

## Power relation and knowledge: linking Islamic education to socio-political reform in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

Saudi Vision 2030, conveyed by His Royal Highness Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), represents a transformative initiative to foster openness and shift away from Wahhabism to establish a more moderate Islam. As part of this vision, the reform of the Islamic education curriculum plays a crucial role. This study examines the curriculum reform processes and strategies, focusing on *Dirasat Islamiyah* textbooks addressing inter-religious and intra-religious relations. Employing a qualitative approach and text analysis, the research applies Michel Foucault's theory of power-knowledge relations to analyze the state's role in shaping educational content. The findings reveal that the reformed curriculum seeks to construct and internalize ideologies that align the younger Saudi generation with the moderate Islam agenda of MBS's government, supporting Saudi Vision 2030. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on power-knowledge dynamics by showcasing education's role in advancing state-driven ideological shifts during significant socio-political reforms.

**Keywords:** Islamic education, curriculum reform, Saudi Arabia, power relations

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, the governments of the rulers of the Hijaz-the region now part of Saudi Arabia-have benefited economically and politically from the activities of the Hajj pilgrimage. However, the discovery of oil in the early days of establishing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia made the country shift its economic dependence away from the Hajj. Along with the spread of Wahhabism that opposed and closed off economic income from people who made pilgrimages to the tombs of saints and tourism of historical rites, the nationalization of Aramco (Arabian American Oil Company) in the 1980s made the Kingdom's economy highly dependent on oil revenues (al-Rasheed, 2010; Vassiliev, 2000). Due to fluctuations and uncertainty in oil price (Sianturi, 2017), as well as the demand for renewable energy in this century, the Saudi government realizes the importance of diversifying its economy. So in 2016 the Crown Prince of the Kingdom, Prince Muhammad bin Salman announced the Saudi Vision 2030 which contains important components of the economic modernization program.

Since the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, economic diversification has begun significantly. To reduce dependence on the oil sector, Saudi Vision 2030 is designed to expand sectors such as tourism, technology, and entertainment. This economic transformation is built on three main pillars: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (Vision 2030, 2023). The initiative promises major changes in the Saudi economy by creating new jobs and increasing investment attractiveness, which is in line with the needs of an increasingly connected and technology-based global economy.

However, the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030 faces various challenges, including changes in cultural practices and human rights issues, freedom of expression, religious intolerance, and extremism. Saudi Arabia is known for its negative image due to its proximity to Wahhabism, which is considered a source of violent ideology for radicalism (Aswar, 2016). In addition, new challenges related to the competence of human workers in the era of technological and global economic development have also forced countries, including Saudi Arabia, to reform curriculum and education (Lee dkk., 2023; Li & Wang, 2024). Educational reform in Saudi Arabia is inextricably linked to Islamic religious education, which forms a core aspect of Saudi Arabia's religious identity. The Islamic education curriculum is mandated to fulfill fundamental duties in building moral character and fostering the core competencies of students within a religious framework (Marghalani, 2017).

Educational reform in Saudi Arabia, particularly Islamic education (*Dirasat Islamiyyah*), is a crucial step towards realizing the goals of Saudi Vision 2030. This is because the international community views Saudi Arabia as having an exclusive, harsh, and radical character (Hein, 2017; The Week, 2015). This character has become a national identity and significantly influences the global perception of Islam. The character of Islam in Saudi Arabia is often associated with extremism and terrorism. The international community even suspects that global terrorism originates from radical Islamic influences taught to the younger generation in Saudi schools (Shea, 2023). Mohammad bin Salman's (MBS) policies, famous for Saudi Vision 2030, aim to transform Saudi Arabia into a more moderate society (Morocco World News, 2018).

Since the introduction of the Saudi Vision 2030 reform plan, Saudi Arabia has implemented various policies to create cultural and economic openness, including opening up tourism, artistic entertainment, and foreign investment. These changes mark a shift away from the conservative Wahhabism teachings that have long been the global image of Saudi Arabia. Although these reforms are supported by some elite rulers, there are challenges from religious groups who claim that Saudi Arabia is liberalizing its religion (Alyusufi, 2023). Therefore, criticism of Wahhabi teachings on one side and criticism of the educational curriculum reforms on the other remain significant issues in efforts to create a more open society integrated with the global world.

