

...the information report on

SAUDI ARABIA: A FORCED MARCH INTO THE FUTURE?

In 2015, Saudi Arabia could rightly be considered the most regressive country in the world. Criminals were beheaded, women were not allowed to drive, and society seemed to be suffocating under a tangle of absurd religious prescriptions and prohibitions inspired by a fundamentalist reading of Islam, under the thumb of ever-older leaders. Less than ten years later, under the leadership of its young Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the country is now looking to the future with confidence, and is committed to a wide-ranging plan to transform its economy, its society, and even its history.

These transformations are profoundly influencing the way the country sees its place in the region and in the world. It is therefore appropriate to assess the impact of these changes on Franco-Saudi relations, and for the future of a Middle East where Saudi Arabia plays a more pivotal role than ever.

From 2 to 7 June 2024, a delegation from the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee therefore visited the country to gain a better understanding of these changes. In particular, it made a visit to the city of al-Ula, a centre of Franco-Saudi cooperation that has been witness to many of the country's transformations, meeting with numerous political leaders, researchers and directors of state agencies. These discussions convinced the delegation of the importance of events in Saudi Arabia for the country, the region and the bilateral relationship.

1. FROM TRADITIONALISM TO UNBRIDLED MODERNISM: A COUNTRY IN THE THROES OF TRANSFORMATION

Since 2015, Saudi Arabia has been ruled by King Salman, the son of Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud, founder of the kingdom. Its de facto ruler is his son **Mohammed bin Salman**, however, a young prince – not yet forty – who, in every regard, has set the country on **a path of profound transformation**.

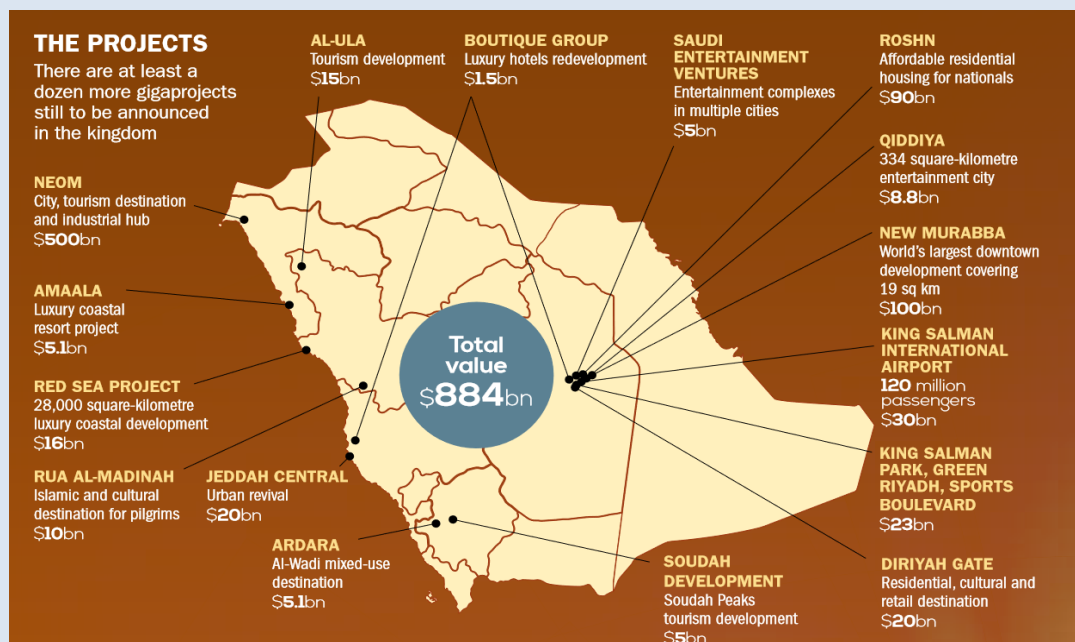
These transformations are summarised in the **Vision 2030** programme unveiled by MBS in 2016. The programme was influenced by consulting firms in the English-speaking world and set a series of highly ambitious objectives for the country to achieve by 2030, not only in the economic domain but also in social, health, environmental, and other areas. It is part of **a highly coherent vision**, the implementation of which is facilitated by **very strong centralisation of power**.

To facilitate the emergence of a diversified, productive economy that is not entirely dependent on oil, a series of societal reforms have thus been undertaken, including the lifting of restrictions on women's activity - *"we cannot develop with half the population in the kitchen,"* as Minister of State Adel al-Jubeir told the delegation - and of strict rules on the separation of the sexes, the abolition of the religious police, the relaxation of rules for entry into the country, the removal of bans on the arts and particularly on music, etc.

