

Policy Report

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*Young Leaders' Perspectives on Potentials and
Prospects for Saudi-German Cooperation*

No. 5

Drivers of Grassroots Social and Political Transformation

Enhancing Saudi-German underground art spheres

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Introduction

Underground cultures in art, politics, and philosophy play a pivotal role in shaping societies and challenging the status quo. According to the French historian Jean-Francois Bizot, they can be considered counter-cultures to the social, cultural and political mainstream within societies. They emerge through negotiation processes at the core of societal debates that occur as reactions to controversial social conditions. Thus, they provide alternative approaches towards social norms.¹

Cultural and artistic spaces in particular act as affective atmospheres that enhance meaning-making and thus reflect social and political transition.² Germany and Saudi Arabia both host vibrant underground communities³ comprised mainly of youth from diverse backgrounds. These communities have witnessed and accompanied entire social and political changes in the past and can thus be considered drivers of grassroots societal progress and creative problem-solving through artistic collaborations. Both societies face considerable political and social challenges that strongly resemble one another, like the climate crises and questions of identity in a globalising world. Furthermore, underground artists in Saudi Arabia and Germany often encounter challenges such as being misunderstood by the wider population, having limited access to resources, experiencing neglect when their ideas reach the public sphere, or simply being underrepresented in their society.

Given these similarities between the Saudi and German underground scenes, this policy report analyses opportunities and obstacles for closer cooperation between representatives of the countries' respective underground scenes. Accordingly, the purpose of this contribution is to illustrate the opportunity, necessity, and suitability of the art scene as an important venue of solutions to current social, economic, and political problems, and what is needed to strengthen and support these relevant aspects in order to

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overcome the crises of tomorrow. Hence, this paper serves to examine the cultural sector as a driver of grassroots social and political transformation. It frames art and culture as venues for political and social participation and aims to identify gateways for cooperation that will enable the future generation to share best-practice solutions in order to navigate upcoming challenges.

Description and Analysis of the Problem

Saudi Arabia and Germany encounter wide-ranging political and social challenges that bear striking similarities. It is primarily the younger generations of both societies that will experience the full magnitude of upcoming multiple crises, such as the climate crisis, demographic stress factors, and questions of identity in a globalizing world. Thus, they are inevitably exposed to the consequences of policies instituted by generations prior to them. In Saudi Arabia, rapid transformation processes, such as evolving civic engagement, renegotiated state-society relations, and cultural and artistic opening, have taken place over the past two decades and thus within a single generation. Especially young adults between the ages of 19 and 39 have experienced and accompanied entire transformation processes and policy changes. With an average age of 29, 69.4% of the country's citizens are under the age of 35.⁴ The Saudi government recognizes this development and has not without reason identified this age group as one of the most important target populations of its Vision 2030. However, young, tech-savvy, and artistically skilled Saudi nationals still face challenges in voicing their ideas within society, considering that the "new Saudi Arabia" ushered in under Vision 2030 is not even a decade old. Public criticism towards Saudi artist Jana Mousa, who receives government support, over the use of nudity in her artwork⁵ and the trending hashtag #CancelEntertainmentAuthority (إلغاء هيئة الترفيه) during the 2017 National Day celebration highlight intra-societal divisions over certain artistic and cultural expressions. Similarly, backlash from conservative circles against the Saudi metal band Creative Waste, which since 1999 operated in the artistic underground before emerging into the mainstream in Khobar in 2019, represents one example of many.⁶

In Germany, meanwhile, the youth population is underrepresented in an increasingly aging society.⁷ Moreover, a trend of affective polarisation⁸ in Germany and Europe as a whole, characterised by group demarcations of 'us vs. them' and therefore hostility towards other political, social, or cultural groups, instills emotions of fear and blocks constructive solutions to address shared multiple crises, such as climate change, underrepresentation of younger generations, and questions of identity in a globalising world. Hence, the voices of the younger population might end up being overlooked and underrepresented.

Although conditions on the ground differ, youth from both Saudi Arabia and Germany need stronger representation of their interests. As Harders (2002), Lust-Okar and Zerhouni (2008), and other scholars convincingly argue, political participation occurs not only at the ballot box, but also in everyday venues of interaction between state and society.⁹ The art and cultural sector is one such everyday arena in which societal expression plays out in Saudi Arabia and Germany. This venue poses a safe and subtle entry door into processes of claim-making, which can positively influence problem-solving abilities, change individual experiences with 'others,' and thus provide a counter-weight to growing polarisation.