So far, studies placing Saudi Islamic education and its relation to Saudi Vision 2030 tend to use a descriptive approach that explains MBS's policies and strategies. In educational reform, MBS has taken bolder steps than previous leaders, who failed to reform due to a lack of political vision and fear of cultural and clerical resistance (Al-Isa, 2009; Al-Otaibi, 2020). Under MBS, clerics who criticize or hinder reforms are monitored and punished, which is seen as MBS's authoritarian stance towards the clerics (Ismail, 2023; Sarah dkk., 2023). MBS's reforms are driven not only by the goal of economic diversification but also by the demand for a modern Kingdom image and geopolitical pressure to eliminate religious extremism (Athanasoulia, 2020). Research discussing MBS's rationality in deciding on Islamic educational reform policies and the power relations in his political leadership with knowledge in Saudi Arabia has not yet been conducted. Therefore, this study aims to fill this

research gap. This descriptive-analytical study seeks to answer questions by examining MBS's rationality in making educational reform decisions and the power relations in his political leadership with knowledge in Saudi Arabia.

## METHOD

This qualitative study uses a literature review method design. This paper aims to understand the social value changes in Saudi Vision 2030 built through the discourse of knowledge in Saudi education. The primary data for this research comes from the 2019-2022 Saudi Islamic education curriculum review documents by IMPACT-se and the 2023 digital textbooks from the Saudi Ministry of Education. Secondary data comes from literature, documentation, and research results related to reform, modernization, and power relations in Saudi Arabia and Islamic education. Data collection techniques involve gathering evidence of curriculum changes, classifying materials by limiting them to non-Muslim contents (Ahl Kitab) and non-Sunni Wahhabi (*Shia* and *Sufis*), and translating texts for comparison. Data analysis uses content analysis with Michel Foucault's theory of power relations to read the significance and discourse strategies of Saudi Islamic education curriculum changes.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Power and Discourse in the Educational Policies

Curriculum reform efforts are one way for rulers to shape discourse. According to Michel Foucault, as quoted by Robert Young, discourse is shaped by power and regulated through specific procedures to control risks and organize knowledge (Young, 1981). These procedures include prohibition, division, and the desire for truth. Foucault also introduced the concept of episteme, an authoritative knowledge logic at a given time, influencing how individuals think and act within a specific cultural and social context (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). This can be seen in the knowledge logic formed in Saudi Arabia before MBS's leadership and the knowledge logic being formed during and will be formed in the MBS era.

Understanding of *mu'amalah* (social interaction) in Islam before MBS was heavily dominated by Wahhabi ideology, which often rejected relations with non-Muslims and even with fellow Muslims outside Wahhabism. Other groups outside Wahhabism were considered '*kafir*' and '*deviants*', to be fought in the name of jihad. This knowledge logic is being changed

by MBS's knowledge regime, one of which is through revising the content of *Dirasat Islamiyyah* books in Saudi schools.

In realizing Saudi Vision 2030 and facing resistance to Saudi's socio-cultural changes by fundamentalist groups, MBS enforces discipline on school teachers if there is teaching that does not align with Saudi's material, goals, and vision (Al-Otaibi, 2020). This step affirms Foucault's view on how power works through normalization and regulation, not repression, by creating and controlling discourse knowledge to generate compliance (Foucault, 1995). Foucault also argued that power is always articulated through knowledge, and knowledge always has power effects (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). Therefore, Saudi Arabia's education policies under MBS show how power produces and regulates knowledge to strengthen its authority in realizing Saudi Vision 2030.

