

The myth of the reforming monarch: Orientalism, racial capitalism, and UK support for the Arab Gulf monarchies

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Abstract

The narrative of ‘reform’ in Saudi Arabia, recently recurring in British political discourse around the kingdom’s Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, is situated within wider Orientalist themes, wherein a progressive and modern West is juxtaposed with an Arabian peninsula mired in backwardness. In this context, the purported Arab ‘reformer’ is presented as the ideal ally of the West, attempting to haul his society up to the West’s supposed standards, for example on women’s rights. This racialising narrative serves to legitimise British support for authoritarian Gulf regimes, thus helping to sustain the political economy of this set of international relations at the political level. It does this by obscuring the important role the United Kingdom plays in sustaining authoritarianism in the Arabian peninsula by externalising the explanatory focus onto the terrain of cultural difference. This article contributes to the literature on UK relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies by critically analysing the ways in which racialising discourses dovetail with material interests to reinforce and sustain these ties. In doing so, it also contributes to the emerging literatures on ‘racial capitalism’ and ‘race’ in international relations, through its exploration of the role of Orientalist discourse in this significant empirical case study.

Keywords

British foreign relations, orientalism, political economy of the Middle East, race in international relations, racial capitalism

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Introduction

The narrative of ‘reform’ in Saudi Arabia, promoted by the kingdom’s Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and taken up by governments and media commentators in the United States and the United Kingdom, was undermined by the October 2018 killing of Jamal Khashoggi, an exiled Saudi journalist critical of the Crown Prince’s rule. The Crown Prince himself likely ordered the assassination (Barnes and Sanger, 2021). The dissonance between the projected image of benign liberalisation and the silencing of

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Khashoggi poses questions about the nature and role of the narrative of Saudi 'reform' within Western public discourse, which this article will attempt to shed light on.

The narrative of the 'reforming' monarch is not new, and is consistent with the juxtaposed, binary caricatures of Orientalist discourse, wherein the West is cast as axiomatically progressive and modern, in contradistinction with an East mired in a backwardness determined by its culture and traditions. In this context, the purported Arab 'reformer' is presented as the ideal ally of the progressive West, attempting to drag his society up towards what are taken to be our own higher standards.

As such, the 'reform' narrative serves two important discursive functions. First, it legitimises Western support for authoritarian rule with the implied but false promise that the regime in question is working to achieve some form of meaningful and transformative change. Second, by moving the explanatory focus for the persistence of authoritarianism away from the historic collusion of governing elites in both the East *and* West, and firmly onto the terrain of cultural difference, it serves to reinforce the West's self-image as liberal and democratic, despite its sustained support for authoritarian rule. In fact, Western support for Gulf monarchs, once the latter are cast as 'reforming', becomes *proof*, rather than disproof, of the liberal nature of Western power. Authoritarianism is thus externalised as an Arab trait, or problem, and a sense of Western innocence is preserved.

Crucially, by legitimating Western support for these monarchies, this racialising discourse serves to facilitate the ongoing incorporation of the Gulf region into global capitalism on terms favourable to the interests of the Atlantic powers. That is to say, the process of racialising the Gulf is a constitutive element of the capitalist relations between the region and the West. To this extent, we are dealing here with an instance of 'racial capitalism'.

This article will critically analyse the 'reform' narrative in the case of UK relations with Saudi Arabia primarily, but also with reference to Bahrain. These illustrative cases will be set within the structural context of UK relations with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council ('GCC', comprising Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity across these six states, they constitute a coherent geopolitical bloc from the point of view of UK foreign relations. Maintaining support for monarchical rule in the GCC has long been a policy of high strategic value to the British state and British capitalism.

The article begins by outlining the role that Britain has played in sustaining authoritarian rule in the region. Noting the contradiction between these practices and the political philosophy of democratic liberalism in which the British political class is steeped, it contends that, beyond the material self-interest of the British state and British capitalism, we must look to the role of ideology and discourse to gain a more complete understanding of how these relationships are justified and thus rendered sustainable politically.

The article then draws on the concept of 'racial capitalism', noting how certain peoples have been racialised within western discourse so as to justify integrating them into the global capitalist system in a subordinate position. It utilises the concept of 'Orientalism', to examine the specific processes of racialisation to which this article pertains. The narrative of the 'reforming monarch' emerges from Orientalist discourse, and the article discusses the nature and lineage of that narrative, and the ways it has been employed in the UK-Gulf context. Particular attention is paid to the emergence of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and the utility of the 'reform' narrative as a defence of continued British support for the Saudi kingdom. Here, the treatment of women's rights within the discourse provides an especially telling illustration of the dynamics in play.

