Introduction and Background

1 A Kingdom of Young People

At some point, any visitor to Saudi Arabia will end up in one of the Kingdom's ubiquitous shopping malls, as, until 2017, 'going to the mall' provided one of the few opportunities for 'entertainment' and (a degree of) gender mixing.[1] During a visit to the mall, what will strike the visitor immediately is the sheer volume of young people, nearly all of whom will be talking or texting on at least one smartphone. Indeed, Saudi Arabia is a young country in terms of its demographics. At least 26 per cent of the total population is less than 15 years old; 19 per cent are between the ages of 15 and 24; approximately 47 per cent are between 25 and 54; but only 3.2 per cent are older than 65.[2] Significantly, these young Saudis have adopted social media usage as a societal norm, with WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter essential components of a young Saudi's daily transactions. The young people the visitor sees in the popular urban malls are by and large well-educated, aspirational and interconnected not just with their domestic peers, but very often also regionally and internationally. This youthful population is driving the desire for change to the extent that the government has become increasingly aware that it cannot inoculate itself from the consequences of widespread Internet usage and modern life.[3] I am often asked about the most significant change I have witnessed since first arriving in Saudi Arabia in early 2001. In my opinion, it is this young population's desire to engage with the world. Back in 2001, the Kingdom still seemed relatively isolated; however, nowadays when I ask my students where they can find the outside world, they reply 'in our pockets' as they point to their iPhone XRs, Samsung Galaxy Note 10s and Huawei Mate 20s.

For decades Saudi Arabia has been governed by ageing monarchs and officials. In a patriarchal society this was often interpreted as the natural order of things, with popular monarchs such as King Faisal, King Khalid and King Abdullah being seen as 'father of the nation'. Nevertheless, over the years a sense emerged that a 'disconnect' existed between the

authorities[4] and the predominantly young population. All of this began to change with the ascension to the throne of King Salman in January 2015 and in particular with the appointment of his son Prince Mohammed bin Salman as Deputy Crown Prince, Defence Minister and head of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA).[5] In addition, between 2015 and 2017 greater numbers of young princes and technocrats were appointed to key positions, culminating in June 2017 with the elevation of 31-year-old Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Crown Prince alongside a cohort of younger officials.[6] Suddenly, Saudi Arabia witnessed the generational change many young people had been hoping for – not to the expected 'fifty-something' generation (as exemplified by former Crown Prince and Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef), but rather to the 'thirty-something' Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his generation. It was, according to many young Saudis, the moment the Kingdom began to modernize.[7]

2 Rationale

My principal research interests focus on Saudi societal transformation and youth issues. I focus in this way because contemporary Saudi societal issues remain an under-researched area, particularly by non-Saudi academics, in part due to lack of access to diverse Saudi societal constituencies. This can lead to a limited understanding of contemporary Saudi society in all its diversity, as well as an overuse of generalizations to describe increasingly complex domestic environments. It is my strong belief that we cannot understand a state without studying its society, or diverse societies, and that in the case of Saudi Arabia it is not enough to focus on 'high politics' such as foreign policy or the succession ad infinitum, as so often happens. Young people are the key to Saudi Arabia's future prosperity, and this necessitates studying the issues – many in the area of 'low politics' such as employment and housing – that they consider important. Indeed, I believe that Saudi Arabia's greatest resource is not oil. Rather it is its human capital in the form of the Kingdom's aspirational young people who are more than willing to participate in the decision-making process.

