

The Impact of US Pressure on Saudi Arabia to Achieve Political and Security Reforms (2009-2016)

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to examine Saudi political reforms from 2009-2016. These reforms came as a result of continued US pressure post-September events in order to change its conservative policy in many files such as Institutional reform, the violation of human rights, and effectively participating in combating terrorism and extremism, where it was accused of supporting terrorism post-September events. The Saudi political system did not put the issues of political reform on the list of its priorities pre-September events, and the details of these issues were not subject to US pressure compared to the rest of the other files such as oil, and military, commercial and economic cooperation. The importance of the study stems from the fact that it is going to be one of these few studies that have focused on the file of political reforms in Saudi Arabia in detail. That could be considered as an addition to the existing literature on this subject. The study has used a systems analysis approach. It is one of the most widely intellectual frameworks in studying the internal or external political activity of any country. The study concludes that the US pressure under the Obama administration led to accelerating political reforms and human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Saudi political reforms; U.S.-Saudi relations; U.S.-Saudi cooperation; Combating terrorism.

أثر الضغط الأمريكي في المملكة العربية السعودية لتحقيق الإصلاحات السياسية والأمنية (2016-2009)

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص الإصلاحات السياسية السعودية من 2006-2019 تلك الإصلاحات التي جاءت نتيجة للضغط الأمريكي المستمر بعد أحداث سبتمبر لكي تغير سياساتها المحافظة في كثير من الملفات مثل: الإصلاح المؤسسي، وانتهاك حقوق الإنسان، والمشاركة بفعالية في محاربة الإرهاب والتطرف؛ حيث اتهمت السعودية بدعم الإرهاب في أعقاب أحداث سبتمبر. لم يضع النظام السياسي السعودي قضية الإصلاح السياسي على قائمة أولوياته قبل أحداث سبتمبر، ولم تكن تفاصيل تلك القضايا عرضة للضغط الأمريكي مقارنة بباقي الملفات الأخرى مثل: النفط والتعاون العسكري والتجاري والاقتصادي. تنبع أهمية هذه الدراسة من حقيقة أنها تعدّ واحدة من الدراسات القليلة التي ركزت على ملف الإصلاحات السياسية في السعودية بالتفصيل، مما يعدّ إضافة إلى الأدبيات الحالية حول هذا الموضوع. استخدمت الدراسة اقتراب تحليل النظم، الذي يعدّ إحدى الأطر الفكرية الأكثر انتشاراً في دراسة النشاط السياسي الداخلي والخارجي لأي دولة. توصلت الدراسة إلى أن الضغط الأمريكي تحت حكم إدارة أوباما أدى إلى تسريع الإصلاحات السياسية وحقوق الإنسان في السعودية.

الكلمات الدالة: الإصلاحات السياسية السعودية، العلاقات الأمريكية السعودية، التعاون الأمريكي السعودي، مكافحة الإرهاب.



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1. Introduction

Certainly, the features of the American discourse on reform in the aftermath of September attacks, 2001, were embodied in the emphasis on democracy promotion in the Middle East, which is an urgent necessity for the United States to spread freedom and respect for human rights in this region. The United States previously adopted a policy based on the exceptional method towards its allies in the Islamic world. However, this method is no longer part of the US foreign policy. Consequently, the relationship between the Arab regimes and the United States grew seriously hard because maintaining the status quo policy and freezing positions in the Arab region became very difficult in the light of current developments in the Middle East region (Salama, 2005, pp. 5-7)

During the period of the study, the Kingdom was able to deal with the file of political reforms in its entire forms positively. Despite its shortcoming, it was a turning point in the history of the Kingdom. The United States recognized new Saudi reality through the special reports issued by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs related to religious freedoms and human rights. In addition, the Kingdom showed cooperation in the fight against terrorism in all ways directly and indirectly, which has a great positive impact on bilateral relations with the United States of America. The strategic relation binding the two parties clearly showed that the United States condoned the Kingdom's shortcomings in the field of political reform and focused on the aspect of combating terrorism in which the United States is interested more than any other file. The US believes that the Kingdom is an ally that cannot be neglected. Rather, some observations, which can push the Kingdom towards reform and change, can be made.

2. Research Problem and Questions

The problem of the study represented in to what extent September 11 attacks, 2001 contributed to moving towards political reform. The research problem revolves around the following questions:

Q1 Was President Obama's administration able to commit to implementing the objectives of the September 2001 events towards the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

Q2 Was the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia affected by the American pressure and achieved political reforms?

3. Hypotheses of the Study

The study's hypotheses include an actual solution to its main problem and its sub- questions. These hypotheses will be mentioned in the following points:

3.1 The study assumes that there is a close relationship between the events of September and the Saudi political and security reforms during the study period, as these events directly affected the acceleration of those reforms, which positively reflected the nature of US-Saudi relations.

3.2 The study hypothesizes that the Obama administration's policy has not abandoned the implementation of the post-September 2001 plan, which became an integral part of US national security, especially democracy promotion and combating international terrorism. This resulted in cooperative interaction and interdependence between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

3.3 The study also hypothesizes that the close relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States is represented by the Kingdom's commitment to cooperate with the Obama administration to achieve post-September events goals. These goals can be materialized by Saudi political and security reforms in a way that serves Saudi interests in its foreign relations with the international community in general and the United States in particular.

4. Objectives of the Study

This study aim at discussed the impact of U.S. pressure on Saudi Arabia to achieve political reforms and support its ability to transcend the limits of conservative politics and change its parameters in many files such as Institutional reform, reforming the violation of human rights in all its forms, and actively participating in combating terrorism and extremism after it was accused of supporting terrorism after the events of September 11, 2001.

5. Significance of the Study

The importance of this study stems from the fact that it is an attempt to investigate the extent of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's response to external pressures in order to achieve important internal political reforms that support its political

position in the face of the ongoing problems in the outside world resulting from the repercussions of the September 2001 events. Moreover, the study covers an important period of time in which great challenges occurred in the Middle East such as the Arab revolutions, the conclusion of the US-Iranian nuclear deal, in addition to combating terrorism, especially after ISIS took control of large areas in both Syria and Iraq. Also, this study will be an addition to the field of study of political reforms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is an integral part of Middle East studies.

6. Methodology

The study has adopted systems analysis approach. It is one of the most widely intellectual frameworks in studying the internal or external political activity of any country. The use of this approach in political science goes back to David Easton, who indicates that any system has inputs affecting it and its outputs. Hence, a feedback process occurs through which outputs affect inputs (Al-Menoufi, 1984, PP. 34-40; and Seoudi, 1992, PP. 32-43). According to this approach, relations between countries are depicted as systems that interact with the inputs of the environment. Consequently, the environment represents the framework in which foreign policy decisions made. The determinants or variables of this environment affect the perceptions of decision-makers. These determinants or variables are divided into two types: the first is external determinants stemming from the international system and the nature of relations between the actors in this system; the second is internal determinants that include military and economic capabilities, political structure, interest groups, and competing elites (Easton, 1995, PP. 23-25). By applying this approach to the current study, the researcher found that this approach is useful in explaining the relationship between a major country (The United States) and a regional country (the Saudi Arabia), where there are a number of variables related to the regional and international environment determine the form and nature of these relations. Accordingly, the two countries depend on the nature of their policies and relations with those variables and determinants. On the one hand, the United States, as a great power dominating the international system and having interests in the Middle East, takes into consideration political and security reforms as one of the mechanisms of counter-terrorism policy, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, takes into account in its foreign policy the international influence of the United States and its strong foreign policy towards these determinants and variables. The Saudi-US relations are based on interdependence and cooperation in many of these variables, including political and security reforms as one of the mechanisms of counter-terrorism policy. In this vein, the independence of Saudi foreign policy emerges. This in return leads to explaining the nature of the future of US-Saudi relations.