The article concludes that racialising discourse is an important component of the political economy of UK-GCC relations, shoring up and even sharpening Britain's self-image as a liberal presence on the world stage, obscuring its sustained commitment to authoritarian rule and thereby facilitating the maintenance and renewal of the ties between British and Gulf capitalism.

These conclusions are reached through analysis of contemporary texts which convey the British government's narrative on UK-GCC relations. This analysis situates that narrative within long-established discourses around relations between the West and the Middle East, identifying familiar or adapted tropes and evaluating the work they are doing at key moments. The analysed texts include transcripts of parliamentary debates and select committee hearings, as well as official statements by ministers. Particular attention is paid to moments of scandal, crisis, or change, where the discourse has been mobilised to justify UK support for monarchical rule. These moments include the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, the mass execution carried out in Saudi Arabia in January 2016, and the 2018 visit to the United Kingdom of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.

The article makes two distinct contributions. First, it adds to a somewhat sparse literature on current UK relations with the Arab Gulf monarchies. This mostly comprises a handful of articles and book chapters, concentrating on distinct issue areas within those relationships (notably, Hollis, 2010: 158–178; Kelly and Stansfield, 2013; Leech and Gaskarth, 2015; Roberts, 2014; Stansfield and Kelly, 2013; Stavrianakis, 2017, 2018).

In *AngloArabia: Why Gulf Wealth Matters To Britain* (Wearing, 2018), I work towards a more comprehensive theorisation and empirical account, in the only book-length survey of the modern political economy of UK-Gulf relations. This covers the commercial and geopolitical significance of hydrocarbons; the importance of Gulf petrodollars to British capitalism; and the various forms of arms exports and military cooperation provided by the United Kingdom to the Gulf regimes in order to maintain these relations. However, this monograph only engages intermittently with the ways in which British support for authoritarian rule is legitimated and sustained within British elite discourse. This article sheds more substantive light on this important dimension. It complements and expands on my previous work by showing how racialising Orientalist discourse legitimates support for the authoritarian regimes that sit at the heart of this set of capitalist relations. Between the discourse analysis in this article and the political-economic analysis in my earlier monograph, a picture of 'racial capitalism' emerges.

Second, the article contributes to recent literature on 'racial capitalism' and 'race' in international relations, through exploration of an important contemporary case study. It analyses the political-economic utility of racialising narratives that posit a culturally liberal West and a culturally authoritarian Middle East, showing how, within that Orientalist juxtaposition, the story of a 'reforming monarch' helps legitimise British support for authoritarianism in the Gulf region. Here, 'race' and racialisation are playing significant roles in sustaining a key subset of capitalist relations and hierarchies within the international system.

The political economy of UK-Gulf relations

For Hanieh, the GCC together represents an emerging economy of comparable significance to the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; Hanieh, 2018: 51). This due both to their enormous reserves of oil and gas, and to the 'petrodollar' wealth generated by the sale of these hydrocarbons. The GCC is a lucrative import

market, Gulf investment is a shaping factor in Middle Eastern capitalism, and above all, GCC petrodollars have played an increasingly significant role in global finance, especially since the turn of the millennium (Hanieh, 2018). In addition, the GCC has emerged as a major shipping hub, central to global trade, and military logistics (Khalili, 2020; Ziadah, 2018).

Against this background, I have argued that UK relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies constitute Britain's most important set of strategic ties in the Global South. By absorbing British exports and through capital inflows to the City of London, Gulf petrodollars play a key role in addressing the major balance of payments challenges resulting from Britain's shift from manufacturing exports towards financial services under neoliberalism (Wearing, 2018: 110–153). In addition, GCC petrodollars are recycled into the British military industry through major arms export contracts, which are vital to sustaining the United Kingdom's industrial capacity to remain a global military presence capable of projecting power internationally (including into the Gulf, protecting the local regimes; Wearing, 2018: 154–186). It is in these various ways that British and Gulf capitalism are bound together. And to the extent that the racialising discourse analysed in this article helps to legitimise the specific terms upon which this integration occurs, with the Gulf monarchies in a central role, UK-GCC relations can be understood in part as an instance of 'racial capitalism'.

In constructing these strategic ties, British imperial power was an active presence through the entire process of state formation in the Gulf throughout the 20th century and up to the present day. Yom and Gause (2012: 78) note that:

the near-absolute power wielded by Arab royals originates not from some ancient cultural essence but from modern colonialism . . . [T]he Gulf region's royal families . . . could not impose their will on rival tribes and clans until Britain formalized their respective claims to rule through defense treaties in the late nineteenth century, and later helped to put down internal resistance.

