King Abdullah, A Leader Towering Above Constraints in Saudi Arabia

Dr. Deepanjana Varshney, Senior Faculty, Department of Business Administration, King Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Abstract
King Abdullah, the present ruler of Saudi Arabia has been an icon of leadership, reform and path-breaking policies in recent times. The research paper gives a detailed exposition on the various approaches of leadership substantiated with the activities performed and policies implemented by the King. The second section of the paper analyzes the policy imperatives in the backdrop of the social, political and cultural framework. In this perspective, the King can be referred to as a unique situational leader who has risen against prevailing barriers and constraints. The Islamic model of leadership stresses on khuluq or behaving ethically towards human beings irrespective of religion, acts as a trustee, be humble and righteous and continuously strive for self-improvement. To sum up, the King embodies the different leadership styles along with threads of Islamic principles in the paper.

Keywords: charismatic; king Abdullah; leadership; transformational; Saudi Arabia

Introduction
Saudi Arabia stands out among Gulf monarchies due to the size of its polity, its strategic influence in and outside the Gulf, and its unique political systems in the Muslim world as the keeper of the two holiest sites in Islam: Mecca and Medina. There are also substantial pressures affecting the status quo relationship between the monarchy and various societal forces [1].

In the search for rapid economic progress, the country faces various socio-cultural challenges. There are contradictory forces that have been blowing over the country. There is the orthodox, rigid impact of Islamic principles, tribal family system and the authority-oriented Ottoman system. Against this backdrop rapid industrial development, technological progress and Western impact have entered in the last few years.

Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques ascended to the throne on 1 August 2005 upon the death of his half-brother, King Fahd. Abdullah held important political posts throughout most of his adult life. In 1961 as a young man, he became mayor of Mecca, his first public office. In 1962, he was appointed commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, a post he was still holding when he became king. He also served as deputy defense minister and was named crown prince when Fahd took the throne in 1982. After King Fahd suffered a serious stroke in 1995, Abdullah became the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia until claiming the throne a decade later.

King Abdullah has been perceived as the leader of his people and genuinely cherished inside and outside his country as a rare humanitarian, a dynamic reformer who has also been deftly balancing his religious obligations as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques". He is the most widely appreciated benevolent monarch recent times have witnessed. He carries with him deep insights about various perspectives of his country, religion, people on the one hand and foresights of connection and communication with different parts of the world on the other hand thus signaling a paradigm shift in the existing ideologies and practices of Saudi Arabia.

At the onset, the paper will discuss King Abdullah in the light of the leadership approaches and highlight the key reforms he has taken. The research questions arise:

a) Does King Abdullah possess visionary and charismatic qualities as a leader?
b) Can he be termed as a transformational leader?

The next section will evaluate on the select situational constraints against which the monarchy is striving to assert the policy imperatives and a framework of development.

Leadership dimension
There is a particular trend in research on charismatic leadership; much of it subsumes vision within charisma [2]; [3]; [4]; [5]; [6]; [7]; [8].

Charismatic leaders can be described as ‘meaning makers’ where the amount of charisma attributed to a leader increases as the leader’s vision becomes more idealized in the minds of followers [9]. Vision is central to charisma and “charisma involves the ability to provide a compelling vision” [10]. It has been argued that a charismatic leader articulates a vision for the organization, and this vision, in turn, provides the framework for organizational strategies [11].
There is a confusion arising from the neo-charismatic leadership theories that have combined charisma and vision into a single construct. This paper focuses on this fundamental concept where each is a different construct namely vision, charisma within the transformational leadership framework [12].

Discussing charismatic leadership leads us to the nature of charisma to be discussed here in context of the King which is socialized charismatic leadership. Personalized charismatic leaders use their charisma effectively to achieve their own ends. Socialized charismatic leaders, on the other hand, use the power of their charisma to achieve organizational (or societal) goals. As far as charisma is concerned, both types of leader have charisma and both can be effective in what they want to achieve. “Charismatics can foster antisocial or pro social behavior. One cannot exclude one or the other for valid scientific reasons; the dynamics may be similar” [13].

