
ARTICLE

Change and Transformation: Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy After the Arab Spring

Gökhan ÇINKARA*

Abstract

This article explores the fundamental dynamics of change and transformation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy following the Arab Spring. It argues that this transformation is driven by three interrelated dimensions. The first dimension is ideological transformation, marked by a re-examination of Saudi identity and the incorporation of historical narratives that resonate with national identity, significantly influencing the Saudi elite's active role in foreign policy and promoting regional cooperation. The second dimension involves the adoption of new management techniques and systems that enhance decision-making processes in foreign policy. The third factor focuses on Saudi Arabia's efforts to expand and deepen its alliance system in response to regional and global dynamics. Collectively, these factors facilitate the Kingdom's technological, economic, and social policies aimed at realizing its "Vision 2030." Consequently, it can be asserted that foreign policy and the broader transformation process are intricately intertwined in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia, Arab Spring, foreign policy, Middle East, Vision 2030

* Assistant Professor, Necmettin Erbakan University, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Konya, Türkiye. E-mail: gokhan.cinkara@erbakan.edu.tr. ORCID: 0000-0001-8372-8571.

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has historically balanced three primary objectives: promoting religious legitimacy, preserving the petro-economic order, and sustaining regional stability. By disrupting this equilibrium, the Arab Spring prompted a strategic reassessment. Thus, Riyadh has diversified its foreign policy engagements, a development influenced by the Arab Spring, in light of the shifting U.S. policies under the Obama administration's ambivalence toward Iran. On the other hand, a generational shift has facilitated the rise of a younger, technocratic elite, exemplified by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's consolidation of power. The evolving policy framework has expanded participation among new technocratic actors while maintaining continuity with traditional values. Similarly, state-society relations have been reshaped by a new nationalism.

The shift in Saudi foreign policy is reflected in closer ties with China (e.g. China-Saudi Arabia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, 2016) and Russia (e.g. coordination within the OPEC+), as well as ongoing discussions on diplomatic normalization with Israel. All this is evidence of how Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is shaped by regional developments, domestic social dynamics, and the Kingdom's various external relationships. Understanding the Kingdom's foreign policy requires examining internal transformation processes, assessing how emerging regional opportunities and threats affect Saudi Arabia, and analyzing the broader global power struggles in which the Kingdom is engaged.

Saudi Arabia has unique characteristics that distinguish it from other regional states. It controls huge oil reserves, significantly influencing global energy markets. Specifically, it holds approximately 17% of global reserves, producing 13.39 million barrels per day in 2023, and maintains a 3.1 million barrel spare capacity, enabling a swift response to supply shocks.¹ Moreover, the Kingdom is the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, making it of central importance to Muslims worldwide. It also often mediates in regional conflicts due to its commitment to stability and the status quo in the Middle East. These elements fundamentally shape Saudi foreign policy.

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However, after the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has visibly moved away from its traditional foreign policy approach and practices. The Arab Spring brought widespread political, geopolitical, and economic changes in the Middle East.² Certain countries in the region faced pressure to take bold steps to preserve

local and regional political stability or the societal status quo. Consequently, this pressure led states to shift rapidly from entrenched policies to alternative paths. In this context, Saudi Arabia, with its significant economic resources and demographic potential, has embarked on a new trajectory. While this path is summarized in policy initiatives such as “Vision 2030” or the concept of the “New Saudi Arabia,” its main thrust can be understood as the restructuring of the political system, the construction of a new Saudi national identity in line with this transformation, and the pursuit of a foreign policy designed to secure these changes.

This study aims to analyze Saudi Arabia’s post-Arab Spring foreign policy by examining the reciprocal and intertwined interactions of multiple factors. It uses process tracing to explore both continuities, transformations, and clear ruptures in foreign policy decisions. At its core, this methodological approach involves the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence to understand causal mechanisms and sequences of events that connect causes to outcomes. By utilizing process tracing, the article foregrounds the temporal dimension of political developments and elite decision-making. Each section of the study integrates empirical data with an analysis of its chronological progression, thereby enabling a structured evaluation of the transformation of Saudi foreign policy in response to shifting domestic, regional, and global conditions. The article’s main question is as follows, “What are the factors enabling change in Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy after the Arab Spring?” To this end, the first section examines the causes of the Kingdom’s new reform path and its effects on foreign policy. This section can also be seen as a case study explaining the change in foreign policy created by ideas, ideology, and social transformation.