However, certain obstacles remain. For instance, both Saudi Vision 2030 and developments in German political rhetoric show strong nationalisation tendencies, raising the risk that appreciation for diversity will slowly wane.¹⁰ Through the art and cultural sector, questions of identity are re-negotiated even beyond national borders.¹¹ Artistic collaborations between Germany and Saudi Arabia can serve to overcome stereotypes and misconceptions that each holds about the other, such as prejudices that have

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arisen in Europe, not only across populist milieus, but also in the political mainstream.¹² Moreover, collaborative art projects can foster a youth participation that is fit for the current crises.

Art as a Catalyst: The transformative power of underground culture in shaping social and political change

Through the messages it conveys, art holds the power to alter narratives and spark crucial conversations and discussions about sensitive issues.¹³ The underground art scene in particular constitutes a decisive venue for societal expression that combats prejudices and advances solutions to the multiple crises. The links between politics and art are often indirect, but their transformative effects are enormous, albeit gradual. Historically, this becomes evident in the suffragist and civil rights movements in the US, and even in the art movements in East Berlin during the Cold War. In both examples, artists used their work to articulate political and social issues. With time, small changes in cultural and social values of individuals created ripple effects that finally drew in the majority.¹⁴ This shows the importance of grass-root and underground initiatives that enhance and can complement state-led change.¹⁵

The resulting transformations in the consciousness of individuals, however, need small, supportive 'subcultures' to become a collective movement. The sense of group affiliation that emerges in the process can facilitate togetherness and encourages community members to further develop and challenge social norms and political understandings. They translate the shifting individual behavioural changes into the wider social and cultural context. Restrictions of such discourse, however, can lead to replication of the status-quo, reinforcing the possible faults it entails.¹⁶

In both Germany and Saudi Arabia, underground projects and their artists serve as catalysts for the generation of ideas. In Germany, the underground art scene addresses issues that are too uncomfortable for the mainstream, such as the climate crisis.¹⁷ In Saudi Arabia, the government increasingly draws upon former members of the underground scene due to their expertise, for example by employing them as teachers and project managers in new state-driven projects.¹⁸ Though they have brought previously marginalised artists into the mainstream, however, state-supported initiatives in Germany and Saudi Arabia nonetheless raise concerns of either inadequate representation or rigid definitions of acceptable expression, which is why mutual support is needed. Thus, the underground art and cultural sectors offer the potential of exchange and joint learning among youth in Germany and Saudi Arabia. This falls on fertile ground since cultural programmes are a key pillar of the Saudi Vision 2030 and bilateral cultural projects between the two countries already exist.

Evidence of Success, Opportunities, and Challenges in Germany's and Saudi Arabia's Underground Scenes

Germany boasts a mature underground scene that has made significant global contributions. It is a successful case study of social and political transformation through art.¹⁹ However, it still grapples with accessibility and resource constraints. Conversely, Saudi Arabia possesses abundant resources but is in the early stages of cultivating new artistic cultures. Here, the art scene was organised within the underground until 2016. Today, some of the former underground artists are involved in state initiatives, which led to an enormous change in their way of working²⁰ and even resulted in an identity transformation for some. Furthermore, not all artists are willing to work in state-funded projects at the expense of more autonomous working modes.

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Since the 1970s, the German art scene, renowned as an international cultural beacon, gained prominence through art around the West side of the Berlin Wall during the Cold War. The grassroots art on the wall, marked by subversive symbolism, critiqued political and social implications of the division of the country and its effects, especially on the young population. Starting in the mid-1970s, the wall's expansion turned it into a larger canvas for street art, evolving into an underground urban scene by the late 1980s in West Berlin and on the east side after unification in 1990.²¹ Initially being the 'wall of shame', it transformed into a public display of sentiments and alternative ideas, symbolising artistic freedom.²² This shift not only influenced political expression but also shaped strategies and possibilities for underground communities globally. Especially the underground subcultures in East Germany, like Gabriele Stötzer's female artists' group, pioneered concepts of self-empowerment, collectivity, and social criticism through various mediums.²³ The iconic Kunsthaus Tacheles, a Yiddish word meaning 'to speak openly', emerged as a significant underground arts centre.²⁴

However, the German art scene also faces challenges due to insufficient financial resources, with a 19-percent value-added tax on art works and high gallery rental costs straining the community. Established art by cultural elites often outshines young, experimental programmes that struggle to generate substantial income. Despite numerous fairs and galleries supporting young artists, many lack the financial stability for long-term survival.²⁵ Unlike countries such as France, argues gallerist Zak Persons, Germany's up-and-coming art scene lacks support²⁶ from museums, administrations, and government bodies. Although Berlin's local government funds individual artists with small Berliner Grants and larger Hauptstadtkulturfonds, this funding falls short of meeting overall needs.