Bsheer (2018: 242) points out that in the inter-war years:

the new [Saudi] state was opposed by a majority of its inhabitants. It was one among multiple possible political formations that British imperial orchestration had blocked . . . The experience of the British colonialists with counter-insurgency and mass repression . . . were central to maintaining Al Saud in power.

From then on, 'reliance on imperial support, first British and then American, to fight subsequent internal threats became a hallmark of Saudi rule' (Bsbeer, 2018: 244). As Hanieh (2013: 24, 27) notes, the kingdom 'faced the rise of revolutionary and nationalist movements during the 1950s and 1960s, which were severely repressed with the open support of US and British advisors', an episode Bsbeer (2018) documents in some detail.

As we will see, British officials today often attribute the persistence of monarchical rule in the Gulf to the region's 'culture' and 'values'. Bellin (2004), like Yom and Gause, dismisses the cultural argument. Rather, she concludes that:

the solution to the puzzle of Middle Eastern and North African exceptionalism lies less in absent prerequisites of democratization [such as the right 'culture'] and more in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism, specifically a robust coercive apparatus in these states. The will

and capacity of the state's coercive apparatus to suppress democratic initiative have extinguished the possibility of transition. (Bellin, 2004: 143)

This coercive apparatus is considerable, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) coming second and fifth respectively in the league table for world leading arms importers over the past 10 years (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2019). These arms have been supplied almost exclusively by liberal democracies, specifically the United Kingdom, the United States, and France, who between them provided 85% of the GCC's major arms imports since the end of the Cold War (Wearing, 2018: 159–163). British arms sales and military cooperation continued almost completely undisturbed through the Arab uprisings of 2011, even as the Gulf regimes colluded in the violent suppression of an overwhelmingly peaceful pro-democracy movement in Bahrain, a subject to which we will return.

Resolving the tension between discourse and practice

It is clear that a simple dividing line cannot be drawn between an authoritarian Arabian peninsula and a liberal West. Authoritarianism cannot be externalised from the West and onto the Gulf as a cultural characteristic. Rather, the persistence of monarchical rule in the Gulf is in no small part the product of an extended period of deeply structured collusion between local elites and Anglo-American power. This directly contradicts the self-image of Anglo-American power as fundamentally shaped and guided by the values of liberal democracy.

This contradiction suggests a tension that must somehow be resolved. The dominant political discourse in, and self-image of, the United Kingdom are framed by the values of liberal democracy. How then has it been politically, morally, or intellectually sustainable within the British polity for the United Kingdom to provide vital sustenance to the Saudi regime and its counterparts for over a century?

Economic and strategic advantages evidently account for a large part of the motivation for UK support for these regimes, but they cannot provide the sole explanation for the solidity of that support, unless we are to dismiss the dominant discourse and set of values in British politics as irrelevant, even a cover story, deployed with conscious cynicism to mask the true impulses of British power. A more plausible interpretation is that the dominant discourse reflects a set of values and beliefs that are sincerely held by the British political class, and that support for highly repressive authoritarian regimes such as the Saudi kingdom must therefore be explained and justified, within that discourse, in such a way as to plausibly reconcile the policy with the predominant values and with the British polity's collective sense of itself. Squaring the contradiction between the claimed liberal democratic values of the British elite, on one hand, and the British state's commitment to authoritarian rule in the Arabian peninsula, on the other hand, is plainly no small task. Discourse, therefore, is not epiphenomenal or a side issue. It plays an important constitutive role and as such merits close analysis.

This article contends that the key conceptual ingredient in squaring purported British values with concrete British policy, in this case, is racism. By framing the peoples and cultures of the Arabian peninsula in an essentially racist way, the British political class is able to justify – not only to others, *but to itself* – its continued support for authoritarian rule in the region. The role of racialised discourse in legitimating these material realities has a long history in the political economy of capitalism and Western imperialism. The 'reform' narrative is a distinct and notable manifestation of that phenomenon.

The role of racialised discourse

Cedric Robinson (2000) documents how ‘the development, organization and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, [and] so too did social ideology’. He develops the concept of ‘racial capitalism’ to describe the ways in which ‘racialism . . . permeate[d] the social structures emergent from capitalism’, and to name ‘the subsequent structure as a historical agency’ (Robinson, 2000: 2). In the age of empire, ‘race became largely the rationalization for the domination, exploitation and/or extermination’ (Robinson, 2000: 27) of the various non-‘European’ colonised peoples.

