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A Sample for Understanding the Saudi Tanwir: Maraya Concert Hall on the Edge of al-Nafud

Since 2017, the Saudi Vision 2030 document has declared the steps, initiatives, and transformations that Saudi Arabia will undertake. Consequently, change has begun to manifest itself in every field, from healthcare to the economy, forestry to agricultural production, music to cultural diversity, and from international relations to digital asset investments. Within this context, this study discusses Saudi Arabia's recent transformation through a cultural yet mentally transformative architectural structure-the unique and modern Maraya Concert Hall located in al-Ula. In this paper, information about Maraya is provided, along with an analysis of the concert hall's location and characteristics, as well as an interpretation of the mental codes of the Saudi administration. However, since there is no established literature on this niche subject, the study utilizes newspaper articles, analyses of Saudi Arabia, and indirectly related scientific research. Therefore, since a comprehensive literature on the subject has not yet been established, the methodology has been designed based on the evaluation of secondary and indirect sources. As a result, it is concluded that Saudi Arabia is resolute in its pursuit of change or transformation and attempts to express this resolve through physical elements such as architectural structures. This article concludes that Saudi Arabia is determined to pursue change or transformation, expressing this determination through physical elements such as architectural structures, and that as a result of these efforts, a new political and economic power has been established in the region.

Keywords: Maraya, Mirror, Desert, al-Ula, Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia.

Suudi Aydınlanmasını Anlamak İçin Bir Örnek: Nufud Çölü Kıyısındaki Maraya Konser Salonu

2017'den beri kendinden söz ettiren Suudi Arabistan Vision 2030 belgesi ile atacağı adımları ve yapacağı işleri ilan etti. Değişim Suudi Arabistan'da sağlıktan ekonomiye, ormancılıktan tarıma, müzikten kültüre, uluslar arası ilişkilerden dijital dünyaya her alanda kendini göstermeye başladı. Bu çalışmada kültürel görünen ancak zihni bir dönüşüme karşılık gelen bir yapı, el-Ula'daki benzersiz ve modern Maraya Konser Salonu üzerinden Suudi Arabistan'ın son yıllardaki değişimi tartışılmaktadır. Maraya hakkında bilgiler verilmekte, konser salonunun konumu, özellikleri ile Suudi Arabistan yönetiminin zihni kodlarına yönelik bir analiz yapılmaktadır. Söz konusu bu dar konuya ilişkin bir literatür henüz oluşmadığından çalışma için haberler, Suudi Arabistan analizleri ve konuyla dolaylı ilgili olan bilimsel araştırmalardan faydalanılmıştır. Bu bakımdan çalışmanın metodolojisi ikincil kaynaklar üzerinden yapılan araştırmalar üzerine kurulmuştur. Sonuç olarak Suudi Arabistan'ın değişim ya da dönüşüm için kararlı olduğu, bu kararını mimari yapılar gibi fiziki unsurlarla ifade etmeye çalıştığını, yapılanların neticesinde bölgede yeni bir siyasi ve ekonomik gücün inşa edildiği kanaatine ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Maraya, Ayna, Çöl, el-Ula, Vizyon 2030, Suudi Arabistan.

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1. Saudi Arabia as a Phenomenon

Although Saudi Arabia has always been an important country, it has particularly become a significant phenomenon both in the Middle East and globally since King Salman ascended the throne. The primary reasons behind this claim lie in Saudi Arabia's emergence as both a regional and a global power, as well as its status as one of the largest economies in the Middle East and the world. In addition to being one of the major economies, Saudi Arabia's position as the only Arab country within the G20 further draws the attention of observers. Undoubtedly, there are numerous factors supporting this notion of phenomenon and underlying the current transformation. Saudi Arabia's strategic location, the planning of new trade routes passing through the country, its still substantial oil reserves, its emerging role as a host for new technologies, and its development into a global cultural hub through sports and other means rank among the foremost sources of Saudi Arabia's phenomenon status (Montague, 2025; Visvizi et al., 2019).

Saudi Arabia's strategic location renders it important in every respect. Positioned at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa, and situated where three major seas converge, the country acquires an important identity. The transformation of Saudi Aramco into a colossal enterprise under the auspices of the United States following World War II is another factor that has made Saudi Arabia a phenomenon. Indeed, while the nation's oil wealth provides substantial economic resources, it simultaneously endows Saudi Arabia with the power to influence commercial and political markets. Although the country lacks a directly assertive military force, its substantial military expenditures constitute a significant element in its emergence as a global phenomenon. Moreover, the presence of Islam's two holiest cities within its borders elevates Saudi Arabia to a position of great importance for Muslims. Such a status sometimes leads to the country being perceived as a mediator, either behind closed doors or openly, reflecting its unique diplomatic qualities.