The Gigaprojects

Vision 2030 is also based on a set of projects with budgets in the tens of billions of dollars. In addition to the ripple effect they are expected to have on the economy, these projects are part of an approach intended to **completely reshape the country** in keeping with a near-demiurgical ambition to **position Saudi Arabia at the forefront of progress**. The enormity of this undertaking is illustrated by the fact that the flagship project, a 170-kilometer-long city called "The Line," is just one of the projects envisioned for Neom, which in turn is only one of the regions being targeted for development.

However, Saudi authorities have recently suggested that its scope may ultimately need to be reduced due to deficits created by **declining oil revenues** and the threat of **economic overheating**.



Source: Middle East Business Intelligence (MEED), via DGTresor

Wahhabism bears heavy responsibility for the stagnation that the country has experienced since 1979, and its consequences reach far beyond the religious sphere: Saudi Arabia, writes Louis Blin, a historian and diplomat with an in-depth knowledge of the kingdom, is "*the only country where the state religion has legitimised anti-economic behaviour by giving religious activities priority over work activities and establishing multiple prohibitions that have hindered development.*" **In short, MBS wants to "put Saudi Arabia back to work."** The shroud weighing in particular on young people has now been lifted, with the aim of "unlocking potential" and creating a prosperous economy.

"We cannot develop with half the population in the kitchen"

On the other hand, this social liberalisation does not imply a political opening. In this regard one might even say it has become more closed off: this is modernisation from above, so much so that the **levers of power**, which were formerly operated in a relatively collegial manner amongst the royal family, are now **monopolised and controlled by the prince and a small circle of close associates**. The brutal consolidation of power marked by the detention of hundreds of princes at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in 2017 and the 2018 assassination of Jamal Khashoggi at the Kingdom's consulate in Istanbul continues unabated, and **no institutional reforms have been undertaken**, in a country where the only elections held are for municipal authorities.

The last aspect of the transformations brought to the country by MBS, and undeniably an original one, is the **near-replacement of the religious frame of reference**, hitherto dominant,

by a more national frame of reference. To exert influence in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia has historically relied upon religious leadership - stemming from the fact that the two most important holy sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, are both located in the country - and on oil wealth. Without in any way negating this frame of reference, MBS now advocates **a more tolerant version of Islam**, far removed from the Wahhabi credo, and above all espouses an extremely keen sense of the nation, driven by **emphasis on the pre-Islamic past** – in short, **“Saudi Arabia First.”** This last point has significant consequences, particularly in terms of foreign policy.

2. A MORE ASSERTIVE FOREIGN POLICY AND A DIVERSIFICATION OF PARTNERSHIPS, IN WHICH FRANCE MUST PARTICIPATE

A. AFTER A PHASE OF ADVENTURISM, A REGIONAL POLICY IN SEARCH OF STABILITY

1. A more aggressive foreign policy at first, before a return to a policy of regional appeasement

Saudi Arabia has historically been **prudent and reluctant to resort to force**, instead relying on **its considerable oil wealth** and on **its alliance with the United States** to ensure its security against its adversaries.

This is why **the military operation** launched by MBS together with the United Arab Emirates in **Yemen in 2015**, seeking to put an end to the threat posed by the Iran-backed Houthi militia, was a fundamental shift in approach. This was also followed by the November 2017 **detainment** in Riyadh of **Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri**, who was seen as not having dealt firmly enough with Hezbollah. The same year, Saudi Arabia drew Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates into a **blockade of Qatar** to punish it for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood. These early actions were chaotic to say the least and suggested a phase of adventurism, but **all three initiatives were resounding failures** – the offensive in Yemen a particularly deadly one at that.

The turning point came in 2018-2019, perhaps in reaction to the (very fleeting) international opprobrium MBS faced in the wake of the Jamal Khashoggi assassination. Thus, although it still considers Iran to be its main strategic adversary, **the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action** on 14 July 2015 and above all the 24 September 2019 **Houthi attack on the Abqaiq and Khurais oil terminals** likely carried out with Iranian assistance, convinced Saudi Arabia to **change its approach**. The **Trump administration's lack of a response** to this attack convinced the Saudis once and for all that they could no longer rely on the United States for security guarantees. They therefore reacted pragmatically, entering into direct discussions with Iran that resulted in diplomatic relations being restored in May 2023.