I have been working on youth-related issues in Saudi Arabia since approximately 2008[8] and my current interest in this area stems from my work at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM).[9] Indeed, I am extremely fortunate to be immersed daily in discussions about Saudi socio-political, economic and cultural issues with young Saudi men from all parts of the Kingdom and all walks of life. Furthermore, my experience is not limited to KFUPM, as since

early 2001 I have also worked with young Saudis at other institutions in various parts of Saudi Arabia, including Prince Sultan University (PSU) and the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG). Nevertheless, from my own experience as a participant at numerous 'youth events' in Saudi Arabia, what was sometimes striking was the lack of input from youth itself. For example, at the 2014 Jeddah Economic Forum on 'Growth through Youth'[10] whilst there were many interesting presentations related to issues such as employment and entrepreneurship, only one session included presentations from two youth participants (both male). This absence of a 'youth voice' at an official forum dedicated to youth issues and in a country where the median age is approximately 26 appeared to me to constitute a glaring omission, particularly as Saudi demographics are central to understanding some of the most important issues facing the Kingdom in the immediate future.[11] Fortunately, since 2016 the situation has improved and we have seen a greater focus on youth-centric issues, particularly in forums such as the Misk Global Forum (plus related Misk programmes)[12] and institutions such as King Salman Youth Center (KSYC).[13]

There is not even close to enough literature on males in the Gulf in terms of development, education and wider societal issues; when this is narrowed down to Saudi Arabia, the available literature is particularly small. Notable exceptions include Yamani's *Changed Identities*[14] and Menoret's admirable *Joyriding in Riyadh*,[15] as well as Murphy's online report 'A Kingdom's Future'[16]. However, there is a dearth of primary research on Saudi youth, and relatively little on what young Saudi men in the contemporary Kingdom actually think. Yet, as a blind reviewer of this book's initial proposal observes, the role of young Saudi men in society is critically important.[17] Thus, the overall aim of this book is to gauge perceptions about a variety of important societal issues in order to uncover young Saudi men's opinions and concerns. What is extremely significant is not only the speed of societal transformation, but also the way that perceptions are changing. We can see that attitudes to Saudi socio-politics, economics and culture are being affected by a potent combination of demographics, improved educational standards (at some levels) and burgeoning social media usage, which in consequence appear to have led to greater social and politico-economic awareness amongst Saudi youth. Hence, the scope of the book covers issues such as perceptions of national identity, attitudes to aspects of the social contract such as employment and housing, youth and societal transformation, social media usage and its effects, gender issues and marriage, and recreation and boredom, as well as attitudes to national development and accompanying initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030.

Another aim of this book is to demonstrate that many young Saudi men want to be taken seriously; they need to feel empowered, valued and heard as well as to be given the chance to participate constructively. Furthermore, many young men do not simply want jobs; they want rewarding careers which will enable them to contribute to individual, corporate and national development. For this reason, it is imperative that we understand not only the aspirations and concerns of young Saudi men, but also how they see their futures in today's world. Indeed, one of the comments from one of the book proposal's blind reviewers resonated, as, in my opinion, it rang very true:

> It has often struck me in the past, especially when I have been in Saudi Arabia giving lectures in universities there, that I myself have little concept of how young Saudi men actually think. One catches glimpses of what a limited range of individuals may think (and sees some of the outcomes in terms of significant numbers joining militant Islamist movements and leaving the country), but those who express their opinions to foreigners are almost certainly an unrepresentative sample. The vast mass of young Saudi men remains to me a silent mass whose thoughts and views are concealed.[18]

Hence, examining the opinions and attitudes of young Saudi men is paramount because without taking into consideration their hopes and fears, the future of Saudi Arabia is difficult to assess with any degree of accuracy.

The perspective of young Saudi men is often also obscured as academic, policy and media attention usually focuses on Saudi women. In fact, as the same reviewer points out, we know more about the views of Saudi women partly because women are seen as occupying a particularly problematic position, and therefore, researchers have seen their position as a worthwhile area of study.[19] In consequence, the viewpoints of young men have been overlooked even though they themselves feel a great deal of anxiety regarding issues related to societal transformation, politico-economic reform and socio-cultural change. Furthermore, traditional notions of masculinity amongst young Saudi men are being challenged as increasing numbers of Saudi women enter higher education and the workforce.