Robinson’s research agenda is now undergoing a revival, with the emergence of a number of new texts (most notably, Bhattacharyya, 2018; Virdee, 2019). In their introduction to a special issue of the journal *New Political Economy* on ‘raced markets’, Tilley and Shilliam (2018: 538) argue that ‘race has been integral to centuries of colonisation in the service of dispossession, extraction and enslavement, and continues to play a role in the ordering of accumulation and impoverishment in the present’. Virdee (2019) shows how various workforces – in early colonial North America and the Caribbean, for example – were racially coded so as to rationalise and facilitate their exploitation. Scholars of racial capitalism are concerned with the racialised manner ‘through which human populations are organised into the service of capital’ (Bhattacharyya, 2018: 23). This article explores how racialisation facilitates the incorporation of the Gulf polities into global capitalism, on terms favourable to the Western powers in general and the United Kingdom specifically, that is, under monarchical rule.

In parallel, there is an emerging literature on ‘race’ in international relations (most notably, Vitalis (2015) and volumes edited by Anievas et al. (2015) and by Persaud and Sajed (2018). This revives and builds on the work of African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, particularly in its deployment of his concept of a global ‘colour line’ to explain how race continues to play a structuring role in the international system. One aspect of this structure highlighted by Du Bois (1925: 425) was the contrast between the ‘democratic face’ shown by ‘modern imperialism’ at home and the ‘visage of stern and unyielding autocracy’ displayed in the colonies. As Du Bois observed, ‘this double-faced attitude is difficult to maintain and puts hard strain on the national soul that tries it’. This article shows how Orientalist discourse around contemporary UK-Gulf relations works to alleviate the tension that Du Bois identifies.

In an earlier work, Vitalis (2007) documented how ARAMCO managers employed Jim Crow style racial segregation as a labour disciplinary mechanism within the Saudi oil facilities under their control in the mid-20th century. This article complements that work by examining another sense in which the ‘colour line’ has been applied in the West’s relationship with the kingdom, and the latter’s incorporation into wider circuits of capital accumulation. Vitalis (2007: 78–79, 139) also notes how ARAMCO attempted to counter the charge that it was an agent of imperialism by presenting itself as a progressive force, working hand in hand with a uniquely enlightened Saudi king. This article picks up on this theme, homing in on its racialised nature in the current discourse around UK-Gulf relations.

These literatures speak directly to the role that racism plays in squaring the iniquities of capitalism with the hegemonic values of liberalism. Virdee (2019: 19) notes that during the age of empire, ‘racism rapidly became one of the principal mechanisms through which inequality and hierarchy could be intellectually legitimized in an age which had proclaimed its belief in human equality’. Chakravartty and da Silva (2012: 370) concur

that ‘racial and cultural differences have . . . been deployed to reconcile a conception of the universal (as encapsulated by the notion of humanity) with a notion of the particular (of difference marked in bodies and spaces)’.

Within this context, ‘race’ should be understood as a social construct rather than a biological fact. The correct analytical focus therefore is on ‘racialization – social relations and processes that produce race by articulating and legitimizing intra-group unity and intergroup incommensurability’ (Vucetic and Persaud, 2018: 38). As such, race can refer to ‘civilization’ or ‘culture’ (Vucetic and Persaud, 2018: 40), and it is within these latter terms that the specific forms of racialisation pertaining to Western discourse around the Arab and Muslim majority world have been articulated and reproduced, in what became known as ‘Orientalism’.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (2003) argued that European colonial rule had been enabled and justified by the specific ways in which the region was represented in academic, cultural, and political discourse. West and East were misrepresented through a simple, juxtaposed binary: the West was progressive, dynamic, and rational, while the East was backward, superstitious, and irrational. In particular, the West was steeped in liberal traditions while the East had a ‘tendency to despotism’ (Said, 2003: 205). This discourse was continually reproduced until it became an all-pervasive common sense – one which flattered the West by comparison with its inferior Eastern ‘other’ and justified the projection of imperial power on ostensibly enlightened grounds. As such, the discourse served as ‘an accomplice to empire’ (Said, 2003: 334).

What is key here is the role of difference, and the way it is socially constructed. Theorists of racial capitalism argue that social orderings based on notions of racialised difference have always been a constitutive part of capitalism. Orientalism is the specific discourse that reproduces such differentiation between the West and the Middle East. Today’s Orientalism facilitates the integration of the GCC into global capitalism *specifically as a set of non-democratic polities*. It achieves this by casting the Gulf region, within Western political discourses, as a naturally non-democratic domain.