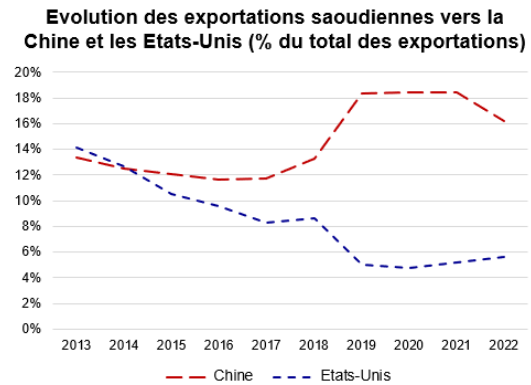
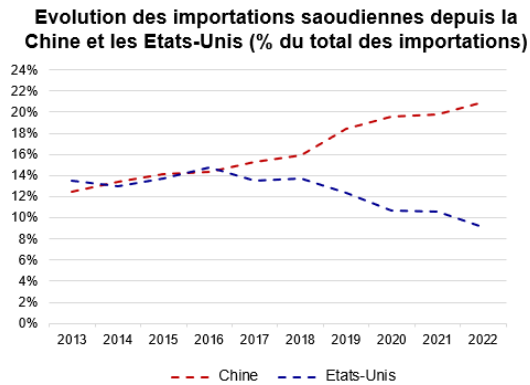
The Qatari episode came to a close in 2021 with a formal reconciliation, without Saudi demands having been met, while MBS ultimately came to acknowledge the reality of the balance of power in Lebanon, where Hezbollah unavoidably had to be reckoned with – although the Israeli offensive has doubtless shifted the dynamics.

Saudi Arabia has therefore returned to a policy of maintaining **balanced relations** and **the pursuit of regional stability** and protection of national integrity – with subtle yet significant differences from the approach taken in the previous period.

2. More diverse partnerships

The country's distancing from the United States, which began with the JCPoA and was aggravated by the attacks of September 2019, became more marked under the presidency of Joe Biden, aggravated by the American administration's reaction to the Khashoggi affair. Nevertheless, it is also part of a fundamental trend that has seen **Saudi Arabia asserting greater independence from its former protector and deepening its relations with China and Russia**. Trade relations have intensified with the former, though the kingdom has in no way broken off its partnership with the second, particularly within the OPEC+ framework.

Saudi exports to China and the US (% of total exports)



Source: General Authority for Statistics, Economic Affairs Department of the French Embassy in Riyadh

With regard to the war in Ukraine, Saudi Arabia has been in a position to simply call for diplomacy, as concerns over energy supplies have once again made it indispensable to its American partner.

The diversification of partnerships set in motion under MBS has thus **reinforced Saudi Arabia's central importance both in the Middle East and beyond**, making it a key player in affairs of all kinds. This central importance has also been reflected in the **proliferation of summits and negotiations organised on Saudi territory**.

3. Is a normalisation of relations with Israel possible?

The Israeli-Palestinian issue provides the clearest illustration of the pivotal role being assumed now more than ever by the Saudi kingdom. Very soon after the signing of **the Abraham Accords**, under which the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan (which has not yet ratified) and Morocco **normalised their relations with Israel**, the question of Saudi participation arose. Given the country's importance in the Arab world, **the decision to do so would have considerable symbolic, diplomatic and economic consequences**. MBS is considered less sensitive to the Palestinian issue than his predecessors, particularly his father Salman, the current sovereign.

Based on information that has trickled out, it appears that this normalisation could take place as part of a **grand bargain** with the United States, under which the latter would provide the kingdom with a written security guarantee, and would doubtless give it special access to the technology necessary for the development of civil nuclear power. This would mean a **genuine political and economic reshaping** of the Middle East, with the shared ambition of MBS and Netanyahu, as well as of certain members of the American administration, seen as being to create **a vast free trade area integrated with global trade networks**. It would also be a **condition for the success of the grand projects being spearheaded by MBS in Neom**, which borders the Gulf of Aqaba, Israel's maritime outlet. In this scenario, Saudi Arabia would clearly side with the United States, from which it would thus obtain recognition as a top-tier partner.

Advanced discussions appeared to be underway up until October 7 and the Israeli campaign in Gaza, which suddenly called everything into question. Since that date, Saudi diplomacy has repeatedly insisted that **no normalisation of relations will be possible in the absence of prospects for Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state**, which therefore constitutes a red line.