Charismatic Theories And The Applicability On The King
Charisma can be defined as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” [2]. He saw charismatic leaders as mystical, personally magnetic, and gifted [14]. He has been playing a pivotal role in the defining areas which is mentioned below:

Philanthropic Gestures
The philanthropic nature of the King has been commended time and again. During the Global Food crisis of 2008 the King made a generous contribution of $500 million which was considered as “timely” and significant [15].

There have been numerous instances when he has come forward to light up the lives of the downtrodden and the underprivileged. His generous donations include aid for young children from malnutrition (2007), Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan (2008), displaced Pakistanis through United Nations (2009), eradication of Polio (2009), Palestinian refugees (2010), refugees in Ethiopia (2010) and the flood relief to Pakistan (2010) are the humble gestures that shows a virtuous individual whose care and empathy calls for high regard and admiration.

Mission, Core Values and Social Identity of King Abdullah
There is an argument that charismatic leaders strongly engage followers’ self-concepts in the interest of the mission that has been articulated by the leader [16]. A person’s self-concept is composed of personal values and social identities. According to the authors, all the values and social identities are organized hierarchically, such that the more central a value is to a person’s self-concept, the more that value will influence the person’s choice of behaviors in a particular situation. Similarly, the more important a social identity is, the more likely the person will seek out opportunities to perform his or her role according to the requirements of that identity [17]. By effectively linking followers’ self-concepts to the mission, charismatic leaders are able to increase the intrinsic valence of followers’ efforts and goals.

The central or core value of carrying forward the values of Islam highlight his key guiding role which also complements with his social identity as the monarch and the Custodian of the two Holy mosques. He has been firm in advocating the teachings of Islam from time to time focusing on its noble concepts. At the same time he has opposed the slandering of the religion by some sections of the globe.

He had always maintained "that the most important features distinguishing Saudi society are its religious values, belief in the leadership and commitment to the unity of the nation. He stressed on the importance of national dialogue, which he said played a major role in the promotion of differing views" [18].

Another charismatic leadership theory is largely a follow-centered process and is based on the social contagion phenomenon. The author argues that few followers actually come into direct contact with the charismatic leader [19]. This is very much apt from the point of view of the King as he has the aura of exclusivity and privacy around him, only the close coterie of members have his access and communication.

Finally, transformational leadership has four components: (1) idealized influence or charisma, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) individualized consideration, and (4) intellectual stimulation [4]. The original transformational leadership theory had only three components and did not include ‘inspiration’. This dimension was added when Bass and his colleagues re-formulated the theory [20]; [21]. These four I’s of transformational leadership interact to influence followers to change or cope with change by means of setting a vision, aligning followers to the vision through effective communication and lastly by motivating and inspiring followers to move toward the vision [21].

Transforming Qualities As A Leader:
The analytical discussion of the following dimensions reflects his deep visionary acumen in an explicit manner and the consequent transforming measures:
Redefining And Repositioning Islam:
The 9/11 terrorist attacks created several ripple effects across the Saudi regime. The first was a significant strain in its alliance with United States, as 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi nationals. The second, and most significant in terms of a direct threat to the Al-Saud regime, was a new wave of domestic terrorism in 2003 led by various extremist factions, including Al Qaeda. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan also served as a focal point of extremist opposition. In a time span of a year and a half, there were over five separate terrorist incidents in Saudi Arabia, shaking the appearance of domestic stability [22].

As a ruler he could foresee the growing miscommunications and perceptual distortions with different religions and their manifestations through terror and gruesome worldwide violence. He had taken those initiatives that reflected Islam as a truly distinctive and enriching religion that speaks of tolerance, love and immense feeling of brotherhood.