Still, I would like to stress that my emphasis on young male perceptions has nothing to do with ignoring the female perspective – indeed I have conducted separate research projects into issues related to Saudi women[20] – but rather I feel that the views of young men are sometimes disregarded. In fact, many Saudi societal issues are often looked at from the female viewpoint, particularly in the West – the most famous being women driving. When the driving ban was still in place, many academics and journalists rarely considered the impact of the ban on young men,

particularly those from less well-off families. In reality, these young men frequently acted as unpaid chauffeurs for their female relatives. No matter what his nationality, for any 'twenty-something' young man this was seriously 'uncool', as he would much rather spend time with his friends. Accordingly, even if a young Saudi man was raised to believe that women should not drive, his reality questioned these norms. This disconnect between accepted norms and everyday life is one of the conundrums that many young Saudi men face, particularly in the urban centres of Riyadh, Jeddah and the Dammam-Khobar-Dhahran conurbation in the Eastern Province. I see this daily with both my KFUPM students and young men outside the university who increasingly encounter conflicts between accepted societal norms and the realities of contemporary, increasingly globalized Saudi Arabia.

Another point I would like to make is that experience has taught me that many of the generalizations that are used to describe young Saudis, particularly young men, are frequently erroneous or completely disregard diverse local contexts. For example, in 2011, it was reported by the Saudi–US Relations Information Service that 'In general, employers say that young Saudi male graduates have an overdeveloped sense of their own value in the marketplace and an underdeveloped commitment to hard work'.[21] This often-repeated idea assumes that self-motivation and career aspirations in Saudi Arabia, as related to personal fulfilment through study and/or work, do not constitute an important factor for any young Saudi man.[22] However, this type of sweeping generalization dismisses an entire constituency of individuals, many of whom desire to play a constructive role in the development of the Kingdom. Additionally, is it really true that all young male Saudi employees have an underdeveloped commitment to hard work? Of course not, as in any society you will find sub-standard customer service or individuals who lack a work ethic. Yet, my own experiences with young male employees at the traffic police, Riyadh Bank, Ikea, Dammam University Hospital, Fitness Time and Hyundai Motors, to name but a few, have been for the most part positive. Furthermore, in the case of many university and college graduates, these young men not only expect to assume significant work responsibilities upon entering the workforce, but in fact also want to do so; they consider that their studies have prepared them for this eventuality. Indeed, the enormous interest amongst young Saudis in start-ups is testament to their desire to make something of their lives.

That said, even though many young men want to assume work responsibilities, they are often disappointed and, more dangerously, demoralized. Unfortunately, as these young people undergo the transition from education to employment they sometimes find themselves 'underemployed'

once in a full-time position. Regrettably, some individuals believe this sometimes mirrors the societal environment – one in which young male Saudis are caught between two opposing attitudes. On the one hand, they are either ignored or marginalized, and on the other, young unmarried men (*shabab*)[23] are deemed to be irresponsible and in consequence are blamed for social ills. Thus, not surprisingly, some youth-related problems stem from the fact that, rightly or wrongly, young male Saudis can feel neglected, because at times there is a sense of not being able to participate constructively either in the workplace or in society.

3 Methodology: Focus Group Discussions

This book is based on fieldwork conducted in Saudi Arabia, including focus group discussions, personal interviews and responses to written online surveys. The most important component of this fieldwork comprised approximately 50 focus groups convened at multiple locations across the Kingdom. The majority of these groups were held between October 2016 and 4 February 2018, with each group consisting of between three to eight members. For the most part, the group participants were young Saudi men aged from 18 to 26 who came from a wide variety of backgrounds in terms of, for example, employment status, region, tribe/family, sect and/or economic stratification.[24]

Krueger and Casey point out that a focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a non-threatening environment.[25] With this in mind, I decided to use focus groups as a qualitative method, as Saudi Arabia is a particularly community-focused country where associational life is deeply implanted.[26] As Montagu observes, the Kingdom thrives on associational life which 'has to take the place of open political discussion'.[27] Hence, in the Saudi context focus groups comprising young men make sense as they represent a social event with, very often, an already existing group or *shilla*. These *shilal* (pl.), Menoret notes, which are often purely recreational, in the absence of independent clubs, associations and societies constitute informal spaces of sociability that are in a way the backbone of urban society.[28]