Furthermore, the established cultural institutions are still perceived today as institutions of the majority population. Young artists therefore withdraw from the public sphere, which means that this scene tends to remain closed and access to events is only granted by invitation.²⁷ Grassroots artist collectives are not as publicised as their established counterparts in tourist books and brochures and therefore rely on face-to-face recommendations and advertisement.²⁸ Yet, these are precisely the subculture movements that are confronting the difficulties of tomorrow: The Art Laboratory Berlin specialises in showcasing contemporary art at the intersection of science and technology, collaborating with scientists to address climate change. Similarly, Art Objective's OCEAN Contemporary focuses on professional engagement with the ocean and its pollution issues. This non-profit initiative aspires to evoke contemplation and instill a sense of responsibility for oceans through the medium of contemporary art. However, they constitute a minority. Beyond financial assistance, they require the support of like-minded peer groups of their age to cultivate effective subcultures.

While Saudi Arabia has a long tradition of art, poetry and culture, restrictive policies in the past prevented creative expression from emerging from the underground.²⁹ Since 2016, however, the creative sector is becoming increasingly visible in the mainstream, giving young artists and especially women the possibility to express themselves through art. Expenditures of \$64 billion over the next ten years³⁰ and emerging initiatives like the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, the Jeddah Art Festival, Misk Art Week, or Riyadh Art Days aim at pushing these developments. In this respect, the Saudi government has repeatedly relied on the underground scene to draw on its expertise. For example, former underground artists now serve as instructors to teach techniques or lead projects.³¹ Moreover, the proliferation of art galleries gives previously underground artists the opportunity to provide commentary on current developments in the Kingdom.³² As the Viennese anthropologist Melanie Sindelar notes, "artists carve out space for themselves to insert their own interpretations and perspective on current narratives idealised by the state", thus negotiating top-down portrayals of these events and developments.³³ Accordingly, the projects of young artists are dedicated to challenges the country faces and provide commentary on current developments and political measures. Through a

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series of photographs, Saudi artist Aziz Jamal illustrates the effects of climate change, thus encouraging policies to respond to environmental issues. Alongside Jamal, artists like Abdulnasser Gharem are tackling political challenges through their work, thus negotiating boundaries amid a growing art scene. In one of his latest works, titled "Climate Refugee", Gharem uses rubber stamps to depict a world map highlighting regions most affected by climate-induced displacement, emphasising that climate change is the defining crisis of our time.³⁴ While many individuals around the world may have become "desensitised to negative news about climate change", as Todman (2023) argues, art uniquely communicates the urgency of the situation and sheds light on such tremendous and uncomfortable issues. Thus, through employing storytelling techniques, artists repackage information in a more engaging manner. Since the scientific talk about climate change is often technical and hard to grasp, artists' creativity is crucial in helping to think of practical ways to deal with environmental problems.³⁵

In observing the transforming Saudi art scene, one aspect has so far been overlooked: Formerly marginalised underground artists, whose expressive art was once frowned upon during a period when only landscape painting was permitted, are now actively supported and promoted by the Saudi government. This puts the artists' own sense of identity and meaning to the test, having once understood themselves as marginal figures, not prominent actors within the state-supported mainstream. Nevertheless, young artists remain in the minority in an art scene still considerably influenced by the older, conservative population (Saudi Artist, in conversation with the author, September 2024). Hence, the contemporary Saudi art scene is very nascent. It has many resources, but lacks the institutional experience to navigate complex and sensitive topics and concepts. Saudi artists could thus benefit from repositories of expertise contained in Germany's art scene, providing an opportunity for enhanced cultural cooperation between the two countries. Meanwhile, those Saudi artists who worked in the complex and restrictive environment of the Sahwa period can offer the German art scene valuable insights into effectively leveraging their art to communicate political messages while navigating red lines. Their demonstrated ability to express ideas creatively, even under difficult conditions, could inspire German artists and institutions to find new ways to contribute to political discourses in today's polarised climate.

Assessing Current Bilateral Policies and Agreements

Hence, cultural and artistic ties between Germany and Saudi Arabia are needed in order to continue to raise issues that are not (yet) being adequately addressed by the governments on either side. With underground artists being at the forefront of current social and political changes, issues can be addressed that then capture the attention of policy-makers and eventually lead to changes. In 2006, the governments of Saudi Arabia and Germany signed a cultural cooperation agreement, which enabled the two countries to collaborate on many projects. In 2023, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Culture, Prince Bader bin Abdullah bin Farhan, met with Germany's Commissioner for Culture and Media, Claudia Roth, to reinforce cultural relations and explore areas of cooperation.³⁶ Several cooperations exist in differing forms, but they remain scarce and lack visibility and public awareness:

Existing cooperations can be seen as examples of excellence, like Abdulnasser Gharem and Akim Monet's Amen Art Foundation in Berlin. Furthermore, in 2021, a little café in Riyadh caught the attention of staff members of the German embassy. Emerging Saudi artists had used the facilities to brainstorm and display their art. Impressed by this action, the German embassy initiated the launch of an art project to support these 12 artists. It was the first of its kind and afterwards, the exhibition was displayed at WRD Art Gallery in Riyadh.

