



Building bridges with old friends



مركز سمث للدراسات
SMT Studies Center

Thursday, 8 March 2018

special reading 15



Alaa Alghamdi*

On March the 7th The Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salam commenced his three-day visit to the United Kingdom. The heir to the Saudi throne is considered the new visionary of Saudi Arabia, whose reform ideas promise to lead the Kingdom into a new direction. In this historic visit to the UK, MbS is set to meet with members of the Royal Family, as well as Prime Minister Theresa May. The visit is hailed as a vital stepping stone in fostering new Saudi-UK relations, in strengthening already existing ties, and entering into a new era of new cooperation, collective investment, and partnership.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom are considered old friends. Led by the modern founder of Saudi Arabia, King AbdulAziz, the groundwork for a century-old friendship was laid. In 1926 the first British embassy opened in Saudi Arabia and 4 year later in 1929 the first Saudi embassy was opened in London. In the meanwhile, the countries are connected deeply via over 200 collective business ventures worth several Billion UK Pounds. Saudi Arabia is the UK's primary trading partner in the Middle East, and currently over 30.000 British Nationals are resident there.

Prince Mohammad bin Salman's visit is tied to expectations and hopes of an even deeper relationship between the two countries. MbS' visit comes as part of his first foreign trip to the UK since assuming his position as Crown Prince, and is set to continue to the United States. The aim of his extensive travels is to foster trade

*SAUDI ACADEMIC & WRITER

🐦@ProfGhamdi

links, business relationships, and to seek new opportunities for investment in education and entertainment. The United Kingdom, being a global forerunner in these fields, is a promising business partner for new ventures that fall in line with MbS' Vision 2030. In his 9 months of holding the title, the only 32-year-old Crown Prince has introduced an all-encompassing new social and economic vision for the Kingdom, which is set to help the shift from an oil-based to a more broadly-based knowledge and market-economy. First steps in social policy have already been made – in June 2018, women will be allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Crown Prince has vowed to increase the number of women in the workforce, and to take steps to develop health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism.



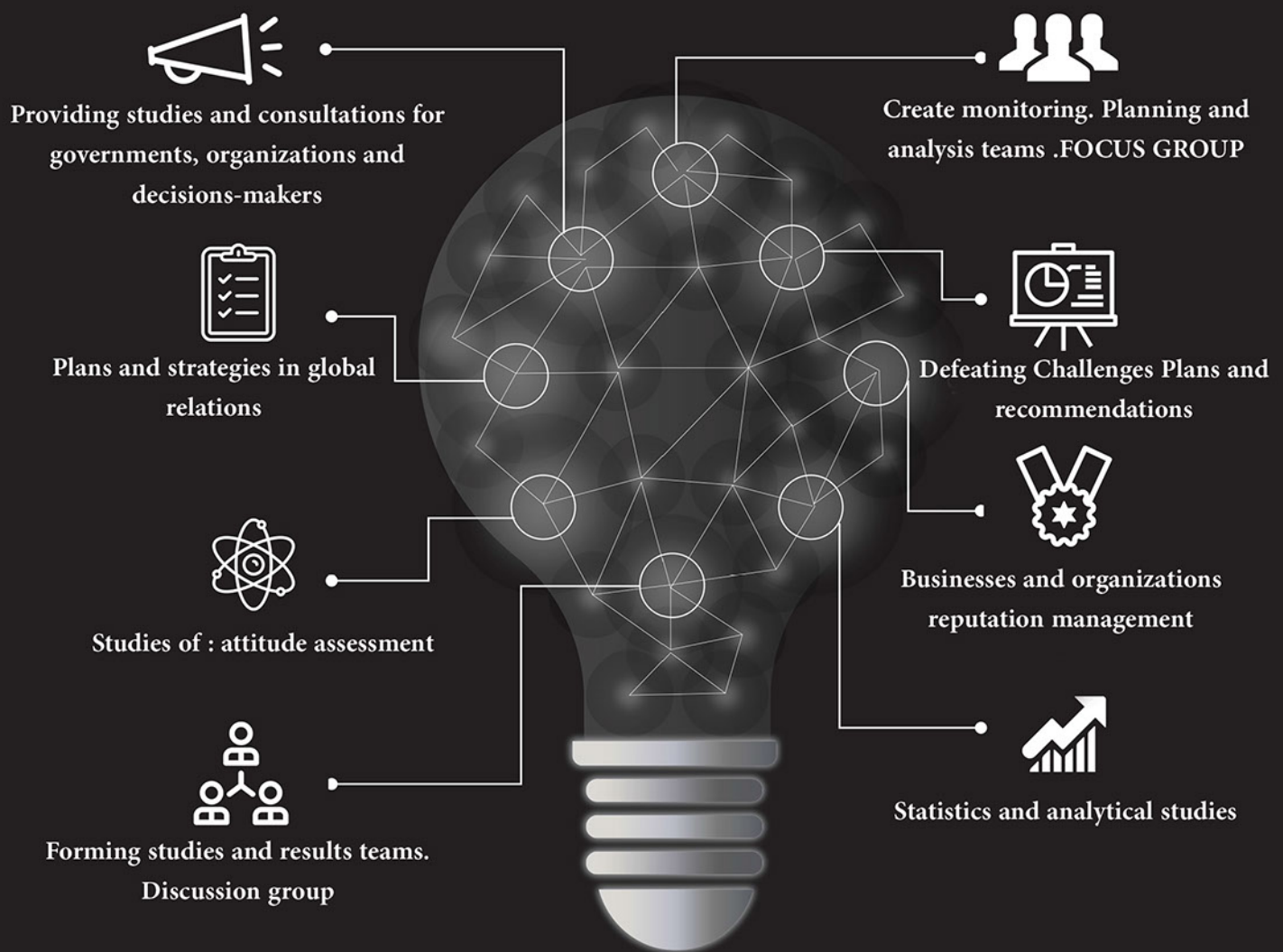
MbS' ideas are fresh, progressive, and provide a new perspective on the opportunities Saudi Arabia can make use of globally. Particularly the friendship with the UK, based on the many shared interests of the two countries, holds plenty of possibilities for mutual profit. Both countries hold the security of the region and the world dear, resulting in the sharing of intelligence and provision of resources. Beyond that, the UK seeks to win the bid for hosting the international leg of the Saudi national oil company Aramco through its stock market. Worth nearly 2 Trillion US\$, listing only 5% of the company on the stock market could raise nearly 100 Billion in very short time. Floating Aramco shares internationally is a central piece of Vision 2030 and will play a central part in diversifying the economy beyond oil. Still, New York and Hong Kong have put forward their bids as well.

