unpopular certain austerity measures can be – and specifically the crown prince himself, if his name is associated with hardship.<sup>20</sup> After several years of spending over \$3 billion on foreign management consultants,<sup>21</sup> the

<sup>20</sup> Steffen Hertog, 'Challenges to the Saudi Distributional State in the Age of Austerity', in Madawi Al-Rashed (ed.), *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst, 2020), pp. 73–98.

<sup>21</sup> Calvert W. Jones, 'All the King's Consultants', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2019. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2019-04-16/all-kings-consultants> (accessed 5 October 2019).

organisers of Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Programme, the king issued a decree banning the use of such firms by ministries barring exceptional cases. This followed digital denunciation of the use of foreign experts who have no deep knowledge of local social and political contexts and may not care about the lives of those Saudis affected by privatisation, restructuring of the economy, cuts in subsidies, and shrinking public-sector employment. This reversal only went so far, however, as three well-known economists and merchants were detained for criticising privatisation of state industries: Jamil Farsi, Isam al-Zamil and Abdul Aziz al-Dakhil.

The expanse of digital activism has prompted renewed regime efforts to cover up evidence of corruption and mismanagement, regional and foreign policy blunders, and other scandals such as the abrupt detention and sacking of senior princes by the crown prince. Internet rumours abound, spread mostly by Mujtahid,<sup>22</sup> an anonymous Twitter account that specialises in leaking stories about royal rivalries and intrigues. When he pointed to a rift between Muhammad bin Nayif and Muhammad bin Salman in 2016, the Saudi news agency was quick to circulate an image of the young Muhammad kissing the hand of his sacked cousin. Bin Nayif was immediately reported to have given the oath of allegiance to Muhammad bin Salman following the latter's promotion, thus assuring audiences that digital chatter about any discord between the two rival princes was unfounded. The opinions that Saudi dissident voices spread around the globe forced the regime to counter critical messages by emphasising the solidarity of the royal family.

Youth hashtag activism occasionally forces the regime to moderate enthusiasm for unrealistic and overambitious projects and initiatives, especially when they are mocked online, such as the famous Social Transformation Programme (STP), which was followed by STP 2, a less ambitious plan. A project to open a nightclub in Jeddah in 2019 also faced days of viral hashtags, criticising the Entertainment Authority, before it was officially announced that the nightclub would not open. The Entertainment Authority instead immediately posted details of an upcoming Quran recitation competition on its website and invited potential candidates to register for the big prize.<sup>23</sup> The official news agency and individual regime accounts on Twitter quickly dismiss negative press circulating online as 'fake news' and rumours. They deem counter-hashtags that undermine official digital messaging and hashtags as subversive and threatening to stability and national security. The regime – through its cyber-trolls – popularises the idea that such messages are the work of exiled Saudi traitors, who are paid agents of hostile foreign governments.

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<sup>22</sup> On rumours and Mujtahid, see Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Mystique of Monarchy' in Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Salman's Legacy*.

<sup>23</sup> 'White Nightclub Shuts Down on Opening Night', *Arabian Business*, 16 June 2019. Available at: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/travel-hospitality/422138-saudi-alcohol-free-nightclub-shuts-down-on-opening-night> (accessed 18 July 2023).

## Social Media between Liberation and Repression

New communication technology has become a tool of repression. The crown prince embraced it in 2016 as he threw away his old Nokia phone and replaced it with a smartphone, in a gesture designed to emphasise his own modernity and empower grassroots contribution to public debate. He was to invest heavily in social media as propaganda for populist nationalism, whereas Saudis paid a high price for using it to voice alternative narratives and opinions. As Saudi Arabia has a very high number of Twitter users,<sup>24</sup> spies of the regime are charged with infiltrating the platform to gather data on Saudi critics, activists, and dissidents. In November 2019 the San Francisco Federal court charged three ex-Twitter employees of gathering data on 6,000 accounts on behalf of the Saudi regime. The key figure in the spy ring is allegedly a young Saudi who worked with the prince's close aide Bader al-Asaker.<sup>25</sup> The regime commissioned prestigious management consultancy firms such as McKinsey to monitor and report on influential online critics of the prince's many visions and transformation programmes, all advertised on social media and Twitter hashtags.<sup>26</sup> Social media became a trap to catch dissidents, but also an enabling tool to unite a new diaspora of Saudi exiles and asylum seekers scattered from North America to Australia.

