

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The multifaceted determinants of Saudi foreign policy in the gulf: Interplay of domestic, ideational, and systemic factors

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf region (2011-2023) is driven by a complex interplay of interests, motivations, and regional dynamics. Existing scholarships often overlook the intricate interactions between these elements and lack a comprehensive theoretical framework synthesizing religious influence, regional standing, and dynamic leadership. **Objective:** This study aimed to address this gap by providing a more integrated and nuanced understanding of Saudi foreign policy. It sought to analyze the multi-faceted interactions among strategic security imperatives, economic motivations, geopolitical factors, religious influences, aspirations for regional leadership, and domestic political contexts. **Methodologies:** A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. This involved semi-structured interviews with prominent policymakers and experts, subjected to thematic analysis, alongside the analysis of secondary economic, political, and security data within the Gulf. Neoclassical realism and constructivism served as theoretical frameworks, enabling a comprehensive exploration of both material and ideational factors influencing Saudi foreign policy. **Results:** The study revealed that Saudi foreign policy was fueled by aspirations for regional dominance, religious influence, and an urgent need for economic diversification. It shed light on how these internal motivations interacted with external regional dynamics, especially during the tumultuous era of 2011-2023, marked by the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, and increased tensions with Iran. Detailed case studies of interventions in Yemen, the Qatar crisis, and the establishment of relations with Israel elucidated the rationale behind key policy decisions. Challenges identified included domestic political constraints, economic diversification efforts, and ongoing regional instability. **Conclusions:** Saudi foreign policy is a complex and dynamic process shaped by the intricate interplay of internal drivers and external pressures. The study's integrated analysis transcended simplistic narratives, offering a thorough and nuanced understanding of these determinants. **Recommendations:** To successfully navigate the Gulf region's complex geopolitical landscape and secure its future, Saudi Arabia requires a sophisticated and proactive strategy. This approach should blend assertiveness with diplomacy, prioritize economic diversification, foster strategic partnerships, and ensure a cohesive integration of both domestic and foreign policy.

**Keywords:** gulf region; regional dynamics; interests; motivations; geopolitical

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## Highlights:

- i. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy (2011-2023) reflects complex regional dynamics and interests.
- ii. Its key interests include security, stability, economic prosperity, and religious legitimacy.
- iii. Motivations include religious identity and nationalistic aspirations.
- iv. Relations within the GCC, the Iran-Saudi rivalry, and external powers shape Saudi policy decisions.
- v. The Yemen intervention, Qatar crisis, and Israel normalization show policy choices.
- vi. The challenges include political constraints and regional instability.
- vii. Future directions involve shifting alliances and reform initiatives that affect the policy trajectory.

## Summary:

This study explores the key factors influencing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf region from 2011 to 2023. It highlights the complex interplay of interests, motivations, and regional dynamics that shape the kingdom's decisions. Saudi Arabia's primary interests are regional security, regime stability, economic growth, and religious legitimacy. The motivations behind its foreign policy encompass religious identity, nationalistic aspirations, and a desire for regional dominance. This study also examines the regional dynamics affecting Saudi policy, such as relations within the GCC, rivalry with Iran, the impact of the Arab Spring, and the role of external powers. Case studies of Saudi interventions in Yemen, the Qatar crisis, and the normalization of relations with Israel provide insights into the kingdom's decision-making process. This study also addresses the challenges facing Saudi foreign policy, including internal political constraints, the need for economic diversification, and ongoing regional instability. It concludes by discussing potential shifts in alliances, emerging global trends, and reform initiatives that could shape the future trajectory of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy.

## 1. Introduction

The Arabian Gulf region, characterized by intricate geopolitical dynamics, has undergone substantial changes in the 21st century <sup>[1]</sup>. Fluctuations in authoritarian regimes, the rise of non-state actors, and evolving alliances among regional and global powers have fostered a dynamic and frequently unstable environment <sup>[2]</sup>. Central to this evolving landscape is Saudi Arabia a critical actor whose foreign policy plays a pivotal role in shaping regional contexts <sup>[3]</sup>. Analyzing the factors influencing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy within the Gulf is essential for understanding regional stability, economic progress, and international relations throughout the broader Middle East <sup>[4]</sup>. This study explores the complex interactions of interests, motivations, and regional dynamics that inform Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions within the GCC and beyond, with a specific emphasis on the period from 2011 to 2023 <sup>[5]</sup>. This timeframe is notably significant because of the repercussions of the Arab Spring uprisings, the emergence of ISIS, and the persistent tensions with Iran, all of which have had a profound effect on the region's political and economic direction <sup>[6]</sup>.

The Gulf region, encompassing six nations Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman display a shared heritage characterized by common historical, linguistic, religious, and cultural elements <sup>[7]</sup>. Nevertheless, despite this collective identity, interactions among these nations have been characterized by both cooperation and competition <sup>[8]</sup>. Saudi Arabia, owing to its considerable size, religious significance, population, and economic resources, has historically assumed the role of de facto leadership within the Gulf region <sup>[1]</sup>. However, this leadership has not been free from challenges, as evidenced by the diplomatic crisis with Qatar in 2017 and ongoing tensions with Iran.

This study is of paramount significance for several reasons. First, it seeks to fill a substantial gap in the existing academic discourse on Saudi foreign policy. Although numerous scholarly works have analyzed Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in broad strokes, there is a notable deficiency in studies concentrating specifically on its interactions within the Gulf region, especially during the turbulent period from 2011 to 2023<sup>[9]</sup>. Second, an in-depth understanding of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is essential for grasping the overarching geopolitical dynamics of the Gulf<sup>[10]</sup>. Saudi Arabia's actions play a crucial role in shaping regional stability, fostering economic collaboration, and maintaining power equilibrium within the area<sup>[11]</sup>. Thirdly, the conclusions drawn from this study carry significant practical consequences for policymakers, analysts, and other stakeholders engaged in regional issues<sup>[12]</sup>. By elucidating the fundamental factors that drive Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, stakeholders can enhance their ability to predict the nation's actions and formulate more effective strategies to promote regional cooperation and alleviate conflict<sup>[13]</sup>.

Current scholarship on Saudi foreign policy has utilized a variety of theoretical frameworks, including neorealism, classical realism, dependency theory, offensive realism, soft power, hedging, and constructivism<sup>[14]</sup>. These investigations have illuminated different facets of Saudi foreign policy, including its relationship with the United States, its involvement in regional organizations such as the GCC and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, and its reactions to regional challenges<sup>[15]</sup>. Nevertheless, a thorough analysis synthesizing the interplay of religious influence, regional standing, and leadership dynamics within a comprehensive theoretical framework is still absent<sup>[16]</sup>. Moreover, the current literature frequently concentrates on either systemic pressures or domestic variables in isolation, thereby overlooking the intricate interactions between these elements<sup>[17]</sup>. This study seeks to address this gap in knowledge by employing a multi-method approach that fuses qualitative and quantitative data to furnish a more integrated understanding of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf region<sup>[18]</sup>. The qualitative aspect encompasses detailed interviews with policymakers and experts, while the quantitative aspect involves the analysis of pertinent economic and political data<sup>[19]</sup>.

This study is motivated by the imperative for a more refined and comprehensive understanding of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy within the Gulf region, especially during the timeframe spanning from 2011 to 2023<sup>[20]</sup>. While existing scholarship provides valuable perspectives, it often falls short of capturing the complex interplay of factors influencing Saudi Arabia's policy decisions<sup>[11]</sup>. This study seeks to address this gap by delivering a more integrated analysis that considers the multi-faceted interactions among strategic security imperatives, economic motivations, geopolitical factors, religious influences, aspirations for regional leadership, and domestic political contexts<sup>[21]</sup>. A more profound comprehension of these interconnected elements is essential for accurately assessing Saudi Arabia's actions and their repercussions for both regional stability and global security. The tumultuous era from 2011 to 2023, characterized by the Arab Spring, the ascendancy of ISIS, and heightened tensions with Iran, presents a particularly poignant case study for investigating these dynamics<sup>[13]</sup>. Through the amalgamation of qualitative and quantitative data, this study aspires to transcend simplistic narratives and provide a more thorough and nuanced analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf<sup>[13]</sup>. This study endeavors to fulfill this need by conducting a thorough examination of several critical facets. First, it investigates the principal factors and motivations that inform Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions regarding the Gulf region during the specified timeframe of 2011 to 2023<sup>[13]</sup>. Second, it delves into the considerable influence of Saudi Arabia's religious authority on its foreign policy orientation within the Gulf<sup>[13]</sup>. Third, this study evaluates the significance of Saudi Arabia's regional prominence in shaping its foreign policy choices, while scrutinizing the role of the Saudi government and leadership in navigating the relationship between religious authority and regional stature in the formulation of its foreign policy decisions<sup>[13]</sup>. Ultimately, this study aspires to comprehend how Saudi Arabia reconciles

its religious identity with its aspirations for regional leadership in shaping its foreign policy toward the Gulf region Abadi <sup>[13]</sup>. Furthermore, it assesses the potential ramifications of these decisions on both regional stability and global security. These research inquiries are structured to offer a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the intricate factors influencing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf <sup>[10]</sup>. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies <sup>[22]</sup>. The qualitative segment will consist of semi-structured interviews with prominent policymakers, diplomats, and experts who possess extensive knowledge of Saudi foreign policy <sup>[23]</sup>. These interviews aim to examine the underlying motivations, decision-making processes, and challenges linked to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy initiatives in the Gulf region. The qualitative data accrued will be subjected to thematic analysis to discern recurring patterns and themes. The quantitative aspect entails examining secondary data pertaining to economic indicators, political developments, and security challenges within the Gulf. These data will be employed to evaluate the hypotheses and facilitate a more thorough comprehension of the factors influencing Saudi foreign policy. The amalgamation of qualitative and quantitative data yields a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research issue than could be achieved through either method independently. This study applies neoclassical realism and constructivism as theoretical frameworks to analyze the interrelationship between the material and ideational factors that shape Saudi foreign policy <sup>[24]</sup>. Neoclassical realism contributes to an understanding of the impact of systemic factors, such as the international balance of power, whereas constructivism elucidates the significance of ideas, norms, and identities in the formulation of state behavior <sup>[21]</sup>.