### Revision of Islamic Curriculum Conten

The revision of teaching materials in the Saudi Arabian curriculum, especially in the *Dirasat Islamiyyah* books, has removed some content related to non-Muslims, such as the depiction of Jews and Christians in the context of faith in the Holy Books. Jews refer to the followers of Prophet Moses, and Christians refer to the followers of Prophet Jesus Christ. For example, in the semester 2 monotheism book for Saudi students in grades 10-12 in 2021, it is explained that the Holy Books other than the Qur'an, namely the Torah and the Gospel, are considered corrupted and altered by Jews and Christians. This explanation urges students not to believe in these two Holy Books. The book also includes verse 75 from Surah Al-Baqarah, indicating that Muslims should be wary and not trust Jews and Christians. This material can be seen in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1. Content of the People of the Scripture in the 2021 Book

In the 2022 book, the explanation that Jews and Christians corrupted their Holy Books is removed, leaving an emphasis that the *Shari'a* in these scriptures has been replaced by the Qur'an. Verse 136 of Al-Baqarah is used to replace verse 75 of the same Surah, emphasizing faith in the Holy Books before the Qur'an without discrimination, showing that Muslims must respect the Torah and the Gospel and view Jews and Christians as brothers. This material can be seen in Figure 2 below:



Figure 2. Content of the People of the Scripture in the 2022 Book

In the 2023-2024 edition, the book no longer mentions the term “People of the Scripture” as referring to Jews and Christians. The focus shifts to acknowledging that the Torah and the Gospel are Holy Books revealed by Allah SWT, and Muslims are commanded to believe in the revelations given to previous prophets, including Moses and Jesus. The book still uses the text from Surah Al-Baqarah: 136. This material can be seen in Figure 3 below:



Figure 3. Content of the People of the Scripture in the 2023 Book

For clarity, a comparison of the revisions to the content about Jews and Christians from 2021 to 2023 in the textbooks, as shown in the three figures above, is presented in the table below. Red text indicates deleted text, while green text indicates replaced text.

**Table 1.** Changes in Content about Jews and Christians from 2021-2023

Explanation in the book 2021	Explanation in the book 2022	Explanation in the book 2023
Torah and Gospel: Scriptures revealed by Allah SWT	Torah and Gospel: Scriptures revealed by Allah SWT.	Torah and Gospel: Scriptures revealed by Allah SWT.
As for the Torah, Allah SWT revealed it to Moses, and the Gospel of Allah SWT revealed it to Jesus	As for the Torah, Allah SWT revealed it to Moses, and the Gospel of Allah SWT revealed it to Jesus	As for the Torah, Allah SWT revealed it to Moses, and the Gospel of Allah SWT revealed it to Jesus
The Ummah has agreed that these Scriptures are discarded (deleted, canceled, replaced) by Islamic law, and that they have been destroyed and altered by adding, subtracting, and forgetting	Muslims have agreed that these Scriptures are annulled by Islamic law.	-
This explanation has been found in verses from the Scriptures of Allah SWT, including about the Torah, His words SWT: "So, do you (Muslims) really expect them to believe in you, while a group of them hear the word of Allah and then they change it after understanding it, even though they know (Him)" (QS. Al - Baqarah: 75)	And the Islamic scholars agree that it is obligatory to believe in him, as He SWT says: Say, "We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us, and in what has been revealed to Ibrahim, Ishmael, Ishaq, Ya'qub and his descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Isa, and to what was given to the prophets of their Lord. We do not discriminate between them, and to Him we surrender." (QS. Al-Baqarah: 136)	And the Islamic scholars agree that it is obligatory to believe in him, as He SWT says: Say, "We believe in Allah, and in what has been revealed to us, and in what has been revealed to us, and in what has been revealed to Ibrahim, Ishmael, Ishaq, Ya'qub and his descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Isa, and to what was given to the prophets of their Lord. We do not discriminate between them, and to Him we surrender." (QS. Al -Baqarah: 136)

In addition to sensitive issues related to Jews and Christians, another sensitive issue in textbooks is the Wahhabi perspective on other Islamic sects, such as *Shia* and *Sufi*. *Shia* is a sect that venerates *Ahl al-Bayt* (the family of the Prophet), whose emergence marked political events during the era of Ali bin Abi Talib. Meanwhile, *Sufi* represents a group focused on mysticism, characterized by a unique understanding of spiritual dimensions and mystical arts resulting from spiritual experiences (Dumairieh, 2021). *Shia* and *Sufi* have fundamental



differences from Wahhabi and one of the motivations behind the spread of Wahhabism has been to cleanse Arabia of the 'heretical' practices of *Shia* and *Sufi* since the Ottoman era.