The relationship between ideology and foreign policy reflects a sophisticated interaction between belief systems and state behavior in international affairs, with ideology serving as a key cognitive framework that shapes how policymakers interpret global events and formulate foreign policy strategies.³ Here, we observe an intriguing framework of bounded rationality through which such strategies find themselves further use. This framework demonstrates how the ideological beliefs of different leaders can shed light on how actors process information and make policy decisions. This emerges as a noteworthy withdrawal from more traditional approaches that often rely on classical rational optimization.⁴ The framework of operational code analysis also provides a structured method for analyzing this relationship by showing how leaders’ ideological perspectives shape distinct belief systems that act as causal mechanisms in foreign policy decision-making.⁵

We should note that the recent scholarship highlights the crucial role of elites in shaping foreign policy. Their influence significantly affects international relations by impacting decision-making, institutional control, and policy

implementation. First, one can argue that elites play a distinctive role in foreign policy decision-making through their control over resources and specialized knowledge. They function as a small group occupying top positions in the social and political hierarchy. Their expertise in specific contexts enables them to apply specialized heuristics and decision-making strategies to manage complex foreign policy issues effectively.⁶

Second, a complex interplay of preferences and incentives shapes the relationship between elites and foreign policy.⁷ While elites may align with public or societal preferences, they can also pursue their own interests shaped by their positions, experience, and expertise. This dynamic is even more pronounced in more autocratic regimes, where elites have vested interests in regime survival and often distort foreign policy decisions. Keeping this under consideration, we can argue that elite politics influences foreign policy through three critical aspects: First, through the selection process which determines who assumes foreign policy roles. Second, through the incentives that shape elite behavior once in office. And finally, through the interaction among elite members that can influence politics and foreign policy to a great extent.⁸ In the Saudi case, such interactions manifest as struggles among royal factions and powerful ministries—traditionally divided into conservative, reformist, and liberal blocs—each competing for authority and foreign policy influence.⁹

Gideon Rose conceptualizes foreign policy through a neoclassical realist perspective, where the main driving force of its formulation is the country's position within the international system and relative material capabilities.¹⁰ However, the neoclassical realist theory sets itself apart by stressing that the influence of material power on foreign policy is neither direct nor straightforward since systemic pressures are mediated by domestic-level intervening variables. The framework functions through a defined causal chain. It begins with the state's relative power position within the regional structure, which shapes its interests and responsiveness to external pressures. Although conventional neoclassical realism centers on the international system, the Middle East constitutes a distinct regional subsystem with semi-autonomous dynamics that intersect with global power structures.¹¹ The second key component of this framework is the role of domestic intervening variables, which account for how systemic pressures are translated into foreign policy decisions. State reactions to international threats are neither purely objective nor uniformly rational; rather, domestic factors mediate the relationship between external threats and policy outcomes. This is particularly relevant in non-Western regions, where state identity may not align perfectly with population loyalties, which can be divided along religious, ethnic, and regional lines.¹² In terms of practical application, the framework demonstrates how structural factors shape the broad parameters of state behavior, while domestic factors determine the

specific form of response.¹³ For instance, in the Saudi-Iran relationship, the framework shows how regional power distribution interacts with domestic factors like nationalism to shape foreign policy decisions.¹⁴ Similarly, in Saudi-China relations, the theory explains how systemic changes and unit-level factors combine to influence bilateral relationships.¹⁵ The theoretical framework also incorporates the concept of an “imperfect transmission belt,” which explains how domestic situations shape the way ruling elites perceive and react to opportunities and constraints in the regional structure.¹⁶ This helps explain why states may sometimes pursue policies that appear suboptimal from a purely structural perspective.¹⁷

Saudi-Style Nationalism and Populism

In the Gulf region, populism does not manifest through mass mobilization, but as rhetoric used by both opposition figures and ruling elites. Populism frames a virtuous citizenry against corrupt elites or marginalized groups, often migrants. Despite the rentier context, populist discourse has grown amid rising inequality and digital communication. Governments have addressed the rise of populist discourse through adaptive strategies aimed at maintaining societal cohesion.¹⁸ Populism is understood as a discursive strategy rather than a fixed ideology. It has been described as a theory of international relations, an economic approach, and a leadership style. In the Gulf, it serves to construct moral binaries and overlaps with nationalist narratives, used both from below and above to navigate political uncertainty.¹⁹ In Saudi Arabia, there have been notable shifts in economic policy and unexpected foreign policy breakthroughs. These developments have contributed to the framing of nationalist and populist discourse within the overarching framework of “Vision 2030.”