## 2. Method and study framework

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a more in-depth analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward the Gulf. This method holds the promise of deconstructing simplistic explanations and one-dimensional interpretations about what drives Saudi Arabia in foreign policy, within a broader context of analysis.

- **Multi-method approach:** Although some analytic sections do conform to a prescriptive essay format, there is a multi-method research design using both qualitative and quantitative data. Such holistic analysis is essential to overcome the perceived gap in the literature, which often fails to capture the interdependent dynamics of influentials on Saudi decision making.
- **Qualitative aspect:** The qualitative part of this research entails semi-structured in-depth interviews with high-level policymakers, diplomats and thoroughly informed experts on Saudi foreign policy. These interviews aim to explore the rationale, decision making and issue implications of Saudi foreign policies in the Gulf. Such interviews will be qualitatively analyzed to identify themes and patterns across the qualitative data including Saudi interest, motives, and regional dynamics.
- **Quantitative aspect:** The second, quantitative half relates to secondary data covering economic indicators, political developments and security challenges in the Gulf. That information is then employed to test hypotheses and further the discussion of what informs Saudi foreign policy. Qualitative and quantitative data are combined to develop a richer, more intricate understanding of the phenomenon at hand than can be achieved by either binary approach alone.
- **Theoretical frameworks:** This study applies neoclassical realism and constructivism as theoretical frameworks to analyze the interrelationship between the material and ideational factors that shape Saudi foreign policy.

- **Neoclassical realism:** Neoclassical realism helps us in understanding both the floating and structural effect of systemic-level variables such as the international balance of power on Saudi foreign policy. Through this analytical prism, the global power structure (including regional security requirements and geopolitical considerations) determines the strategic predilections of the Kingdom.
- **Constructivism:** Constructivism explains the significance of ideas, norms, and identities in the formulation of state behavior. Specifically, it clarifies the crucial influence of ideas, norms, and identities such as Saudi Arabia's religious authority and its ambitions for regional leadership on the behavior of the state and the development of its foreign policy. This perspective is vital for understanding the non-material drivers of Saudi foreign policy, including its religious legitimacy and national identity.
- **Integration of theoretical frameworks:** This dual theoretical approach has permitted a thorough investigation of the material and ideational determinants of Saudi foreign policy. Instead, the study combines neoclassical realism and constructivism to go beyond what it perceives as the two-pronged approach of extant literature that has largely examined systemic or domestic factors in isolation rather than capturing their interplay with one another. This holistic approach allows a deeper and more complex understanding, blending the interaction of religious power, regional status and leadership dynamics in rich theoretical fabric.
- **Scope and Focus Justification:** This estimate is derived from the Gulf, with a particular attention to the 2011–2023 turbulent period. Notably, this is period which saw the Arab Spring, the emergence of ISIS and increased confrontation with Iran - a key reason that makes Saudi foreign policy such an exemplary case study for understanding indeed intricate its foreign aid policymaking can be. This time is of special import for the examination of these dynamics and underscores the need for a finely-tuned understanding of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf. The analysis incorporates a systematic review and synthesis of the literature on Saudi foreign policy, regional dynamics and international relations produced by numerous scholars who have employed various theoretical tools to shed line light on aspects of Saudi foreign policy.

### 3. Historical context of Saudi foreign policy

The Saudi state emerged from the cursed arena of inter-Arab quarrels and strife and was elevated to the global scene by sheer luck<sup>[25]</sup>. Armed with oil revenues, the Al-Saud, until recently a parochial family of a parochial country, began to indulge in higher diplomacy<sup>[26]</sup>. They undertook grandiose projects while flaunting their new-found fortune and foresight. The American response was, in principle, straightforward: It committed itself to Saudi Arabia's security in return for controlling its oil supply<sup>[27]</sup>. Saudi foreign policy<sup>[13]</sup> has reached the peak of modernity, transnationalism, and esotericism. Suddenly, an inconspicuous Kingdom lay within the central globes of developments Abadi, 2019). The renaissance of the 1980s was accompanied by oil booms and political winds blowing toward an Islamic government<sup>[28]</sup>. An inadvertent consequence was the half-hearted support for irregular political Islamism. However, this heyday was brief and ill-conceived. Over the past four decades, Saudi policy has been influenced by paradigm shifts. After the climate of transnationalism turned crabwise, the involvement of Islamic actors<sup>[29]</sup> has since decreased<sup>[30]</sup>. The political scene is, in turn, more monolithic, with government support directed toward institutionalized, non-Islamic, nostalgic, and economic activities<sup>[1]</sup>. Other than in the 1980s, Saudi actors are now less dominant and influential than their adversary states. Nearby regimes have followed a more conciliatory approach

toward Islamism<sup>[31]</sup>. Shifting regional politics can create new, invisible sinks. Saudi Arabia's non-political interests have persisted and become more prominent<sup>[32]</sup>.

## **4. Key interests of Saudi Arabia**

The first and most prominent determinant of foreign policy appearing in the literature is economic interests<sup>[23]</sup>. As a complex and multidimensional concept, interests can be defined in various ways, but in general terms, they are states' goals that guide their policy choices<sup>[33]</sup>. The most prominent interests are differentiated as core and peripheral based on their hierarchies and significance<sup>[34]</sup>. Core interests encompass the state's notion of survival and security, and exogenous threats targeting these interests are perceived as existential and intolerable<sup>[35]</sup>. Geopolitical and geo-economic concerns are core foreign policy interests. At times, the two can be harmonious, but at other times, they can create existential dilemmas for states<sup>[36]</sup>. For instance, as the US began to abandon the Middle East and focus more on the Asia-Pacific, Saudi Arabia began to forge a relationship with China<sup>[37]</sup>. The US viewed this as an existential dilemma of losing a partner and market to China, while Saudi Arabia viewed it as an opportunity to act multilaterally and pursue nuclear capabilities<sup>[15]</sup>. These core interests lead to motivations that are defined as states' aspirations in pursuit of policy actions regarding a foreign country or region<sup>[3]</sup>. Foreign policy motivations have been classified as core, such as protecting and maximizing interests, and peripheral, such as symbolic or normative motivations, such as prestige, honor, or the desire to be seen as a great power<sup>[38]</sup>. Regional dynamics, especially alliances and rivalries, are the chief motivators of foreign policy<sup>[39]</sup>. On the one hand, they act by reassuring countries in trouble or unease, creating external deterrence against a common threat; on the other hand, they prompt states to safeguard their existential interests from external aggression by acting proactively<sup>[40]</sup>. In the latter case, regional dynamics can motivate the pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy toward other countries in the region<sup>[39]</sup>.

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### **4.2. Security interests**

Saudi Arabia's security interests in the Gulf region are established based on its concern for internal and external stability <sup>[20]</sup>. Internally, Saudi Arabia's leadership remains preoccupied with ensuring stability in the context of domestic conditions: ongoing economic and social changes aimed at deepening the rentier economic structure, a rising populace, weak political representation, and heightened awareness of the implications of Arab Spring developments throughout the region, <sup>[41]</sup>. Externally, the country continues to be challenged by Iran's quest to promote its interests and influence throughout the region, including attempts to impose a dominant Shia narrative in Saudi Arabia <sup>[3]</sup>. Moreover, the country's perception of this multiplicity of external threats is compounded by its uneasy alliance with the United States, which Saudi Arabia considers unreliable following the US withdrawal from its military presence in Iraq and the perceived lack of support following the outbreak of the Arab Spring <sup>[39]</sup>. A specific component of the country's security interest is the perception of the "strategic balance" within the Gulf and wider <sup>[20]</sup>. Middle East regions (Jassim2024). In this context, Saudi Arabia attempts to ensure that the regional order continues to provide it with the required external and regional incentives to support its policy objectives regarding Iran (Aziz & Sarwar, 2023). Moreover, Saudi Arabia's considerable economic strength is used to exert financial leverage over Iran's allies in the region, including Syria and the Joint Action of Informal Arab League States established to promote an anti-Iran policy <sup>[39]</sup>. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has consistently sought to engage regional and international capital to promote the construction of a navy armed with a variety of sophisticated weaponry <sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **4.3. Political interests**

The recent political actions of Saudi Arabia's leadership have energized political analysts across the world to speculate about the motives behind the moves <sup>[41]</sup>. The Kingdom's foreign policy has drawn attention not only for its strident opposition to the governments in Egypt and Syria, but also for its skeptical drift toward the waning of US hegemony and a more active Russian role in the region, with all that connects with growing ties with Moscow <sup>[20]</sup>. Additionally, there are concerns about its growing rapprochement with Iran's leadership, which nonetheless do not negate the possibility of a near-term escalation back to open confrontation following last year's attacks on the Abqaiq oil processing facilities, which were blamed on Iranian operatives <sup>[42]</sup>. Potential research on what lies behind these behaviors can be grounded in in-depth interviews with Saudi officials, diplomats, and businesspeople, but this is not readily available to significantly expand upon the interpretations of Western newspaper articles unless access could be negotiated with former advisers in the inner circle of the 82-year-old King Salman <sup>[10]</sup>. However, the accessible research literature provides some literal and insightful interpretations of the unfolding Saudi foreign policy <sup>[11]</sup>. Most of this literature confines its attention to the domestic political motivations behind the growing dynamism of Saudi Arabia's leadership, namely Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's accelerating and efficacious consolidation of power: efforts to minimize political risks to almost zero and seize the historic opportunity to take the leadership comfortably in both Saudi Arabia and the GCC <sup>[20]</sup>.