7. Literature Review

The study dealt with a number of previous studies that dealt in detail with U.S.-Saudi and Gulf relations, and explained the strengths and weaknesses of it, and how the study tries to clarify its differences with them and cover the subject of the study, can be observed as follows:

The study of Ali Khaled Gerges has dealt with the development of bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States since its inception until 2010. It also included the period of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, as this period is considered the most open to the west, especially the United States. The study has also addressed military, security, economic and commercial cooperation between the two countries. The study did not extensively touch upon the issue of political reforms, but it only confirmed that the issue of promoting democracy declined due to the security and economic coordination between both countries (Gerges, 2011).

The study of Fawaz Naser Al-Qahtani has aimed to analyze and scrutinize the continuity and change in US foreign policy toward the Gulf region, particularly Saudi Arabia, under the two administrations of George W. Bush and Barak Obama. The study also has examined the nature of the changes in American foreign policy towards the Gulf region in order to illustrate the factors that led to change and the time of its occurrence. Additionally, the study has focused on decision markers because they were one of the most significant factors that caused a change in US foreign policy. The study has concluded that the two administrations of Bush and Obama have witnessed a continuity of US foreign policy towards the Gulf Countries. Although the mechanisms of implementing this foreign policy are different under both administrations, the goals of the American foreign policy are still continuous and constant. For instance, the events of September caused tensions in relation between both countries, but the consequences of the events of September were ostensible, as the effects were confined to a

change in tactical goals. However, this study did not deal with the file of political reforms in a detailed manner, especially promoting freedoms, human rights and political participation. It focused on war on terrorism, the positions of the USA on regional issues and regional powers (Al-Qahtani, 2018).

The study of Ghada Ahmed Fathy has analyzed the US-Saudi relations from 2001 to 2006, as it has sought to analyze the nature and limits of alliance relations between both countries and the foundations of the US-Saudi relations, and the history and development of them. The study also has analyzed the different political, military, security, economic and ideological dimensions, in addition to the nature of challenges and crises they faced. Hence, the study has validated its hypothesis and has proved the resilience of alliance between both in facing their crises and challenges. However, the study did not touch on the file of Saudi political reforms and how the United States contributed to pushing this file forward (Fathy, 2020).

Compared with previous studies, the current study has sought to deal with extensively the file of Saudi political reforms and its effect on the bilateral relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia. What distinguishes this study from previous literature may be the fact that it is going to be one of these few studies that have focused on the file of political reforms in Saudi Arabia in detail. That could be considered as an addition to the existing literature on this subject.

8. Structure of the study

This Study is structured under seven main sections; 1-introduction, 2.the mechanisms of the Obama administration's policy in putting pressure on Saudi Arabia to achieve political reforms,3. the Institutional reform in the aftermath of September attacks, 2001,4. Saudi civil society institutions and political reforms,5. reforming human rights violations, 6.strengthening the security policy to combat terrorism, as well as 7.conclusion.

8.1 The Mechanisms of the Obama Administration's Policy in Putting pressure on Saudi Arabia to Achieve Political Reforms

The issue of political reform did not occupy an important space in the nature of US-Saudi relations before the events of September 2001, and the details of such issues were not a priority in that relationship compared to other files such as oil, military, trade and economic cooperation.

The events of September 2001 prompted the two parties to rearrange their relations on new bases that were introduced as a determinant of those relations. This determinant is the issue of political reform and democratic transformation in the Kingdom, and willingness to deal with these issues in post-events stages.

The US administration has linked the dramatic transformation that occurred and the lack of democracy in the Arab world to issues of violence, extremism and terrorism. Therefore, the file of freedoms, support for democracy and human rights was a key priority in the policy of the United States towards the region in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular. The positions of many American officials, as well as decision-making circles such as the US Congress and think tanks varied. These positions, whether positive or negative, continued in all successive US administrations after the events of September 2001. However, the Obama administration dealt with the file towards the Kingdom in a different and positive way.

The file of Saudi political reform during the presidency of George W. Bush was subjected to a number of American criticisms. In fact, the United States tried to play a role in pushing Kingdom to initiate political reforms through official statements or through annual reports on the state of human rights around the world issued by the US State Department. Indeed, the majority of these reports criticized human rights in Saudi Arabia, the form of government, and political opposition. However, the Obama administration rejected the policy of the ex-President George W. Bush with regard to spreading democracy. The Obama administration focused on civil society and institutions building by following the bottom-up model (Singh, 2011, PP. 2-3).

In the middle of 2009, however, the US' trend changed to a greater participation in the issues of democracy and human rights. The Obama administration began to pay more attention to issues of democracy in a number of non-democratic countries such as South Sudan, Honduras, Belarus and Cote d'Ivoire. Thus, the Obama administration adopted a new approach to democratic politics by emphasizing the multidimensional framework and various initiatives to promote broad normative frameworks for the institutional framework in support of democracy (Carothers, 2012, PP.11-12).

Hence, the issue of democracy emerged in Obama's speeches. Obama emphasized, in his speech before the UN General Assembly in September 2010, the importance of promoting democracy, stressing that "those who defend the universal values of their people remain our closest friends and allies, while those who deny these rights, whether they are terrorist groups or totalitarian governments, have chosen to remain our enemies". He added that Democracy, more than any other system of government has been able to achieve citizens' desires and demands, and this fact will only grow stronger in this world where borders are vanishing (Singh, 2011).

The Obama administration adopted a new approach in the Middle East. This approach emphasized that US' external efforts to support democracy should be avoided, and that change in the Middle East should stem from local societies, as many analysts believed that George W. Bush's intervention to promote democracy and change in the Middle East led to the holding of elections and the arrival of Islamists to rule in some countries (Carothers, 2012, P.1), which could harm the interests of the United States in this vital region. However, some statements called for Arab countries to reform. This was stated by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in her speech to Arab leaders in January 2011 in the Qatari capital, Doha. Hillary called on the countries of the region to conduct political reforms that would create the space that young people demand to participate in public affairs and to play a key role in making decisions that affect their lives (Singh, 2011). In contrast Bush, Obama rejected the use of force as a means to promote democracy, but Obama has not ruled out the possibility of occurrence this matter in cases of genocide and ethnic cleansing provided that this matter is supported by the international community. Therefore, the American burdens will be limited and the conditions will be ripe for success (Celso, 2012, P.5).