King Abdullah offered an outstretched hand to other faiths, engaging in a historic meeting with the Pope in November 2007 at the Vatican and calling for a dialogue of faiths centered on his fundamental belief in peaceful coexistence. King Abdullah’s travel to the Vatican was the first such visit for a Saudi king. The World Conference on Dialogue, sponsored by King Abdullah and hosted by King Juan Carlos of Spain in the summer of 2008, brought together hundreds of leaders from the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and other faiths together in a historic gathering that broke barriers and promoted greater understanding [23].

The ability to transcend above the boundaries of religion-social divides have been demonstrated by the King in all his activities where he essentially spoke of everyone being the “brothers and sisters of humanity” and this is indeed an awe-inspiring statement from a monarch who had the capacity to discern the universal mankind globally and the ushering in of an era of peace, development and goodwill.

Most importantly, King Abdullah has backed his words with wide-ranging actions from peace summits to development aid to robust diplomacy toward solving conflicts [23].

In fact the “Messengers of Peace” Project embodies King Abdullah’s overarching vision through which he has sincerely made an endeavor to create a common platform of worldwide unity and speech. He advocated that in doing so human minds will be uplifted from the existing hatred and wrong-doings. King Abdullah understands that a paradigm change comes only through focused education of the people, hence he has entrusted Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah, Minister of Education with the responsibility of the project. The Peace Gift program complements with the Project in making the youth of the country forge a harmonious relationship with over thirty million scouts throughout the world.

Visionary leadership has been termed as a sort of drama by some researchers. The authors proposed that a visionary leader first of all has a vision, then goes on to communicate it to other members of the organization and then realizes it by empowering his or her followers to help him or her achieve the vision [24]. This is what precisely the King has been doing in the last few years even if it had ruffled some conservative feathers. He has articulated his overusing vision into remarkable feat of political, social and economic measures.

Stride towards Moderation
With time King Abdullah had exhibited a steadfast and continuous effort to transform the revolting aspects of extremism and move towards a platform of moderation. Among the most significant moves were elections at the municipal level in 2005 and expanded powers for the Consultative Council, including some access to budget information and the ability to propose new legislation [25].

In 2009, after a period during which reform had been largely viewed as stalled, King Abdullah announced a significant reshuffling of his cabinet. These changes were notable, as they placed more reform-minded and technocratic ministers in top positions including the ministries of education and the judiciary, along with the appointment of Nora bint Abdullah al-Fayez as Deputy Education Minister, the first women to serve in a senior ministerial position [26].

In the past 10 years the regime has pursued both a carrot and stick approach to reform—allowing selective privatization of the economic sector through such mechanisms as membership in the World Trade Organization, and pushing for gradual reform of the social sector through a series of a national dialogue forums broadcast on national television on topics such as women’s rights and religious tolerance, all while coming down hard on opposition [27].

Other significant moves included the expansion of the Senior Ulema Committee and 2010’s royal decree limiting the power to issue official fatwas to the Senior Ulema Committee, both of which were seen as trying to limit the ability of religious interests to oppose reforms [28].
Education
The education sector, in King Abdullah’s rule, has been witnessing gigantic achievements to keep pace with scientific and technical developments around the world. About a quarter of the country’s budget is allocated for education each year [29]. The Kingdom is currently investing heavily in the creation of a wide educational infrastructure, including Higher Education [30].

King Abdullah has embarked on a rapid transformation of the higher education system, expanding from 6 to 24 universities in less than ten years, in addition to allowing for the cautious introduction of private education and funding a massive $2.4 billion overhaul of K-12 education [1].

Empowering Women
Professor Fawziah al Bakr argues that segregation is stopping the sector from progressing both locally and internationally. Not only are women treated as inferiors, she said, but “you always have to have double buildings and double management” [31].

While there is a tendency for both Muslim and non-Muslim commentators to take a polarized view of religion-based gender segregation, it is undoubtedly one of the main barriers to status in the international academy. At the onset, it must be acknowledged that it is a complex issue [32].

