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Currently, “Saudi Vision 2030” has attracted attention as a plan that exceeds the framework of economic reforms and aims to change the status of traditional Saudi society, such as by empowering women and expanding the entertainment industry. However, Vision 2030 has aspects of ideological control wherein the government exerts increasing pressure on dissidents. Researcher Takao analyzes the issues dealt in this movement and its context.

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Saudi Vision 2030 As a Form of Ideological Control

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1. The “Carrot and the Stick” in Vision 2030

The economic reform plan, “Saudi Vision 2030,” unveiled in April 2016, initially gained attention based on how the Saudi government’s planned to tackle traditional domestic challenges, such as the diversification of industry and “Saudization,” or prioritizing the employment of Saudi nationals. However, of the results of Vision 2030 thus far, changes to the traditional aspects of society have drawn more attention than those to economic structures, such as the organizing music concerts (March 2017), the re-opening of movie theaters (January 2018), and the lifting of prohibitions on women watching soccer games in stadiums (January 2018) and driving cars (June 2018). The population of Saudi Arabia, the majority of which are 30 years old or younger, have accepted these changes as the “carrot” of Vision 2030, and appear to be favorably disposed to the leadership behind promoting

Vision 2030, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS).

However, Vision 2030 includes “carrots” and “sticks.” One of these is the “National Character Enrichment Program,” an initiative aimed at ideological control. This program claims to “cultivate a tolerant and moderate religious ideology.” However, its specific meaning was initially unclear. Perhaps the first opportunity to obtain a specific explanation on this subject from MbS was at the October 2017 economic meeting, the “Future Investment Initiative Summit,” where he made the following statement (partially excerpted).

We will soon return to the state of things before 1979. That is, in other words, we will return to a moderate and tolerant Islam that is open to all religions, traditions, and peoples of the world ... (omitted) ... considering that 70% of our citizens are 30 years old or younger, to be frank, we do not want to waste the next 30 years dealing with a destructive ideology ... (omitted) ... we hope to live natural lives that reflect our noble religion, customs, and fine traditions ... (omitted) ... [for this purpose] in the near future, we intend to destroy the remaining extremists ... (omitted) ... before 1979, neither Saudi Arabia nor this whole region was in the sort of circumstance we face today. The Sahwa (“awakening” in Arabic) problems also began to grow after 1979. (October 25, 2017 “al-Sharq al-Awsat”)

These statements were picked up domestically and by some foreign media (*BBC, The New York Times, The National* [a daily paper in UAE], etc.). However, there was almost no discussion of the true meaning of these remarks of MbS. It was perhaps thought that there was nothing particularly new about the contents of the remarks.

For example, “a moderate and tolerant Islam” is a slogan used to resist the extremism of groups, such as al-Qaeda, and it has been recited since the period of the previous king, Abdullah. Moreover, the key word here is 1979, the year of the Iranian revolution. Because of this, many media outlets and experts seem to have understood the MbS’s remarks as referring to the elimination of the Iranian threat, a long-running problem for Saudi Arabia. Thus, it is unclear whether new efforts to exert ideological control will begin.

Certainly, considering the size of the effects that the Iranian Revolution had on the region, the importance of 1979 for Saudi Arabia cannot be doubted.

However, it can be seen in MbS's remarks that domestic affairs, rather than regional ones, hold a more important position in his mind. For example, in March 2018, in an interview with a US television program, MbS explained that expansion of the entertainment industry and women's rights, which is being pursued as a part of Vision 2030, was commonplace prior to 1979, when strict religious interpretations and practices were not imposed. Based on these remarks, we can infer that the MbS's reference to 1979 should not necessarily be interpreted solely within an Iranian context. Remarks in October 2017, when MbS referred to the domestic Saudi problem of Sahwa, shows this even more clearly. Based on these remarks, in the "before 1979" reference by MbS, it is important to search for a context that is different from that of the external threat posed by the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran . I will, therefore, seek to understand the efforts used to exert ideological control, which are part of Vision 2030, by analyzing the internal troubles Saudi Arabia faced in and after 1979.