Contemporary forms of Saudi communication platforms include old print media and satellite audio-visuals, but in recent years new social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, Clubhouse, Spaces, and YouTube allowed a space beyond official channels for a short period of time, after which the regime realised the explosion in 'subversive' usage. Social media allows rapid, flexible, and individualistic ways of maintaining contact, initiating new networks, and sustaining relations across ideological divides, regions, and communities within the country. Writing just before the advent of these platforms, Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson argued that new communication technology contributed to creating public spheres that are independent, autonomous, and outside the control of traditional authority such as the state and notable community figures. This public sphere has become discursive, performative and participative. The spaces have created new authority figures, multiple voices and interpretations, and contributed to diversity. These voices challenged traditional sources of authority, knowledge, and information in the Muslim world, and became an important outcome of the communication technology revolution.<sup>27</sup> They also contributed to fostering transnational networks of solidarity, knowledge sharing and loyalty.

<sup>24</sup> Over 10 million Saudis use Twitter. For detailed statistics on social media in Saudi Arabia see: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/> (accessed 23 November 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Kari Paul, 'Former Twitter employees charged with spying for Saudi Arabia', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2019. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/06/twitter-spy-saudi-arabia-workers-charged> (accessed 24 May 2023).

<sup>26</sup> On management consultancy work for the Saudi regime, see Al-Rasheed, *The Son King*.

<sup>27</sup> Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson (eds.), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003).

Such aspects of the communication revolution were tested during the 2011 Arab uprisings.<sup>28</sup> Commentators forecast the efficient organising potential of social media, but regimes were quick to respond. As they controlled access to the internet, they were able to cut it off and leave participants without connection as soon as protest erupted. It was only a matter of time until authoritarian regimes grasped the enabling potential of social media and endeavoured to control and monitor participants.<sup>29</sup> Eventually, in Saudi Arabia many users ended up in prison simply for posting articles on Facebook or tweeting commentaries, poetry, and images in support of the Arab uprisings that undermined and exposed cracks in the official propaganda.

The Saudi regime proved more resourceful, capable, and wealthier than the users in controlling social media among participants, whose access primarily depended on state-controlled communication monopolies. The Saudi regime under the crown prince created special Twitter farms to monitor dissent and build a data bank on dissidents.<sup>30</sup> His many aides invited citizens to help draw up a list of subversive voices online and promised to silence them forever, dubbing them traitors who need to be punished for the sake of the nation. Young and old Saudis were imprisoned simply because they bypassed the government's 'red lines', a common charge against those who criticised the king or high-ranking princes, or simply offered different opinions on the newly introduced policies of the crown prince, for example Vision 2030, the Social Transformation Programme, the Entertainment Authority, and other initiatives.

While new social media bridged the language gap, it also allowed for broader participation, including those without specialist religious literacy. Furthermore, images became a medium to convey messages without words. Photographs of beggars in the kingdom's largest cities, collapsing infrastructure such as roads and schools, abusive men in the privacy of their own homes, and the excesses of religious surveillance of the population spread across the cyber sphere, exposing cracks in the official propaganda about modernisation, security, and prosperity. Young Saudis also produced video clips, comedy and art performances to challenge the sterile official media. Saudi satire and comic songs in support of women being given the right to drive spread across the world. Art that challenged male dominance was circulated online to undermine the basis for restrictions on women.

The regime feared messages relating to calls for mobilisation and activism the most, as they easily and instantaneously transmitted across regions. Individual grievances and personal stories were quickly posted, with images and sounds, across the globe, thus enabling the sender to reach a huge audience at a very low financial cost. These were local events and experiences that became global concerns, thanks to a very active Twitter population.

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<sup>28</sup> Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> See Marc Owen Jones, *Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Deception, Disinformation and Social Media* (London: Hurst, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> 'Saudi Arabia Image Makers: A Troll Army and Twitter Insider', *New York Times*, 20 October 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/20/us/politics/saudi-image-campaign-twitter.html> (accessed 27 November 2019).

There was also the emergence of new solidarities and loyalties. In some respects, Saudi society became an increasingly imagined virtual public square, within which one communicates regularly. But from 2016 this became more dangerous for those conveying messages critical of the regime. In addition to being a source of support, social media also became a platform for the regime to insult critics and threaten them with prison sentences and even death.

New social media contributed to breaking the isolation of Saudi individuals, living in a state where they are deprived of legal civil society, political parties, and independent associations. It allowed regular sharing of news, ideas, political opinions, and experiences, becoming the alternative source of knowledge and a 'digital parliament' of sorts for many Saudis and outsiders. This proved to be important in situations where citizens are marginalised in public platforms and denied political representation. As the regime encouraged antagonism between groups along domestic divides such as liberal and Islamist, muwatin (national) and foreign, men and women, Sunni and Shi'a, and along regional lines, Saudis found a platform to express their diversity and encourage unity against the regime's divisive policies and strategies. Those who called for national politics and formed civil society organisations with a strong online presence were immediately suppressed through detention and trials, followed by long prison sentences and bans on travel. They were subjected to campaigns tarnishing their reputations as traitors and agents of foreign enemy governments.