In 2016, the Saudi Arabian economy, long reliant on oil, began to experience a serious crisis. In response, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman introduced a set of policies aimed at diversifying the country's economic base. This wide-ranging initiative, known as “Vision 2030,” marked a clear shift away from dependence on oil. It laid out plans not only to expand the range of economic sectors but also to bring about the social changes needed to support and sustain this transformation.²⁰ The Kingdom's preference for the status quo required skepticism toward predictions of change. The monarchy's main priority has been stability; change has typically been viewed cautiously as unexpected results might arise—even if change offered a chance to improve contemporary conditions. However, the “Vision 2030” program marked a shift from this cautious stance with Saudi officials adopting radical change, accelerated by a sense of urgency.²¹

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“Vision 2030” project aims to bring stability to the Kingdom’s economy, which currently relies on oil exports for 74% of its income.²² Balancing the budget has emerged as a key objective. Achieving this involves increasing the non-oil sectors’ (manufacturing, construction, tourism, technology, and logistics etc.) contribution to the GDP from 40% to 65%.²³ Experts argue that realizing these ambitious targets may require considerable time. They also suggest that these targets may eventually need revision under a future “Vision 2050” initiative.²⁴ Therefore, the Kingdom has eliminated subsidies for various sectors and consumer goods, and introduced new taxes to achieve this economic objective, which has directly accelerated privatization.²⁵ The primary challenge in implementing these reforms was that the Saudi economy favored distribution over production.²⁶

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The desire for economic transformation in Saudi Arabia has been pursued in tandem with the emergence of a new trajectory in the social sphere, initiated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman through a series of significant changes in the public sphere such as lifting the ban on women driving, opening the public sphere to women and youth, reduction of religious police etc. Saudi elites have focused on persuading traditional social sectors to implement these radical changes. For this purpose, in 2017, the Crown Prince met with religious leaders and assured them that the reform process would respect Islamic traditions. Establishing a balance between modernization and religious sensitivities is important in Saudi Arabia as a social contract. For example, King Faisal’s era also demonstrated similar approaches.²⁷ Saudi Arabia’s new elites led by the Crown Prince are implementing numerous previously unseen changes including permitting women to wear the abaya voluntarily, allowing cinemas to operate, restricting the authority of the religious police, and approving rock concerts. However, these changes have naturally resulted in the centralization of political powers in the elites as they seek to control the traditional sectors of the society and retain strict oversight of the transformation process.²⁸

Who are the main supporters of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in this ongoing economic and social transformation? The most revolutionary change has been Mohammed bin Salman’s deliberate cultivation of youth and women as a new power base.²⁹ The Crown Prince has actively courted this demographic, understanding that 63% of Saudi Arabia’s population is under 30 and increasingly educated abroad.³⁰ This new constituency has generally embraced his social and economic reforms, though their support may prove

more volatile than traditional power bases.³¹ This is largely because these social sectors lack both organizational cohesion and institutional capacity.

How do these economic reforms and ideological transformations reflect on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy? Saudi Arabia's evolving economic structure has coincided with a more outward-looking diplomatic orientation aimed at supporting national development goals.³² The reform process in Saudi foreign policy has also increased the country's need for foreign investment.

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Saudi Arabia seeks external financing and foreign partners for megaprojects shaped around "Vision 2030," such as the NEOM Line.³³ For the success of international investment projects like NEOM, stable and diversified diplomatic engagements are considered beneficial. These projects require cooperation among countries, thereby enabling pragmatism and conjunctural openings in foreign policy. Consequently, the diplomatic