B. FOR FRANCE, A RELATIONSHIP TO BE DEEPENED AND OPPORTUNITIES TO BE SEIZED

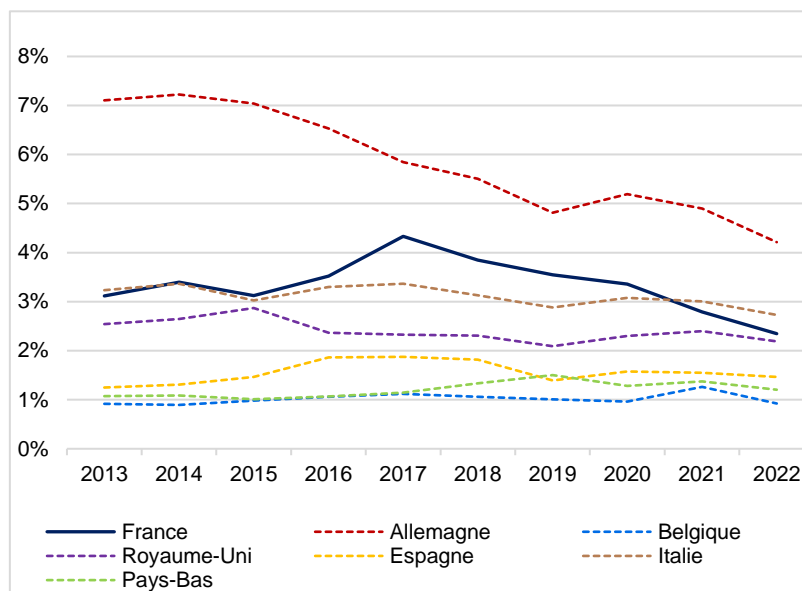
1. France, a secondary but valuable partner

France has not had the kind of historical relationship with Saudi Arabia that it has had with Lebanon, Syria, Iraq or Egypt. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Arabian Peninsula was a

zone first of British, and then of American influence. Louis Blin, however, points out that France under Bonaparte once considered establishing relations with the Sharif of Mecca to counter British influence and opened a consulate in Jeddah as early as 1839 – which leads him to note that “*Arabia was better known in France in the 19th century than it is today.*”¹

For these historical reasons, **France comes well after the United States or Germany in the ranking of the kingdom's economic partners.**

Saudi Arabia's imports from France and its European neighbours (% of total imports)



Source: General Authority for Statistics, via the Economic Affairs Department of the French Embassy in Riyadh

Nevertheless, France is **one of the country’s biggest foreign investors**, with \$1.2 billion of FDI inflows in 2022 and \$6.1 billion in stock – respectively, the second and fourth largest in the world – which illustrates the strong interest present among French companies. However, trade relations remain highly dependent on oil prices, and exports are largely driven by aeronautics (41% of the total value in 2022); in May, Saudia announced an order for 105 Airbus aircraft.

However, France has **many assets it can bring to the table** in Saudi Arabia. The meetings held by the delegation in Riyadh and al-Ula, whether with ministries (culture, foreign affairs) or various state authorities (such as the General Authority for Military Industries or the Misk Foundation) showed that **France's know-how is appreciated**, and that good political relations had the potential to produce economic results.

All this shows that there is **undeveloped potential to be drawn from France-Saudi Arabia relations.**

The human rights stumbling block

The human rights violations committed by Saudi Arabia have rightly sparked **strong international reactions** and countless reports from NGOs and international organisations. But the official protests **have not had the desired effect**, giving the impression that it was nothing more than a convenient way for Western leaders to ease their consciences at little cost – a perception that is increasingly widespread in the Middle East and the Global South.

This was particularly true in regard to **the Khashoggi affair**: the gruesome murder of a political opponent at the Istanbul consulate elicited a wave of indignant reactions from Western leaders,

¹ Louis Blin, *L'Arabie saoudite, de l'or noir à la mer Rouge*.

with the United States foremost among them. For several months, MBS, who had been shown to be responsible for the murder in a CIA report released to the public, was subject to a degree of ostracism at international summits, with candidate Biden having declared in 2020 that he would make the kingdom a “pariah.” However, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was a rapid return to realism: with Saudi oil indispensable for keeping energy prices under control, the country regained its place in the community of nations. This **reversal**, embodied in the July 2022 fist bump between Biden and the crown prince, was **a severe blow to the credibility of Western discourse**. In any case, the manoeuvre was doomed from the start, since Western countries do not have the means, or no longer have the means to “punish” a country by inflicting complete international isolation upon it.