To shape an inclusive generation in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi government has revised the curriculum regarding *Shia* and *Sufi*. The 7th-grade Islamic Studies textbook for Saudi students in 2022 initially taught caution towards *Shia* and *Sufi*. They were mentioned in a chapter on extreme beliefs related to the Prophet's family on page 34. This chapter includes a section that describes examples of beliefs labeled as signs of polytheism. Specifically, *Ahl al-Bayt* is a term commonly used by *Shia* to refer to themselves and their *imams* (Ali bin Abi Talib and his 11 descendants). Examples include asking and praying for salvation from them, commonly known in Indonesia as *syafa'at*, and claiming that they possess powers and knowledge usually reserved only for God or prophets. Although previous pages explain that the term *Ahl al-Bayt* refers to all members of the Prophet's family (such as his wives and other prominent figures), popular practices and beliefs described in this section and the following pages (pilgrimage to the tombs of saints) show a strong connection to *Shia* and *Sufi* mysticism. The material as described can be seen in Figure 4 below



Figure 4. *Shia* and *Sufi* Contents of the *Dirasat Islamiyyah* Book Class 7 of 2022

In 2023, the extremist beliefs (*ghuluw*, often understood as a religious exaggeration) that are known to be embraced and refer to some *Shia* and *Sufi* groups are no longer labeled as “*shirk* (deifying) Allah” but as beliefs that may lead to the trial of the fall of *shirk*. In 2023,



Various labels of shirk and idolatry were removed, as well as the statement that “some people have extreme views on the subject”, making this discussion more theoretical than actual references to groups in Islam. The material as mentioned can be seen in the following figure 5 below:



Figure 5. Shia and Sufi Content of the Book of *Dirasat Islamiyyah* Grade 7 in 2023

A comparison of the content changes regarding *Shia* and *Sufis* from 2022 to 2023 can be seen in the table below. Red text indicates removed text, while green text indicates replaced text.

Table 2. Changes in *Shi'a* and *Sufi* Book Content 2022-2023

Explanation in the book 2022	Explanation in the book 2023
Holding an extreme view of the <i>ahl albayt</i> of the Prophet by exalting them above the degree that Allah SWT has given them, including among the causes of shirk to Allah SWT. And some people have extreme views towards them, so they fall into shirk to Allah SWT. And among those examples:	Holding an extreme view of the <i>ahl albayt</i> of the Prophet by exalting them above the degree that Allah SWT has given them, including among the causes of shirk to Allah SWT. And among those examples:
Their prayers to others besides Allah SWT, and seek help to them in difficulties. And this is <i>shirk ilahiyah</i> .	Their prayers to others besides Allah SWT, and seek help to them in difficulties.
Claiming that they have the ability to influence the universe and manage creation. And this is <i>shirk rububiyah</i>	Claiming that they have the ability to influence the universe and manage creation
Claiming that they have the ability to know supernatural things or that they know the future until the Day of Resurrection. And this is <i>shirk in the name and attributes</i> .	Claiming that they have the ability to know supernatural things or that they know the future until the Day of Resurrection.

Wahhabism, which teaches *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* (loyalty and separation), encourages followers to actively distance themselves from non-Muslims and their world (Hegghammer, 2010). The same view also applies to 'heretical' or 'kafir' groups such as *Shia* and *Sufi*. This is, of course, not in line with MBS's goals in Saudi Vision 2030. Through content revisions like the example above, Saudi education aims to create a generation capable of accepting and being open to all religions. Thus, in the future, the Saudi generation is expected to be able to cooperate in various economic, political, and cultural sectors with citizens of different countries.

MBS's steps in reforming the curriculum material as mentioned above are not without resistance. This includes obstacles from Saudi scholars who disagree with efforts to reduce Wahhabism's role and other criticisms from the Islamic world, which has regarded Saudi Arabia as a true representation of Islam's purity. Nevertheless, MBS possesses the courage and strategic ideas different from his predecessors. Three main drivers for accelerating educational reform in the MBS era are the increasing demand for education and jobs, calls for quality education to prepare Saudi youth for the job market, and concerns about an education system that fosters extremism. The Kuwait crisis and the events of September 11 strengthened the push for educational reform, which received pressure from America and internationally (Quamar, 2021). Reforms under MBS use a bold approach to address Wahhabi influence and promote more moderate and market-oriented education (Al-Otaibi, 2020).