normalization efforts of the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan with Israel align closely with Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030." In addition, Egypt transferred the islands of Sanafir and Tiran to Saudi Arabia in 2017, anticipating economic benefits from the NEOM project.³⁴ The Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, signed in 1979, guaranteed Israel's maritime navigation rights in the Straits of Tiran. This guarantee requires Saudi Arabia to obtain Israeli approval for expanding Highway 392 and constructing the bridge connecting Egypt and NEOM.³⁵ The transformation of Saudi foreign policy has also been shaped by economic constraints. Falling oil prices and large budget deficits have limited Saudi Arabia's traditional "checkbook diplomacy," forcing a more selective approach to foreign aid and intervention.³⁶ Nevertheless, the Kingdom continues to provide significant financial support to regional allies, including Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and others, viewing this assistance as crucial for maintaining regional stability.³⁷ In the aftermath of the change in the leadership, Saudi Arabia has also worked to establish new partnerships, including establishing connections with Iraqi Shia leaders in an effort to curb Iranian influence in the region.³⁸ Before NEOM, Saudi Arabia undertook a similar megaproject: King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC), launched in 2005 on the Red Sea coast north of Jeddah, was envisioned as a major hub for non-oil industries, tourism, and a population target of one million to help diversify the country's economy. However, years after its founding, KAEC has struggled to attract residents and industry, with only around 10,000 inhabitants and much of its industrial zone remaining

underutilized, although it has succeeded in establishing a major port and a world-class golf course.³⁹

These shifts in foreign policy reflect both structural economic needs and ideological reorientation. Saudi Arabia's ideological transformation under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has led to a paradigm shift in the country's foreign policy. Such a shift reflects a divergence from the Kingdom's traditionally cautious diplomatic approach toward more proactive policies.⁴⁰ Some have also argued that this transformation aims to strengthen Saudi Arabia's leadership position within the Arab world further.⁴¹ Relations with the U.S. remain a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's regional security strategy, despite periods of tension and uncertainty along this policy path. However, developments such as the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement signed during the Obama administration undermined Saudi Arabia's confidence in U.S. security commitments.⁴²

Saudi Arabia's new proactive approach has produced complex outcomes. Notably, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition with the UAE to address regional security threats. The UAE is a significant contributor to the Arab world's economy, with a GDP that accounts for nearly half of the region's total output. Additionally, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are responsible for 40% of OPEC's oil production, making it a major player in the global energy market.⁴³ The formation of a Saudi-UAE axis to confront regional security challenges represents a significant diplomatic realignment.

The Kingdom's foreign policy has demonstrated increased regional engagement, reflecting a more proactive approach, seemingly guided by a unifying doctrine that aims to establish Saudi Arabia as the preeminent authority in Arab affairs and the primary conduit for international powers to access the region.⁴⁴ This recalibration had complex effects on regional dynamics, requiring greater coordination among regional actors. Although securing the approval of the U.S. under the Trump administration has been regarded as a significant accomplishment for the recent Saudi leadership, the Kingdom's relations with Europe have deteriorated, as evidenced by the expressed concerns of several European capitals regarding the validity of Saudi Arabia's proactive regional policy.⁴⁵ In the coming period, Crown Prince

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Mohammed bin Salman appears more likely to be a part of additional regional issues. This suggests that the transformative period in Saudi foreign policy will continue to generate both opportunities and challenges for regional stability and international relations.⁴⁶

Underlying this shift in foreign policy is a reconfiguration of Saudi Arabia's foundational identities. The Saudi foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by an Islamic identity. This is manifested through its custodianship of Mecca and Medina, and the official adoption of Wahhabism as an official religious doctrine.⁴⁷ This religious identity directly impacts how Saudi Arabia positions itself in regional politics. We can observe this impact especially through the Kingdom's self-perceived role as a leader of Sunni Islam and rivalry with Shiite Iran.⁴⁸

Moreover, the Bedouin/tribal identity continues to shape the Kingdom's diplomatic relations, particularly with the Gulf Arab nations that share similar social structures and cultural heritage.⁴⁹ This shared tribal culture facilitates closer cooperation with GCC countries and influences regional alliances.⁵⁰ Additionally, Saudi Arabia's identity as a rentier state, derived from its oil wealth, significantly impacts its foreign policy decisions and international relationships.⁵¹ These evolving identity dynamics have paved the way for new strategic alignments. At the domestic level, on the other hand, the leadership has sought to recalibrate the role of religious institutions in public life, aligning them with broader modernization objectives.⁵²