The discourse whose evolution Said traced over the 19th and 20th centuries survives into the 21st century. Kumar (2017: 65–66) notes the persistence of the purported dichotomy between progressive Western modernity and stagnant Eastern tradition. Al-Rasheed (2020: 327) describes the portrayal of an inherently conservative Saudi society as a discourse ‘derived from older ones on the inevitability of Oriental despotism’. This discourse supports the myth of the reforming monarch and obscures the existence of progressive forces within Saudi society (Al-Rasheed, 2020: 85). To the extent that these tropes legitimise UK-GCC relations – and thus, facilitate the ties between British and Gulf capitalisms – it can be said that ‘race’ is doing the sort of work envisaged by theorists of racial capitalism.

Orientalist juxtapositions are regularly employed when British officials are challenged on the United Kingdom’s relationship with the Arab monarchies. When questioned by the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee about British policy during the Arab uprisings, Foreign Office minister Alistair Burt said, ‘[t]he values of these countries will never completely mirror ours and we cannot expect that’ (Foreign Affairs Committee (House of Commons), 2013: Ev80). Sir Tom Phillips, British ambassador to Saudi Arabia at the time of the uprisings, asserted the need to ‘work with the grain of particular societies to advance UK values’ (Foreign Affairs Committee (House of Commons), 2013: Ev48). Questioned by another parliamentary committee on British support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, Sir Simon Mayall, former Middle East adviser to the Ministry

of Defence (MoD), said that '[w]e are a values-based society. They are a values-based society. It is a different set of values' (Business, Innovation and Skills and International Development Committees (House of Commons), 2016: 23).

Within the well-established Western discourse regarding the Middle East, these familiar allusions do not need to be elaborated upon in order to be understood. 'UK values' are axiomatically liberal and democratic, in contradistinction to those of the Arabian Gulf. Here, Britain is encountering monarchies that have emerged from a fundamentally different culture, and conducting necessary relations with them as best it can in these challenging circumstances. The United Kingdom's deep implication in the persistence of Gulf authoritarianism is thus obscured and its sense of liberal innocence upheld.

It is vital to emphasise the long-established Western preference for monarchs who can act as guarantors of correct foreign and economic relations, and suppress popular movements who might challenge the rule – and, crucially, the strategic and economic policies – of those regimes (Wearing, 2018: 11–46). The image of a backward society ruled over by a relatively progressive monarchy works precisely to legitimate support for monarchical rule *against* popular challenges, or the prospect of them. Therefore, while monarchical rule, in general, is represented as a product of the region's 'culture' and 'values', the monarchs themselves are portrayed – strictly within these parameters – as the best of all possible options.

The GCC states – as key sites of strategic value and capital accumulation – are incorporated into global capitalism as authoritarian regimes in no small part because these are the preferred terms of their Western backers. To the extent that this is made possible through the mobilisation of racialising discourse, this can therefore be understood as an instance of racial capitalism.

Orientalism and 'reform'

As Virdee (2019: 5) notes, 'modernity' is a key concept in racial coding, understood as a Western standard to which racialised others must aspire or strive. This was the explicit rationale for the 'mandate' system under which former Ottoman possessions were placed under British and French control after the First World War. The Covenant of the League of Nations (cited in Gopal, 2019: 265) described these places as 'inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves'. Therefore, 'the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience . . . can best undertake this responsibility'.

The 'reform' narrative around a Gulf monarch can be situated within this frame. 'Reform' is terminologically interchangeable with 'modernisation', implying a 'civilising mission' now being carried out by our ally among his own people. Within these racialising parameters, we may note the difficulties he faces, given the deficiencies of his subjects and their culture, but we can applaud his efforts and comfort ourselves with the fact that, though the reforming monarch may not rule in accordance with our own values, he is doing everything he can in challenging circumstances, as indeed are we in offering what support and encouragement we can.

As Gruffydd Jones (2015: 72) notes, such framings silence the history of imperialism in the creation of present iniquities. Bsheer (2018) gives voice to that history, showing the decisive role played by the West during the 1960s in helping a conservative Saudi royal faction to crush a popular, progressive political movement, and entrench authoritarian rule (see also Vitalis, 2007, on Saudi workers' resistance to ARAMCO's racial

discrimination). This article's critique of the 'reform' myth can complement efforts to break the silence around these important histories of grassroots resistance to an authoritarianism sustained by the West.