Paradoxically, although the Khashoggi affair has had an international impact, and although Saudi Arabia remains a target of criticism in certain areas such as women's rights or religious tolerance, where substantial progress has nonetheless been made, other extremely problematic, long-standing practices provoke little reaction outside the NGO community. This is the case in particular of **the use of automatic weapons against Ethiopian migrants** at the Yemeni border, as documented by Human Rights Watch, or of the **kafala system**, which despite recent improvements continues to facilitate **the exploitation of migrant workers**. Diplomatic missions should raise their voices on these issues, and efforts should be made to find ways to influence the authorities.

2. Defence ties that merit further development

France has a long-standing defence partnership with Saudi Arabia. The kingdom is the **fifth largest client of our arms industry**, with orders totalling **€9.5 billion between 2013 and 2022**. Historically, the relationship began with the supply of frigates for the Red Sea Fleet in the 1980s, combined with an Operational Maintenance (MCO) contract that remains in place today. France has also sold **132 CAESAR howitzers** to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi procurement authorities are increasingly demanding with regard to skill transfer and localisation

The biggest challenge for the French defence industry is the **dual competition** it faces both from traditional players such as the United States, which accounted for 43% of total arms imports by value in 2022, and from new players such as South Korea (accounting for 37% of imports in 2022) or Spain, which has in particular won several orders for battleships to be purchased for the Saudi Navy.

This intensified competition is consistent with the Saudi policy of diversifying partnerships. Saudi procurement authorities are leveraging this competition and making increasingly significant demands in regard to transfers of skills and localisation, consistent with the goal of the 'Saudisation' of the defence industry: the target for 2030 is to have **50% of defence spending localised within the Kingdom**.

This diversification and the increased demands of procurement authorities present both a challenge and an opportunity for French industry, which should provide support to the kingdom in its skill development ambitions.

Recommendation: deepen defence cooperation by supporting the Saudi partner's ambition to create a national defence industry, and by facilitating skill transfers

3. Convergences in foreign policy to be leveraged

"We agree with you about everything," Adel al-Jubeir, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, told the delegation. This statement may seem to go too far, but it is indisputable that France and Saudi Arabia do share common concerns on the main issues in the region: the Israel-Palestine issue, Iran, Lebanon. All these concerns are grounded in the desire to achieve

stability and combat extremism. It is a convergence facilitated by the shift that has taken place in Saudi policy since 2019, starting with the de facto cessation of military operations in Yemen and the return to more accommodating positions on Iran, which nevertheless remains a strategic adversary.

a) Insufficient human and real estate resources

To leverage these convergences, it will first be necessary to provide more personnel to serve at the French embassy in Riyadh, since the bilateral relationship has grown considerably, with various major projects being undertaken, particularly in the cultural field. The embassy has a competent, committed and largely Arabic-speaking staff, a considerable asset in the region. It is essential that it be provided with sufficient resources to accomplish its missions.

Recommendation: increase the personnel at the French Embassy in Saudi Arabia to reflect the expansion of its missions and to help strengthen Franco-Saudi cooperation at all levels

The delegation also wishes to draw the Government's attention to the [situation of the French embassy in Yemen](#), which since 2015 has been temporarily based in Riyadh due to the conflict. Its agents have been provided with office space at the French embassy in Saudi Arabia, but **the overall capacity of the premises is insufficient to provide good working conditions for the agents of both embassies**; the same observation applies to the ambassador's residence, which is well below the minimum surface area (250 square metres) defined for diplomatic posts.

Furthermore, **the human resources allocated to the embassy are plainly insufficient** (there are only 6 agents instead of the 9 considered necessary), requiring post personnel to perform very frequent on-call shifts. Current events show that despite its peripheral position in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen has now become a "Middle East hot spot." France must act accordingly.

Recommendation: provide the French embassy in Yemen, which is currently located in Riyadh due to the security situation, with resources commensurate with the expanded missions and growing strategic importance of the country.

b) An initiative worth pursuing on the Israeli-Palestinian issue

Since October 7 and the beginning of the campaign against Gaza, prospects for peace seem out of the question. For the time being, **the United States has not changed the orientation of Israeli policy**, which remains focused on the **destruction of the military capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah, with no prospects for a political settlement**.