Political demonstrations in the Arab world in December 2010 and January 2011 have been erupted. Simultaneously, Protests in the Saudi Eastern Province have been held on March 2011. These protests called for women's rights, the right of expression, political representation and improving the economic reality. Commenting these demands and the call for demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, the Obama administration expressed its support for the rights of Saudi citizens to freedom of expression and assembly, and called on the Saudi government to allow the peaceful representation of the opposition. The US administration, through its State Department represented by its Secretary Hillary Clinton, has also expressed its support for the protests demanding women's rights (Fathy, 2020, P.284).

This led to strained relations between Riyadh and Washington, as the Saudi government repeatedly criticized these statements, considering this matter an unacceptable external interference in the Kingdom's internal affairs.

Obama's shift was evident in his emphasis on mutual respect within the framework of universal principles. Consequently, this shift paved the way for broader efforts that were evident in tone and tactics with a change in essence (Alessandri et al, 2015, P.6). That is why the issue of human rights was not strictly raised, as happened in the Bush administration. Perhaps President Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2014 was an attempt to reassure the Saudi ally, as the Obama administration chose to contain the Saudi dissatisfaction with American Policy without cost. Then, the White House announced that President Obama, during his meeting with the Saudi monarch, will not address the issues of religious freedoms and human rights, including women's rights in Saudi Arabia (The Arad Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014, P.3).

Although Saudi Arabia has been designated, from 2004 to the end of the Obama administration, as a state of concern under the 1998 Religious Freedom Act, but the Obama administration has waived any sanctions that might be imposed on Saudi Arabia under this Act for the sake of the American national interest (Blanchard, 2017, P.13). Many US officials also praised King Abdullah's government for taking a more transparent approach and responding to citizens' demands represented in improving economic and social conditions, and political rights. For instance, the Saudi government in 2011 adopted a broad social spending program, addressing the unemployment crisis, allowing women to run for the municipal elections in December 2015, expanding the elected membership of the Shura Council to include 30 elected women, and reducing the voting age from 21 to 18 years (Blanchard, 2017, P.14). National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor also praised package of reforms adopted by Riyadh, especially allowing women to be represented in the Shura Council, stressing American support for these reforms (The White House, 2011). In addition, the Obama administration supported the ambitious plan to reform and develop the 2030 vision of Kingdom suggested by the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohamed bin Salman in April 2016 (CNN in Arabic, 2016).

Accordingly, the mechanism adopted by the Obama administration in addressing the file of Saudi political reforms did not include the issuance of any strict official public criticism of Saudi Policy and did not take into account the concept of force as a means of making political changes similar to its previous administrations. Indeed, the Obama administration considered this matter as one of the special issues that it is preferable to discuss diplomatically, not officially, given the reservations of Saudi leaders about it. Additionally, the Obama administration's cooperation with the Saudi government in the fight against terrorism, regional security, and the maintenance of Saudi oil energy supplies limited the Obama administration's ability to pressure Saudi Arabia to bring about a rapid and broad change in Saudi domestic and social policies. In particular, the US administration's call for Riyadh to adopt these reforms was met with criticism and considered it an external interference in the country's internal affairs, leading to tension in relations between the two countries that the Obama administration did not want.

8.2 The Institutional Reform Post- September Attacks, 2001

The United States' dependence on the cooperation with Saudi government in countering terrorism, regional security, and global energy supplies may limit the ability of the U.S. administration to exercise pressure on Saudi Arabia for faster or expanded changes in its domestic and social policies. International parties supporting social and political reform in the Kingdom have skepticism about external interference. Simultaneously, some reformers doubted the US commitment to promoting political and social liberalization. They believe that Saudi-US security cooperation in the field of security and counterterrorism enhances the ability of the Saudi government and the royal family to control the Saudi people and political rivals. In addition, some observers believe that the Kingdom's reluctance to adopt broader social reforms is as a result of the rapid transformation that the Kingdom has witnessed since it was established. Some reforms were met with violent opposition. The Saudis have discussed issues of political legitimacy and power throughout the history of the Kingdom. Reformists' petitions since the 1990s have urged the royal family to make decision-making and governance structures more participatory, accountable, and responsive to citizens' needs. Since 2003, activists have submitted petitions calling for specific political reforms including the transformation of government from monarchy to constitutional monarchy (International Crisis Group, 14 July 2004), reforming of consultative assembly and districts system, and the establishment of a Saudi Royal Commission to provide advice. In May 2003, it was announced that a royal commission was established to provide advice to the ruling family. Prince Sultan bin Turki bin Abdul-Aziz, chairman of the commission, stated that the establishment of the commission came in light of the current circumstances, necessity of introducing reform and contributing to everything that would achieve progress and prosperity in the Kingdom. He noted that one of the main duties of the commission was to conduct consultation and give advice toward evaluating the governance and re-establishing its foundations based on the principles of Islamic law and foundations adopted by King Abdul Aziz Al Saud, the founder of the Kingdom. He added that the commission will also support the members of the ruling family to lead this country to achieve the good for its sons, and exclude some princes, officials and businessmen, who are to be involved in corruption." He emphasized that among the duties of the commission would also be the preparation of studies and research that would serve the public interest and persuade achieving popular participation in managing the country's governance in accordance with the principles of consultation (Al-Quds Al-Arabi Newspaper, 2003).

The then Crown Prince, Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, responded to the initial calls for reform by holding a national dialogue. This action was depicted by some observers as an unprecedented opportunity for Saudi citizens to discuss political and social issues in public and criticize government policies (the King Abdul-Aziz Center for National Dialogue, 2003).

In the Kingdom's first municipal elections in held in 2005, half of the seats in 178 newly established municipal councils were granted nominal powers to oversee local government and make recommendations to regional and national authorities.. It was completed in three phases. The first phase began on February 10, 2005, in Riyadh region. The second was on March 3, 2005, in the eastern and southeastern governorates. On April 21, 2005, the third stage was in the north and west governorates with the aim of form municipal councils to which some powers of the ruling family were transferred, and then to be the beginning of change in political life (Salem, 2005, p.p.112-113).

In February 2005, the former Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, pointed out that the government was

convinced of the need to follow the reform process in the Kingdom. He confirmed that change must meet the requirements of our people and preserve its social fabric, which needs to be done gradually. He added that the Saudi government is fully convinced of the necessity of political reform, but this reform must be gradual." (Al-Faisal, 2005).

Regarding this political measure, Simon Henderson, who is interested in studying the Saudi affair, author of a study on the political succession and Saudi opposition in 1996 and author of a book entitled "After King Fahd", says "it will not be a cure for all problems of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia nor the problems of relations between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, but it will be an interesting test" (CNN News, 11 February 2005).

8.3 Institutional Reform from 2009-2016

Municipal council elections were scheduled to be conducted in 2009, but the elections were postponed for reassessment. However, in April 2009, Prince Mansour bin Mutaib bin Abdul-Aziz, then Vice Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs, noted that recommendations in relation to improving the municipal council system were the topic of a recent conference in Ras Tanura. The Saudi government announced that elections would be held in September, perhaps for calming public protests (BBC News, 28 September 2011).