### **Power Relations and Islamic Knowledge in Saudi Arabia**

The Wahhabi understanding of monotheism promoted by Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab was intertwined with political motives, as an ideological tool to strengthen bin Saud's rule in Saudi Arabia and counter regional powers like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, which aligned with Soviet Communism during the Cold War. According to MBS, the U.S. leveraged this ideology to undermine Soviet influence in Muslim countries, reportedly requesting Saudi Arabia to disseminate it through investments in educational and religious institutions in the global Muslim world (Morocco World News, 2018).

This relationship between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. increased during the Kuwait crisis in the Gulf War (Solichien M, 2014). However, Wahhabism became a boomerang for both Saudi Arabia and the United States in the early 21st century. The September 11, 2001,

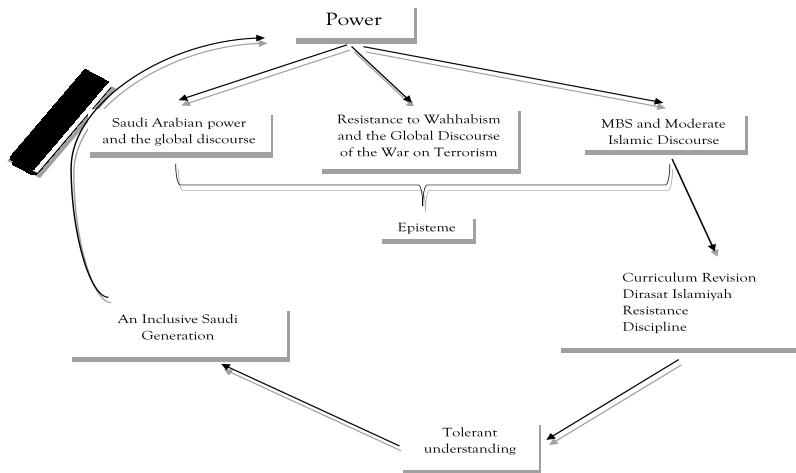
Attacks targeting major American cities revealed an ideology of terrorism within the Islamic teachings understood by Saudis. This was especially highlighted after U.S. intelligence investigations into Al-Qaeda's movements showed that 79 percent of the perpetrators were Saudi nationals, with Osama bin Laden as the mastermind (FBI, 2001). Bin Laden had opposed, which in Foucault's terms is called resistance to the Saudi government's decision to station 'kafir' military forces in their country during the Kuwait crisis in 1991 and sent an open letter rebuking the Grand Mufti of the Kingdom, bin Baz, for his fatwa permitting the government's decision, which was seen as violating the sanctity of holy sites (Quamar, 2021). These views on '*kafirs*' displayed intolerance and hatred towards other religions. Therefore, after the September 11 attacks, Saudi Wahhabism was deemed the most responsible for revising its teachings. This includes the term '*kafir*' directed at Jews, seen as hate speech and anti-Semitism towards Israel, influencing Saudi Arabia's relationship with Israel.

In Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia claims to be the heart of the Arab and Islamic world, bearing responsibility for Palestinian Arabs and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has economic and security interests and is under U.S. pressure to normalize relations with Israel, the home of the Jewish people. The discourse on Saudi Arabia's normalization with Israel has been pursued since 2021, following the Abraham Accords signed by other Arab countries; the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, in 2020. However, the discourse with Saudi Arabia is still hindered because any normalization considerations must be linked to the prospects of a Palestinian state. Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the U.S., Princess Reema binti Bandar al-Saud, stated that while Saudi Arabia recognizes Israel's need for security, it cannot come at the expense of the Palestinian people (Cooper, 2024).

Additionally, during U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Riyadh on February 5, 2024, discussions with MBS included progress on normalization discourse. This is a critical issue discussed about the Gaza war and Houthi Yemen attacks who follow the Shia sect on Red Sea shipping routes. Concurrently, an Arab public opinion survey released in Riyadh reported that the majority of Arabs do not support official recognition, harbor hostility, and are highly skeptical of Israel (Cooper, 2024). This attitude, including among Saudis, is seen as intolerance towards Israel's Jewish populace. This stance is suspected of stemming from Saudi Arabia's strict and extreme Islamic teachings towards other religions disseminated through educational institutions.