Building on the redefinition of Saudi Arabia's foundational identities, the ontological security framework offers further insight into the Kingdom's foreign policy behavior. This framework reveals that Saudi foreign policy is driven by the need to maintain a distinctive identity, not just physical security.⁵³ Unlike traditional approaches focused on material threats, this perspective shows how identity-based anxieties shape Saudi behavior.⁵⁴ When similar Islamic models emerge in the region, they create existential anxiety for the Kingdom.⁵⁵ In response, Saudi Arabia employs two key strategies: demonizing challengers and narrowing its own identity.⁵⁶ This process has resulted in a gradual shift from a broadly Islamic orientation toward a narrower Sunni Islam (in response to Iran), and ultimately toward Salafi-Wahhabism (in response to the Muslim Brotherhood).⁵⁷ While preserving distinctiveness, this identity narrowing has ultimately constrained Saudi regional leadership capabilities.⁵⁸

In parallel with identity-driven anxieties, Saudi foreign policy is also driven by the regime's need to maintain domestic legitimacy and manage security on multiple fronts.⁵⁹ The Saudi regime pursues a carefully balanced approach that reflects what analysts call "omnibalancing." This corresponds to managing multiple challenges across domestic, regional, and global levels simultaneously.⁶⁰ The regime's legitimacy rests on several key pillars that directly influence foreign

policy choices. These include but are not limited to the personal charisma of leaders, upholding traditional and Islamic values, providing economic patronage, and demonstrating effective engagement with the outside world.⁶¹ This legitimacy foundation is particularly crucial as it determines the regime's room for maneuver in foreign relations. Accordingly, the stronger the domestic legitimacy, the greater flexibility leaders have in foreign policy decisions.⁶²

In conclusion, the Saudi leadership has historically adopted a pragmatic foreign policy approach focused on the regime and state survival. This includes securing external protectors while maintaining relative autonomy, ensuring economic resources, and preserving regional and Islamic status.⁶³ Such a manifestation has meant maintaining close but carefully managed relations with Western powers, particularly the U.S., while also being mindful of domestic sensitivities around issues like Palestine.⁶⁴ Stemming from the critical geopolitical position resulting from long coastlines and exposed oil facilities,⁶⁵ the Kingdom's strategic vulnerability has led it to pursue multiple strategies, including seeking external protectors, building collective security through the GCC, engaging in cautious regional diplomacy, and purchasing arms.⁶⁶ This complex balancing act reflects what scholars term "managed multi-dependence"—a century-old pattern whereby Saudi Arabia attempts to maintain relative autonomy while managing various internal and external challenges and resources.⁶⁷

Consolidation of Power and Centralization of Decision-Making

Against the background of the Arab Spring, the rise of new elites in Saudi Arabia signaled a major reshaping of the existing internal hierarchy. Central among these emerging elites is the middle class from the Hijaz region, noted for being comparatively liberal and modernist when contrasted with elites from Najd. This group has emerged as the primary voice of middle-class opposition toward the Saudi regime.⁶⁸

Under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, traditional power centers have been restructured while new stakeholder groups have gained prominence, fundamentally altering the landscape of Saudi leadership.⁶⁹ The most notable change has been the rise of a new technocratic elite.⁷⁰ These Western-educated professionals now dominate key government positions, with non-royal technocrats holding approximately 85% of cabinet

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positions by 2020.⁷¹ The group includes chemical engineers at SABIC (Saudi Basic Industries Corporation), petroleum engineers at Saudi Aramco, and professionals in various development-oriented ministries.⁷² The business elite has also undergone a substantial transformation. While traditional merchant families maintain their influence, they have been joined by new entrepreneurial elements. New actors include both young entrepreneurs and an increasing number of women in the workforce.⁷³

Institutional restructuring under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has sought to streamline executive functions and align them with long-term strategic plans such as “Vision 2030”.⁷⁴ This move marked a decisive shift from horizontal to vertical succession. The leadership structure has undergone a notable reorganization, with enhanced executive coordination under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.⁷⁵ This arrangement ensured the continuity of the monarchy through a horizontal succession system among King Abdulaziz’s sons. When King Salman ascended to the throne in 2015, he began dismantling this power-sharing dynamic to establish greater centralization.⁷⁶ Recent administrative changes reflect a reorganization of decision-making processes to enhance efficiency and policy coherence within the leadership framework.⁷⁷ Historically, Saudi Arabia relied on a system where senior royal family members headed key ministries and shared power, which was crucial for maintaining domestic stability. This was especially the case during the 1970s oil boom.⁷⁸