The ascent of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman provides a significant contemporary example of the myth of the 'reforming monarch', and we will return to that case, with specific reference to UK-Saudi relations, later on. However, the myth has recurred in the wider Anglo-American political discourse, and the case of the Crown Prince should be seen within this historical context. As the 'reform' narrative around Mohammed Bin Salman began to take shape, the e-zine of the Arab Studies Institute, *Jadaliyya*, published an online article entitled 'Seventy Years of the *New York Times* Describing Saudi Royals as Reformers' (Al-Arian, 2017), collecting numerous articles going back to the earliest days of the US-Saudi alliance. Saudi kings and crown princes from the mid-20th to the early-21st centuries are repeatedly hailed as moderate rulers of a backward society, committed to ambitious reform programmes. This includes King Faisal (who ruled between 1964 and 1975) and King Abdullah (2005–2015), who had been responsible for the repression of progressive popular forces at home (Bsheer, 2017) and in Bahrain, respectively.

The same tropes recur in the British context, and can be found in a debate on UK-Saudi relations in the House of Commons in January 2016, at a time when mass executions in the kingdom had sparked controversy around London's ties with Riyadh. Here, the minister responsible for Middle East policy, Tobias Ellwood, pointed to 'incremental progress' on 'reform', but noted that 'the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia reflects widely held conservative social values and, as such, needs to move at a pace that is acceptable to its society' (Hansard, 2016: Col.94). Furthermore, '[o]nly by working with [the House of Saud] are we likely to bring about the change we all desire' (Hansard, 2016: Col.95) since, in this 'mostly socially conservative society . . . today's leadership is on the liberal end of opinion . . . We will therefore continue to work with Saudi Arabia to make sure that it moves towards its programme of reforms and modernisation' (Hansard, 2016: Col.98). Again, the civilising mission is being carried out, almost on our behalf, by our allies, the agents of progress and modernisation (a framing which renders Saudi dissidents invisible). This is cited explicitly as a reason to continue supporting the regime.

Twice in the debate, Ellwood remarked that 'Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country', and hence 'change cannot happen overnight' (Hansard, 2016: Col.94, 111). In reference to the kingdom's use of the death penalty, the Scottish National Party member of parliament (MP), Peter Grant, responded that:

I do not think we would excuse murder by the authorities in the Republic of Ireland on the basis that it was a young country, nor indeed in the nine member states of the European Union that did not exist in the early parts of the 20th century. (Hansard, 2016: Co.111)

Grant's error perhaps is to take the word 'young' too literally, whereas within the Orientalist discourse, this might more accurately be seen as an allusion to the supposed immaturity of Arab culture (Said, 2003: 40). In any case, this was the only attempt by any MP – even in a debate characterised by repeated, sharp criticism of the government – to challenge Ellwood's Orientalist framing. This itself is a measure of the discourse's potency.

The 'reform' narrative performed particularly important work in the wake of the 2011 uprising in Bahrain. There, internal security forces supported by a Saudi-led military

intervention had suppressed a broad-based movement calling for constitutional reform and democratisation. The forces involved in the crackdown included those armed and trained by the British, and British support for the Bahraini regime endured throughout the crisis (Wearing, 2018: 187–205).

Following these events, British ministers repeatedly asserted that while regrettable incidents had occurred, the Al Khalifa monarchy was an agent of moderation, now on the path of meaningful reform (Foreign Affairs Committee (House of Commons), 2012: Ev 41; Hansard, 2012: Col.471W). This was directly contradicted by Amnesty International (2012) and Human Rights Watch (2014b), who documented how the regime was regressing in key areas, with Human Rights Watch's (2014a) deputy Middle East director dismissing talk of reform as 'a joke'. One important element within the 'reform' narrative was the attribution of the 2011 unrest to sectarian tensions, best managed through a national dialogue over which the regime would preside. In ignoring the cross-sectarian nature of the early protests (Ulrichsen, 2012) and the ways in which the regime had deliberately stoked sectarian tensions to undermine the unity of the opposition, this theme played directly into Orientalist tropes whereby Arab societies are riven by ancient communal hatreds, which acceptable 'moderate' allies are required to contain.