Since Saudi Islam, Wahhabism, is integrated into every teaching institution, one investigation focused on Saudi school textbooks. The 2003 national dialogue and scientific panel commissioned by Crown Prince Abdullah resulted in findings related to fundamental Wahhabi principles in Saudi school lessons that were 'accused' of supporting violence against other religions (Shea, 2023). Based on these findings, the Saudi government, accompanied by U.S. pressure, revised the content of school textbooks, including Islamic Studies books.

The relationships formed in the dynamics of political power and knowledge discourse in Saudi Arabia can be described in the following scheme;



**Figure 6.** The schema of relationships formed in the dynamics of Political power and knowledge discourse in Saudi Arabia

The scheme above illustrates the episteme changes in each power. The episteme at the beginning of the establishment of Saudi Arabia discourse on the purification of Islam from all practices of *Bid'ah* (innovation in religion), another episteme was formed outside Saudi's power which discourse on the narrative of extremism/intolerance against Saudi Islamic practices, and the third episteme in the MBS era wanted to discourse moderate Islam in Saudi Arabia. The power regulates knowledge through the revision of the school curriculum for the Saudi generation. An example of revised material on non-Muslims—not referring to them as 'kafirs'—particularly Christians and Jews, is the depiction of them in discussions about faith in the holy scriptures, as shown in the research findings. Knowledge about the scriptures revealed by Allah SWT to previous prophets is an essential aspect of the faith for all Muslims,

including Wahhabis. Therefore, the teaching and understanding of these scriptures are taught to Muslim generations to ensure the correct fulfillment of the pillars of faith.

### **Impact of Power Relations in Saudi Arabia**

Early Wahhabism is not in line with MBS's ambitions in Saudi Vision 2030, which desires cultural openness, economic cooperation with foreign investors, strengthened tourism, and entertainment. Through content revisions, Saudi education aims to create and instill a character in the generation capable of accepting religious and cultural differences. Relations of power and knowledge that included curriculum revision and the promotion of tolerance led the Saudis to political and religious reforms.

Revisions regarding other social interactions in the Islamic Studies books also address Wahhabi relations with *Shia* and *Sufi*, whose practices are considered extreme in venerating the Prophet Muhammad's family and holy figures. These revisions aim to create character-tolerant knowledge in the Saudi generation towards *Shia* and *Sufi* groups, who dominate the Eastern region of Saudi Arabia, an area with oil fields as a primary source of Saudi income before economic diversification. With changes in knowledge about 'the other' groups, MBS envisions a moderate Islam that will create more stable political and security conditions, both domestically in the Eastern region and in regional politics with Yemen, Iran, and other *Shia*-majority areas. The impact of this discourse is enabling the country to prioritize the economic development focus outlined in Saudi Vision 2030.

Saudi political and social stability aims to change Saudi's image, which was previously intolerant, to a more positive one. This effort includes developing non-religious tourism, which attracts foreign visitors and contributes to increased tourism revenue as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 program. In developing the tourism industry sector, the government improves economic feasibility, creates jobs, and supports cultural and environmental aspects (Pratiwi & Muslikhati, 2024). Providing opportunities for every generation of Saudis to engage in the transformation of economic activities, will minimize extremist activities (Al-Otaibi, 2020). Power relations shape how reforms are implemented and accepted by different stakeholders.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since its inception in 2016, Saudi Vision 2030 has prioritized economic diversification by developing non-oil sectors such as tourism, technology, and entertainment while addressing

challenges related to cultural transformation, human rights, and religious intolerance. Central to these reforms is the revision of Islamic studies curricula to eliminate intolerant content, promote moderation, and counter extremism, particularly toward Jews, Christians, Shias, and Sufis. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, strict oversight of educators and international training initiatives have been implemented to align educational practices with Vision 2030's objectives. These measures align with Foucault's theory of power, which emphasizes the role of normalization and regulation in shaping societal discourse and knowledge. The reforms seek to foster social cohesion, enhance political and regional stability, attract foreign investment, boost tourism, and improve Saudi Arabia's international reputation, despite facing resistance to these transformative changes.

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