The turmoil in the Arab world has stimulated discussions on social and political reform in the Kingdom since January 2011. Saudi citizens continue to present a number of opinions for different liberal and conservative trends on most social and economic issues. In many cases, Saudi points of view are inconsistent. For example, while many Saudis welcomed the King's announcement on women's participation in the upcoming session of the Consultative Shura Council and in the 2015 municipal elections, some official clergymen denied being consulted and stated that they oppose the decision. They said, "It is still unclear whether the gender guardianship system in the Kingdom, which requires women to document the consent of a male relative for most public procedures, will apply to nomination and voting procedures of 2015 (Blanchard, 2012, p. 12).

In December 2015, municipal elections were held as scheduled and included the participation of Saudi female candidates and voters for the first time in accordance with reforms announced by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz who expanded the National Shura Council to include 30 women in the 2013 session. Although these moves were controversial in the Kingdom, some foreigners regarded them as limited political and social reforms unless some issues of gender discrimination rights were resolved (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

The United States praised those Saudi elections and depicted them as a historical landmark because women won municipal council seats in the first open vote for female voters and candidates. The United States Department of State said that the participation of women represented an important step forward in the Kingdom towards a more comprehensive electoral process to ensure the representation of all citizens in a government responsible for all Saudi citizens, and congratulated nearly 1,000 women who ran in the elections (VOA News, 13 December 2015).

8.4 Saudi Civil Society Institutions and Political Reforms

It is known that the Saudi regime in the field of political reforms was dealing exclusively with the official internal media and human rights organizations, whether in the field of human rights, such as Amnesty International or the international media. However, the accelerating events in the Middle East, such as the events of September 2001, the transformation of the internal politics in the Saudi Arabia and international pressure, resulted in the approval of the establishment of civil society organizations, which specialize in the fields of human rights, media and communication, administration, and journalism.

These organizations were able to contribute to the reformation of the Saudi regime, where they have played a key role in monitoring the Shura Council elections. In addition, human rights bodies in Saudi Arabia communicate with competent international bodies and submit international reports in its relevant cases, enabling them to exercise the oversight of the Saudi government. These bodies also meet with official delegations from abroad, and are responsible for media statements.

The Saudi National Society for Human Rights, for example, which is one of the institutions affiliated with civil society organizations and approved in 2004 by Saudi regime (The National Society for Human Rights), has played a prominent and significant role in the areas of oversight, follow-up, and meeting with the relevant authorities internally and externally. In October 2008, the Society received a delegation from the European Parliament, The Department of Relations with the Arab Gulf States and Yemen. A delegation was headed by To Tobia Pelger, Vice President and Charge d'Affairs of the Council,

along with a number of officials. They have exchanged talks about many important issues concerned with human rights, including the death penalty in the Kingdom, In addition to presenting an important aspect of defining the society and its activities and working mechanism, and providing the visitor with the society's publications in English, which explain the progress of its work and activities.

This was a significant step in the internal and external political openness in order to build bridges of communication with other people and cultures and to clarify the true image of some issues that are sometimes misunderstood, owing to misinterpretation of these issues by some media abroad (Huquq Journal, 2008).

In November 2008, the Society, in its meeting with Saudi officials, praised the initiative launched by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz at the international conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Madrid, and considered this move very important, and serves the humanitarian causes with the aim of establishing the spirit of cooperation, rejecting violence and marginalization (Huquq Journal, 2008).

In a similar vein, the society met in February 14, 2009 with a delegation of senior aides' members of US Congress and briefed them on the Society's activities and achievements. They have addresses many issues related to human rights, including women and children issues, and the rights of expression and political participation. The Society also plays an important role in spreading the culture of human rights in society and the concepts of human rights in the Kingdom which are different from those in the Western world (Huquq Journal, 2009).

On December 14, 2009, the Society, headed by Mufleh Al-Qahtani, received a Norwegian delegation headed by Ambassador Thomas Bredl, the official in the Saudi Arabia Department at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The discussion revolved around the issues related to human rights and the role of the Society in spreading its human rights culture and raising awareness of community members in this regard. The Society indicated that King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz has instructed to approve the society's programs in this respect, and the delegation welcomed these efforts and tangible progress in expanding the space of freedoms for civil society organizations to exercise their roles effectively. Then, the delegation has invited the Society to visit some human rights organizations in Norway to exchange views (Haque journal, 2009).

In April 2010, the Society headed by Mufleh Al-Qahtani, participated in the first Gulf Forum of National Human Rights Organizations in Qatar. It introduced a working paper on "The Role of National Society for Harman Rights in Saudi Arabia in supporting, promoting and protecting human rights, and spreading the culture of human rights in Saudi society: achievements, challenges and aspirations". The Society reviewed the achievements related to spreading the culture of human rights by the following: **1)** seeking to making rights concepts contained in the curricula of higher and public education institutions; **2)** Participating in many television programs and newspapers; **3)** Issuing dozens of brochures and pamphlets on Saudi laws, and international Arab and Islamic conventions and covenants, which the Kingdoms joined; **4)** Holding many seminars, meetings and workshops through which the work of the society is introduced and clarified; **5)** Receiving thousands of complaints from citizens, residents and some human rights organizations abroad, and then dealing with these complaints to ensure that the complainants obtain their rights. These complaints were classified as follows (prisoners, financial administration, labor, judicial, personal status, and family violence, etc.). **6)** Receiving many delegations and ambassadors from European, American, Asian and Arab countries, international organizations, universities and other human rights organizations, and then exchanging views with them on human rights issues and clarifying the Society's viewpoint on these issues; **7)** The meeting of the Society's representatives with senior state officials in order to discuss ways of cooperation between the two parties, and address the issues that fall within the jurisdiction of the government's bodies; **8)** visiting many detainees and prisoners who accused of civil, political and criminal offenses, and examining their cases and including them in the relevant reports issued by the Society on human rights conditions in the Kingdom. **9)** Discussing many policies related to legislations based on human rights, which were tainted by many deficiencies, such as the rights of women and children, the right of expression and political participation, combating corruption, living conditions, social, health and educational care, and prisoner affairs; **10)** The inclusion of legal texts that limit the abuses that accompany the enforcement of laws through security and administrative agencies, and prohibit the infringement of persons or treating them inhumanely; **11)** Defining the Society's aspirations at the Gulf and international levels by finding a final solution to the problems of stateless

persons and those without identity papers in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and setting unified rules with regard to expatriate workers, and preserving their rights and the rights of employers, as well as the rights and security of the state (Huquq Journal, 2010).

The National Society's actions continued to support the human rights file through visits contributed to achieving tangible and important progress in the issues of the file. On April 22, 2013, the Society's delegation headed by Mufleh Al-Qahtani visited the Governor of Riyadh, Prince Khalid bin Bandar bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and they agreed on solving many problems related to human rights, setting future plans, supporting civil associations and organizations in this respect, and submitting their recommendations to the highest authority for adoption and implementation (Huque Journal, 2013).