The distinctive characteristics of Saudi Arabia lead to the formation of a different perception of the country in the minds of ordinary people. Alongside the negative aspects, all these elements that create this phenomenal effect are related today to the construction of a new Saudi Arabia.

The original architect and proponent of the "New Saudi Arabia" concept, Mohammed bin Salman, has not kept this idea secret (Khatri, 2025). In fact, the most fundamental document articulating the vision of a new Saudi Arabia is the "Vision 2030" plan (Saudi Vision 2030). This document comprehensively defines all objectives and the roadmap to be followed, detailing each aspect thoroughly and linking them to a specific timeline. Therefore, the ambitious vision of "creating a new state" has been formalized through the Vision 2030 document. This official vision statement explicitly presents the idea of a new Saudi Arabia. The three main pillars of this vision can be summarized as follows:

- The construction of high culture,
- The qualification of human capital,
- The diversification of the economy into non-oil sectors (Saudi Vision 2030).

The document, the Vision 2030, announces the transformation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from a petroleum-based structure to an information and digital production-based economy (Digital Government Strategy). Thus, the Saudi economy aims to be diversified beyond oil dependency, becoming an integrated, competitive country within the framework of a diversified economy, mindset, and future promise as expressed below. Within this framework, a society with sustainably improved quality of life is envisioned. One

of the most important resources of this society is culture, which has become a fundamental goal (Saudi Vision 2030; Alharbi, 2024). The primary objective of this goal is to pave the way for a Saudi society with a high quality of life and cultural development capable of competing globally with its counterparts. Transitioning from an oil-dependent economic base to a digital economy-based structure is one of the most significant aims of Vision 2030 (Digital Economy Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). In this context, the authors of the Vision 2030 document strongly believe that Saudi Arabia will advance with a developing digital economy (Digital Transformation in Vision 2030: Building a Global Knowledge Economy, 2025). Indeed, the general perspective is that Saudi Arabia's transformation into a country that attracts foreign investors and invests in and enables investment in various sectors beyond oil revenues marks a turning point for the country. Among the diverse economic sectors are the digital economy, new tourism, high-tech pharmaceutical and chemical production, logistics centers located on trade routes, and ecological diversity (Olaje, 2025). Undoubtedly, one of the first steps in this area was the establishment of economic zones, accompanied by plans to privatize state assets to prepare for future investments. Therefore, the system has been designed based on the idea that the most important investment should be made in human capital. Within this framework, the Vision 2030 can be seen, as expressed in the declaration of intent, as a text embodying the metaphor of the "ambitious nation" (Saudi Vision 2030; The Report: Saudi Arabia 2022; Khatri, 2025). The "ambitious nation" ideal includes increasing productivity among the population and its components, spreading transparency, institutionalizing accountability, combating corruption, involving citizens in decisions in all areas, and rooting the concept of a social state among the main goals of the vision document (Saudi Vision 2030).

Saudi Arabia's rise as a global phenomenon is deeply rooted in the philosophical foundations of its vision document, which manifests itself through colossal, extraordinary, and almost futuristic architectural projects. Consequently, analyzing contemporary Saudi Arabia through its architectural works is not only possible but also highly meaningful for understanding the country's modernization, economic transformation, and cultural vision. Within the framework of the Vision 2030 plan, the country approaches architecture not merely as construction but as a lifestyle and a vision for the future (Diwan & Fallin, 2024). In line with this objective, Saudi Arabia has undertaken world-renowned monumental architectural projects. Foremost among these is NEOM, an estimated \$500 billion project. NEOM is designed as a futuristic city stretching 170 kilometers, car-free, with zero carbon emissions, and powered entirely by renewable energy (Saudi Vision 2030; NEOM). This project aims to integrate artificial intelligence and sustainability technologies into architecture, offering a living space in harmony with nature. Another significant project is The Mukaab (the Cube-shaped Structure) in the capital Riyadh, poised to become one of the world's largest buildings with an edge length of 400 meters (New Murabba). Its exterior is adorned with geometric patterns inspired by traditional Islamic architecture, while its interior features a modern and futuristic design. Other architectural groups combine cultural heritage with modern designs, emphasizing the preservation of Arab cultural traces in their projects. For example, the Diriyah Gate project in Riyadh honors the country's historical roots while being designed as a luxury tourism and cultural center (Diriyah Gate; Diriyah Gate Development Authority).

The large-scale construction initiatives mentioned are fundamentally aimed at revitalizing Saudi culture and promoting it globally. However, such initiatives should not be perceived merely as lavish, ostentatious structures with historical backgrounds. Indeed, major engineering and contracting projects like NEOM, Trojena, Amaala, and Jeddah Tower also introduce new business solutions, planning, and management models. Ultimately, flourishing Saudi Arabia seeks to distinguish itself as a country that, through architectural works, both preserves its cultural heritage and reflects its forward-thinking vision. The massive investments made under the Vision 2030, along with innovative technologies and sustainability-focused projects, elevate Saudi architecture to a distinctive and impressive position on the world stage. These architectural achievements provide strong parameters

for understanding Saudi Arabia's economic, cultural, and technological transformation (Pavan, 2023).