While viewing this policy through a strictly domestic political prism is effective for the Gulf in the very short term, it does not capture the broader picture in its essential conception <sup>[20]</sup>. Even more seriously, this paradigm of interpretation falls dangerously short for observers outside the GCC, who are interested in Saudi development due to its global significance as a significant oil exporter and its leadership in the Islamic Faith <sup>[20]</sup>. Further deterioration in Saudi-Iran relations and instability in the energy markets will likely have grave consequences for the global economy as well as world politics, ultimately threatening a historic watershed in the pattern of interstate relations that have been in place since the end of the Second World War <sup>[43]</sup>. If not viewed through the prism of systematically changed external and regional factors affecting Saudi national interests, the recent spike in political activity in Riyadh will come across as simply an elated and youthful leadership that recently came to office being unilaterally ambitious and reckless in its decision-making,

which raises the specter of chaos and destabilization in the region's politics <sup>[44]</sup>. Framing the inquiry in this way highlights some commonality with more widely kept motives for such foreign activity in other regions: a rise in assertiveness and military modernization by a government that has often suffered foils internationally or is considered militarily vulnerable in a volatile security environment policy <sup>[3]</sup>. Conversely, the routinely noted behaviors of statecraft also have their counterparts: hedging via intensified dialogue to lessen tensions and hedging via bolstering international coalitions against potential threats, even though these behaviors are less substantive than originally envisaged or even backfire. Finally, the economic, security, and political impacts of Saudi Arabia's central summarize in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Analyzes the advances and disadvantages the economic, security, and political impacts of Saudi Arabia's key interests.

Key Interest	Advantages	Disadvantages	Economic Impact	Security Impact	Political Impact	References
Economic Growth and Development	-Diversifies economy beyond oil dependence - Attracts foreign investment - Develops non-oil industries	- Difficult to reduce reliance on oil revenues - Challenges in developing a robust private sector	- Reduces economic volatility - Promotes sustainable growth	- Enhances economic stability and security	Strengthens Saudi's regional influence and leadership	[7]
Strengthening Arab-Islamic Solidarity	-Bolsters Saudi's position as leader of the Muslim world. -Provides political and economic support to Muslim minorities	- Potential for sectarian tensions with Shia-majority countries	- Expands Saudi's economic and political ties in the Muslim world	- Helps counter Iranian influence in the region	- Solidifies Saudi's regional dominance and religious legitimacy	[45]
Cooperation with International Powers	-Maintains strategic partnerships (e.g., with the US) - Advances in the Middle East peace process	- Potential conflicts with partners over regional issues	- Secures access to global markets and investments - Attracts foreign aid and support	- Enhances regional stability and security cooperation	Strengthens Saudi's global influence and diplomatic standing	[46]
Maintaining Saudi's Leadership in Oil Markets	- Preserves Saudi's dominance in the global energy market - Enables use of oil as a political and economic lever	- Vulnerability to oil price fluctuations - Potential for conflicts with other major producers	-Provides a reliable source of government revenue - Allows Saudi to shape global energy policies	-Secures Saudi's economic and geopolitical influence in the region	-Reinforces Saudi's regional leadership and bargaining power	[20]

## 5. Motivations behind Saudi foreign policy

The Gulf region is of paramount concern for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia owing to its geographic proximity <sup>[12]</sup>. The GCC was a core pillar of Saudi national security and foreign policy during King Abdullah's reign <sup>[47]</sup>. With King Salman's rise, the Kingdom has pursued a bold foreign policy focused on Gulf and Arab issues. Saudi Arabia regards a strong and united Gulf as essential for protection against threats from Iran and Shi'i militancy, as well as the US withdrawal from the region <sup>[12]</sup>. A key driver of recent Saudi foreign policy has been its desire to project credibility and resolve. King Abdullah explicitly sought to protect the GCC from the rising tide of threats and went to significant lengths to bolster it. King



Salman inherited this perspective<sup>[31]</sup>. The ability to rally regional allies speaks to a state's strength. Much of the Saudi foreign policy undertaken with respect to the Gulf over the last half-decade has been an attempt to project confidence and resilience<sup>[31]</sup>. On the other hand, Gulf Security Architecture must not solely focus on capabilities, but also on the motivations that drive policies<sup>[48]</sup>. Arguably, sensitivities around motivations have prevented serious forward movement in establishing formal multilateral security architecture. Within the GCC, Saudi Arabia Abadi and Taiwan are at a crossroads<sup>[13]</sup>. The relationship's centrality to regional security is not in question; debates instead center upon motivation and why the most powerful states in the region have not pursued a closer security relationship<sup>[49]</sup>. Establishing a united front would be advantageous vis-à-vis Iran, which, as the largest power in the Gulf, understandably tries to gain influence through proxies and covert operations<sup>[50]</sup>.

### **5.1. Religious motivations**

Religion is one of the most important elements of Saudi Arabia<sup>[20]</sup>. When they chose to settle near Najd, they had already explicitly stated their intention to be defenders of the faith. Religious scholars expected more than just the rulership of a country<sup>[51]</sup>. This talk of unity between defense, rulership, and faith only heightened net sayers' apprehensions of the ruling family<sup>[52]</sup>. Under the normally vigilant eye of the Ulema, the Al-Saud family enjoyed a privileged relationship with one of the most powerful and influential religious establishments in the Middle East<sup>[7]</sup>. The Al-Saud family drew both strength and, ultimately, this religious resentment would provide a fertile foundation on which Wahabbi extremism could grow. The Ulema or Wahabbi religious authorities probably rank second in terms of power and influence after the Al-Saud family<sup>[53]</sup>. However, just as the Ulema's religious adherence and ultimate support for the ruling family is rooted in the Al-Saud family's unique relationship with Ibn Su'ayd, so too is their reluctant acceptance of the royal<sup>[54]</sup>. The family has never been able to conquer the cities of Mecca and Medina (Sertkaya, 2023). Ibrahim greatly hampered the expansion of the Al-Saud family and the Ikhwan into the Hejaz. Ibrahim's campaign also heightened the importance of these two cities to the Al-Saud family<sup>[32]</sup>. The Al-Saud family's respect for the Hejaz and especially for Mecca could be viewed by some as an unattainable prize, coveted but hard to possess (Amanullah, 2024). Suleiman's campaign on the contrary, was made much easier in the ever-fragmenting Emirate between the Al-Raziq and Al-Aish control of Medina and more significantly true rivalry from the Al-Mahdi family north of Mecca. It is no surprise that the Ultra-Salafi and Wahabbi militias and groups that currently populate the Kingdom's environment are better able to garner support for their anti-Saudism under a Medina rather than a Meccan context<sup>[55]</sup>. Although the history of Wahhabi anti-Saudism in Medina has been largely overlooked in favor of the more heroic Meccan and Hejazi narratives, Mecca's reputation and political capital within the Saudi state remain.

### **5.2. Ideological motivations**

Leeds and Mattes claim that states utilize foreign policies to pursue an assortment of behaviors that govern substance and shape details from a selection of constituent interests in reaction to domestic and international motivating pressures<sup>[56]</sup>. They tend to espouse a particular mix of inputs for macro-level directions and more mechanical state choices. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has emerged from, and remained enmeshed in, an elaborate package of national interests and international motives that have combined to shape inputs into policy<sup>[57]</sup>. The Saudi state has been thrust into both interacting processes that have ensured its distinctive path and substantive mix of policy inputs in arenas that are local, regional, and extra-regional<sup>[24]</sup>. The formal actions and behaviors of the state have had at best varying degrees of substance and salience in consideration of interests and motives<sup>[58]</sup>. Saudi leaders promote an assortment of policy motivations against material risks and opportunities, and behind-the-scenes modalities that have shaped behaviors<sup>[41]</sup>. Detailed sequencing of timing and patterns also resolves some residual policy puzzles, such as

why announcements advocating a reform agenda have not been matched by action <sup>[41]</sup>. Finally, the sometimes-fractured prioritization of motivations in responses to broad developments, such as the Arab uprisings, is made comprehensible <sup>[59]</sup>. Saudi Arabia attempts to shape the reception and acceptance of local product- and state-eschewing grievances and mobilizations <sup>[23]</sup>. A corollary is the promotion of buffering states, with regimes willing to pay for Saudi protection and stewardship, even if rotten <sup>[60]</sup>. A major task in emancipation from the predicament is the reformulated assessment of policy inputs and procedures with resultant adjustments to efficiency and salience <sup>[61]</sup>.

### 5.3. Nationalistic motivations

Alongside regime survival and security, nationalism has driven Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf. As in other states in the region, the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also meant the establishment of a state ideology that conflated group identity and the interests of the state and posited the state's significance above all other actors and identities <sup>[62]</sup>. Within this context, control of the interior (the "We") translates into empowerment and control of the periphery (the "They" and self-ascribed "Arabian") <sup>[44]</sup>. Building on such self-exclusionary social categories, the process of state formation in Saudi Arabia culminated in the establishment of an ideologically delineated "national" territory to encompass the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina (the holiest sites of Islam and loci of inter-political legitimacy), as well as its own legitimate set of ruling institutions stemming from Islam <sup>[63]</sup>. Furthermore, Islamic nationalism incorporates the (Westphalian) "nationalism" espoused within the Sykes-Picot boundaries of the Saudi state<sup>[46]</sup>. This finalized definition of Saudi group autonomy also served as the basis for state ambition <sup>[20]</sup>. While Saudi state ambitions within the Arabian Peninsula have translated into an instrumental approach to the aims and assets of interest in addressing regime survival anxieties, ambitions beyond the Gulf were marked by curved ideological zeal. Nevertheless, the realist presumption of regional "loose-border" competition still reigns in the external treatment of the Saudi state's pursuit <sup>[64]</sup>. Irrespective of the degree of perceived ideational zeal of their composite self-images and state ambitions, states have tended to maintain, relinquish, or revise existing ambitions considering the costs and benefits attached to their irrevocable (or erodible) sources of leverage <sup>[65]</sup>. Even by realist assumptions, the acquisition of national identity and state ambition vis-à-vis others should not automatically assume feasible ambition <sup>[66]</sup>. Saudi foreign policy's motivations and their impact on religious, ideological, and nationalistic elements are shown in **Table 2**.