The Society's action, along with other related associations, resulted in the issuance of directives by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to follow up the legislative frameworks related to the judicial system, the institutional structure related to the Shura Council, the Ministry of Interior, the Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Department on Women and Children, reform, the right to political participation and freedom of expression, political Prisoners, combating corruption, and finding quick solutions to violations. After the Council of Ministers briefed on these regulations and based on royal directives, it issued on November 11, 2013 necessary decisions regarding them. The Saudi Minister of Justice, Mohamed Al-Issa and his ministry members considered that the approval of these regulations is one of the complements of the judicial development and modernization system in the Kingdom. The Society, for its part, welcomed these bold and important steps in this regard (Huquq Journal, 2013).

Additionally, the Saudi Journalists Association accompanied all movements and developments in the field of political reform inside the Kingdom, and exercised its professional rights in discussing those reforms and their pros and cons. It highlighted these reforms internally and externally, and exerted great media pressure to accelerate the implementation of all royal decisions that were aimed at achieving and supporting political reform in all its details. The Association issued two press reports for the years 2016-2017, which is one of the tasks of the Freedoms Committee of the Journalists Association. The two reports dealt with all press conditions in the Kingdom. The cooperation of Association with the external media is a qualitative leap because press statements were limited previously to official government agencies (Saudi Journalists Association).

Previously, the talk of the National Society and other bodies about political reforms inside the Kingdom was a taboo, and bodies talking about these reforms were exposed to a serious risk. Therefore, the Kingdom's retreat from its previous views considered a qualitative transformation from the stage of conservative thought to the stage in which a more democratic atmosphere prevails, including preserving the rights of citizens to exercise their natural roles within the state provided that this does not affect the security of the state. The movement of society in this way is considered an important model that revealed and clarified the realistic changes taking place in the file of political reforms. This means a natural reflection of the extent to which civil society involved in this reform. The National Society and other bodies continued to intensify their efforts by meetings and follow-up during the years of the study period until now.

8.5 Reforming Human Rights Violations

These cases can be classified and clarified by focusing on reforming violations of the rights of religious freedoms, freedom of expression and political opposition which was strongly criticized by international human rights organizations and the United States in the aftermath of September attacks, 2001 until the beginnings of taking power by the King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz in 2005.

8.5.1. Reforming Violations of Religious Freedoms

In July 2008, King Abdullah called the organization of the World Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Madrid, Spain. The King invited Jewish and Christian clergymen, representatives of Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian religions. The Conference adopted the Madrid Declaration which recognized the diversity of people and the existence of differences among them, and called for spreading the culture of mutual respect (The World Conference of Dialogue, July 16-18, 2008).

In November 2008, King Abdullah went forward towards his initiative to organize a meeting for interfaith dialogue at the UN General Assembly asserting the Madrid message (Gerges, A. K. 2011, P.249). King Abdullah's interfaith dialogue

initiative appeared on the list of Saudi reform indicators. The Freedom of Religions Report issued by the U.S. Department of State in 2008 on Saudi Arabia described the initiative as “very important” (U.S. Department of State, October 26, 2009).

In 2010, Saudi Shiite and Sunni clergymen continued a series of interviews and meetings to put the foundations for mutual understanding. Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar, a Shiite clergyman, and Sunni sheikhs, Ayedh Al-Qarni and Saad Al-Braik, have met in a private initiative for several months. In April 2010, they declared the Charter for Coexistence between Saudi Shiites and Sunnis. The charter seeks to criminalize verbal attacks on either of the two sects (I am a Muslim for Islamic dialogue network, April 12, 2010).

The King Abdullah made some moves to promote sectarian tolerance, including combating hate speech given by some extremist Sunni clergymen (Ansary, 2008).

During the visit of United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2011, officials in the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs alleged that at least 3,500 imams had been dismissed for embracing extremist views and more than 20 thousand of the country's 75 thousand imams had been retrained, a higher number than what was previously reported. The Ministry of the Interior estimates that nearly 70 percent of all imams in the country are free of religious fanaticism and meet necessary qualifications to be clergymen. The Ministry of Interior claims that it exerts efforts to retrain the remaining 30 percent of imams.

In February 2013, a delegation from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom visited Jeddah, Dhahran, and Riyadh to assess the progress which the Saudi government had made in policies and practices in relation to freedom of religion or belief. The delegation met with high level officials in the Saudi government including the ministers of foreign affairs, justice, education, culture, information, and the assistant minister of Islamic affairs. During the visit, a group of non-governmental interlocutors confirmed that Saudi Arabia would witness an array of positive changes, but this is made very slowly because the common people are still very conservative. In addition, the group asserted that King Abdullah made all possible effort to advance the reform and modernization agenda, which had positive effects on a group of human rights concerns including freedom of religion and belief (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2013).

On January 23, 2015, King Abdullah died and was immediately succeeded by his half-brother, the crown prince at that time, King Salman bin Abdul Aziz. In various statements, King Salman stated that he would continue many of his predecessor's policies and would seek to achieve progress in Saudi foreign policy committed to Islamic teachings (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2015).

In 2016, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom noted some improvements including limiting the powers of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, strengthening the capacities of national awareness-raising committees, supporting the culture of dialogue and understanding between Islamic religious sects in the Kingdom and promoting interfaith dialogue in international communities, Improving conditions of public religious expression by Shiite Muslims in certain areas of the Eastern Province, continuing efforts to counter extremist ideology inside the Kingdom including the dismissal of clergymen and teachers who adopt intolerant or extremist views, revising textbooks and curricula to remove intolerant passages (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2016).

8.5.2. Freedom of Expression and Political Opposition

The Kingdom has made significant progress on freedom of expression, as the Saudi government has not prosecuted or harassed those who express critical opinions, particularly with regard to unveiling human rights abuses, undermining the religious legitimacy of the state, and criticizing the monarchy or the powers granted to the King. There are two main factors for the expansion of the margin of freedom of expression: the high level of public expression through electronic media, and increasing the tolerance of the Saudi government towards critical opinions.

The spread of technology has allowed Saudis to express themselves more easily on the Internet without revealing their identities. In June 2009, the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University published a regional study which concluded that Saudi Arabia was the second country, after Egypt, in blogs via Internet. In fact, Saudi blogs tend to focus on personal matters more than politics, but they include blogs in Arabic and English that criticize the governmental activity and social norms (Etling, B. and Kelly, J., 2009). In May 2010, a public relations corporation located in Dubai named

“Spot On” published the results of a survey on the use of Facebook. The results indicated that Facebook has become in competition with the print press in the region, as 1.1 million from Arab region use Facebook since its inception in March 2009 (Spot on Report, May 2010).

Remarkably, King Abdullah decided to encourage the expression of opinions and reduce censorship on publishing. In his study conducted in 2008 on freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia and other modern systems, Muhammad bin Saud Al-Bishr, Saudi professor at the College of Information and Communication at the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, cited words said by King Abdullah in 2005 and 2006 promising to increase public participation and declaring his commitment to the development process (Al-Bishr, 2009, p.p. 190-191). It was reported that King Abdullah personally encouraged a member of the Shura Council to criticize the performance of government institutions (Lacey, 2009, p.49).