This restructuring has allowed for more streamlined governance mechanisms in line with the strategic goals of Vision 2030. We witnessed him gaining control over multiple crucial ministries, including defense, foreign affairs, and finance, in his early deputy crown prince days.⁷⁹ Leadership dynamics have evolved toward a more centralized executive structure under the Crown Prince’s guidance, facilitating policy continuity and implementation.⁸⁰ The appointment of non-royal officials or technocrats to key positions, such as Adel Al-Jubeir becoming the first non-royal foreign minister, further demonstrates the shift away from traditional power structures.⁸¹

Technocrats play a pivotal role as both enablers and beneficiaries in the implementation of Gulf Visions, serving as crucial intermediaries between ambitious government plans and their practical execution. As trusted “foot soldiers” of these transformation initiatives, they occupy key operational and management positions, forming a new generation of professionals drawn from the national workforce. The implementation of Visions still relies heavily on top-down approaches with limited consultation mechanisms. There is a recognized need for greater capacity building at the technocratic level and technocrats help strengthen bonds between the middle class and the political establishment, particularly in Saudi Arabia, where they are crucial in facilitating the transition from a distributive rentier state to a more diversified economy.⁸²

This emerging group of technocrats plays a dual role: they drive forward economic reforms and simultaneously bolster the charismatic appeal of Saudi leaders. In doing so, they connect the government's ambitious vision with the shared historical identity and social unity of the Saudi people. The charismatic authority of Saudi leadership has been instrumental in creating a new form of social solidarity (*assabiya*) that helped transcend traditional tribal loyalties.⁸³ The effectiveness of this charismatic leadership in national integration is evidenced by Saudi Arabia's domestic stability, which has become a significant factor in its regional influence.⁸⁴ Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman actively cultivates comparisons to historical figures, particularly drawing inspiration from the first two Muslim Caliphs, Abu Bakr and Omar.⁸⁵ He is also openly inspired by his grandfather, King Abdulaziz, with websites showing his face morphing into that of the Kingdom's founder, attempting to establish historical legitimacy for his rule.

The merchant families have also played several crucial roles in shaping Saudi Arabia's socio-economic landscape; these roles include, economic leadership and innovation, political and administrative influence, business infrastructure development, social and cultural impact, economic development role, and relationship with the royal family.⁸⁶ The influence of merchant families extends beyond pure business interests, as they help balance traditional Arabian values with modernization pressures. Their role has evolved from traditional trading to becoming sophisticated international business operators. However, their success remains deeply tied to their ability to navigate both local cultural expectations and international business standards while maintaining strong relationships with the ruling family.⁸⁷ In addition to these families, it's essential to consider the evolving demographics of Saudi Arabia as a factor that amplifies and strengthens the leader's charisma.

Nearly 63% of Saudi nationals are under 30 years old, with about 40% being 18 or younger, creating significant demographic pressure on political and economic systems.⁸⁸ This "youth bulge" is primarily concentrated in urban areas, creating clusters of young, educated citizens with evolving expectations. As noted in Hicham Aloui's research, this demographic trend will continue influencing Saudi politics for at least another generation before the demographic transition plateaus.

Saudi Arabia's New Alliance System

Strategic hedging has become a key framework for interpreting the more autonomous direction of Saudi foreign policy during the Salman era. As Evelyn Goh notes, hedging constitutes "a set of strategies aimed at avoiding situations in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality."⁸⁹ It functions as an "insurance policy" that enables states to manage potential risks through diversification.⁹⁰

The concept extends beyond simple balancing or bandwagoning behaviors. Instead of choosing sides between major powers, hedging involves cultivating relationships with multiple international actors simultaneously. It is possible to argue that hedging allows Saudi Arabia to keep “a foot in all extra-regional hegemon’s camps.”⁹¹ This “engage-and-resist strategy” approach helps countries navigate threats and constraints under conditions of unipolarity. Simultaneously, it paves the path for potential changes as system leaders decline.⁹² Such hedging can better explain contradictory behaviors in Saudi foreign policy. For example, while maintaining its security relationship with the U.S., Saudi Arabia has pursued closer ties with Russia. Decisions, including discussions about purchasing the S-400 anti-missile defense system, further demonstrate such a tendency.