When viewed from a broad perspective, the intellectual and mental objectives of the Saudi Arabian elite become clearly discernible. Therefore, it can be argued that Saudi Arabia, particularly within the framework of the Vision 2030, aims for a comprehensive and highly serious transformation in sociological, scientific, economic, and societal domains (Pavan, 2023). The sociological and societal transformation promotes increased participation of the young population in the workforce and enhances the role of women in social life, while also leading to changes in family structure, with smaller and more modest households emerging. This outcome profoundly affects social life and economic balances. Societal change is supported by nationalism and new ideological values. On the other hand, the shift in scientific and technological perspectives paves the way for the rise of a form of technocracy, where expert cadres become more effective in governance, and large projects like NEOM are expected to support technological innovation and knowledge-based development. Digital transformation and technological advancements necessitate the redirection of economic strategies toward non-oil sectors. Economic transformation aims to reduce oil dependency, achieve economic diversification, and establish a sustainable growth model, which undoubtedly supports the Saudi government's main objectives. Consequently, growth has accelerated in tourism, entertainment, and service sectors (Call of the Desert, 2024). The implementation of the tax system, increased efficiency in the public sector, and the creation of a productive Saudi workforce in the private sector constitute the cornerstones of economic reforms. Economic independence against regional geopolitical risks and strengthening international cooperation are also prioritized. Challenges and obstacles require ensuring social participation and considering compatibility with traditional values for the sustainability of reforms. Maintaining regional stability and managing geopolitical risks are critical for the transformation in Saudi Arabia. In conclusion, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a profound transformation process in economic, social, and cultural fields with the Vision 2030. This process is therefore oriented toward meeting the needs of its young and dynamic population.

The most significant impact of all these initiatives will be seen in the emergence of a Saudi consciousness shaped by the Vision 2030. This consciousness represents the concrete manifestation of the "higher idea" concerning Saudi Arabia's intellectual transformation. The intellectual transformation in Saudi Arabia is being actualized through the Vision 2030. The intellectual roots of the "New Saudi Arabia," constructed since 2020, lie deep within the Vision 2030, the initiative led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman aimed at modernizing and diversifying the kingdom's economy and society by reducing its dependence on oil (Saudi Vision 2030; Rundell, 2022). This vision is framed as an intergenerational and intercultural rupture from the traditional matrix that has dominated Saudi Arabia for decades and is being observed with astonishment by the global public. The core intellectual dimensions of this change are declared to the world through cultural and educational reforms, initiatives to reconnect with historical and national roots, Saudization-which can be described as a form of nationalism-and the decision to build a new Saudi nation. Moreover, hosting international entertainment events symbolizing a break from past conservatism suggests the promotion of cultural openness (infatah=انفتاح). At the heart of this openness lies the intrinsic issue of embracing intellectual property and innovation ownership.

2. The Essence at the Roots of Saudi Tanwir: Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is a comprehensive development program launched in 2016 under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The program aims to transform the kingdom's economy by reducing its heavy dependence on oil, which currently constitutes a significant portion of government revenue, and to promote social and cultural progress. The background of the Vision 2030 stems from the recognition that global oil demand is expected to peak around 2030 and then decline, posing a threat to Saudi Arabia's

economic stability if it remains reliant on oil revenues (Grand & Wolff, 2020). This situation has prompted the government to establish a strategic roadmap to transform the economy, empower its citizens, and modernize society. The Vision 2030 is built upon three main themes:

1. *A Vibrant Society*: Enhancing quality of life, preserving cultural heritage, and improving social services,
2. *A Thriving Economy*: Creating a diverse and sustainable economy that offers opportunities for all,
3. *An Ambitious Nation*: Establishing an effective, transparent, and accountable government (Saudi Vision 2030).

The Vision 2030 also encompasses phased implementations through the "Vision Realization Programs" which focus on economic reforms, social development, and government efficiency with the aim of positioning Saudi Arabia as a global investment hub and a leading power within the Arab and Islamic worlds. In its concise form, the Vision 2030 can be described as a developmental initiative born out of the necessity to prepare Saudi Arabia for a post-oil future, diversify its economy, and advance social reforms.