Faced with this catastrophic situation, **Saudi Arabia has for the moment opted for a wait-and-see approach**, condemning the Israeli campaign, which it has described as "genocide," but without ruling out prospects for a normalisation of relations. In its discussions with various political leaders, the delegation observed some distancing from this issue.

Europe, meanwhile, has been **muted** on the subject, hampered by its usual divisions and by its lack of influence on the actors in the conflict.

In this deadlock, **a joint Franco-Saudi initiative for the recognition of a Palestinian State** once a political authority supported by several Arab States has been established in Gaza would make complete sense. **Saudi Arabia** would thus reaffirm the **leadership role** it assumed in 2002 when it presented the Arab Peace Initiative, and **France** would assume once again the **capacity for diplomatic initiative** it has long demonstrated in the region, taking the position it has historically held on the Palestinian question.

But above all, even though such an initiative is unlikely to resonate with Israeli leaders, a joint declaration would be a strong signal that the international community **refuses to accept the worst-case scenario**.

Recommendation: Recognise Saudi Arabia's pivotal role, explore possibilities for a joint peace initiative

4. Developing academic cooperation, nurturing French language and culture

France's archaeological missions in Saudi Arabia have earned it considerable credibility with Saudi authorities (see part 3); it would be advisable to draw on this to **strengthen university ties between the two countries**. To this end, work will need to be done among French universities, which are sometimes reluctant given the country's problematic image. France has much to offer in multiple areas, however, particularly in medicine and management. Barriers have long been in place to prevent female students from moving abroad, but almost all of them have now been lifted, and it would certainly be a shame if they were to find similar barriers in place upon their arrival.

Recommendation: Launch an aggressive policy of academic cooperation, encouraging French universities to welcome Saudi PhD and postdoctoral students

Saudi Arabia has a closer relationship with the English-speaking world and remains a kind of terra incognita in terms of the promotion of French language and culture. Nevertheless, great potential lies in France's attractiveness amongst Saudis, in particular its association with cultural sophistication and luxury. The Alliance Française has established five educational centres in the country: two in Riyadh, one in Jeddah, one in Khobar and one in al-Ula. The delegation visited the latter of these, whose attendees include future official city tour guides and students intending to pursue their studies in France, particularly in archaeology. The Institut Français provided for under the 2018 intergovernmental agreement (see part 3) has not yet materialised; according to the information provided to the delegation, its role is expected to be performed by a facility slated to open at Villa Hegra in 2026. Al-Ula could thus become a **centre for the promotion of the French language**, and for academic cooperation; it would be prudent to leverage this potential to help **spread French language and culture throughout the country**.

Recommendation: support the development of French language and culture in Saudi Arabia by expanding the French teaching network

3. FOCUS ON AL-ULA, A CORNERSTONE OF FRANCO-SAUDI COOPERATION

A. A SYMBOL OF THE NEW SAUDI ARABIA

1. A long-neglected, exceptional site

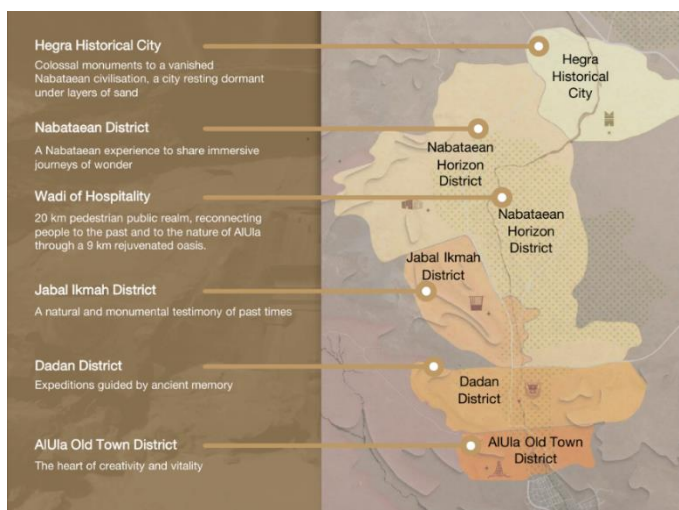
In the northwest of Saudi Arabia, a few kilometres from the town of al-Ula, is the **Nabataean site of Hegra**, which is of exceptional historical, artistic and archaeological importance. It is a set of tombs carved into sandstone, made by the same civilisation that built Petra.