In summary, there are growing numbers of varying Islamic feminist voices. Some are calling for the removal of the segregation as there is no historical basis for it. Others are calling for reciprocity of the obligation in segregation to be enforced: that if women are to cover their faces to avoid being ogled then men are to avoid ogling them. In the Islamic academy too, traditional rationales for segregation, such as ‘protection’ for women, are being challenged by the idea that segregation re-enforces the intellectual denigration of women [33].

In recent times, the royal decree issued by Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah to appoint 30 highly educated Saudi women to the Shoura Council (consultative assembly) and to ensure women make up at least 20 percent of the Council in the future is a key turning point in the history of the Kingdom [34].

Today, King Abdullah’s determination is geared toward empowering women not only socially and economically, but also politically, while boosting their role in mainstream Saudi national life. He is addressing traditional gender inequalities through the adoption of a national agenda favorable to a greater role for women in politics. By opening new opportunities for them in the Shoura Council, he is giving women the tools they need to lead in the decision-making process. Moreover, by supporting and promoting Saudi women’s rights, he is establishing a foundation of equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women in general and in particular at the higher executive level [34].

The desire of women to find a place for themselves in the workforce has been fed by the expansion in women’s education [35].

In 2010 the newly created Princess Noura Bint Abdul Rahman University in Riyadh topped the list of funding from the public purse, receiving 238.8 million US dollars. The expenditure exemplifies the duality of the King’s approach. On the one hand he is undaunted by spending such a large amount of money on a university only for women. On the other by doing so he is maintaining the dominant social paradigm of gender distinction: at least for the time being. The issue of gender distinction in Higher Education is one of the issues that are causing concern within the Kingdom’s academy [32].

Women have been moving steadily into new areas of private-sector employment that were unacceptable a generation ago, such as advertising, broadcasting, and journalism, while women work in at-home offices in professions that are closed to women, such as architecture. Women now work in shops that cater exclusively to women, and there are also entire shopping malls catering exclusively to women and employing only women [36].

In July 2012, Saudi Arabia announced that it would allow its women athletes to compete in the Olympics for the first time. Officials say the country's Olympic Committee will "oversee participation of women athletes who can qualify". The decision will end recent speculation as to whether the entire Saudi team could have been disqualified on grounds of gender discrimination. The public participation of women in sport is still fiercely opposed by many Saudi religious conservatives. There is almost no public tradition of women participating in sport in the country. Saudi officials said that, if successful in qualifying, female competitors would be dressed "to preserve their dignity [37].

The growing role of women in the various areas requires admiration and in line to this slowly gender segregation borders should be dimmed. The process has been started by the King and needs to be continued along with other threads of policies.

Employment, Saudization And The Expatriate Dimension
Unemployed and underemployed youth in Saudi Arabia are growing impatient waiting for structural reforms to take root [38].
An example of this dilemma is the king’s recent announcement of an increase in public sector salaries, unemployment benefits, as well as the intention to create one million jobs through accelerated Saudization of the workforce [39].

The Ninth Development Plan seeks to reduce unemployment rate among the national workforce from around 9.6% in 2009 to about 5.5% by the end of the Plan in 2014 [40].

The unpleasant question arises that will such earnest measures really catalyze the employment process in the long term? The drive for the growth of the private sector at an average annual rate of 6.6% over the period of the Plan, thus increasing its percentage share in GDP up to 61.5% by the end of the Plan (pg 25) poses the delicate question again related to the mismatch between general Saudi skills and the competitive demands of the private sector.

The 9th plan clearly articulates the Saudization dream: Increasing the share of national manpower in total labor force (Saudization rate) from 47.9% in 2009 to approximately 53.6% in 2014 by providing 1.1 million job opportunities to labor market entrants [40]. Despite the program which has been pursued with focus and zeal has been dampened to some extent not by the well-thought measures and streamlined policies but the acute skill and demand mismatch and other related problems already discussed.