**Table 2.** Summarizes the driving forces behind Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and its effects on religious, ideological, and nationalistic aspects.

Key Interest	Advantages	Disadvantages	Economic Impact	Security Impact	Political Impact	References
Regional Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintains stability in the Gulf region</li> <li>- Counters threats from Iran and other regional rivals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Requires significant military spending and involvement in regional conflicts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Diverts resources from economic development</li> <li>- Disrupts trade and investment flows</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhances Saudi's regional influence and dominance</li> <li>- Increases the risk of military confrontation with rivals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bolsters Saudi's leadership role in the Arab world.</li> <li>- Strains relations with Iran and other rivals</li> </ul>	[4]
Regime Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Preserves the Al-Saud family's rule</li> <li>-Suppresses domestic dissent and opposition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Restricts political and social freedoms</li> <li>-Alienates segments of the population</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Limits economic and social reforms</li> <li>-Discourages foreign investment in sensitive sectors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Justify heavy security spending and crackdowns</li> <li>-Increases risk of internal unrest and instability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Consolidates the monarchy's power</li> <li>-Undermines Saudi's international reputation</li> </ul>	[13, 66]

Key Interest	Advantages	Disadvantages	Economic Impact	Security Impact	Political Impact	References
Economic Interests	-Diversifies the economy beyond oil -Attracts foreign investment and technology	-Faces competition from regional and global powers -Relies on oil exports as a primary source of revenue	-Drives economic reforms and privatization -Promote non-oil sectors like tourism and finance	-Enhances Saudi's economic leverage and influence -Reduces vulnerability to oil price fluctuations	-Strengthens Saudi's global economic standing -Aligns with the vision 2030 reform agenda	[51]
Religious Legitimacy	-Reinforces Saudi's role as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites -Promotes a conservative interpretation of Islam	-Faces criticism from more progressive and liberal segments of the population. -Strains relations with Shia-majority countries like Iran	-Attracts religious tourism and investments -Limits economic and social reforms that conflict with religious norms	-Justifies Saudi's regional leadership and influence among Sunni-majority countries	-Bolsters the monarchy's religious credentials and legitimacy -Complicates relations with non-Sunni states and groups	[46]

Table 2. (Continued)

## 6. Regional dynamics influencing Saudi foreign policy

In early June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar to protest what they saw as Doha's support for extremist groups and its independent foreign policy [67]. The severing of diplomatic relations and subsequent economic boycotts took the dispute to a new level, leaving the GCC in disarray (Al-Hamadi 2021). This rift marked a new low in centuries of rivalry and conflict in the Gulf, refocusing attention on the efforts of major regional players to jockey for position [57]. Despite the lack of mutual trust and the difficult nature of the compromised solution, Qatar was reinstated following five months of intensive negotiations mediated by Kuwait [23]. The Gulf crisis highlighted the competing worldviews of Arab states, often at odds regarding the proper management of domestic, bilateral, and regional politics [45].

In 2015, Yemen's Houthis, a Zaydi Shiite rebel group, wrested control of Yemen's capital Sanaa from former president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi after a complicated political crisis that began with the Arab Spring in 2012 [1]. The following year, a coalition of Saudi Arabia and other regional powers moved to oust Houthi fighters from Yemen under the pretext of restoring Hadi to power. The war devolved into a bloody stalemate with regional and international ramifications [54]. Saudi Arabia and its allies grew increasingly frustrated with the United Nations-led peace process, accusing Iranian-backed Houthi rebels of nipping any possibility of a compromise solution in the bud, and reportedly began to weigh a change in strategy in 2021 (Mason [31]. After President Joe Biden took office and withdrew US support for Saudi Arabia's offensive operations, the Kingdom became increasingly concerned about Iran's growing influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as US interest in the region waned [23].

Reverting to a long-standing truism in global politics, Riyadh began moving out of its comfort zone, reaching out to its arch foes with the mediation of China and Iraq to manage disagreements rather than resolve them through war [68]. This effort not only led to the restoration of diplomatic relations with Iran but also thawed Saudi Arabia's long-standing enmity toward Assad [1]. Facing growing isolation and a pressing need for economic and political reconstruction, Tehran also grew increasingly amenable to cooperating with Riyadh, softened its hardline rhetoric against the Kingdom, and reportedly urged the Houthis to adopt a more

conciliatory stance <sup>[69]</sup>. A surprisingly close relationship was on display at a meeting of the Arab League in Jeddah in May 2023 attended by both Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, who have been at odds since the start of the uprising against the latter's regime in March 2011 <sup>[70]</sup>.

### **6.1. GCC relations**

Turkey has taken an interest in the Arab Gulf states, and strengthening relations with the GCC was listed as a foreign policy priority in the Yükselticilure form Action Plan of August 2007. Turkey has also launched an initiative featuring a multi-layered dialogue involving several fields of cooperation with the GCC states<sup>[71]</sup>. Both sides agreed to renew efforts to ensure the effective utilization of the GCC-Turkey Cooperation Agreement signed in 2009 by the two parties to promote cooperation in economy, politics, security, culture, and technology <sup>[71]</sup>. The agreement covers wide areas of cooperation, including security and defense cooperation, trade and economic cooperation, and judicial and police cooperation. In the economic domain, Turkey signed a favorable trade agreement with the GCC expanding coverage to include investment and trade in the services and government procurement domains <sup>[26]</sup>. In the field of cultural cooperation, the parties concerned agreed to facilitate and organize contacts, cooperation, and exchange of relevant activities among various bodies that will promote understanding and cultural appreciation among people <sup>[30]</sup>. In the judicial and police fields, a working group was formed to promote cooperation in combating organized crime, drug smuggling, and terrorism through exchanges of information and shared experiences <sup>[66]</sup>.

The GCC advanced relations with Arab countries, Iran, and Turkey as part of its focus on regional connections and markets. The eleven points covering the strategic use of oil, deterring threats to oil security, diversifying oil customers, promoting membership in the production of arms and dual-use technologies, learning the significance of self-reliance besides partnerships to protect GCC security, countering propaganda and false information quests, sending determined and direct messages, partnering to upgrade the regional picture, and taking advantage of information technology were stated as long-term actions <sup>[66]</sup>. The contribution of GCC member state leaders to combating these sources aims to overthrow and change regimes and instate other regimes loyal to them <sup>[62]</sup>. GCC activism includes organized effort, information dissemination to explain developments in the region, encounters with local and foreign media, visits to regional states and exchange of information <sup>[45]</sup>. Also discussed is how GCC member states' leaders sought to downplay and pluck popular uprisings on the part of efforts to advocate triumphing election results. To this end, foreign and Gulf media outlets that were batting this concept were barred, and efforts were made to close or sideline informal meeting venues <sup>[67]</sup>. Attention was directed toward oil-producing states as a model to be adhered to <sup>[42]</sup>.

### **6.2. Iran-Saudi Rivalry**

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has shaped the various conflicts in the Middle East. Although distinct events contributed to the escalation of the Sunni-Shia conflict and regional suspicion, tensions were fueled and exacerbated by the competition for leadership in the Islamic world and geopolitical hegemony throughout the region <sup>[13]</sup>. In a region that is extremely susceptible to the forms of hegemonic competition, confrontation has become violent <sup>[66]</sup>. Saudi Arabia feared that the Shia advance in the region following the Arab Spring revolts might encourage the emergence of domestic dissent and feared Iran's potential growing power through the nuclear negotiation process with the United States, while Iran pronounced its intention to continue an active policy against the Saudi influence in the Levant and the Gulf <sup>[10]</sup>. Consequently, wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and hostilities in Lebanon have increasingly defined the nature of the rivalry <sup>[8]</sup>.

While many factors influence both countries' engagement in this rivalry, the diverging ideological, religious, ethnic, and sectarian narratives each country produced to justify its policies and question its opponents' acts objectively interacted with other explanatory variables <sup>[72]</sup>. The contending elite and regime types of Saudi Arabia and Iran contributed to the production of specific discourses on sectarianism that have come to dominate each state's foreign policy in the region <sup>[72]</sup>. Nevertheless, engagement in sectarian narratives remains an utterly contextual approach that needs to be illustrated by examining regional conflict escalations <sup>[33]</sup>. The Arab Springtime revolts in 2011 and the 2013 realization of mutual suspicion and distrust between new political developments in the region and the expansion of the nuclear negotiation process in past years have occupied the spotlight since the countries' inability to frame each other through institutionalized alternative narratives <sup>[39]</sup>. While the surge of Houthi insurgency has driven Saudi Arabia into active engagement against Iran's potential growing power in Yemen Iran's vision of assisting the Shiite government of Iraq in confronting the resurgent power of the Islamic State in 2014 could be perceived as counterproductive to Saudi Arabia's continuing influence <sup>[73]</sup>.