Because the site dated from pre-Islamic times and visits were discouraged by a hadith of the Prophet, it was **voluntarily neglected by the Saudi authorities** until the early 2010s. However, in a complete turnaround typical of the MBS era, it has since been the subject of an extremely proactive **policy of scientific, cultural and tourist development**. The delegation sought to make a visit this emblematic site, in order to understand how **archaeology has been harnessed in support of a policy of promotional outreach**.

2. A proliferation of projects

The development of the site began with the archaeological research undertaken by French epigraphist and philologist Laïla Nehmé and a Saudi team starting in 2002. Their work has in particular uncovered a large amount of written material, which has contributed to our understanding of the origins of Arabic script, as well as deepening our knowledge of a region that was a **commercial and cultural crossroads** in the centuries preceding the rise of Islam.



“Journey through time”: a development plan dividing the national territory into five touristic zones (source: Afalula)

Today, the site is the location of a very large number of projects: the Saudi authorities intend to make it a **true cultural tourism hub**. Luxury hotels, international concert halls, nature reserves and contemporary art museums are among the many projects already completed or now in progress intended to serve this objective. The transformation of the city is highly visible; the old town has been restored and a boulevard lined with shops and cafes has been created. The Saudi authorities created an ad hoc entity for the purpose of developing the site called the *Royal Commission for al-Ula* (RCU), which has now *de facto* assumed the functions of a municipal authority.

3. A window into the construction of a Saudi identity

The considerable investment in al-Ula goes beyond the realm of cultural or artistic policy: MBS aims to use Hegra to help **reconnect Saudi Arabia to its pre-Islamic past**. **Evidence of a Christian presence**, as well as a Jewish presence, long attested to but repressed by Wahhabi orthodoxy, is now being highlighted in order to support the image of a Saudi Arabia not exclusively defined by Islam. Archaeology will thus be used in support of a kind of **identity building seeking to anchor Saudi Arabia, which is a young country, in the distant past**. France has been given a leading role in the implementation of this project through the creation of Afalula.

B. AFALULA, THE FRUIT OF A JOINT PROJECT

1. An object with a unique status

The French Agency for the Development of Al-Ula (Afalula) was created by an **intergovernmental agreement signed on 10 April 2018** for a ten-year period by Jean-Yves Le Drian, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, who now serves as its President. It is the result of the Crown Prince's intention to highlight French expertise in cultural development in the context of Franco-Saudi relations – which can be seen as both an opportunity and a limitation. **Originally endowed with an annual budget of €30 million, the Agency is entirely financed by the Saudi side** while remaining subject to French law and employing exclusively French employees.

Its role mainly consists of identifying and mobilising French expertise for projects launched by the RCU in a very broad range of areas identified in the agreement:

- Planning, mobility and urban infrastructure,
- Preservation of archaeological and architectural heritage,
- Cultural and artistic offerings and cultural engineering,
- Concepts and installations for sustainable tourism and hotel management,
- Craft and local economy,
- Capacity building and skill reinforcement, technology transfer and provision of know-how.

In December 2021, a new agreement was signed to create “Villa Hegra,” presented as a kind of Saudi counterpart to the Villa Medici in Rome. The villa is expected to open in 2026 and will include a cultural centre and an artists' residence.

2. Successful cooperation in multiple areas...

Since the creation of Afalula in 2018, **346 contracts** have been signed by **203 French private companies and public actors**, including **194 contracts by SMEs**, for a total value of approximately **€2.32 billion**. The most emblematic projects include, in particular:

- the tramway, designed by Alstom for a total of more than €500 million;
- the hotel project in the heart of the Shaaran Nature Reserve, designed by Jean Nouvel;
- the buildings at Villa Hegra, by the agency Lacaton & Vassal;

Prestigious brands such as Cartier, restaurateurs such as Alain Ducasse and the Ferrandi school have also entered into partnerships with al-Ula. Overall, **the French presence is very visible in al-Ula**, and will soon be part of the landscape with the architectural projects at Villa Hegra or the Jean Nouvel hotel.

3. ... but also some disappointments, in a context of fierce competition

However, the relationship between Afalula and its exclusive counterpart, the RCU, has not always been easy. Some friction arose in discussions between the former's CEO Amr al-Madani and Afalula, which he seemed to consider just one partner among many. Indeed, the RCU also works with many international consultants, who in some cases view French competition with suspicion. The RCU has thus proven to be a particularly demanding partner, leading to some disappointment and criticism, particularly regarding the Pompidou Centre's involvement in the design of the planned museum of contemporary art, which turned out to be less significant than expected, and the creation of a **French heritage endowment fund**, provided for in the 2018 agreement but still not established. The putative amount of this fund has also been significantly reduced, from **800 million in the initial estimates to 50 million** in Afalula's responses to a written questionnaire from the delegation.