The utility of the 'reform' narrative in this context was articulated with remarkable candour by Foreign Minister Alistair Burt, who told the British Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, 'we think that the best chance for stability in Bahrain lies through the successful national dialogue process by Bahrainis, which will seek their own political settlement, *which is highly likely to encompass the Al Khalifa leadership and the structure of Bahrain*' (emphasis added, Foreign Affairs Committee (House of Commons), 2013: Ev7). This was a reasonable prediction given both that participation in the 'national dialogue' was skewed heavily in favour of government allies (Ulrichsen, 2012), with many dissidents excluded or in jail as political prisoners, and that the monarchy continued to enjoy decisive backing from its Saudi neighbour and the Atlantic powers. Here, the racialising 'reform' narrative was central to official justifications for the ongoing incorporation of Bahrain within the monarchical regional order presided over by the major capitalist powers.¹

The reforming prince

When King Salman acceded to the Saudi throne in January 2015, he quickly began fast-tracking the promotion of his young son, Mohammed Bin Salman, first to Defence Minister, then to Deputy Crown Prince, and finally to Crown Prince and de facto head of the government in June 2017 (Gause, 2018: 40). In anticipation of a long-term decline in petrodollar revenues, the Crown Prince announced a major programme of economic structural adjustment, involving a wave of privatisations, the part-flotation of state oil producer Saudi Aramco on a leading global stock exchange, and the wider diversification of the economy away from oil dependence through the attraction of international investment (Hanieh, 2018: 202–206).

Attracting that investment required the Saudi kingdom to present itself to the West as a 'modernising' state, with reforms extending to social liberalisation (Kinninmont, 2017, 11; Al-Rasheed, 2020: 80–81, 87). The Crown Prince pursued this public relations exercise with an April 2018 tour of the United States involving highly publicised meetings with politicians, business leaders, and entertainment industry figures. Mohammed Bin Salman, the *New York Times* reported, was 'seeking to change the perception of Saudi

Arabia from an opaque and conservative kingdom, where . . . women are relegated to second-class status, to a modernist desert oasis' (Arango, 2018).

A similar visit to the United Kingdom was conducted in March 2018, where the same story was told in unison by the two allied kingdoms. The official statement from the British Prime Minister's Office (2018) in advance of the trip makes early mention of a 'major programme of domestic reforms'. 'Saudi Arabia is changing' asserted Prime Minister Theresa May, while the then foreign secretary Boris Johnson (2018) stated that 'since Mohammed Bin Salman became Crown Prince, Saudi Arabia has introduced exactly the kind of reforms that we have always advocated', 'genuine reform has taken place after decades of stasis' and 'our role must be to encourage him along this path'. A Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2018) document accompanying the visit stated that 'Britain will continue to support Saudi Arabia as it delivers its vision of an open and tolerant society'.

As the editorial board of the Financial Times (2018) put it, 'the UK government's message is unambiguous: this is a man to do business with', while the prospect (ultimately unrealised) of the part-flotation of Saudi Aramco on the London Stock Exchange had put 'pound signs' in the eyes of British ministers. At an event co-chaired by May and Mohammed Bin Salman, 15 of Britain's top business leaders were invited to consider opportunities raised across a range of sectors by the planned Saudi privatisation programme. A pledge of £65 billion of mutual UK-Saudi trade and investment was agreed (Jenkins et al., 2018).

Bhattacharyya (2018: ix) describes racial capitalism as 'a way of understanding the role of racism in enabling key moments of capitalist development'. This moment in the development of UK-Saudi state and economic relations was being facilitated by senior British ministers purveying a well-worn 'reforming monarch' myth, steeped in Orientalist themes.

That message was, however, directly contradicted by Human Rights Watch in their subsequent annual report covering 2018, according to which 'Saudi authorities stepped up their arbitrary arrests, trials, and convictions of peaceful dissidents and activists' and 'Saudi prosecutors escalated their longstanding campaign against dissidents in 2018 by seeking the death penalty against detainees on charges that related to nothing more than peaceful activism and dissent'. Well before the Crown Prince's UK visit, in 2017, the Saudi regime had:

passed a new counterterrorism law that . . . included criminal penalties of 5 to 10 years in prison for portraying the king or crown prince, directly or indirectly, 'in a manner that brings religion or justice into disrepute', and criminalized a wide range of peaceful acts that bear no relation to terrorism. (Human Rights Watch, 2019)

The reform myth and women's rights

The role of women's rights within the 'reform' narrative is worth dwelling upon, as this example sheds a particular light on the political and symbolic work being done by this trope, and on the realities behind it. Changes in the status of Saudi women were repeatedly foregrounded in UK government rhetoric surrounding the Crown Prince's visit. In the official statement from The Prime Minister's Office (2018), the first two examples given of the kingdom's 'major programme of domestic reforms' are 'lifting the ban on women driving' and 'opening up attendance at major sporting events to women', while

in the quotes given from Theresa May, the first two examples that ‘Saudi Arabia is changing’ were ‘recent decisions to allow women to drive . . . [and] a target for women to make up one third of the Saudi workforce by 2030’. In an article for *The Times*, Boris Johnson (2018) began his account of the reforms with an entire paragraph on women’s rights:

The ban on women driving cars has been overturned. Gender segregation has been relaxed. The kingdom has adopted an official target for women to account for 30% of the workforce: in February women were allowed to register their own businesses. Women now attend sporting events and from next month cinemas will open their doors to everybody.