In recent years, Saudi Arabian foreign policy has shifted markedly, moving away from its historically cautious posture toward a more active role. The Kingdom has demonstrated increasing readiness to engage in major foreign policy initiatives and has not shied away from a proactive stance by adapting to an increasingly multipolar world order. This shift is reflected in several unprecedented moves.

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The Kingdom’s changing approach is also reflected in its international alliances and partnerships. Saudi Arabia has called for closer partnerships with Jordan and Morocco, and pushed for stronger integration among GCC countries.⁹³ These changes represent a fundamental transformation from Saudi Arabia’s traditional preference for maintaining a low profile to taking

more visible and assertive positions on the global stage. The Kingdom’s growing presence in the G20 highlights its rising economic influence and its readiness to assume broader international responsibilities.

This new diplomatic posture extends to regional issues as well. For instance, the Saudi position on normalization appears to be influenced by both regional security considerations and Palestinian interests; however, there are claims by Israeli government figures that Saudi Arabia might normalize relations without substantial gains for Palestinians.⁹⁴ The potential Saudi-Israeli normalization presents complex implications for regional dynamics. Elie Podeh’s analysis demonstrates that Saudi-Israeli interactions have remained limited and pragmatic, shaped primarily by broader regional considerations and indirect diplomatic signaling.⁹⁵

The trajectory of Saudi-Israeli relations follows a discernible pattern of gradual evolution. Initially in the years 1948-1967, King Abdulaziz adopted a strategic approach characterized by non-engagement in Arab-Israeli conflicts while focusing on countering Hashemite influence in the region.⁹⁶ Following the 1967 conflict, Saudi policy shifted to alignment with mainstream Arab positions demanding Israeli territorial withdrawal. Yet, the Kingdom notably refrained from supporting calls for Israel's elimination.⁹⁷ The 1980s-1990s marked Saudi Arabia's transition to a more active diplomatic role, exemplified by the Fahd Peace Plan of 1981, which contained an implicit acknowledgment of Israel's existence.⁹⁸ A critical transformation occurred after the 2006 Lebanon War under the pretext of shared opposition to Iran and Hezbollah.⁹⁹

"Vision 2030" aims to double Saudi Arabia's GDP by 2030, requiring significant private and foreign investment of approximately \$4 trillion in the non-oil economy.¹⁰⁰ The strategy outlines eight priority sectors for development: tourism, construction, finance, healthcare, manufacturing, mining, petrochemicals, and retail and wholesale trade.¹⁰¹ The plan represents a deliberate shift from traditional Western-oriented development models toward a more diverse international engagement strategy, particularly with Asian partners.¹⁰² Saudi Arabia's decision to become a founding member of the Beijing-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), despite U.S. objections, illustrates this shift.¹⁰³ Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has directly connected Saudi "Vision 2030" with China's Belt and Road Initiative, paving the way for China to become one of the Kingdom's principal economic partners.¹⁰⁴ Aramco began selling oil to Chinese "teapot" refiners, a dramatic shift in strategy. The Kingdom reduced oil prices to compete with Iran, Iraq, and Russia in the Chinese market. These actions supported China's goal of deregulating its energy market.¹⁰⁵ A pivotal shift occurred in the mid-2010s, sparked by Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent Western isolation. This geopolitical reality forced Russia to seek new alliances in the Middle East. A breakthrough came with the formation of OPEC+ in 2016, which marked the beginning of closer cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia, particularly in energy markets. The personal relationship between Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak and Saudi Minister Khalid A. Al-Falih played a crucial role in building trust and cooperation.¹⁰⁶

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has further cemented Russia's pivot toward the Middle East. Notably, GCC countries have maintained a relatively neutral stance on the conflict, resisting Western pressure to condemn Russia's actions. This diplomatic positioning reflects the success of Russia's long-term strategy to build alternative partnerships outside the Western sphere. Currently, Russia and Saudi Arabia share common ground on several key issues, particularly regarding energy markets and the global transition away from fossil fuels. Both countries advocate for a gradual rather than rapid decarbonization process, positioning

themselves as reliable energy suppliers during the transition period. The relationship has expanded beyond energy cooperation, with Russia successfully inviting Saudi Arabia and the UAE to join BRICS, demonstrating its effort to create alternative international frameworks to counter Western influence.¹⁰⁷ Under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom has demonstrated a readiness to engage with a range of powers—such as Russia, China, and potentially Israel—when doing so serves its strategic interests.¹⁰⁸