Nevertheless, Saudization can only become genuinely successful when the local skill base is ready to take off in terms of Knowledge, skills and competencies for the radical growth and development introduced. Till the time the level is not reached the support of expatriates is an unwilling compulsion. Once the target is reached in the years to come then the expatriate role can be diluted and ultimately phased off. Till then, an extensive training and skill development action plan (long term) with the help of experts and the expatriates needs to be expedited fast. For this program, the role of the expatriate in skill development should be outlined in details with fair expat policies.

The expatriates who constitute a majority of the workforce are somehow an ignored segment of the country’s population who presence is reminded subtly from time to time as being a burden on the country’s unemployed workforce. However research portrays a different picture. It seems there is a persisting sense of caution in exhibiting open appreciation towards the expat contribution domain as that might send signals that might undermine the local’s sentiments and abilities.

There are seventeen factors which are believed to be the main factors in the low participation rates of Saudi workers in the private sector, which amongst others, include language skills, lower wages, and benefits, inflexibility of relocation in the Kingdom, long working hours etc. However, besides this, the high preference for the governmental sector might also have a deeper grounded reason [41]. Policy makers may have given little importance to the fact that “the expatriate worker, whether in the field of production or services, contributes to the GDP of the Kingdom”.

A conducive uniform, expatriate policy for the sincere and performing ones may minimize the sense of alienation persisting from the unconscious neglect. Moreover do they deserve some more dignity and recognition than mere contractual workers?

It has to be remembered that expatriates are here today because of certain deep-rooted gaps in the skills and other related reasons already analyzed in a vast body of research and transformation can come only if there is a mutual, collaborative professional association between the nationals and the outside workers. This will usher in faster development of the citizens and gradually expatriate reliance can be phased off without disturbing the applecart.

Concluding lines
Ironically, the prevailing constraints have been posing barriers for the policy implementations for King Abdullah; nevertheless he has demonstrated himself as the towering figure that has continuously ushered in changes for the better within the domain of socio-religious bottlenecks, educational and cultural backwardness.

At the beginning of the paper the charismatic and visionary qualities of the King as leader has been given a detailed exposition through the various reforms and transformational measures of Abdullah amidst the prevailing situational constraints. This finally reinforces the fact that the leadership qualities of the king which is in sync with the expectations of the followers.

Not for a single moment had he deviated from his fundamental role of the religious leader (the custodian of the two Holy mosques). His own value system has been well-defined but here I would like to mention that unlike his predecessors he redefined himself as a Social figure and a perfect role model of leadership in the world. The combination of vision and charisma is indeed a rare combination which his personality and actions blend with ease and excellence.

Dr. Shobani in the launch of his book titled “King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia: A Leader of Conse-
sequence” has aptly emphasized six areas where the King’s contribution has been remarkable, namely, institutionalizing dialogue, empowering reformists, curbing extremism, exercising prudent foreign policy, bringing transparency and growth to the financial system, and promoting education [42]. Indeed he has rounded off well when he highlighted the King’s performance in a short span of time by the statement that “no Saudi leader has transformed Saudi Arabia to the extent that King Abdullah has.”

King Abdullah is the epitome of such a charismatic global figure who has been the guiding force for the Muslim as well as non-Muslim population of the world. One can say he possesses the exceptional qualities that make us bow to him: immense love for humanity, tolerance, the advance acumen of comprehending the far-reaching role of women, the broad vision of forging ahead without violating the essential teachings of Islam. He is the father-figure all countries would really yearn to have to look up. The alluring attractiveness of his magnificent personality is lasting and his dignity, humility speaks a lot about the priceless individual that he is. King Abdullah has been named as the most influential Muslim among 500 Muslims for the past 4 years [43]. Charisma, in his case has been spread out in the different areas of his gestures, activities and chalking out the coherent and awe-inspiring vision. In December 2012, Forbes named him as the seventh most powerful figure in its list of the “World’s Most Powerful People” for 2012 [44]

References