The three main themes of the Vision 2030, which can be classified as a Vibrant Society, a Thriving Economy, and an Ambitious Nation, should be understood as major efforts aimed at reducing oil dependency through investments in sectors such as tourism, entertainment, mining, technology, and logistics (Alfaiz, 2025). Broadly speaking, the core of these initiatives lies in increasing the private sector's contribution to the Gross Domestic Product from 40% to 65% and attracting significant foreign investment. Therefore, prominent mega-projects such as NEOM (the city of the future), Qiddiya (the entertainment city), and the Red Sea Project are designed to stimulate tourism, innovation, and economic dynamism. Alongside these large-scale projects, the expansion of cultural and entertainment opportunities, the enhancement of women's participation in the workforce, and improvements in health and education are among the foremost social reforms developed under the Vision 2030. Key milestones of these social revolutions include granting women the right to drive and promoting entrepreneurship among women. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at improving quality of life-such as increasing life expectancy, encouraging sports and healthy lifestyles, and enhancing urban living standard-are prioritized objectives within the Vision 2030 reforms (Saudi Vision 2030). Indeed, positioning Saudi cities among the world's top 100 cities is also placed at the forefront of the overall goals. Concurrently with these objectives, plans to increase the number of umrah visitors, double UNESCO World Heritage sites, and promote Saudi heritage and Islamic values represent tangible steps to strengthen the social dimensions of the Vision 2030. Additionally, ambitious targets related to environmental sustainability, renewable energy, afforestation, and carbon emission reduction stand out as notable elements in the Vision 2030 framework. Notably, the goal is to source 50% of energy from renewable resources by 2030 (Grand & Wolff, 2020). As Vision 2030 is implemented in phases of five years each, clear strategic goals and the Vision Realization Programs (VRPs) have been developed to ensure accountability and monitor progress. In this respect, the initial phase focused on fundamental reforms, while the current phase accelerates investment and sectoral growth. The subsequent phase aims to sustain and expand these achievements, with tangible outcomes including increased foreign investment, growth in non-oil sectors, and visible social transformations across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi Vision 2030 primarily targets the "Saudi elites" through broader objectives such as creating a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. The Vision aims to empower all citizens, including the elites, by fostering a strong social infrastructure that respects cultural traditions and national pride while promoting modern amenities and effective social services. Furthermore, it focuses on economic diversification

and expanding opportunities for success in the private sector, education, and investment, directly benefiting elites involved in business and governance. Additionally, Vision 2030 emphasizes the importance of establishing an efficient, transparent, accountable, and high-performing government aligned with the ambitions of Saudi elites to lead and contribute to national development (Montagu, 2024). More specifically, the Vision encourages the growth of the private sector and aims to reduce dependence on oil revenues by promoting investment and entrepreneurship, areas in which elites play a significant role. The plan includes privatization efforts and the expansion of public-private partnerships that open new avenues for elite participation in the economy.

Table 1. The Probable impact of Vision 2030 on Saudi Elites

Perspective	Enlightenment Potential	Restrictive Factors
Economic Pluralism	Promotion of Innovation	Hierarchical Control
Social Liberalization	Encouragement of Openness	Suppression of Opposition
Global Integration	Diffusion of New Ideas	Resistance from Conservative Elites

Saudi Vision 2030 places the elites-namely business leaders, investors, and policymakers-at the core of its economic transformation. For these Saudi elites, the primary goals and opportunities are concentrated in the following areas:

1. *Private Sector Contribution:* It is aimed to increase the share of the private sector in GDP from 40% to 65% by the year 2030, thereby creating significant investment and leadership opportunities in sectors such as healthcare, education, transportation, and public services,

2. *Privatization Program:* Another key objective involves transferring state assets and services to private operators, achieving 40% private sector participation in critical sectors,

3. *SME Growth:* Increasing the contribution of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to GDP to 35%, alongside raising the contribution of non-oil exports to non-oil GDP to 50%, are also regarded as important parameters in the transformation envisioned by the Saudi elites (Saudi Vision 2030).

Due to the aforementioned considerations, the partial privatization of Saudi Aramco through an initial public offering, and the allocation of the proceeds towards investment, are regarded as significant contingent upon the realization of the outlined factors. Ultimately, these objectives offer the Saudi elite comprehensive roles in shaping the future of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through investment, leadership, and innovation in high-growth sectors.