## Diaspora Institutions

The limitation of social media is felt by diaspora activists. Consequently, many exiled activists embarked on several offline projects to establish long-lasting institutions and promote a wide range of legal, social and political goals. These institutions provide a platform for advocacy beyond individuals and their own isolated activism.

Yahya Assiri had been a captain in the Saudi Royal Airforce for fourteen years before he moved to Britain. He visited London in 2009 and 2010 on military training missions, but in 2013 he resigned from his job in the military and applied for asylum in Britain. He objected to the imminent war in Yemen, subsequently launched in 2015, and began to work as a human rights activist.<sup>31</sup> I met Assiri when he was training at Amnesty International with a view to establishing a Saudi human rights organisation in exile. Having trained in advocacy and gathering accurate evidence about detained political prisoners, beheadings, and torture in prisons, he launched ALQST with funding from various European donors. The organisation soon gained prominence and has become a focal point for Saudis seeking justice for their detained relatives, frequently consulted by global media and human right organisations. Publishing several rigorous reports on human right abuses and launching successful advocacy campaigns, ALQST has also taken Saudi cases to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the UN Committee against Torture, the European Court of Human Right (ECHR), the European Parliament in Brussels, and other

<sup>31</sup> Conversation with author, 24 September 2019.



international forums. With several activists employed, it consults legal advisors and other global NGOs to provide detailed and accurate reporting on the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia. Assiri created the organisation but decided to involve other activists and lobbyists to ensure continuity while he remains involved in its activities as board member.

In December 2018 another organisation sprung up in exile. Diwan London,<sup>32</sup> a cultural and social forum, was launched to host conferences, seminars, lectures, and social events. Its main objective is to provide space for exiles of all political persuasions: Islamists, liberals, Shi'a and advocates for women's rights. Its aim is to raise awareness of the plight of Saudis in exile and at home and help new activists integrate in a small community of exiles. One of its flagship forums is the Diaspora Annual Conference, with invitations issued to diverse groups of exiles in London, the US, Australia and Europe. Many attend in person but the majority join the conversation online. In 2018, newly exiled Islamists Sultan al-Abdali, Muhammad al-Omari, Ahmad ibn Rashid al-Said, Muhammad al-Qahtani, and Shi'a activists Fuad Ibrahim and Hamza al-Hassan were present in person at the conference. Other activists joined via Skype, as many dissidents were still waiting to be granted asylum and travel documents in the countries where they had applied. Washington-based activist Hala al-Dosari, now Jamal Khashoggi Fellow at the *Washington Post*, Abdullah al-Awdah, Amani al-Ahmadi, and Amani al-Issa, among others, joined the conference online to present their ideas and visions of a different Saudi Arabia. Many activists demanded practical measures to stop repression and secure the immediate release of prisoners of conscience. Others called for the overthrow of the regime as the ultimate solution. They joined old exiles who had fled the kingdom in the 1990s like physics Professor Muhammad al-Massari.<sup>33</sup> Young participants as far away as Australia and Canada condemned the murder of Khashoggi and the controversial role Muhammad bin Salman had played in this brutal episode.

Dissidents at the conference had different agendas and aspirations, but the recent brutality of the regime made clear the urgency to participate in this diverse conference. Their joint efforts may come to haunt the regime as they form a national front determined to challenge the current repression and lobby the international community. Their efforts so far may not be taken seriously by their host governments, all of whom are allies of Saudi Arabia. But, as the number of exiles increases and their voices become louder at Saudi embassies, the EU, UN, and the US Congress, they look set to become more of an embarrassment for the regime and its allies. They are a counterpoint to the propaganda about a new and modern Saudi Arabia, in addition to changing the image of the country abroad. Since its first meeting in 2018, the Diaspora Conference continues to hold annual gatherings. Many voices during these sessions have called for the establishment of a new political party to institutionalise the demands of activists.