2. After 1979, From a Domestic Perspective

With respect to the domestic situation in Saudi Arabia in 1979, the event that immediately comes to mind is the armed occupation of the al-Haram mosque in the holy city of Mecca, in November of that year. The ringleader of this occupation, Juhayman al-Otaybi (1936-1980) occupied the al-Haram mosque together with several hundred followers dressed up as pilgrims, taking approximately 1,000 people as hostages in the process. The occupation continued for approximately one month and the captured al-Otaybi was later executed, in January 1980.

During the armed occupation, al-Otaybi called for the dethronement of (then current) King Khalid. The core of this demand was the idea that Saud dynasty's government was against Islam, that is, it was a denial of the government itself. This was related to the fact that al-Otaybi was a member of the Otaibahs, one of the powerful tribes in the central Arabian Peninsula. In the early 20th century, when the king at the time, King Abdulaziz, called for territorial expansion for the great cause of spreading



The captured al-Otaybi

Islam, the Otaibahs cooperated with his request, forming the main force of his colonial militia. However, when King Abdulaziz interrupted this expansion to permit a more stable government, the majority of Otaibahs rallied to the banner of revolution, eventually being wiped out in 1929. Thus, to Juhayman, the Saud dynasty was an enemy family who misrepresented themselves as Muslims.

A more important domestic problem that began after 1979 was the Sahwa mentioned by MbS. During the Gulf War from 1990 – 1991, Saudi Arabia positioned itself as the leader of the Islamic/Arab alliance, cooperating with the multinational force composed primarily of European nations and the US, to serve its national



Two prominent members of Sahwa, al-Hawali (left) and al-Ouda (right)

interests. In doing so, it positioned itself as an opponent of Iraq, a Sunni Islam nation like itself. People who viewed this as a contradiction petitioned the government to adopt policies and a structure that were more reflective of Islamic values, demanding a political revolution.

Among these Sahwa, as they were called, aside from secular intelligentsia, such as doctors and lawyers, there were also famous Islamic scholars and imams, such as Safar al-Hawali (born 1950) and Salman al-Ouda (born 1956). As a result of the Sahwa movement, the government immediately expelled them from public office and put them under house arrest or prohibited them from overseas travel, thereby preventing them from accruing greater influence.

Thus, criticism of the government in and after 1979 was not enough to threaten the system itself. However, considering that Saudi Arabia positioned itself as the leader of the Arab/Islamic world and prided itself on its commitment to the great cause of Islam, its citizens' criticism of the legitimacy of its actions from a religious standpoint was a blot on the Saudi government's reputation. As such, there were very few opportunities to discuss the above problems within the country.

3. Domestic Problems Fill the Media

(1) The armed occupation of the al-Haram Mosque

These internal problems were highlighted during May 2019, which was the month of Ramadan, due to the television dramatization of the armed occupation of the al-Haram Mosque and the television appearances of individuals related to Sahwa.

In the middle of May, al-Arabiya Broadcasting, which the Saudi government invests in, announced the broadcast of the television program “Juhayman,” which depicted the occupation of the mosque by al-Otaybi. This was the first time that the incident had been adapted for the screen in Saudi Arabia.

When the actual armed group gained control of the mosque, various questions were debated within the government from a religious perspective, such as whether military actions should be permitted on holy ground, the pros and cons of allowing non-believers (foreign military groups), whom the government had asked



A scene of a gunfight between the militant group led by al-Otaybi and the Saudi security forces, recreated on a set of the al-Haram mosque (From “Juhayman”)

assistance from, to enter a holy site, and so on. However, in the television program, this kind of debate about the relationship between religion and government was omitted, and what was emphasized was the psychological changes within al-Otaybi himself, particularly his inability to conceal his bewilderment at the death of his comrades and his eventual capture, which reflected a certain immaturity in his character. In the end, al-Otaybi’s expression when he is captured by the security forces gives off a sense of meaninglessness. From this expression, we can infer that the purpose of the program was to communicate to the audience the degree of regret that those who act against the establishment feel and the unhappy ends that they receive.

At this point, the Saudi actor who played al-Otaybi, Yaqub al-Farhan (born 1984 in Jeddah), in an interview for al-Arabiya Broadcasting, asked “Why did this attack on a holy site take place? What sort of effects did it have? The time

has come for us to learn about our own society.” Regarding al-Otaybi, he stated that “He really loved himself, and I was able to take material from this egotism, which was caused by his youth.” In these comments, while the actor locates the tragedy on holy grounds as a major event that cannot be overlooked, he can also be seen distancing himself from al-Otaybi by criticizing al-Otaybi’s motives and actions as infantile. However, he does not acknowledge any legitimacy to al-Otaybi’s actions, nor that al-Otaybi was charismatic and of unwavering conviction.