The Vision 2030 plan, which aims to implement profound reforms in economic, social, and cultural spheres in Saudi Arabia, can indeed be considered a form of "Saudi Enlightenment." This is because the plan seeks to reduce dependence on oil by diversifying the economy, strengthening the private sector, encouraging women's participation in the workforce, and improving education and employment opportunities for the youth. These objectives embody the essence of an enlightenment process. Moreover, through mega-city projects, investments in renewable energy, and hosting international events, the plan aims to enhance the country's global appeal. For these reasons, the Vision 2030 can be regarded as an enlightenment for the Saudi elites, as it promotes a transition from a traditional oil-based economy to a modern, technological, and knowledge-based economy. Social reforms, particularly those enhancing the roles of women and youth in society, support the adoption

of new ideas and lifestyles within the elite. Additionally, international collaborations and foreign investments broaden the elites' vision by integrating Saudi Arabia more deeply into the global economy. However, some liberal reforms that conflict with conservative values may provoke debates among the elites regarding identity and values (Hope & Scheck, 2020). Ultimately, the Vision 2030 offers the Saudi elites an opportunity for economic and social enlightenment while simultaneously generating tension between traditional values and modernization. The plan transforms the elites' mindset and lifestyle, contributing to Saudi Arabia's positioning as a global actor. It also has the potential to accelerate a kind of enlightenment by exposing elites to new global ideas, fostering innovation, and supporting more open social values. Nevertheless, the process is constrained by centralized power, limited political freedoms, and resistance from traditional segments. This may result in the emergence of a pragmatic, modernizing elite group.

3. Maraya as an Architectural Structure

One could argue that architecture constitutes one of the concrete measures aimed directly at the minds of the Saudi elite and serves as a transformative pathway within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan to create a "new state" by 2030. In this regard, alongside prominent projects such as the Haramain High-Speed Railway, Mukaab, Qiddiya, and NEOM, perhaps one of the most striking examples is the Maraya concert hall in al-Ula, which, despite its relative modesty, stands out as a significant architectural landmark.

The Maraya building has been designed as part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative to promote tourism, culture, and infrastructure development. Named "Maraya," which means "mirrors" in Arabic, the structure is a striking glass edifice that harmonizes modern architecture with the natural landscape of al-Ula an ancient city renowned for its rock formations and archaeological sites (Mansuri, 2024).

Maraya is located in Wadi Ashar, near the ancient city of al-Ula, a historic region in the northwest of the kingdom. These areas have hosted significant civilizations throughout history and are known for their rich archaeological and cultural heritage. al-Ula was the capital of the ancient Lihyanite Kingdom, founded around the 6th century BCE. It corresponds to the biblical city of Dedan. Situated on the "Incense Route," the region served as a strategic center for the trade of spices, silk, and luxury goods between Arabia, Egypt, and India (James, 2023). The Nabataeans ruled the region until the 1st century CE, establishing Hegra (Madain Salih) north of al-Ula as their second capital; Hegra is renowned for its rock-cut tombs and is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. During the Ottoman period, al-Ula maintained its importance as a key stop on pilgrimage routes and as a station on the Hejaz Railway. Archaeological findings in the area date back to the Bronze Age, confirming al-Ula's significance as a center of human settlement for millennia. Wadi Ashar, where Maraya was constructed, is a valley rich in archaeological remains reflecting the natural and cultural heritage of the region. It contains rock inscriptions, tombs, and monuments from ancient civilizations such as the Lihyanites and Nabataeans, demonstrating Wadi Ashar's historical role as an important settlement and cultural hub alongside al-Ula (Alrouf, 2024). Both al-Ula and Wadi Ashar have historically been crossroads of ancient trade routes, holding substantial economic, cultural, and religious significance. Today, they represent some of Saudi Arabia's most vital archaeological and natural treasures. The region has also become a leading example of creative desert tourism development in Saudi Arabia, featuring boutique hotel concepts that contribute to the growth of the country's tourism sector (Hope & Scheck, 2020).

It can be inferred that, supported by its historical and cultural background, Saudi authorities plan to construct Maraya in al-Ula, aiming to highlight the region's historical and cultural heritage while simultaneously revitalizing tourism and transforming it into an international center for cultural exchange. Indeed, the fact that many significant cultural events and international meetings in Saudi Arabia have already been held at Maraya clearly demonstrates this objective. For instance, Maraya's use as the main venue for the "Tantara

Festival," where artists from around the world perform concerts, serves as an example supporting this claim (Malek, 2020; Tashkandi, 2019).

The decision to construct the Maraya building in al-Ula was made by the Royal Commission for al-Ula (RCU) (Royal Commission for AlUla). The RCU is a Saudi governmental entity established by royal decree in July 2017. Its mandate is to preserve and develop al-Ula, a region in northwestern Saudi Arabia renowned for its extraordinary natural and cultural significance, including the archaeological site of Hegra, Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage site. The RCU aims to protect al-Ula's heritage while implementing a sustainable transformation plan that promotes tourism, culture, education, and the arts, in alignment with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which emphasizes economic diversification and the empowerment of local communities. Operating independently in terms of administration and budget, the institution's objectives include creating a concert and event venue that harmonizes with the valley's landscape and develops al-Ula as a cultural hub and tourist destination consistent with Vision 2030. Notably, the building's complete mirror cladding is designed to reflect and amplify the surrounding historical monuments and natural beauty, thereby highlighting the region's aesthetic and cultural value. Prince Badr bin Abdullah Al Saud, the Governor of the Royal Commission for al-Ula and Saudi Minister of Culture, has led the development and enhancement of the Maraya Concert Hall (RCU Governor Inspects Major Al-Ula Infrastructure Projects, 2019). Under his leadership, Maraya has undergone significant design processes to become a larger, permanent facility with over 500 seats, acoustics improved for opera performances, a new restaurant (Maraya Social), an art exhibition space, and a rooftop terrace. The mirrored design, reflecting the surrounding desert landscape, remains a defining feature. These efforts form part of a broader vision to position al-Ula as a global cultural and tourism destination in line with the Saudi Vision 2030.