### **6.3. Impact of Arab spring**

The Arab Spring created a new context for implementing Saudi Arabia's regional policy. The main courses, instruments, and mechanisms of Saudi Arabia's regional policy in the Arab world have remained unchanged <sup>[74]</sup>. These include the strategic alliance with the US, regional rivalry with Iran, leadership in the propagation of Gahwa 24 political Islam, counterterrorism, and funding both ally regimes and their opposition <sup>[12]</sup>. There are two interpretations of Saudi Arabia's actions as a reaction to the Arab Spring. Pearlman contends that Saudi Arabia proactively intervened to forestall competition from local rivals and maintain support among its allies <sup>[24]</sup>.

However, various authors consider that the Arab Spring created hostile conditions for Saudi Arabia, which resorted to counter-revolutionary means. However, Saudi Arabia has been unable to maintain stability <sup>[13]</sup>. Thus, these authors emphasized that the first interpretation requires further scrutiny. Shrewdly pointed out the limits of analyzing the broader regional impact of the Arab Spring. While some changes were surprising and indeed challenging to Saudi Arabia the responses employed were within the traits of the GCC states' responses to previous instances of citizen unrest <sup>[20]</sup>. He also sketched out other events, specifically in the late 1970s where the ruling monarchies successfully weathered challenges.

The ethnocentric view of revolutions apparent in the debate over the Arab Spring, which explains everything based on the case of one country, should not dominate the analysis either <sup>[39]</sup>. A key factor underlying why Saudi Arabia was more prone to revolution than neighboring states was the differentiation in the socioeconomic structure between Saudi Arabia and other monarchical states <sup>[47]</sup>. On the other hand, the Saudi regime must be credited with relative success in weathering the most intense unrest since April 1858, while simultaneously coming under unprecedented pressure from international political and economic trends <sup>[47]</sup>. Lastly, it should be acknowledged that the response was far from successful because of the simultaneous coupling with shifts in international power structures, changes in regime leadership <sup>[47]</sup>.

### **6.4. Role of external powers**

Both the US and Iran have been the focus of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy <sup>[51]</sup>. Saudi Arabia's perception of threats has been channeled into its relationships with external powers. The Arabian Peninsula must maintain good relations with either the US or Iran, which has caused Saudi Arabia to continually adjust its policies <sup>[62]</sup>. Saudi Arabia used its close relations with the US to challenge its regional rival's ambitions, while Iran used its relations with Russia and China to present its opposition to Saudi Arabia's Western connections <sup>[75]</sup>. The role of external powers in both the Yemen and Qatar crises is also paramount. Saudi

Arabia's failure in the Iran-Saudi conflict or the Qatar-Saudi conflict ultimately led to external powers intervening in regional affairs <sup>[63]</sup>. In the Yemen crisis, Iran has covertly and overtly supported the Houthis, while Qatar has openly supported opposition forces in the Gulf crisis <sup>[21]</sup>. These external actors provided economic and military support and engaged in local media diplomacy, leading to a more complicated geopolitical climate <sup>[63]</sup>. This situation heightens Saudi Arabia's insecurities, as the two conflicts have cost Saudi Arabia significantly in terms of both finances and prestige <sup>[31]</sup>. This has caused Saudi Arabia to go from being a security provider and designer of consensus to a security consumer whose doubts over its sovereignty and reputation linger <sup>[57]</sup>. The multi-faceted view of GCC relations, the Iran-Saudi rivalry, and the Arab Spring's impact is shown in **Table 3**.

**Table 3.** Presents a multi-faceted perspective on GCC relations, the Iran-Saudi rivalry, and the Arab Spring's effects.

Approach	Description	Advantages (For Saudi Arabia)	Disadvantages (For Saudi Arabia)	Impact on GCC Relations	Impact on Iran- Saudi Rivalry	Impact of Arab Spring	References
<b>GCC Unity &amp; Cooperation</b>	The GCC's stated goals include economic integration and a unified response to external threats.	Enhanced regional influence, economic benefits from free trade, stronger security posture against external threats.	Inability to achieve true unity, unilateral actions by Saudi Arabia undermining collective efforts, deepening geopolitical fissures among member states.	Weakened efficacy of the GCC as a trade bloc and security alliance, strained relations between Saudi Arabia and other GCC members.	Intensified rivalry as Saudi Arabia's unilateral actions are perceived as aggressive by Iran.	Exacerbated existing tensions, highlighted the limitations of GCC unity in responding to internal and external challenges.	[67]
<b>Iran-Saudi Rivalry</b>	A long-standing geopolitical and ideological competition between Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shia).	Maintaining regional dominance, countering Iranian influence in the region, protecting Saudi Arabia's interests and allies.	Costly conflicts (e.g., Yemen), potential for escalation, risk of regional instability, damage to Saudi Arabia's international reputation.	Increased tensions and mistrust among GCC members, some states engaging in strategic hedging between Saudi Arabia and Iran.	Intensified conflict, proxy wars, sectarian tensions, arms races.	Arab Spring uprisings provided opportunities for both sides to increase their influence, leading to increased proxy conflicts.	[39]
<b>Impact of Arab Spring</b>	The 2011 uprisings significantly impacted the regional landscape.	Opportunities to support allies against revolutionary movements, bolstering Saudi Arabia's regional influence.	Increased regional instability, costly interventions in various countries, risk of spillover effects into Saudi Arabia.	Deepened divisions within the GCC, some members supporting revolutionary movements while others backed incumbent regimes.	Increased proxy conflicts, both sides vying for influence in the aftermath of regime changes.	Significant regional instability, regime changes, rise of non-state actors, increased sectarian tensions.	[55]

## 7. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy strategies

A nation's foreign policy is undoubtedly influenced by its leadership, both at the top and through the civil service. Such a system exists in Saudi Arabia, and unless changes occur as a function of internal or external events, the policies will likely continue to evolve along similar trajectories (Suryadinata, 2022).

Central to this is the continuity of power of the ruling elite, particularly through the Shah and now the king, despite fluctuations in subordinate power blocs and the royal family. Similarly, Iran is replete with history and imperial ambition, which affect its ambitions as it recalibrates its position in the world after a period of isolation (Hododi, 2024). Similarly, they possess core behavioral orientations that seem likely to be maintained over the next one to two decades, subject to purely internal changes in the underlying political system (Mason, 2013).

It is against this backdrop of regional history and political culture that the internal power dynamics in Saudi Arabia and Iran are analyzed (Payne, 2017). It seeks to explore how these factors shape the two regimes' understanding of their environments, desired outcomes, self-definitions, and ability to exercise influence (Strachan and Whaley2023). By articulating these core motivations, this analysis provides insight into what constitutes the "national interests" of Riyadh and Tehran, a key concept that lies at the heart of many states' diplomatic, military, and economic engagements (Mashwani et al., 2024). Certainly, interests provide the incentives under which success or failure of foreign policy is determined. A simultaneous focus on motivation or desire, however, reveals how interest-specific choices might be filtered, augmented, or obscured by the regime's visions, aspirations, and insecurities (Hassen, 2023). In doing so, it seeks to provide an understanding of not only the immediate motivations behind actors' choices but also the regional power dynamics that affect those decisions (Cashore et al.2021).

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### **7.1. Diplomatic engagement**

The GCC states are essential allies for security, and Saudi Arabia's attempts to counter Iranian influence reflect strategic pragmatism. The Kingdom is relationship-rich, which offsets its strength <sup>[62]</sup>. Its territorial expanses, distinct ethnicities, and sectarian identities – and their governance, or lack thereof make these states subject to external influences, leading to alliances with countries far removed geographically <sup>[5]</sup>. Formal and informal alliances prioritized downward national security and the amelioration of grievances against dominant powers over their designs <sup>[13]</sup>. Nevertheless, ex-post facto improvised measures have led to hindsight accountability decisions, poorly customizing actions, tactics, and choices to available knowledge,

resulting in needless resource expenditures, casualties, and extreme outcomes<sup>[78]</sup>. Saudi Arabia has articulated the need for greater state capacity to manage the asymmetric threat posed by Iran and its Houthis and <sup>[66]</sup>. As a responsible actor in complex and changing regional contexts, the Kingdom's regional and bilateral efforts reflect anger over institutional weaknesses, distrust of security assurances, territorial boundaries, and the West <sup>[78]</sup>. Additionally, monitoring and regulating internal dissent has resulted in tacit alliances with Egypt's regime, the war in Yemen and its axis with Qatar <sup>[38]</sup>. Saudi Kuwaiti aspirations and overreliance on the complete defense partnership have led to extreme threat perceptions, and flexibility over the geopolitical and economic costs of the mutually beneficial alignment is openly contested <sup>[38]</sup>. Attempting to talk with a regional leader and then calling for his removal, concurrent detente with Iran, Gulf responses to diplomacy, and the cycling skepticism toward the current presidency simply deflected blame for failed decision-making with increasingly larger proxies and sideshows <sup>[26]</sup>.