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With the election of Donald J. Trump as U.S. president, the strategic value attributed to Saudi Arabia has notably increased. Saudi Arabia's hosting of peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine exemplifies the Kingdom's recent foreign policy posture. This emerging role builds on the Kingdom's recent diplomatic achievements, including successfully negotiating Russia-Ukraine prisoner swaps and maintaining a policy of "positive neutrality" that has enabled productive relationships with both sides of the conflict.¹⁰⁹ This stance has since been codified as a permanent foreign policy

strategy that now anchors the Kingdom's wider external engagement. Such global diplomatic initiatives have not only positioned Saudi Arabia prominently as an effective mediator internationally, but have also enhanced domestic public confidence in the leadership through visible foreign policy successes. For Saudi leaders, these achievements provide crucial leverage and expanded maneuverability for advancing internal social reforms.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the shifts in Saudi Arabia's regional alliances and strategic priorities following the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia continues to hold a strategically unique position in the Middle East. The Kingdom's custodianship of Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina, positions it centrally in the Muslim world, and its extensive oil reserves further strengthen the Kingdom's geopolitical leverage. As a result, financially fragile states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon depend on Saudi financial assistance. Such an increasing economic dependency, in fact, reinforces an asymmetrical relationship between Saudi Arabia and its neighbors. Moreover, our findings illustrate how the Saudi leadership within OPEC gives it considerable influence over global oil markets and price stability. Major global powers, including the U.S., China, and Russia,

closely monitor Saudi Arabia to overlook a state wielding such significant economic and geopolitical leverage.

Within this environment, this study specifically focused on how the Kingdom embarked on a series of internal reforms as a strategic response to the escalating regional instability and disorder fueled by the Arab Spring. The ascension of King Salman in 2015 and Prince Mohammed bin Salman's appointment as crown prince in 2017 were pivotal in solidifying this transformation. These reforms, collectively termed "Vision 2030" or the "Saudi First" initiative, aimed to reshape the relationship among religious authorities, royal elites, and the Saudi public profoundly. These factors resulted in a change of Saudi foreign policy towards a much more proactive, and strategically autonomy-seeking stance.

As Riyadh reshapes its national identity, we observe how its approach to external threats has evolved over time. The Saudi leadership has recently been seeking new strategies for safeguarding national unity, territorial integrity, and the political order. In pursuit of these objectives, it did not hesitate to sideline with key figures of the Sahwa movement, an Islamist revivalist trend prominent since the 1970s. Last but not least, the distinctiveness of Saudi Arabia's political system has been highlighted to leverage national interests effectively on the international stage. Taking these into consideration, "Vision 2030" has triggered a process of elite-driven identity reconstruction with considerable implications for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy.

This article also underlined how the era of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has witnessed a notable influx of externally recruited, highly educated technocrats into key positions. Change in higher cadres has substantially consolidated decision-making mechanisms in Saudi foreign policy. What deserves additional attention is how this breaks away from past practices that prioritized elite consensus and stability. Ultimately, foreign policy decision-making has become highly centralized around Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Notably, our study has also identified how diverse international developments trigger different reactions from the Saudi elites. An accurate example of this is the Saudi elite's realization that U.S. support for the existing political regime in Saudi Arabia is, in fact, uncertain and inconsistent. This understanding was exemplified by Washington's ambivalent stance toward Hosni Mubarak's fall in Egypt during the Arab Spring. This pushed Riyadh to seek to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships, strengthening ties with Russia and China rather than relying solely on the U.S. This strategic shift was driven, in part, by concerns regarding its regional rival, Iran. For instance, Iran's integration into China's Belt and Road Initiative and its extensive military collaboration with Russia in Syria underscored Tehran's growing ties with both powers. In a

pragmatic response, Saudi Arabia deepened its cooperation with Russia, notably through the coordination of oil production strategies via OPEC+ agreements beginning in 2016. Simultaneously, it strengthened economic ties with China through large-scale infrastructure and technology investments, including China's pivotal role in developing Saudi Arabia's 5G network and renewable energy projects under "Vision 2030."

Considering these, one could argue that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the aftermath of the Arab Spring has been shaped primarily by a combination of various social transformations, elite-level personnel changes, and the pursuit of new strategic alliances with different global powers.

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