The al-Ula Development Company (UDC) is a hospitality and real estate development firm located in the city of al-Ula, Saudi Arabia. It was established on January 30, 2023, by the Public Investment Fund (PIF) as part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative to transform al-Ula into a global tourism destination (AlUla Development Company). UDC focuses on developing a portfolio of premier hospitality, residential, retail, commercial, and infrastructure assets in collaboration with the RCU and the private sector. The company aims to promote sustainable economic growth while preserving the cultural heritage of al-Ula.

The structural features of the Maraya Concert Hall in al-Ula can be summarized under the following five headings:

1. *Integration with Nature and Invisibility:* The building's exterior is clad with 9,740 mirror panels that reflect the surrounding desert landscape, rendering the structure nearly invisible. This design allows the building to appear as a natural part of its environment, symbolizing architecture's respect for nature,

2. *Fusion of Technology and Art:* Maraya holds the Guinness World Record as the world's largest mirrored building. The mirrors not only provide an aesthetic reflection but are also specially coated to withstand the harsh desert climate, including intense sunlight and sandstorms. This represents the union of technology and art adapting to natural conditions,

3. *Cultural and Historical Context:* Situated in the al-Ula region, which was the ancient capital of the Lihyan and Nabataean kingdoms, Maraya merges this rich historical heritage with modern architecture. It reflects the cultural identity of the area and symbolizes Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a center for culture and tourism,

4. *Silence and Simplicity:* Architect Florian Boje's design philosophy emphasizes the building being "silent and invisible." This approach aims to create a minimal structure that harmonizes with the environment without disturbing nature,

5. *Multi-functional Cultural Center*: Maraya is not only a concert hall but also serves as a versatile cultural venue hosting exhibitions, conferences, and various artistic events. It stands as a symbol of the dissemination of culture and art. These features collectively highlight Maraya as a pioneering architectural masterpiece that blends environmental sensitivity, advanced technology, cultural significance, and multifunctionality.

Maraya should be regarded as a work of art. It holds the distinction of being the world's largest mirrored building and has earned a place in the record books [Oomen, 2020]. The primary material used in the construction of the Maraya Concert Hall is the 9,740 mirrored panels that clad its exterior. These panels were locally manufactured by Guardian Glass using UltraMirror technology (The Maraya Concert Hall).

Specialized mirrors with unique coatings were used in the construction of the building, designed both to reflect the surrounding desert landscape and to withstand the challenges posed by solar radiation, sandstorms, and the harsh desert climate (Saudi's Maraya Concert Hall Breaks World Record, 2020). Consequently, the building becomes almost invisible at certain times of the day, harmonizing seamlessly with its natural environment. These mirrors constitute the fundamental architectural and aesthetic identity of the concert hall. Moreover, the design and construction of the hall were completed rapidly using advanced technology; the architecture was planned to be quiet and unobtrusive, preserving the natural integrity of the region. In summary, the primary material employed in the construction of the Maraya Concert Hall consists of specially coated mirrored panels, which form the essential visual and functional elements of the structure. Additionally, the hall's design and construction utilized cutting-edge technology to ensure swift completion, with an architectural approach that maintains the natural landscape without disruption, rendering the building silent and nearly invisible.

The building's mirrors are coated with a special layer designed to withstand sandstorms, temperature fluctuations, and the harsh climatic conditions of the desert. This coating enables the structure to reflect sunlight during the day, thereby illuminating the hall, and to reflect starlight at night, creating an enchanting atmosphere. The interior houses a 1,777-square-meter auditorium, which serves multiple purposes including concerts, theatrical performances, exhibitions, and other events. The design was realized by Saudi architects in collaboration with the Italian architectural studio Giò Forma. Maraya is regarded as a "land art" piece that harmonizes with the surrounding natural and historical heritage (Maraya Concert Hall; Maraya / Giò Forma Studio Associato S.r.l.). The architecture of the building is conceived to reflect and enhance the natural environment, thus emphasizing nature rather than competing with it, and offering visitors distinct visual experiences both during the day and at night. In summary, the Maraya building stands out as a multifunctional concert hall, adapted to the desert environment, clad in expansive mirrors, protected by advanced technology, and designed to integrate seamlessly with its surroundings.