## **7.2. Military alliances**

Saudi Arabia has limited military options to engage external threats amid a conflict that flared up during the Arab Spring. These armed forces directly face external threats. Such as The Arabian Revolution, the catastrophic invasion by the Saudi army to Bahrain in assistance of the Bahraini Royal regime, the Saudi intervention in Yemen to assist Yemen's regime against the Houthis inspired by the Arab Spring, and the Alawite regime in Syria assisting against the uprising<sup>[39]</sup>. This motivated the UAE to launch a dispute with Qatar. Therefore, both nations became part of the Middle East wide armed forces <sup>[79]</sup>. Aware of this strategic situation, Saudi Arabia initiated military cooperation with Egypt. The need for these military coalitions can be traced to Saudi military failings in Yemeni conflicts <sup>[80]</sup>. The UAE, Oman, and Egypt provided ground troops. The tactical assistance by Sudan, Libya, Jordan, and Pakistan, to some extent, enabled Saudi Arabia to shape the regional military architecture, as previously addressed <sup>[57]</sup>. Saudi Arabia is the unflagged leader of this Arab military league, as envisioned by King Abdullah. It is engaged with the recruitment of new members, provision of advances in military to the Qatar regime, joint military exercises with Egyptian forces, and assuring the Saudi- led armed forces are pan-Arab and Islamic <sup>[50]</sup>. Mirroring the state of domestically federating ethno-linguistic variations into a unified exclusive Saudi identity, in foreign policy, Saudi Arabia employs military force to federate ethnically fragmented regimes <sup>[50]</sup>. It includes Jordan and Morocco as new members of the GCC. This was indicative of Saudi Arabia's ambition to lead a multinational pan-Arab military alliance, but it failed to lead a Muslim League comprising Pakistan and Malaysia <sup>[76]</sup>. This assumes that Arab nations resent sectarian divides and grouping against Iran's ascendance. Whether in the Gulf or further beyond, this vision failed inexplicably. Today, Saudi Arabia officially considers resorts in military penalization of Qatar <sup>[81]</sup>.

## **7.3. Economic partnerships**

Saudi Arabia has long been a key player in the GCC, advocating the usefulness of the council considering Iranian power expansion <sup>[11]</sup>. Saudi Arabia redirected initiatives rejected by the Gulf states: the 2002 Arab initiative, the 2006 Davos initiatives, and the enduring acceptance of Shiite-majority Iraq [50]. Thus, although Doha landings were not negotiated with Saudi Arabia's permission, the Kingdom should not be viewed as the maintainer of African lands but rather as the most prominent member of the GCC. Following the uprising of some Arab regimes, Saudi Arabia persuaded the GCC to accept Jordan and Morocco into the expanded headquarters. However, after repeated desertion of garrisoning in the Dome, these prolonged candidates found little sympathy in Riyadh <sup>[82]</sup>. The unprecedented Arab upheaval that began in early 2011 shook almost all regional regimes. To Islamists, this was seen as an unprecedented divine gift, and their growing power and subsequent failures have considerably altered their perceptions and predictability <sup>[83]</sup>.



While Shiite-led Iraq is a cause for deepening concerns for Saudi Arabia, the fate of the al-Houthis with their Zaydi sect establishment, the deepening influence of Iran in Syria, and Shiite rulers seeking a larger role continue to spread fear and suspicion toward Shiite populations in their country<sup>[50]</sup>. The Shiite-sect conflict has long festered in the Gulf Arab states, especially Bahrain, which has a large Shiite population. The second round of politically driven unrest against rising prices and rigidity in Saudi Arabia began in early 2011<sup>[13]</sup>. Another wave of protests was met with significant financial measures<sup>[70]</sup>. The deep-seated fears of the Muslim Brotherhood's strategy have expanded to this new fear, primarily affecting the Sunni order in the Gulf. This new regime is designated as completely anti-Arab<sup>[48]</sup>. The first step of reshaping the approach was sending enormous amounts of arms collectively supplied by external powers to the Gulf princes. Saudi Arabia was especially favored by these powers not because it was vital for oil but because it had legitimacy beyond daily quarrels<sup>[41]</sup>. The Arab world's opening with wider economic partnerships in newer and richer areas distracted Dubai and other GCC-UAE from status games<sup>[82]</sup>. To counter a more realist approach to regional stability, unproductive technocrat-led councils and schedules are seen as ominous signals<sup>[84]</sup>.

## **8. Case studies of Saudi foreign policy decisions**

Saudi Arabia has historically formed bilateral power approaches to collect allies, guarantee security, and enhance its power at a multilateral level<sup>[45]</sup>. Saudi power has been manifested in its natural resources in the form of oil<sup>[85]</sup>. However, a changing regional landscape has forced it to re-evaluate these approaches to safeguard and enhance its national interests regarding its security dilemma and the threat of the Iranian axis<sup>[86]</sup>. The Saudi American alliance remains key to the formulation and implementation of Saudi foreign policy. Nevertheless, Russia and China have added complexity to Saudi foreign policy<sup>[57]</sup>. The GCC body has been able to enhance the regional group and sustain the status quo<sup>[62]</sup>. The rising "Arab spring" has created conditions in which the relative power and prestige of Saudi Arabia have been challenged, especially with the political change in Egypt and the possibility of the democratization of post-Mubarak Egypt<sup>[87]</sup>. Competing Egyptian, Turkish, and Iranian regional responses to the Arab uprising all affect the conditions that the Saudi king must deal with in defining and implementing Saudi power at the regional level<sup>[41]</sup>. This multilateral framework is of crucial importance to Saudi security, given its existence in an unstable regional environment, coupled with the existence of a hostile Iran and rising Sunni Shiite sectarianism<sup>[88]</sup>. The recent development of political Islam in Tunisia and Egypt poses another challenge to Saudi Arabia's dominant political Islam as the major Sunni regional power<sup>[13]</sup>. The mass demonstration for political reform in Tunisia posed another challenge to Saudi legitimacy as a Sunni conservative leader power<sup>[13]</sup>. The overthrow of Tunisia's president produced a "domino effect" in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen. One root cause of the Saudi insurgency has been factors within Saudi Arabia, ranging from social malaise to the aged King Abdullah's succession<sup>[89]</sup>. These challenges mean that a change in the regional context and its global regional stance may be needed for Saudi Arabia to enhance its national interests at both the national and regional levels<sup>[41]</sup>.

### **8.1. Intervention in Yemen**

Yemen is located south of Saudi Arabia, and the Saudi Kingdom sees itself as the leading Arab country. The two countries have close and long-standing connections in several areas, and Saudi Arabia has always tried to exert its influence over<sup>[12]</sup>. In February 2012, Saudi Arabia brokered a transitional agreement that led to the ousting of Ali Abdullah Saleh and the accession to power of then-president Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi<sup>[13]</sup>. The transitional agreement was not successful, and during the Arab Spring protests against Hadi's regime in 2014, the Houthi rebels took over Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, and Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia<sup>[3]</sup>. While the US and the Allies were skeptical of Hadi's government due to its corruption and ineffectiveness, the Saudi Kingdom was alarmed by the rise of the Houthi rebels. This led them to begin a military campaign on

March 26, 2015, to repel the Houthi rebels <sup>[66]</sup>. The campaign started after a summit summoned troops from the Gulf states to invade <sup>[73]</sup>. Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen has triggered numerous questions regarding its motives. This seems to contrast with normal Saudi behavior which was characterized by restraint prior to 2015 <sup>[55]</sup>. What has changed in the power struggles that led to intervention? Why did Saudi Arabia, which usually prefers to remain on the sidelines as in Iraq and Syria, intervene so vehemently? What shaped its foreign policy responses? Much research has been conducted on the determinants of Saudi foreign policy in Yemen since the outbreak of the war <sup>[73]</sup>. A multitude of actors, interests, motivations, and regional dynamics have been identified. However, only a few scholars have assessed Saudi Arabia's response to the Yemen crisis from the perspective of foreign policy analysis with respect to the relevant actors <sup>[3]</sup>. This is surprising, as the intervention in Yemen was the biggest political change since the Arab Spring and highly shaped the region <sup>[39]</sup>. Some scholars have assessed the social dynamics within the ruling family, which in part led to the war in Yemen. Although they provide relevant insights into how certain actors can gain more influence over others, they do not consider the context and constraints of decision-making <sup>[39]</sup>.

## **8.2. Relations with Qatar**

Saudi Arabia's claims that Qatar supported terrorism had been stated before in 2007, and Saudi Arabia had taken the issue to the Arab League and UN Security Council in 2015. Saudi organizations had taken the issue to court, and in May 2017, Qatar openly stated that it was ready for mediation <sup>[67]</sup>. Nonetheless, despite denying false accusations, Qatar had privately bent over backward to prevent a breakdown of relations, including appointing Abu Dhabi's choice as the Commander of the Qatari Armed Forces <sup>[47]</sup>. On 5-6 June, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, in an unprecedented move, sought to hit Qatar with a combined regional embargo of salience on par with non-Arab Iran and Iraq in the 1980s, targeting multiple sectors, including aviation, diplomatic relations, finance, trade, food, and media <sup>[82]</sup>. Saudi Arabia-controlled media presented heavily doctored footage of a speech by the Emir of Qatar to mobilize public opinion, and frantic media operations were conducted against Qatari entities to shift the responsibility for the crisis <sup>[47]</sup>. Qatar was soon absorbing the effects of the embargo aimed at strangling it into submission, particularly in the aviation sector, and trading heavily on this aspect in framing the crisis to avert a ground invasion <sup>[29]</sup>. Saudi Arabia sought to preemptively erode Qatar's first-mover advantage by countering claims that it had violated airspace sovereignty, positioning guidance systems to monitor Qatari aircraft, and utilizing privately owned Visual Flight Rules specialist agencies to surveil Qatari military aircraft, including bombers flying to Turkey <sup>[82]</sup>. On June 6, 2017, the US and Saudi Arabia sought to mediate the crisis, and efforts were conducted by varying ad hoc arrangements and levels of seniority. On June 10, 2017, Kuwait's Emir raised three options to resolve the crisis aimed at convening an emergency GCC summit <sup>[62]</sup>.

