

Year Ender 2017 News: A year of historic change in Saudi Arabia, with more to come

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WOMEN START DRIVING

Dubai: Saudi Arabia in 2017 laid the groundwork for momentous change next year, defying its conservative reputation for slow, cautious reforms by announcing plans to let women drive, allow movie theaters to return and to issue tourist visas. The kingdom could even get a new king.

King Salman and his ambitious 32-year-old son and heir, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, have upended decades of royal family protocol, social norms and traditional ways of doing business. They bet instead on a young generation of Saudis hungry for change and a Saudi public fed up with corruption and government bureaucracy.

Hereâ€™ a look at the major pivots of the past year and the reforms to come in 2018:

WOMEN START DRIVING

In a surprise late-night announcement, Saudi Arabia announced in September that it would finally becoming the last country in the world to allow women to get behind the wheel. Activists had been arrested for driving since 1990, when the first driving campaign was launched by women who drove cars in the capital, Riyadh.

In June, the kingdom plans to begin issuing licenses to women, even allowing them to drive motorcycles, according to local reports. It will be a huge change for women who have had to rely on costly male drivers or male relatives to get to work or school or to run errands and visit friends.

In 2018, women will also be allowed to attend sporting matches in national stadiums, where they were previously banned. Designated "family sections" will ensure women are separate from male-only quarters of the stadiums. The crown prince tested public reaction to the move when he allowed women and families into the capital's main stadium for National Day celebrations this year.

MOVIE THEATERS RETURN

Movie theaters were shut down in the 1980s during a wave of ultraconservatism. Many Saudi clerics view Western movies and even Arabic films as sinful.

The first theaters are expected to open in March. Previously, Saudis could stream movies online or watch them on satellite TV. To attend a cinema, though, they would have to travel to neighboring countries like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

The opening of cinemas will give families and young Saudis another way to kill time as the crown prince introduces more entertainment options to encourage local spending.

CONCERTS AND COMIC-CON

This past year, rapper Nelly and two Games of Thrones stars came to for the first time. John Travolta also visited the kingdom, meeting with fans and talking to them about the U.S. film industry.

It's a notable shift from just a few years ago, when the religious police – known as the Muttawa – would shoo women out of malls for wearing bright nail polish, insist restaurants turn off music and break up gatherings where unrelated men and women were mixing.

The entertainment drive started earlier this year, with an all-male concert by Saudi singer Mohammed Abdu, which was both nostalgic and groundbreaking. He had not performed in Saudi Arabia since the late 1980s.

Saudi Arabia also held two Comic-Con events in major cities, where thousands of fans dressed up in their favorite action-hero costumes. Actors Julian Glover and Charles Dance – Grand Maester Pycelle and Tywin Lannister from HBO's – Game of Thrones – made an appearance at one. Rock music blared in the halls.

A HISTORIC TRUMP VISIT

President Donald Trump chose Saudi Arabia as the first stop in his first overseas tour as president. Saudis said the visit marked the return of warm U.S.-Saudi ties that had cooled under President Barack Obama, who helped secure a nuclear deal with Saudi rival, Iran.

Saudi Arabia, literally rolling out a red carpet for his arrival. The president was treated to numerous state banquets, oversaw the signing of \$110 billion in arms deals with the kingdom and even joined in a traditional Saudi sword dance with the king and his son, the crown prince.

Donald Trump stands with Saudi King Salman during a photo with leaders at the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting

The centerpiece of the visit was an Arab-Islamic-U.S. summit, which drew heads of state to the Saudi capital for Trump's speech to Muslim world leaders. Trump also grabbed headlines with an image of him, King Salman and Egypt's president for the opening of a counterterrorism center.

NEW HEIR TO THE THRONE

In possibly the boldest move by the king's son this year, he pushed aside to become first-in-line to the throne.

The sidelining of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who was a feared interior minister overseeing domestic security and a longtime U.S. partner in counterterrorism, established a new era for the kingdom. Given Mohammed bin Salman's young age, his appointment essentially sets Saudi policy for decades in the hands of a man seen as a risk taker.

Saudi analysts and observers say the crown prince may clench the throne sometime next year if his father abdicates in

order to secure his son's reign.

Several months later, the emboldened crown prince launched an unprecedented anti-corruption sweep that saw dozens of senior princes, businessmen and ministers detained at five-star hotels across the capital. The arrests of senior princes among the ruling Al Saud family to keep their disagreements private.

The purge also raised concerns along with disarray and resentment from within a royal family whose unity has been the bedrock of the kingdom.

CRISES WITH NEIGHBORS

Saudi Arabia led a stunning four-nation boycott of neighboring Qatar over its ties with Iran and its perceived support for Islamist opposition groups throughout the region.

The kingdom cut off ties with the small Gulf state, demanded Qatar shutter the flagship Al-Jazeera news network, sealed its land border and barred Qatari flights from using Saudi airspace. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain also took similar steps against Qatar.

The moves failed to bring a wide-reaching reversal in Qatar's policies, pushing it instead closer to Iran and Turkey, which stepped in to help with immediate food shortages and vital imports.

The crown prince was also seen as the force behind an attempt to force Lebanon's prime minister to resign in a bid to pressure Lebanon's Iranian-backed Hezbollah group. Egypt, France and other countries opposed the move, which threatened Lebanon's delicate power-sharing system.

BIKINIS AND TOURISTS

The kingdom will begin issuing its first tourist visas next year and announced plans to build a semi-autonomous Red Sea destination where strict rules of dress need not apply.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman

In a bid to attract even greater foreign investment, the crown prince held a massive investment conference days before the anti-corruption sweep. The prince said the kingdom needed to that is open to all religions, and even went so far as to lay some blame on previous Saudi rulers for reacting improperly to the rise of a more religious, Shiite-ruled Iran.

He also announced plans for a envisioned as a hub for technological innovation. The futuristic city will be funded by the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, which the prince oversees, as well as the Saudi government and a range of private and international investors.

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