The structural framework of the building is composed of a steel structure to ensure rapid construction and durability. This steel framework is shaped as a cube with dimensions of 100 x 100 x 26 meters. Within the interior spaces, specially designed ceramic tiles reflecting the natural colors and textures of al-Ula have been used, alongside custom-made chairs from the Poltrona Frau brand (The King Fahad Chair). Behind the stage, there is a massive retractable window, which is operated via an automated mechanical system.

4. The Idea of Maraya and Its Roots in Saudi Mind

In recent years, the primary reasons behind Saudi Arabia's emphasis on its history are to strengthen the country's legitimacy and national identity, as well as to consolidate its regional and international position. In 2022, King Salman officially declared the founding date of the country to be 1727, marking the year when his great-grandfather Muhammad bin Saud assumed leadership of the Emirate of Diriyah, instead of the previously recognized date

of 1932. This shift is indicative of the new order and clearly aims to highlight the historical depth and rootedness of the Saudi dynasty. Such historical emphasis is closely linked to Saudi Arabia's efforts to forge a reinforced identity both in domestic politics and regional competition. Particularly since 2015, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the country has been implementing comprehensive reforms and modernization programs while simultaneously redefining its historical heritage to foster national unity and legitimacy. Moreover, historiography and the emphasis on the past serve as ideological and political tools for Saudi Arabia to maintain the regional status quo and to contend with Iran and other rivals. The strengthening of the historical narrative supports the Saudi dynasty's claims to leadership and the continuity of the state (Determann, 2014).

The Al Saud family's emphasis on the past should be regarded as a form of praise. This praise clearly manifests as a type of nationalism. Nationalism in Saudi Arabia has developed in a manner consistent with Arab nationalism in the region and the family's historical traditions. Unlike other Arab nationalist movements in the region, Saudi nationalism is primarily based on religious and local elements and has been utilized as a tool to legitimize the Saudi regime. In this context, Saudi nationalism possesses a distinctive character, emphasizing both religious and national identity (Ménolet, 2005). Recently, cultural events organized within this framework in Saudi Arabia, conducted under the umbrella of Arab nationalism, generally revolve around festivals and organizations that celebrate Arab culture, history, and traditions. Some of these events include:

1. *al-Janadriyah Festival*: Held near Riyadh, this festival celebrates the local culture of Saudi Arabia and the Arab lifestyle. The festival features folk dances, camel and horse races, local handicraft markets, and traditional cuisine. Each year, a different country is invited as the guest of honor,

2. *King Abdulaziz Falconry Festival*: This festival commemorates the traditional art of falconry through falcon competitions, handicraft exhibitions, music, and dance performances. The event highlights an important aspect of Arab cultural heritage,

3. *Souq Okaz*: Originally a major market in the pre-Islamic period, Souq Okaz is now organized annually to promote Arab culture. The festival includes activities and award ceremonies in various artistic fields such as photography, poetry, and theater,

4. *Riyadh Spring Festival*: Celebrated during the spring season, this festival honors the relationship between Arab culture and nature through flower exhibitions and agricultural displays,

5. *Diriyah Cultural Activities*: Diriyah, the historical capital of Saudi Arabia, is regarded as a symbol of Arab culture and history. At the at-Turaif district, a UNESCO World Heritage site, museums, art galleries, and traditional culinary experiences are offered. These activities support the emphasis on Arab nationalism through the unity of language, history, and culture, thereby contributing to the social and cultural perpetuation of Arab identity in Saudi Arabia.

Since 2020, the notion that Saudi cultural identity is experiencing a government-driven cultural renaissance balancing tradition and modernization has gained widespread acceptance (Khatri, 2025; Hope & Scheck, 2020). This transformation is clearly observable in social reforms, the promotion of cultural diversity, the emergence of new cultural initiatives, and the strategic utilization of culture to enhance national security and global standing. Throughout this process, a transition from a conservative, religion-centered identity to a more open, inclusive, and dynamic one aligned with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 objectives can be clearly traced. Indeed, the Maraya Concert Hall, situated in al-Ula along historic international trade routes, stands as a tangible embodiment of these ideals. When seeking philosophical rationales behind the mindset that conceived or constructed Maraya, numerous justifications readily come to mind.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched Vision 2030, which has served as a catalyst for a broad cultural evolution aimed at diversifying the economy and modernizing society while preserving traditional Islamic values (Abedalrhman & Alzaydi, 2024). This vision frames culture as a pillar of national identity and security, fostering a renaissance that embraces both heritage and future aspirations. The government has made substantial investments in cultural projects such as restoring historical sites, promoting the arts, and encouraging cultural dialogue; this signals a transition towards a more inclusive and multifaceted identity beyond a solely religious one. Maraya, particularly notable for its rooftop restaurant, stands as a prominent venue where these claims are vividly manifested.