## **8.3. Normalization with Israel**

The Iran deal opened the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel and Saudi Arabia both condemned the Iran deal in private, arguing that it gave too much to Iran <sup>[79]</sup>. Both are wary that the Iranians will either continue building their nuclear weapons <sup>[66]</sup> in secret or use the influx of funding to promote their proxy and terrorist groups throughout the region <sup>[10]</sup>. A host of intelligence analyses indicate that the Iranian government seeks to atomize the Middle East, focusing on targeting the Sunni monarchies of the GCC with the help of their Shia allies, such as deep connections to Saudi Arabia or support for the Houthi rebels fighting the KSA <sup>[3]</sup>. Billions of dollars in frozen funds and billions of dollars in new oil revenues will enrich the Iranian state. While most will bolster the country's economy, some will undoubtedly fund groups that stand against Israel and Saudi Arabia <sup>[90]</sup>. Both countries have a shared interest in monitoring the implementation of the Iran deal for violations and maintain doubt over the credibility of unilateral oversight <sup>[91]</sup>.

Israeli security and reducing Arab sentiments that could jeopardize it are critical to creating the conditions necessary for Israelis to pursue peace with the Palestinians <sup>[47]</sup>. Peace between the two and the GCC requires that public calls for violence and expansion do not emanate from official mouths, and that both peoples understand that continuing conflict jeopardizes national interests, most critically economic growth <sup>[92]</sup>. Palestinian peace removes much of the impetus for anti-Israeli sentiment, replacing it with economic opportunities in trade with Israel <sup>[92]</sup>. Saudi Arabia would be a key player in brokering a peace deal with Fatah, as it is the only country that has consistently supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization since its founding <sup>[66]</sup>. While Hamas wrests control of the Gaza Strip, it would be naïve to think that powerful Palestinian fathers will not challenge the West Bank <sup>[92]</sup>. With their participation, the signing of an Arab Israeli peace agreement, including operational norms banning violence against Israel and other parts of the Arab world, would be a massive step toward a healthy Arab Israeli relationship <sup>[93]</sup>.

## **9. Challenges facing Saudi foreign policy**

The analysis of Saudi Arabia's extrarational relations is best attempted by exploring its founding principles, which are still applicable today <sup>[78]</sup>. Although today's global politics are filled with challenges, Saudi Arabia, like other nation-states, has specific principles that guide its policies toward other countries. Some of these principles are well known and articulated, while others are more ambiguous and inferred from the dynamics of interstate relations <sup>[7]</sup>. Interests are the primary determinants of foreign policy; the interstate system provides the international context for their articulation; and it is up to the states to employ diplomatic strategies to realize them <sup>[57]</sup>. Beyond this, Saudi Arabia has several specific guidelines for conducting foreign policy. State interests are determined at the individual, national, and 'civilizational' levels, and they can conflict at times, hence the difficulty of precise articulation of policy <sup>[94]</sup>. An official statement on a particular issue may address only a subset of interests, leaving others unspoken, and even this may change over time. When states face territorial threats, disagreements may arise as to which other states are the most threatening to national interests, and passions run high <sup>[95]</sup>. Therefore, foreign policies often need to be inferred from the mistrust of other states or pessimistic expectations of developments in others, leading to 'realist' or defensive predictions <sup>[96]</sup>.

Particularly interesting is how self-building assessments lead to proxies that effect covertly nihilistic objectives aimed at aggressively interventionist policies against a state. Among Saudi Arabia's founding principles is the maintenance of the country's culture and religion against foreign influences, particularly a unique and intolerant interpretation of Islam <sup>[97]</sup>. However, unprecedented waves of globalization have exposed Muslims to heterodox beliefs and customs. As such, home-grown extremist religious ideology can surface in states perceived as morally decadent, and aggressive opposition states can feverishly act to offset, curtail, and expel it from their turf, as illustrated by the Saudi/Iranian Cold War <sup>[12]</sup>. Saudi Arabia's unique culture and religion made it a founding ally, and close relations remain to this day. Initially, it was immensely useful in consolidating new state and international alliances <sup>[20]</sup>. In securing its founding principles, Saudi Arabia acted against the growing influence of Iran-ruled Afghans, installed regimes in Yemen and Sudan, and staunchly supported the Liberation Organization and the wars against Iraq <sup>[50]</sup>. With oil fields becoming nationalized, color revolutions sweeping Middle Eastern monarchies, and the Iranian Revolution, anti-Western sentiments grew, and the Nasirist front expanded to include all Arab nations <sup>[13]</sup>. Following the Iranian Revolution, anti-Saudi Ariya-Khodimism became widespread among Shiite Iranians, triggering hostilities that have lasted to this day.

### **9.1. Internal political challenges**

Despite its political clout and wealth, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is far from invulnerable. Many of the determinants investigated are reflections of the internecine power struggle that characterizes Saudi politics<sup>[78]</sup>. Many commentators assert the power of the Saudi princes to dictate foreign policy in relation to perceived enemies and friends alike. There are multiple scapegoats to explain the setbacks and frustrations of recent policy decisions. The case study of Yemen exemplifies these dynamics<sup>[12]</sup>. What was previously treated as an affray initiated by Yemenis external terrorists, Saudi-trained 'remnants,' insurgents, or separatists was interpreted as an external invasion imposed on helpless Yemen is by the so-called coalition<sup>[73]</sup>. Such domestic interpretations filtered into official discourse and the media, causing the loss of public sympathy and domestic popular support for the KSA's intervention in Yemen<sup>[12]</sup>. Moreover, KSA's Gulf allies believed the war was unwinnable, putting even more strain on the alliance. The Saudis expanded the conflict into a regional proxy war with Iran to gain leverage. In the recent political detente with Iran, Riyadh appears to have suffered the most significant setback<sup>[39]</sup>. Its successes can still be characterized as political victories and territorial gains in relation to China and Russia. In summary, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy must accommodate the constraints and challenges imposed by domestic political rivalries<sup>[78]</sup>.

Despite its apparent tremendous degree of resilience, Saudi foreign policy is conditioned by domestic political constraints. Saudi foreign policy behavior has become increasingly attentive to broad public sympathy and support<sup>[41]</sup>. Those sympathetic to the pan-Arab vision must resort to heroic al-Qaeda stylings and universal apologies to justify the violence inside the KSA. In addition, the pan-Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood has been newly denounced by al-Qaeda and other groups, and even its history has been denied. What domesticized all the sects and converts, differences, and splits, was the age of jingoism, wherein anti-Iranian invectives dominated<sup>[95]</sup>. Unfortunately, as illustrated in the case study, the dynamics and consequences of these dual policies are contradictory and damaging<sup>[98]</sup>. Aside from personnel (and token engagements with alternative political elites there is little willingness for further adjustment to continued tumult<sup>[5]</sup>.

### **9.2. Economic diversification issues**

Saudi Arabia's economic development is fundamentally based on the transition from an oil-based economy to one based on sources of growth beyond oil, that is, economic diversification. Saudi Arabia has recognized the importance of diversifying its economy over the past few decades<sup>[20]</sup>. However, despite efforts with initiatives such as diversifying the types of investments made and the geographical distribution of investments made, a massive focus on oil has remained, and decreased diversification has been observed, especially since 2014<sup>[99]</sup>. The Kingdom's leaders recognize that Saudi Arabia will face challenges stemming from its economic structure<sup>[13]</sup>. An economic structure that is too dependent on oil revenue leads to susceptibility to external factors, hindrances to building a diversified economy capable of self-sustainable growth, and difficulties in meeting rising expenditures<sup>[28]</sup>. Concerns about the future availability of oil as a widely used energy source have led to its re-evaluation in many aspects, including country-wise economies dependent on oil revenues<sup>[99]</sup>. The wide-ranging visions involve moving away from oil as the main source of energy. While a shift from oil as an energy source to another source will not occur soon, uncertainty surrounding the long-term future of oil is present<sup>[99]</sup>. Intra-regional geopolitical disputes also raise concerns about dependence on oil<sup>[85]</sup>.

The volatility of the oil market has also impacted Saudi Arabia in various ways, such as leading to budget deficits. Economic diversification requires sound fiscal policy, effective liquidity management, and supportive financial sector policies<sup>[47]</sup>. In this regard, the Kingdom must establish strong regulatory

frameworks, improve the business environment to a level that would create an incentive for more investments in non-oil sectors, and invest in development banks to finance small- and medium-sized enterprises<sup>[8]</sup>. Creating a predictable environment for investors involves political reform<sup>[53]</sup>. Important steps include streamlining procedures, strengthening economic governance and transparency, and reducing regulatory barriers<sup>[98]</sup>. Since the Kingdom is a relatively new player in the investor protection market, it must learn not only from OECD member countries but also from developing countries<sup>[78]</sup>. For investment to grow, the Kingdom must seek structural policy reforms to increase productivity<sup>[100]</sup>. A low level of labor productivity is a major barrier to economic diversification in MENA oil exporters, preventing them from developing a competitive private sector. Growth in total productivity is critical for developing a more competitive private sector and improving economic diversification<sup>[15]</sup>.

### **9.3. Regional instability**

Saudi Arabia's articulated policy outflows from its vision of proper regional behavior, an assessment of threats to this vision, and policy responses for it<sup>[78]</sup>. These outflows are shaped by the internal politics of the Kingdom itself, the perceptions and motivations of the actors responsible for its foreign policy, and the regional and global political environments in which these actors operate<sup>[45]</sup>. The political environment in the Gulf Arab region has long been influenced by the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, comprising both foreign policy rivalry and the domestic ramifications of that rivalry<sup>[39]</sup>. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has played an important role in shaping Saudi and Iranian political decisions across the spectrum, from micro-level political tactics to regional diplomatic initiatives<sup>[39]</sup>. Both states perceive each other as territorial adversaries, epitomized by territorial disputes over islands and straits through which nearly 50% of the world's oil passes<sup>[85]</sup>. In the immediate realm of interest, there is a historic imbalance between their national capabilities that reinforced, in Saudi Arabia's view, Iran's precarious and path-dependent insecurity dilemma and the perception of an aggressive Iranian quest for hegemony. Shia-Sunni sectarian rhetoric was added to this round of geopolitical anxieties<sup>[66]</sup>. On the macro-level, the political unrest that followed the Iranian Revolution and the US-Iraq Cold War era missed Saudi Arabia, which saw stability at the Arab-Iranian<sup>[62]</sup>.