However, what ties the UK to Saudi Arabia goes beyond history and economic interests. In fact, this time may be particularly fruitful for strengthened bi-lateral ties. The United Kingdom, set to split from the European Union, will soon be on the lookout for new trading partners and new investment opportunities. Foreign Minister Adel al Jubeir is optimistic about this prospect and recalls that after having been partners for many years who could rely on each other in the most difficult of situations, the current situation could be the stepping stone for major developments on all fronts, very much linked to MbS' Vision 2030. Experts have said it is expected the two countries will ease visa access to further ease travel, business, and educational exchanges. This would not only help boost the Kingdom's international reputation, but also showcase the commitment of MbS' effort to rebrand Saudi Arabia. Particularly the role of students and young people is of vital importance in the

Kingdom's plans and the UK's potential. The Saudi Scholarship Programme, for example, annually allows a handful of highly qualified students to study abroad. Many of them pick outstanding UK universities and help to establish the Kingdom's reputation and image abroad. Upon return, these students are well-equipped to help realize MbS' vision for a new Saudi Arabia through their multifold qualifications and expertise in technology and science. The UK currently hosts just over 13.000 Saudi students at its universities.

On the 7th March, the Crown Prince was set to meet Theresa May at the iconic Downing Street building. In high expectation of this visit, British foreign Minister Boris Johnson has expressed his excitement, proudly describing MbS as a reformist with the desire to listen to all religions, a man of tolerance and mutual respect. Also, May said before the visit, "The link with Saudi Arabia we have is historic, it is an important one, and it has saved the lives of potentially hundreds of people in this country". The meeting is expected to lay the groundwork for a new UK-Saudi Strategic Partnership council, and to establish the key first steps in creating infrastructure that is mutually beneficial, and will last for generations to come. The visit is considered as the Crown Prince's chance to present the Kingdom as a reforming, modern and progressive society, determined to maintain the status of G20 economic power. At this rate and with the many possibilities for further cooperation, this vision is one that is rapidly coming closer and will aid the shift to a more diversified economy and society.

What We Do



✉ info@smtcenter.net

www.smtcenter.net/en
 @SMT_CENTER_EN
 @Smtcenteren
 @smt_center_en