Discussion among exiles continued with a view to launch a political party in the diaspora. On 23 September 2020, Saudi National Day, eight exiles held a press conference to launch

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<sup>32</sup> 'Diwan London' website, available at: <http://www.diwan.tv/> (accessed 8 August 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Nadine Dahan, 'Saudi opposition joins forces in London to tackle "oppression"', *Al-Jazeera*, 10 December 2018. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/saudi-opposition-joins-forces-london-tackle-oppression-181210182434052.html> (accessed 28 May 2023).

the National Assembly Party (NAAS), with Assiri as its first General Secretary. The party called for democracy, separation of powers, representation, an independent judiciary, respect for human rights and the rights of women, immigrants and minorities. The founding members initially included liberals, Islamists, Shi'a, Sunnis and feminists. Within a week, two members (an Islamist and a Shi'a) withdrew from the party and renounced their membership. Both had been targeted by trolls of the regime and their own community. In the case of the Shi'a member, his audience reprimanded him for 'selling his soul' to liberals and atheists, a reference to the fact that NAAS had unveiled women supporters. In the case of the Islamist, he was urged to withdraw as the party calls for the abolition of the death penalty, seen as a core tenet of sharia law.

As a non-sectarian party, NAAS failed to appeal to those whose activism centres on identity politics and sectarian affiliation. Although the party still has among its founding members moderate Islamists, Salafis denounced it and launched an online campaign to undermine its message and depict it as a Western conspiracy against Islam and the land of the two holy mosques. Needless to say, regime online trolls greatly contributed to the onslaught on the party during its first year of activism.

The experience of NAAS and the attacks it received confirm that in exile, old ideological and sectarian affiliations do not necessarily dissolve in the pursuit of wider democratic goals. The history of other opposition groups in exile, including the Iraqi opposition in the 1990s, confirms that domestic schisms tend to be reproduced in the diaspora. By December 2021, the party had more than 50 committed members, and many supporters, organised in executive committees, and media and awareness raising initiatives. In 2023, it launched an advocacy campaign led by its second General Secretary Abdullah al-Awdah, who organised meetings in Washington with members of congress. The Party launched its Youtube channel, online newspaper *Sawt al-Naas*, and website.<sup>34</sup> Many feminists remain ardent supporters of NAAS and continue to play a leading role in formulating its policies, strategies, and activism. Unlike other older opposition groups, NAAS has attracted mainly young men and women who remain its backbone. It has become the voice and the platform of a young generation seeking democracy and denouncing sectarian, radical, and separatist agendas, predominant among an older cohort of exiles.

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<sup>34</sup> NAAS website, available at: <https://the-naas.com/en> (accessed 25 May 2023).

## Conclusion

The emergence of the new Saudi diaspora is a development triggered by contradictory policies at home. So-called reform coincides with an unprecedented wave of repression and abuse of human rights. Muhammad bin Salman pledged to transform the country, but this transformation refuses to countenance any expansion of civil and political rights. Many Saudis at home enjoy the new social liberalisation but remain critical of their exclusion and lack of political representation in durable institutions. The duality of reform and repression has pushed many Saudis to seek refuge abroad, thus precipitating an incipient diaspora of young men and women. Social media connects them to the homeland while new institutions in exile promise to amalgamate their voices to increase the pressure on the regime to adopt political reform. The number of exiles will no doubt increase in the short term and their activism and advocacy will become more refined and targeted. However, the success of any diaspora community is always dependent on global and geopolitical considerations beyond the control of the exiles themselves.

So far, the diaspora has dismantled the regime's monopoly on the narrative of reform and prosperity and highlighted serious abuses under the guise of creating a modern Saudi Arabia. It has inserted itself as a dispersed virtual citizenry, willing to engage in shaping the future of the country from without. While it is too early to predict whether diaspora initiatives will succeed, it is certain that the noises it makes annoy a regime desperate to control public discourse about its many alleged successes and achievements. Had these diaspora voices been as insignificant as claimed by the regime, it would not have organised the most treacherous political crime against Jamal Khashoggi. The diaspora remains on alert lest the regime repeats murder on foreign soil. So far the regime's viable options include threats, spying and device hacking, while they await the opportunity to eliminate peaceful young voices calling for political reform and a return to the homeland. The telephone devices of many NAAS party members were hacked in July 2021 using the 'Pegasus' spyware, sold to the regime by the Israeli cyber-arms company NSO Group. Many exiles continue to receive threats and intimidation abroad while their relatives still living in the Kingdom are either imprisoned, banned from travel, or forced to cut ties with them.

Should the regime implode from within, for example, as a result of a power struggle within the royal family, the opportunity may arise for the diaspora to play a role in the country's future. However, the insurmountable divisions within the exile community may militate against serious cooperation and coordination of demands. The young democratic elements within the diaspora may find themselves face to face with the factions of old – radical Islamists, separatist movements and sectarian activists – thus thwarting the prospect of establishing an inclusive democratic Saudi Arabia.



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A protest against the potential visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to Britain, London, 25 January 2018.

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