## **10. Future directions of Saudi foreign policy**

### **10.1. Potential shifts in alliances**

Considering that the events described in the Arab Spring and its aftermath took place just prior to and during the drafting of this study, some of the conclusions may already be outdated. This applies, for example, to the assumed durability of alliances and the durability and cooperation of relations between strategic partners<sup>[13]</sup>. The US policy options in the Gulf states, which were scrutinized with the utmost care, may have changed, along with the countries considered US allies<sup>[101,102]</sup>. While this understanding of potential Arab Spring aggressors and their agents falls short of encompassing today's possibilities, the events of 2011 showed a sudden inversion of allies and enemies. Friendly forces overtly joined those considered adversaries a short while ago<sup>[13]</sup>. Old, seemingly sturdy coalitions have crumbled overnight. These questions, raised and addressed in early 2011, remain equally pertinent: Will the Arab Spring and its aftermath result in a redefinition of alliances in the Gulf states?<sup>[103]</sup> Is it possible to envision a scenario in which new coalitions are formed, with other countries holding a pivotal role? An illustration of such concerns may be drawn from Iran's attitude and its explanations regarding Egypt<sup>[6]</sup>.

### **10.2. Emerging global trends**

Attempting to go beyond the undertaking of a dubious and futile 'Consolidation' of regional security, this article sought to place the growing strategic autonomy of Saudi Arabia within a new paradigm that offers

‘Resilience’ vis-à-vis traditional and non-traditional security threats emanating both locally and globally<sup>[104]</sup>. This demonstrated that such a refined security approach shifted the ‘inflection point’ of Saudi foreign policy away from the issue of ‘protection’ and to that of ‘prosperity’, and involved placing policy emphasis on a holistic view of security that transcends single conceptual approaches and takes account of the ‘political and economic vices’ of the past<sup>[86]</sup>.

Regional stability is being affected by rising tensions with Iran and the US's unpredictable policies<sup>[105]</sup>. While localization became a strong theme, particularly during the decade-long run-up to the recent Iraq War, with security arranged through a web of arms deals designed to satisfy both the American and regional powers, it meant ‘telling tales of incompetence’ of the Brothers and disdaining past protection by the Father<sup>[23]</sup>. The decline of a regional anchor of political legitimacy and reassessment of regional interests after five decades of heavy investment in political power wrought changes to the social, military, and economic approaches that provided security for Gulf regimes<sup>[95]</sup>. It redefined the challenges faced by the region and introduced the need for a more comprehensive form of resilience. Consequently, security arrangements increasingly turned to working multilaterally with a diversified pool of partners and non-state actors to embrace a wide range of economic, financial, environmental, social, and infrastructural development<sup>[23]</sup>. They also became more active in terms of using soft power and ‘strategic narratives’ to enhance the region’s role in the global economy and governance.

In comparison to attempts to mediate regional tensions or opt for ‘Gulf exceptionalism’ by reframing urgent domestic socio-political challenges as foreign policy issues, the institutionalized recognition of an interdependent regional realm of politics, with the emergence of the ‘GCC’ and the introduction of consultative mechanisms to contain tensions, became a stronger expectation<sup>[106]</sup>. In a world challenged by radicalization, sectarianism, and heightened political symbolism between the ‘Iraq-Iran-Syria’ and ‘Saudi Arabia-UAE’-led alliances, fears of state collapse, protracted conflict, and contested borders across the region would prompt the recognition of political interdependence to contain common threats and rivalries<sup>[107]</sup>. Consequently, there might emerge a coalition of the ‘Gulf Arabs’ against Iranian threat perception, annexation in Palestine-Jerusalem, or nuclear-capable Turkey-’Muslim Brothers.’

### **10.3. Sustainability and reform initiative**

Governance, transparency, and accountability should be regarded as essential values from which state survival throughout the Kingdom is derived<sup>[108]</sup>. Moreover, the requirements for policy or governance implications should build sound research and findings around the likelihood of that reservation being altered<sup>[109]</sup>. It is suggested that future research should focus on what will now be sustained or on alternatives that will most likely not happen, that is, what are the triggers, safety mechanisms, and steppingstones between extremes?<sup>[8]</sup> This reasoning is most straightforwardly framed in terms of risk assessment but can be turned into an exercise in scenario-building<sup>[110]</sup>. The interest in this latter practice stems from its broad recognition that agency and uncertain outcomes are unavoidable conditions of the world and that both can be accommodated productively<sup>[111]</sup>.

## **11. Conclusion, recommendation, and future direction**

Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy in the Gulf region from 2011 to 2023 illustrates a nuanced and dynamic scenario. The Kingdom's initiatives are influenced by the diverse interplay of strategic interests, religious imperatives, and regional factors. Although the overarching objective remains the attainment of regional leadership and stability, the strategy has transitioned from a predominantly reactive and status quo-focused approach to a more proactive and assertive stance. The principal findings are as follows:

- i. **Security Concerns:** The emergence of ISIS, the ongoing conflict in Yemen, and strained relations with Iran have significantly influenced Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, resulting in military interventions and strategic maneuvers. Nevertheless, these initiatives have faced scrutiny concerning human rights violations and implications for regional stability<sup>[12]</sup>.
- ii. **Economic Diversification:** Vision 2030 has significantly influenced foreign policy, driving the pursuit of economic partnerships and investments in non-oil sectors. This necessitates a stable regional environment and strong international relations<sup>[20]</sup>.
- iii. **Regional Leadership:** Saudi Arabia is actively establishing regional leadership by utilizing its religious influence, economic strength, and military capabilities. This pursuit has led to instances of collaboration and rivalry with other Gulf nations, as demonstrated by the crisis involving Qatar<sup>[41]</sup>.
- iv. **Religious Influence:** The Kingdom's religious identity plays a crucial role in shaping its foreign policy, albeit with an evolution in its approach over time. Historically, the Kingdom utilized religious authority as a means of soft power; however, a more proactive and assertive dissemination of its interpretation of Islam has recently been evident, accompanied by initiatives aimed at promoting an image of "moderate Islam"<sup>[55]</sup>.
- v. **Domestic Political Dynamics:** The maintenance of internal political stability and the successful realization of Vision 2030 are of paramount importance, as foreign policy accomplishments are employed to enhance domestic legitimacy. Nevertheless, domestic limitations also play a significant role in shaping foreign policy decisions<sup>[66]</sup>.

### 11.1. Current situation

According to this analysis, Saudi Arabia is currently confronted with a multi-faceted geopolitical environment. Although it upholds its dedication to achieving regional stability and diversifying its economy, it must effectively maneuver through persistent tensions with Iran, manage its relationships within the GCC, and address both internal and external security challenges<sup>[11]</sup>. The Kingdom's proactive foreign policy, which seeks to address perceived threats, inherently involves the potential risk of intensifying regional conflicts. The achievement of Vision 2030 is closely linked to the preservation of regional stability and the attraction of foreign investment, necessitating a carefully calibrated equilibrium between assertive measures and diplomatic outreach<sup>[112]</sup> (Sarwar et al., 2021). Furthermore, The Kingdom's employment of religious influence within its foreign policy continues to be a significant component; however, its methodology is increasingly evolving toward a more nuanced strategy that promotes "moderate Islam" to enhance its international reputation and attract investments (Lorenz, 2021).

### 11.2. Future directions and strategic planning

To adeptly maneuver through future developments, it is imperative that Saudi Arabia's strategic framework for foreign policy incorporates the following considerations:

- i. **Diversified Security Approach** in context of national security, it is essential to uphold a robust defensive stance while concurrently prioritizing multilateral collaboration and diplomatic strategies to address the potential dangers linked to unilateral initiatives. This approach necessitates the reinforcement of alliances with pivotal global partners and the pursuit of dialogue and de-escalation frameworks with regional adversaries.
- ii. **Sustained Economic Diversification** in vision 2030 should be at the forefront of our foreign policy initiatives, as it is essential for driving transformative reforms that enhance the business landscape, attract foreign investment, and lessen our dependence on oil revenues. By prioritizing innovation,

nurturing human talent, and championing sustainable economic growth, we can secure a prosperous future for the nation. Embracing these strategies is not only beneficial but also imperative for the success of our nation.

- iii. Strategic Regional Partnerships in Saudi Arabia must prioritize the careful management of its relationships with neighboring Gulf states and Iran. Although competition for regional influence is unlikely to diminish, it is vital to pursue de-escalation and diplomatic engagement to prevent further conflict. Enhancing regional cooperation within the GCC is essential for effectively addressing common challenges.
- iv. Nuanced Religious Diplomacy in the Kingdom ought to persist in utilizing its religious authority; however, a more sophisticated strategy is essential. Advocating for "moderate Islam" can serve as an effective mechanism for improving global reputation and drawing on foreign investment. This strategy must align with domestic reforms and a commitment to upholding human rights.
- v. Enhanced Multilateral Engagement in Heightened engagement in multilateral diplomacy and international organizations has the potential to elevate Saudi Arabia's position on the global stage while effectively addressing common challenges. This encompasses collaboration on matters such as climate change, economic development, and counterterrorism efforts.
- vi. Domestic-Foreign Policy Integration in a robust integration of domestic and foreign policy objectives is essential. Fulfillment of Vision 2030 is intrinsically connected to the preservation of regional stability and the attraction of foreign investment. Achievements in foreign policy can bolster domestic legitimacy and reinforce authority.

## Abbreviations

CBM	Confidence-building measures
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
MbS	Mohammad bin Salman
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
UAE	United Arab Emirates

## Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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