Following an internal audit ordered by President Jean-Yves Le Drian upon his arrival in 2023, Afalula underwent a **reorganisation** aimed in particular at streamlining its organisation chart; its operating budget was also doubled, increasing from €30 to €60 million per year. Time will tell whether this reorganisation has produced the expected results in the years until the expiration of the intergovernmental agreement in 2028.

In light of these factors, the delegation formulated a proposal aiming to **increase the transparency of the agency's operation**.

Recommendation: increase the transparency of Afalula's operations, in particular by publishing an activity report presenting the main components of the agency's budget.

4. Archaeology, a tool of influence and promotional outreach

Archaeology has special importance for Afalula. Historically, this was the origin and core purpose of the French presence in Al-Ula, starting with the project first undertaken in 2002. France was the first foreign actor to come to the site. This seniority also explains **the importance of archaeology for Afalula**: it is the only area in which the agency has **full project control**.

Since Hegra, other new construction sites have been opened by French teams as well, in particular the site at **Dadan**, located very close to the city of al-Ula, which is from a pre-Nabataean and above all "indigenous" civilisation in the strict sense of the word from a historical perspective, since the Nabataean civilisation actually originated outside the current Saudi territory. Several other sites from different periods have been explored as well: Khaybar, in the South, where a rampart dating back to the 2nd millennium BC was discovered, as well as the oasis, which was located in the heart of the city and was occupied for several centuries. In the latter case, it was the French side that made the Saudi authorities aware of the heritage nature of the site.

Afalula's actions in the field of archaeology highlight the midwife-like role this discipline can play. Its purpose goes beyond science: **it highlights a country's historical depth, yet without sacrificing scientific rigour to political issues or co-optation by politics**. In this area, as in others, Afalula faces very strong international competition, which sometimes has much greater resources; the agency has thus had to fight to retain control of the excavations at the Hegra site.

It emerged from discussions held by the delegation with the teams present in the field that **administrative burdens have sometimes hampered the smooth operation of the projects**. The role of French research institutes abroad (Umifre) is crucial in this regard; under the dual supervision of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the CNRS, they have a real impact in terms of cultural diplomacy and promotional outreach.

The Umifre of the **French Centre for Research in the Arabian Peninsula** (Cefrepa) in particular merits greater support, by permanently establishing the temporary branch office created by Afalula, or the transfer of the headquarters from Kuwait to Saudi Arabia, which would be more fitting from a scientific point of view.

Recommendation: Reinforce the French Centre for Research in the Arabian Peninsula (Cefrepa) and shift its center of gravity to Saudi Arabia

Cefrepa could take on the financing of research projects in a way that is more closely tied to the field, since centralised management by the CNRS has sometimes proven unable to meet the teams' concrete needs.

Recommendation: streamline the financing of archaeological projects by decentralising the management of funds at the Cefrepa level

The management of archaeological work both in Saudi Arabia and abroad in general also suffers from an **institutional fragmentation** seen amongst the ministries of Europe and foreign affairs (*via* its consultative commission for French archaeological research abroad), culture (*via* its sub-directorate for European and international affairs) and higher education and research (*via* the CNRS). For this reason it may be appropriate to study the possibility of a **convergence**, or perhaps the **creation of a specific entity in charge of the management**

of French archaeology abroad. This would make it possible to centralise French expertise and mobilise it more easily, as well as helping to establish a more balanced relationship with the local partners, particularly when they are highly demanding – as is the case in Saudi Arabia.

Recommendation: strengthen the interministerial nature of the management of archaeology abroad in order to make it a true tool for promotional outreach

The delegation is convinced that **archaeology constitutes a real tool of cultural diplomacy**, a field in which France could achieve even greater excellence than it currently does. Having itself **mobilised archaeology for the construction of its national narrative** (such as when Napoleon III launched the excavation of what was presumed to be the site of Alésia), it is able **to contribute its experience to younger countries now embarking on the same path**, to help them avoid the pitfalls associated with such an undertaking. These challenges are nowhere more apparent than in Saudi Arabia, a country that has **turned its back on a rigid, homogenising, and ahistorical conservatism, to move forward instead with an eye both to the past and the future.**



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