Furthermore, the compelling logic for conducting research in a group rather than in an individual setting, contend Stewart and Shamdasani, is to facilitate observations of how and why individual accept or reject others' ideas.[29] Again, this was highly applicable to these focus group discussions, where due to the 'social' atmosphere of the groups, participants felt free to voice their opinions and agree/disagree with others. In fact, I tried to keep the atmosphere social and informal, as this prompted more open discussion. For this reason, the focus groups were convened

in people's houses, coffee shops, desert camps, parks, beaches and *istira-hat* (usually a rented room or small property where friends go to relax in their free time). Once the participants were comfortable, focus group discussions centred on the main themes of the book, i.e. the chapter titles, which in turn were determined by issues and themes raised in these discussions. At this point, I would like to stress that all focus group members and individual interviewees consented to their views being expressed in this book; nonetheless, I respect the wishes of focus group participants, individual interviewees and online respondents who, unless named in this study, asked to remain anonymous.

The focus groups were conducted in a variety of locations, including the main urban centres of Riyadh, Jeddah and the Dammam-Khobar-Dhahran conurbation. However, as I will argue later in the book, there is frequently an over-emphasis on the 'urban belt' that stretches across the Kingdom from Jeddah to the oil-producing areas of the Eastern Province, much to the detriment of other regions of Saudi Arabia. As a result, there is danger that the researcher remains within an urban 'echo-chamber', engaging with a well-educated constituency already familiar with academic research projects. The result is the further marginalization of voices outside the recognized elites or those beyond the main cities. Therefore, I also convened focus groups in other regions, including Asir and Qassim, in cities and towns such as Abha, Khamis Mushait, al-Mithnab and Onaizah. It was also necessary to travel beyond the boundaries of the major cities within their respective provinces, for example to towns such as al-Majmaah and Aflaj (north and south of Riyadh respectively) or al-Ahsa and Qatif in the Eastern Province. A few examples: I met with groups of young doctors in al-Ahsa and Abha, petrochemical employees in Jubail, would-be entrepreneurs in Riyadh, primary-school teachers and their unemployed peers in Aflaj, and SANG soldiers in Qassim.

I also felt it would be beneficial to arrange different groups within specific areas, as this provided an opportunity to talk to members of disparate constituencies residing in the same geographic area. Thus, I convened multiple groups in Riyadh and Jeddah, often based around a common interest and/or background. Sometimes these focus groups occurred on consecutive days with different group members, but on occasion the same group reconvened for another discussion. As examples: one of the Jeddah groups comprised *Shari'ah* law students from Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah, another final-year high-school students; a focus group in Riyadh consisted of underground musicians (rappers), another of young consultants working on Saudi Vision 2030 projects. Moreover, in order to try and break down some of the generalizations often ascribed

to parts of Saudi Arabia, I convened focus groups in different urban districts. For example, in Qatif in the Eastern Province, I held groups in different municipal areas including Awamiya, Safwa and Tarout Island.

Significantly, due to widespread internal migration in Saudi Arabia, predominantly to the main urban centres, I was able to include many individuals from other parts of the Kingdom in the focus groups, including young men from places such as Ar-Ar, al-Qurayyat, al-Baha, al-Jouf, Hail, Madinah, Tabuk, Taif and Wadi Aldawasir, to name but a few. Unfortunately, it was not advisable to visit Najran province in 2016–18 due to the ongoing conflict on the Saudi–Yemeni border, but I was able to meet groups of Najranis in the Eastern Province who were either studying or working there.