The Saudi elites are increasingly engaged in a conscious effort to democratize heritage by recognizing and celebrating diverse cultural expressions across the regions of Saudi Arabia, including pre-Islamic history, Bedouin traditions, and local customs (Hope & Scheck, 2020). This inclusivity extends to marginalized art forms and minority narratives, indicating a shift from a monocultural perspective to a pluralistic identity. Visitors to Maraya today can observe these transitions firsthand. The diversity of events held at Maraya, the variety of their themes, and the quality of nearby boutique hotels provide compelling evidence of this eclectic lifestyle.

Within the framework of these transformations, it is necessary to add cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power alongside Saudi Arabia's traditional sources of power. Saudi Arabia is now positioning itself as a global cultural hub to attract tourism and investment (Kéchichian, 2019). For instance, international events such as the Andy Warhol exhibition and concerts by Andrea Bocelli, Alicia Keys, Usher, Angham, and Majid al Mohandis exemplify this cultural outreach (Abigael, 2023).

Both the al-Ula project and other initiatives aim to Saudize the labor market within the Saudization framework. The region is planned to enable new employment opportunities accordingly. Analyses indicate that investments amounting to 20 billion dollars are planned by 2035. This scale of investment clearly allows for significant leverage in providing thousands of new jobs in Saudi Arabia[Bhatia, 2019].

The increased visibility of female tour guides, the presence of women in public spaces, and the curtailment of the morality police's powers reflect a more open social environment in everyday life. These reforms indicate a shift in social norms and a relaxation of the strict conservative controls which have been traditionally defining Saudi cultural identity. Similarly, campaigns that focus on solo female travelers and challenge prevailing stereotypes actively contribute to reshaping the international image of Saudi identity. Initiatives such as the Culture Year exemplify a national dialogue about identity that balances tradition with modern global engagement. Maraya can be regarded as the pinnacle embodiment of all these developments in every respect.

From a general perspective, it can be asserted that the Maraya Concert Hall stands as a powerful symbol representing modernity and the Kingdom's ambitious vision for the future, particularly aligned with Saudi Vision 2030. The design of the structure not only creates a visually striking "mirage" effect but also occupies a central position in honoring and highlighting the natural beauty and historical significance of Al Ula, which hosts Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, Hegra. Consequently, with its state-of-the-art facilities hosting international concerts, conferences, and cultural events, it constitutes a pivotal step towards transforming the venue into a major cultural hub that promotes intercultural exchange and showcases Saudi Arabia's burgeoning arts scene.

5. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's petroleum wealth, and the economic magnitude it has enabled, have secured the kingdom a significant position in global politics. The monarchy, which has structured all its social, economic, and international relations around the oil regime, has

recognized the necessity to reposition itself in the face of technological and economic changes at the beginning of the 21st century. This repositioning gained considerable momentum following the accession of Salman bin Abdulaziz to the throne and the appointment of his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as crown prince. Mohammed bin Salman and his team, through the development of visionary documents, have placed Saudi Arabia at the center of a profound transformation. The cultural changes have challenged the traditional social fabric, eliciting serious yet ultimately inconclusive criticism. Economic reforms have aimed to fundamentally overhaul the existing Saudi economic structure, adapting it to a digital economy framework.

Changes in both cultural and economic domains have necessitated a transformation in human capital. It appears that the Saudi ruling elites and leading tribal figures have collectively constructed a social contract to transform the kingdom. This has given rise to massive construction projects across the country, accompanied by evolving new administrative forms. These projects should not be understood merely as engineering investments; above all, they constitute new organizational models embedded within the Saudi socio-economic order. Moreover, these projects carry a rich historical and social heritage beyond their technical aspects. Saudi elites thereby achieve multiple objectives simultaneously: advancing traditional Saudi business practices, generating new organizational competencies, and, by leveraging a strong legacy from the past, conveying a forward-looking message. One such project is Maraya, a part of al-Ula mega complex, which, with its extraordinary physical structure, has become one of the most significant reflections of the new Saudi mindset. Its location at the crossroads of historic trade routes recalls the strong historical ties between Najd and the Levant. Furthermore, situated in an untouched natural environment, Maraya aspires to a perfection aimed at humanity, becoming one of the most exceptional examples in this context. In addition to exhibiting modern art and hosting significant artistic performances, Maraya serves as a venue for international conferences, rendering it a vibrant and sustainable exemplar that represents the modern Saudi vision. Thus, Maraya transforms into a symbolic monument reminiscent of the ancestors of the Saudi elites. It is recommended to view modern Saudi architectural projects through this lens.

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