The freedom of expression, which prompted even members of the royal family to involve in it, expanded. Princess Basma, the daughter of Saud Al Abdul Al-Aziz and the granddaughter of the King who is the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, is a blogger and opinion writer. In April 2010, she wrote in Al-Madina Newspaper that she “did not find any evidence in Qur’an or Islamic history calling for an institution in the state to promote virtue and prevent vice. She condemned arresting and beating individuals by religious police explaining that this matter made a wrong impression on Islam (Abdul-Aziz, 2010). In 2008, the governor of the city of Hai'l, Prince Saud bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, appeared in a documentary film produced by the B.B.C. entitled "Inside Saudi Arabia" , where he welcomed constructive and good criticism of ministers and governors by Saudi media reports. He said that the city of Hai'l alone has four discussion forums. He added “you sometimes have to see what they say about me” (Mill, 2008).

8.5.3 Ongoing Restrictions on Freedom of Expression

Despite encouraging signs of expanding the margin of freedom of expression and increasing its means, a number of Saudi officials have declared that there are dangers to this freedom of expression and the government still has the upper hand in determining what the Saudi press can say and what cannot be published.

The Ministry of Culture and Information continues to endorse the appointment of editors-in-chief in Saudi newspapers and can withdraw the approval when it sees an abuse of criticism. Under the decree of criticizing the government, government officials are prohibited from criticizing the government. In November 2006, King Abdullah issued an order for all government employees preventing them from expressing opposition to government policies or programs. In May 2008, the prosecution accused the human rights activist, Raef Badawi, of setting up a website that insulted Islam when his website asked why churches were absent in Saudi Arabia while there was a church in Qatar (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

In March 2009, the Saudi Minister of Higher Education reminded his employees that they were not allowed to contact foreign parties or cooperate with diplomats or foreign institutions. The minister said in May 2010 to spokespersons for ministries outside Riyadh not to speak to the media in order to reduce available information on the government, which can be obtained from representatives of the ministries. In February 2010, the Saudi investigation police service summoned a number of activists from the two cities of Al-Khobar and Al-Qatif in the Eastern Province for questioning them regarding their meeting with officials from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss human rights issues (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

In September 2012, a Twitter writer, Badr Thawab, was arrested after his tweet “The Fall of the House of Saud”. In early 2013, he was accused of, among other charges, using social media to undermine national unity (Global voices, 2013).

On March 9, 2013, a court in Riyadh sentenced two members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (Abdullah Al-Hamid and Muhammad Al-Qahtani) to 11 and 10 years in prison, respectively (Jamjoom, 2013). In addition to this, they were banned from travelling for a period which was equivalent to the period of their prison sentences. On April 24, 2020, it was announced that the activist Abdullah Al-Hamid was dead in prison. It was reported that Al-Hamid was arrested in 2003 by the Saudi security because he called for transforming the regime into a constitutional monarchy (Al-Hamid, 2020).

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom continued to follow up the issues of activists in its annual periodic reports (2011-2016), confirming freedom of thought and making recommendations to the Saudi side in order to improve political reforms (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, Saudi Arabia, (2013,

P.6, 2014, P.80, 2015, P.P. 59- 60, 2016, P.4).

Accordingly, it is evident that the structure of the system based on these religious visions and interpretations is considered the origin and nature of the judicial system in issuing judgments. This in turn contradicts international visions of human rights, and puts the Kingdom under suspicion of its inability to manage this file. Therefore, the Kingdom is between trying to be in harmony with the international vision of human rights and maintaining the conservative heritage, through which the Kingdom was built and its political-religious system was constituted, greatly suffered from using freedoms concerned with violating religious affairs and making judgments in accordance with religious interpretations. Therefore, the conflict continues between the political system of the Kingdom and international institutions over this file, because the Saudi political system is still affected by the religious conservative view, and its vision of the correct application of religious provisions in this regard, while international institutions frequently criticize this method of governance, and believe that this system is still a source of concern in the international community.

8.5.4 Women's Rights

There were many measures adopted by the Kingdom in order to promote women's rights, support their presence and attitudes in political participation, and prevent racial discrimination against them. These measures will be clarified as follows:

8.5.4.1 Supporting women's rights in National Societies for Human Rights

In 2007, a group of women submitted an application to register the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights, but the group received governmental warnings to stop it. (Human Rights Watch, 2008). In 2011, during the visit of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Ministry of Justice officials stated that women enjoy equality and justice under the law of law, although these allegations were not proven (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2012, P. 7).

8.5.4.2 Ending the Guardianship of Men over Women

King Abdullah made a small change to this regime. In January 2008, He issued a decree that women can reserve in hotels without male guardianship (Reuters, 2008). In October 2019, the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage confirmed to the Arabic-speaking Okaz Newspaper: "All Saudi citizens are required to show a family ID upon check-in to hotels. This is not required from foreign tourists. All women, including Saudi women, can book in hotels on their own, providing an ID card upon check-in (Kalin,2019).

In March 2008, the first women-only hotel, administrated by women only, has been opened (Hammond, 2009). In 2009, the government pledged to abolish the guardianship system, but this has not been materialized, and legislative steps have not been taken to abolish this system (Human Rights Watch, 2009). In 2009 and 2013, Saudi Arabia agreed to abolish the male guardianship system and all forms of discrimination against women as a result of the periodic review of the Human Rights Council (Human Rights Watch,16 July 2016).

In August 2019, for the first time, Saudi Arabia allowed women to travel without the need for a guardian's approval and granted women more family rights. It is considered new steps to limit male guardianship over women at a time when the Kingdom faces criticism due to its human rights record (BBC News, 2019).

8.5.4.3 The Right of Women to Drive

Despite the lack of legal recognition, independent activists have tackled basic human rights problems in Saudi Arabia. For example, in June 2010, Saudi women called for the right to drive by organizing a protest in front of the Saudi embassy in Washington and collected 1,100 signatures on a request sent to King Abdullah (Rights Activists Call for Women's Rights, 26 June 2010).

In May and June 2011, to confront and challenge these restrictions, women also organized protests for the right of women to drive. As a result, the Obama administration exercised quiet pressure on Saudi Arabia to allow women to drive cars. However, the imprisonment of Saudi activist for women's rights, Manal Al-Sharif, after she posted on a video of her at the wheel of a car in Khobar, revealed the American diplomatic failure. Therefore, Obama's envoy, Richard Erdman, rebuked the Saudi ministers secretly (Leigh, 2011).

Saudi officials have repeatedly declared their rejection of outside interference in their internal affairs. For example, Prince

Mansour bin Mutaib bin Abdulaziz, the US-educated Minister of Municipal Affairs, vehemently rejected the idea that political development requires women's participation, saying that issues such as women driving are not fundamental to our society. (Leigh, 2011)

In September 2013, the head of the Council of Senior Scholars in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdel Aziz bin Abdullah Al al-Sheikh, stated, "Islamic law does not prevent women from driving". (Human Rights Watch, It's like living in a box, 2016).

On September 26, 2017, in a royal decree broadcast live on state television and at a simultaneous media event in Washington, Saudi Arabia announced that it would allow women to drive, ending a long-term policy that had become a global symbol of women's oppression in the ultra-conservative Kingdom (Hubbard, 2017).