Map 1 Principal Saudi cities and towns

I also endeavoured to meet young men from a wide cross-section of society in terms of background and employment, in order to achieve a balance wherever possible, as my aim is to identify not just differences, but also commonalities. Focus group participants included, but were not limited to, final-year high-school students, college and university graduates, government/public-sector employees, private-sector employees, entrepreneurs with their own start-ups, military personnel, healthcare personnel, oil and petrochemical employees, gym and/or hotel receptionists, and the unemployed. In fact, when I initiated this project I wanted to ensure that it would be very much a collaborative effort. Therefore, I encouraged my focus group members, students and their combined networks to contribute to the research in order for it to reflect their opinions and concerns. Consequently, the views expressed in this book are very much informed by those of focus group members, interviewees, and/or data from surveys and student projects. Certainly, the opinions expressed by these young men can sometimes be contradictory, not always factually true or only partially correct. Indeed, at times the views of these individuals are based on perceptions. Nonetheless, I believe perceptions shared by many young men in different parts of the Kingdom are significant, because perceptions, even if incorrect, matter. The central question is why these perceptions become widespread and accepted as fact.

Certainly, in order to build a network of contacts that facilitates extensive interviews in various locations, working in Saudi Arabia on a full-time basis provides a distinct advantage. Having lived in the Kingdom since January 2001, I have had sufficient time to build trust with both individuals and institutions and establish a network of contacts. Furthermore, from my previous experience of conducting research in the Kingdom I was aware that as I was conducting an exploratory study, my approach would necessarily be far less structured than a confirmatory one. In addition, as I noted in my 2014 book about Saudi state–society dialogue,[30] it was apparent that in the Saudi context my fieldwork needed to be open to unsuspected phenomena which may have been concealed by what Miles and Huberman term 'prior instrumentation'.[31] Despite having already established a Kingdom-wide network of personal contacts, due to the interconnectedness of Saudi society and the importance of personal relationships, as in the past, I was aware that it would be necessary to adopt to a greater degree a chain referral or 'snowballing' approach, in order to penetrate hitherto difficult-to-access constituencies. This procedure involves recruiting individuals for focus group discussions by means of informal contact between them. For example, when my KFUPM students graduate I ask them to join me on LinkedIn not only to follow

their progress, but also to widen my Kingdom-wide network. As I have taught over a thousand KFUPM graduates who now work in multiple sectors, including for companies associated with Saudi Vision 2030, this has proved to be an invaluable chain referral resource.

Referrals matter, states Okruhlik, but they must be used wisely because who the referrer is also matters. In addition, the researcher must be constantly vigilant to guard against biases inherent in chain referrals and, whenever possible, self-consciously seek diversity.[32] Drawing on Okruhlik's experience, I recognize that 'snowballing' necessarily injects an element of randomness into the research process, but at the same time I have found that, used wisely and carefully, it directs me towards individuals who ultimately make significant contributions to the research.

Additionally, it is impossible to conduct qualitative fieldwork in Saudi Arabia without establishing a degree of trust. Without this trust, not only would it not be possible to establish contacts, but focus group members would not feel comfortable to suggest others known to them who might have something interesting to contribute to the research. Okruhlik concurs, noting that an early lesson was that people were not impressed by professional accomplishments or degrees. Rather, they were made comfortable by personal demeanour and character.[33] In fact, Saudi behaviour is highly personalized, to the extent that Long and Maisel point out that personal rapport is the *sine qua non* of good relations.[34] Okruhlik stresses that she 'cannot over-emphasize the importance of integrity and of building personal relationships of trust', a viewpoint I share wholeheartedly.[35]

Due to the 'trust' issue, I did not record the focus group deliberations, as in the past I have found that this can have a detrimental impact on the discussion. Rather, I took copious notes, which were written up after each session. Of course, I prepared several generic question sets for group discussions, but I have always been acutely aware that it is often beneficial to 'follow the flow' of the conversation, particularly when group members highlight areas of importance to themselves. Again, Okruhlik observes that in Saudi Arabia the researcher should not gather data to support an inflexible line of argument. Rather the researcher should listen, observe and ask questions, as the Kingdom's socio-political context require fluidity in methodology. If the researcher is rigidly fixated on a single methodology and/or line of enquiry, the danger is that the complexity and nuances of contemporary societal debates will be missed.[36] For example, I spent around three hours in animated discussion regarding local healthcare issues in Asir with a group of medical interns in Abha because this was the topic of most concern to them.

I was also fortunate to direct a workshop at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in April 2017 that focused on