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Shared exhibitions like NEXT WAVE by Misk Art Institute and Berlin Art Institute in September 2022 displayed the work of nine emerging Saudi artists on the occasion of the 11th edition of Berlin Art Week. The purpose of this exhibition was to discuss and challenge the limits and definitions of human experiences. In 2019, four exhibitions of the Albert Speer + Partner (AS+P) GmbH opened at the King Fahad National Library in Riyadh, heralding the German Cultural Days and discussing urban planning, architecture and art. Such joint exhibitions are relevant, not only because they visualise fields of concern and visions for the future, but because they create spaces of exchange between artists, the general public, and decision-makers.

The Goethe-Institut offers and funds “A Self-Leadership and Creativity for the Arts” training programme for emerging female artists, inspiring them to present themselves and their work with confidence and succeed in their artistic pursuits. This includes mastering communication of their artistic expressions up to leveraging resources.

Scholarships and residency programmes include the Berlin Art Institute (BAI)'s residency programme, which allows students at international art universities and non-German artists affiliated with embassies, academies, and other art-promoting institutions to study and develop art in Berlin. In 2021, the MISK ART Institute became a partner of BAI, with Saudi artists Fatima Abdulhadi and Khalida Bataweel becoming art residents. The Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK) in Berlin also awards fellowships.

Conclusion

Both in Saudi Arabia and Germany, there is no shortage of ideas and voices demanding political decision-makers to provide a better future for the next generations. In their artwork and artistic acts, they depict the crises of tomorrow and today in an easily accessible way for the broader public. At the same time, they visualize the tragedy of failing to confront crises such as climate change and political polarisation. Despite coming from different cultural backgrounds and socio-economic conditions, both societies are confronted with similar challenges. Nevertheless, underground movements can only thrive if they give rise to cooperative subcultures. Both youth populations are underrepresented in their own society and therefore need the support of like-minded peers of their age group to shape subcultures and ultimately trigger necessary transformation processes. The rich knowledge of both art communities, encompassing Germany's well-established network structures and wide gallery landscape, along with Saudi Arabia's funding opportunities, niche knowledge in art practices, and unique ability to communicate and mediate the relevance of art to political leaders, can offer valuable opportunities and learning spaces for young Saudi and German artists. Moreover, establishing communal meeting spaces could mitigate disparities and counteract polarisation. Exchange platforms for resources, talent, and expertise also present a valuable opportunity for enhanced cultural exchange.

Policy Recommendations

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia and Germany could join forces to address the outlined challenges and promote cultural dialogue in the domain of art and underground culture, on both an institutional and individual level. Several institutions and associations are already working to strengthen the art and cultural sector. This policy report does not wish to bypass them, but rather intends to complement them. Therefore, it endorses the existing recommendations of UNESCO³⁷ and the European Commission³⁸ on societal change through arts and socially engaged art projects, in line with the current EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-26.

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The following additional recommendations are tailored specifically to the Saudi and German scenes and aim in particular to strengthen the transformative character of underground subcultures:

1. Increasing the number of fellowships and scholarships, using the previously mentioned BAI and NGBK model of shared, bilateral funding.
2. Utilising part of the financing Saudi Arabia offers and linking it with the German funding structure and expertise, e.g. within the framework of joint programmes, Teach-Ins, and providing facilities and operational resources.
3. Strengthening community involvement and community building by using mature network structures, e.g. the Berlin art scene, in order to create subcultures. This includes organising discussion groups, theme days, and programmes around exhibitions with underground leaders, including, for instance, former East-Berlin artist collectives. Possible financing could be generated through participation fees, donations and grants.
4. Increasing coaching possibilities using the Goethe-Institut model, which combines teaching with residency offerings, to train emerging artists in art practices and new approaches in order to break with the elitist art scene and encourage minorities and disadvantaged underground artists. In this way, diversity can be practiced, which counteracts social and political polarisation as well as possible audience fragmentation. The latter will lead to stronger, more cohesive communities.
5. Proliferating concept-focused calls for proposals and tenders. While all forms of artistic expression hold significance, there is a particular need to intensify the promotion of those addressing impending crises, as they serve as crucial gateways for essential social and political transformations. This includes topics on identity, climate change and its repercussions, and political polarisation.
6. Establishing debate spaces and places for training on communication challenges between artists and public bodies who are advising decision makers.
7. Advertising projects to Saudi and German associations in a targeted manner.

Endnotes

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