On June 24, 2018, the Kingdom issued a decree allowing women to drive in the country and the ban on driving was lifted (Ngo, 2018). Amnesty International has said that the Saudi Arabia's decision to allow women to drive is a matter that deserves to greet, but it must be followed by further reforms in the area of women's rights (Amnesty International, 2018).

8.5.4.4 The Abolishment of Sex Segregation

King Abdullah encouraged women's education and entry into the workforce, and tolerated the increasing presence of women in public places. However, most of his positions were symbolic without institutional or legal emphasis. The new Saudi labor law, which came into effect in 2006, no longer includes explicit provisions calling for gender separation. Rather, it stipulated in its fourth article that all work provisions would be implemented under loose conditions with committing to the rules of Islamic Law (KSA, Council of Experts in the Council of Ministers, 2005).

The Shura Council approved an international recommendation stipulating the embodiment of the principle of "absolute equality" between men and women. During the session held on February 24, 2008, the Council endorsed Recommendation No. 198 issued by the General Conference of the International Labor Organization on the relation between the employer and employee, submitted by the Administration, Human Resources and Petitions Committee. The recommendation stipulated "the necessity of embodiment of the principle of absolute equality between men and women in constitutions, laws and legislation in the Kingdom, and non-discrimination against women" (Saudi Press Agency, 24 February 2008).

In October 2009, in an important symbolic message, King Abdullah dismissed an official who criticized the mixing between the sexes at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (University World News, 2009). The King also reinstated the head of a unit in the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue in Mecca in April 2010, who had been dismissed for declaring the legality of some forms of mixing of the sexes (Murphy, 2010).

8.5.4.5 The Right of Women to Political Participation

King Abdullah recognized the right of women to vote and run in the 2015 municipal council elections, and expanded the magnitude of the National Consultative Assembly to include 30 women in the 2013 session (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

The United States Department of State praised Saudi elections which it described as a "historical landmark", especially after involving women as candidates and voters, who won parliamentary seats. The United States considered the elections an important step forward in Saudi Arabia (VOA News, 2015).

8.6 Strengthening the Security Policy to Combat Terrorism

In January 2008, Bush administration's strategy towards the Saudi Arabia affirmed that the U.S. victory in the World War on terrorism would be impossible without a partnership to drain funds for terrorists and combat Islamic extremism in the Kingdom (U.S. Department of State (2008).

American policy makers sought to obtain the support of the Saudi authorities in the fight of various terrorist groups, and Saudi Arabia exerted great efforts to pursue this file locally, regionally, and internationally. It can be seen through the following:

8.6.1. Countering Extremism

After international pressure on the Kingdom, whether from the United States or international institutions in regard to fighting terrorism, Saudi officials consider efforts aimed at combating violent extremist ideology are an essential factor in the domestic counter-terrorism campaign (Al-Qahtani, F. N. (2018), P.266, The Kingdom has handled this file in various ways including the

program of rehabilitation of detainees accused of terrorism through (Reassurance Campaign for Dialogue) preventing youth from traveling to fighting countries, re-evaluating educational curricula that call for extremism, and following up clergymen who incite hatred (Saudi Press Agency, 2 September 2009, and, U.S. Department of State, 30 May 2013).

During 2012, the Saudi authorities banned Saudi citizens from traveling to Syria to fight and took steps to limit the flow of funds collected from Saudi private sector to Sunni armed groups and charitable associations in Syria. However, the hints of some Saudi officials and clergymen to genocide against Syrian Sunnis and foreign invasion by Iran and Hezbollah conveyed the impression among individuals of the necessity of their intervention. In response to a question on the Kingdom's point of view on jihad in Syria during a joint appearance with the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, in July 2013, Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, said, "a person may make an effort with his hand or tongue which is the least to be done, but we exert efforts at all levels" (Saudi TV, Al-Ikhbariya satellite channel, 2013).

In January 2014, the Kingdom issued a decree stipulating prison sentences of Saudis who traveled abroad to fight with extremist groups. In addition, more than 1600 suspects supporting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) were arrested in the Kingdom. In addition, several attacks were reportedly aborted (Blanchard, 2014, P.P.6-7).

During 2016, the Saudi government continued its ongoing program to update educational curricula including textbooks. Under the title of the National Transformation Program and 2030 Vision, the Ministry of Education has managed to unify and reduce religious courses to increase the focus on secular education and limit the ability of teachers to spread extremist religious interpretations in school curricula (U.S. Department of State, 19 July 2017).

The Ministry of Information Affairs continued to train, organize, and prevent imams from inciting violence. The Ministry continued to monitor mosques and religious education and imposed new regulations banning posters and other propaganda on potential extremist issues and organizations in domestic mosques. Some privately funded satellite television stations in the Kingdom continued to adopt sectarian hatred and fanaticism (U.S. Department of State, 19 July 2017).

In May 2017, in its capital of Riyadh, the Kingdom inaugurated the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology to counter terrorism and focus on promoting a culture of moderation on the Internet and the , and preventing the spread of propaganda. Additionally, this center has developed innovative techniques that can monitor, handle and analyze extremist speeches accurately (The Embassy of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, March 2019)

8.6. 2 Countering Terrorism Financing

The International Drug Control Strategy Report, released by the U.S. Department of State in September 2009, on money laundering concludes that the Saudi Arabia is still an important source of financing terrorism throughout the world (United State, Congressional Research Service Report, October 4, 2004 – June 11, 2008).

Saudi officials have insisted that their efforts to combat terrorism financing are intensive and strong and not confined to actions taken against entities or individuals who constitute considerable internal threats to the Kingdom. In December 2008, the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA) issued new bank account regulations that appear to significantly strengthen the rules relating to multilateral organizations that have been a source of concern to the U.S. officials of terrorism financing (The Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, 2008).

The US and Saudi officials also reported that the Saudi government has made significant progress in preventing financial support for extremists. For instance, the Saudi government has imposed restrictions on sending charitable donations abroad and has arrested individuals who provide terrorists with financial support. However, US officials remained concerned about the ability of Saudi individuals and charitable organizations to support terrorism outside Saudi Arabia, and noted the limited Saudi capabilities in this regard. (Boghardt, 2014 and Abi-Habib and Jones, 2015).

In 2014, money going to fighters in Syria was often directed through Kuwait to avoid Saudi countermeasures (Boghardt, 2014, see also Abi-Habib and Jones,2015). Despite these tougher measures and significant progress, financial support for Sunni extremist groups from the Saudis remained a major problem (U.S. Department of State, 19 June 2015). Money is allegedly collected secretly and transported illegally abroad in cash, sometimes by pilgrims performing Hajj and Umrah. To handle this issue, the Ministry of Interior continued its efforts to counter the smuggling of money in large quantities in 2016. (U.S Department of State, March 2017).

U.S. government sources stated that although the Saudi authorities had made "serious and effective efforts" to counter the illegal flows of funds to extremists, terrorist financing by individuals in the Kingdom posed a dangerous threat to the Kingdom and the international community (Global Terrorism Database (2016).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United States and Italy also co-chaired the Anti-Daesh Financial Group, which is a broader coalition established in 2015. It focused on suspending Daesh financing (Glazer, 2016).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's efforts to diversify anti-terrorism methods continued. In May 2017, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States established and co-chaired the "Terrorist Financing Targeting Center" as a new collaborative effort to stop the flow of terrorism financing. Since its establishment, the Trade Commission has classified a number of terrorists from a variety of groups including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Hezbollah and the Taliban (The Embassy of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, March 2019).