(2) The Sahwa

Furthermore, positioning the Sahwa, who appeared at the time of the Gulf War, together with the domestic problems that took place in and after 1979, is something of a temporal discrepancy. Yet, as stated previously, the Sahwa are the only concrete examples mentioned by MbS in his remarks about “before 1979.” It would also be wrong to say that no connection exists between the Sahwa and the country “before 1979,” considering that dozens of Islamic scholars mostly related to the Sahwa were arrested as a group directly before MbS’s remarks in October 2017.

On the first day of Ramadan, on “al-Liwan,” a program on Rotana Media Group’s Gulf Channel, the Islamic scholar Aidh al-Qarni (born 1960) appeared live. His name is known domestically and internationally through his representative introductory book *Don’t Be Sad*, and he is also known as a survivor of a failed assassination attempt in the Philippines, in March 2016, when he was visiting the country as a lecturer. As a member of the Sahwa, he has continuously criticized government policy and has also been arrested and imprisoned.



Al-Qarni speaks eloquently during a live broadcast

However, in recent years, al-Qarni has adopted a wait-and-watch policy, with respect to the government, while preaching on religious television programs. He was not subject to the mass arrests described earlier. This new al-Qarni said the following regarding his relationship to the Sahwa, which

was widely broadcast within Saudi Arabia.

I apologize to the Saudi people for teaching that the Sahwa way is an unimpeachable Islamic truth different from a tolerant way of life. Today I support the tolerant Islam that Crown Prince Mohammad has called for. Religion must bring peace and compassion to humanity.

In this way, al-Qarni clearly announced his repentance for his past anti-establishment activities and his support for the current government. The domestic Saudi media reported his repentance as proper and merited, so this may be called a win-win for the government and al-Qarni himself. The government understands that criticism of anti-establishment activities is more effective in bringing the people around to the notion of a “moderate and tolerant” Islam, if it comes not from a disinterested party, but in the form of repentance from someone who was previously involved in such activities. On the contrary, al-Qarni can be certain about his safety within Saudi Arabia as he has expressed his gratitude for being spared from the mass arrests described previously and appeared as loyal to the current system.

4. Conclusion—— The Meaning of “Before 1979”

Thus, 1979 witnessed subsequent events that changed the region, beginning with the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran and followed by the conclusion of the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, the start of the Hussein administration in Iraq, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Through these events, the GCC was established (1981) and, to reinforce its image as the leader of the Arab/Islamic world alliance, Saudi Arabia changed the title of its king to incorporate “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” the same title used by the sultans of the Ottoman Empire and others (1986). In terms of the present status of security, 1979 was clearly an important turning point for Saudi Arabia and the entire region.

However, when MbS referred to “before 1979” he seems to have considered the domestic situation at the time, when the reforms being conducted today, such as the expanding entertainment industry and women’s rights, were ordinary parts of life. Thus, the barriers to the reforms that MbS is engaged in are domestic in nature, such as al-Otaybi and the Sahwa. These forces,

which cast a doubt on the government from an Islamic perspective, are the entities referred to by MbS that aim for a “strict religious interpretation and implementation” not seen “before 1979.” In his comments in October 2017, MbS clearly stated that they would “destroy” these entities, and it has been rumored in Saudi Arabia since the spring of 2019 that the Sahwa members who were arrested en masse will soon be executed. Thus, while the government is making progress on social reforms within the framework of Vision 2030, it is also engaged in efforts for ideological control, namely the removal of those who stand in the way of these changes.

However, these efforts carry risks for the government. For example, al-Qarni’s repentance was highly praised by the establishment in the religious world, state-run media, and so on, but there were also some people who perceived it as nothing but a forced confession. In dealing with



Ali al-Omari (left), Nasser al-Omar (middle), and Awad al-Qarni (left) who were arrested with al-Hawali and al-Ouda and are rumored to be executed soon

those who are related to the Sahwa movement, the Saudi government is paying close attention to ensure that the people do not sympathize with them or, even worse, treat them as heroes (or, if they have been executed, as martyrs).

(End)