The story of liberalising reform was, again, directly contradicted by Human Rights Watch (2019), who described ‘a large-scale coordinated crackdown against the women’s rights movement beginning in May’, just weeks after the Crown Prince’s visit. Those targeted were often the same activists who had campaigned for many years and at great personal risk for the driving ban to be lifted.² The NGO noted that:

just weeks before the Saudi authorities lifted the ban on women driving . . . authorities launched arrests of prominent women’s rights activists and accused several of them of grave crimes like treason that appear to be directly related to their activism. . . . Human rights organizations reported . . . that Saudi interrogators tortured at least four of the women, including by administering electric shocks, whipping the women on their thighs, and forcible hugging and kissing . . . Authorities accused several of those detained of serious crimes, including ‘suspicious contact with foreign parties’ under dubious legal pretences. Government-aligned media outlets then carried out an alarming campaign against them, publishing their photos branded with the word ‘traitor’.

Meanwhile, ‘Domestic workers, predominantly women, faced a range of abuses including overwork, forced confinement, non-payment of wages, food deprivation, and psychological, physical, and sexual abuse without the authorities holding their employers to account’ (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The persecution, arrest, torture, and public demonisation of the very women who had campaigned for the lifting of the driving ban – an act which the kingdom was now benefiting from in its public relations abroad – is a particularly telling episode. The message to those activists, and to any others seeking to emulate their example, is plainly one of strong deterrence, but also an attempt to deny those women their agency and victory in the change that had taken place. Rather, that agency was being handed to the supposedly ‘reforming’ Crown Prince, who in all likelihood would not have lifted the ban were it not for the international embarrassment caused by these women’s campaigning (Al-Rasheed, 2020: 235–238, 243).

This is highly significant in terms of the racialising discourse that was being mobilised to facilitate a rejuvenation of UK-Saudi state and economic relations. For the story to hold, the people of the Arabian peninsula cannot be seen as the (potential or actual) agents of their own liberation, let alone as more ‘liberal’ than their rulers. These politics cannot be seen as arenas of social contestation where rights might be won through popular struggle. Rather, the only possible agent of ‘reform’ must be our allied monarch, whose success will always be limited by the almost innately conservative culture in which he is forced to operate. It is this racialising discourse that not only makes it possible for the British state to support and arm the security forces of a kingdom that jails, tortures, and sexually assaults women’s rights activists – materially facilitating their subjugation – but

also makes it possible for the United Kingdom to continue providing that support *specifically in the name* of women's rights.

Conclusion

UK-GCC relations are structured through a multifaceted political economy with deep historical roots, based around the recycling of petrodollars into the City of London and the British arms industry. This however cannot represent a full account of how these relations have endured for so long, given the sharp dissonance between the British state's role in helping to preserve monarchical rule and the values framing the dominant discourse of British political culture. Analytical attention therefore needs to be paid to the political economy of UK-Saudi relations in the fullest sense of the term, with as much emphasis on the 'political' aspect as the economic, and with an understanding that this 'political' aspect, including the racialising discourse discussed in this article, is not epiphenomenal to the economic and strategic dimensions of the relationship, but an important and even constitutive element, just as 'race' has been throughout the history of capitalism and imperialism.

Within the racialising discourse around UK relations with these regimes, the myth of the reforming monarch is an important and illuminating one, which affords us the opportunity to explore the nuances of that discourse in some detail. The public controversy around the killing of Jamal Khashoggi suggests that the potency of that narrative is not unlimited, and that it may not be capable of fully containing the contradictions between ostensible liberal values and concrete British policy in respect of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf regimes. These tensions and instabilities indicate that racialising discourse in respect of UK-Gulf relations is and will remain a fruitful topic for critical analysis. Against the background of significant Anglo-American backing for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf regimes through the crushing of the uprising in Bahrain and the Saudi-led military action in Yemen, the political and discursive basis of this support in the face of its human costs is a topic that warrants further scrutiny.

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Notes

1. For a full discussion of this episode, see Wearing (2018: 201–205).
2. On the campaign for the right to drive within the wider context of grassroots Saudi Arabian feminism, see Doaiji (2018). More broadly, on the ways in which the agency of Muslim women has been obscured so as to justify the exertion of Western power, see Abu-Lughod (2002).

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