As part of the Kingdom's commitment to strengthening its counter-financing capabilities, the Public Prosecution Office issued in 2017 a guide that addresses the guidelines for preventing money laundering, including the procedures and steps that must be taken in the event of money laundering detection (The Embassy of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, March 2019).

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia cooperated with a number of international and multilateral organizations that counter terrorist financing. These organizations include the G20, the Financial Stability Board, the International Organization of Securities Commissions, and the International Association of Insurance Supervisors. In cooperation with these organizations, Saudi Arabia supports all initiatives and efforts aimed at combating money laundering and terrorism financing (The Embassy of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, March 2019).

8.6.3. The Role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the Arab Regional and International Alliance

In 2011, the Kingdom signed an agreement with the United Nations to create the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Center. The Kingdom pledged \$ 110 million to the center to help build its capacity and effectiveness in helping countries in combating terrorism. In addition to Saudi Arabia's efforts for the Counter-Terrorism Convention, workshops on UN Security Council resolutions have been held through the Counter-Terrorism Committee of Security Council (U.S. Department of State, 30 May 2013).

Saudi officials have repeatedly declared that the Kingdom is fully committed to implementing all UN Security Council resolutions related to combating terrorism, namely Security Council Resolutions (1267) of 1999; (1989) of 2011; (1373) of 2001; (2170) and (2178) of 2014.

The Kingdom is also one of the countries that have signed all 16 United Nations conventions to combat terrorism and financing it (The Embassy of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, March 2019).

In April 2014, the Saudi government also participated in the working group of Strategic Cooperation Forum between the US-Gulf Cooperation Council on counter-terrorism and border security (U.S. Department of State, 19 June 2015).

In December 2015, Mohammed bin Salman, the then Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense, announced making a multinational Islamic military alliance to fight terrorism, and a joint operations center located in Riyadh. The joint statement of the alliance members referred to the Charter of the United Nations and the Organization of the Islamic Conference to justify the formation of the alliance (U.S. Department of State, 2 June 2016). Representatives from 39 countries focused on the ideological, financial, military and informational aspects in fighting terrorism (U.S. Department of State, 19 July 2017).

In this vein, in December 2017, the Kingdom pledged to provide \$ 100 million to support the Sahel force of the Group of Five to combat terrorism in West Africa (U.S. Department of State, 19 June 2015).

8.7 Conclusion

The study concluded the following significant findings:

- The United States, as a close ally of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, expresses faint criticism towards the file of human rights and religious freedoms in the Kingdom, and that it has not publicly criticized this matter except in the context of its annual reports issued by the US Congress or the US State Department in a regular manner. Saudi Arabia, for its part, appreciated these American diplomatic pressures devoid of the concept of force in carrying out Saudi internal political reforms. Therefore, the Kingdom sought to initiate these reforms in line with the consolidation of the concept of democracy

and the Kingdom's own and bilateral interests.

- In the reign of King Abdullah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was characterized by giving importance and special status to the file of political reforms and human rights and accelerating in specific speed especially the file of institutional reform which remained static until he took power, and the file of the political participation of women and their rights at all levels. In push and pull status, he could draw the attention of all international human rights institutions to his notable positive change. It is a message that the Kingdom deals with the file by the highest authority and is desirous to make the file of reforms a clean state coinciding with the aspirations of the new political vision of the Saudi regime which has the desire to be in line with the vision of International human rights.

- Security cooperation and coordination between the two counters hindered the efforts of the United States to exert intense pressures for comprehensive political reforms in Saudi Arabia because the two countries sought to achieve appropriate results that are consistent with their public policy. The Saudi regime believed that the considerable development of the democratic transition could cause negatively the government of Saud family, especially with the outbreak of Arab revolution in 2011. Therefore, the Kingdom decided to adopt constructive and positive political reforms, which did not exceed the issues allowed by the Saudi authority.

- The file of Saudi Political reforms has significantly evolved. The establishment of civil organizations and unions related to human rights, and media and press rights have been approved. These organizations follow up the Saudi society's rights through direct contact with the highest ruling authority. These rights are represented in political freedoms, namely participation in legislative elections, the right of expression and opposition, and criticism of all repressive methods practiced against them. In addition, the powers of these unions and organizations have been expanded by meetings with the official diplomatic bodies of all foreign and Arab countries to exchange views, and understand the possibility of developing these organizations and gaining experiences that contribute to the consolidation of these political reforms.

- The participation of women in the legislative elections is a real victory for the Saudi political authority in light of the fact that these reforms are in harmony with the American pressures without coercion.

- From the above mentioned, it is evident that the American pressure under the Obama administration led to assist Saudi Arabia in accelerating political reforms and human rights, and increasing its capacity in the field of fighting terrorism. Even if the main motive is a change in the perceived threat to the Kingdom instead of American influence, these great successes deserve appreciation. This also came in conjunction with the Kingdom's ability to respond quickly to interact with the United States and the international community and express a strong desire to prove its effective role in counter-terrorism policy internally and externally. This has been clarified through the active roles that have been adopted by the Saudi regime in combating extremism, terrorism and their financing at all levels. Despite this harmony between the actors in this aspect, there is some suspicion on the part of the American side of the existence of some difficulty in the seriousness of changing the Saudi policy completely. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the Obama administration sold weapons to the Kingdom in the amount of nearly \$ 115 billion, which should be considered signs of confidence in international relations and cooperation at the highest levels, mutual doubts remained between the two parties. At the official American level, about 64 members of Congress have written to Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, messages raising concerns and questioned the influence of these sales on the interests of national security for the United States and its allies, where Ted Liu, a member of the American Democratic Party, informed the Guardian Newspaper that "I am not opposed to helping Saudi Arabia, which was a longstanding ally of the United States. What I am fundamentally opposing is the continuity in selling weapons to a military coalition that has repeatedly committed war crimes" (Borger, 2016). Thus, there have been doubts related to the military events and operations led by the Saudi Arabia and its leadership of the Arab military coalition in Yemen, as members of the US Congress believed that there were war crimes against civilians being committed in Yemen by Saudi Arabia, and thus the continuity of the United States of selling weapons to Saudi Arabia is tantamount to engagement in those crimes. The Saudi officials, for their part, remained critical of President Obama and his administration, considering them untrustworthy and hostile to the Kingdom owing to regional files such as the Iranian nuclear deal agreed upon by the United States. According to the Saudi perspective, Iranian demands will become a source of great concern in the region because Saudi Arabia

completely refuses the support of any country for a Shiite regime on its southern borders, as the decisions in the Yemeni file were made after bargaining between Washington and Tehran, which mostly ended in favor of Iran. This did not dissuade Washington from concluding the nuclear agreement (Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2013, p. 3). Nevertheless, the strategic relationship and preservation of it between the two parties remained a matter of interest by both parties, and cooperation in the military field is evidence of the strength of this relationship.

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