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Explaining the Factors Influencing Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy in West Asia (2011–2023)

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ABSTRACT

Southwest Asia is one of the most significant and strategically important regions in the international system and has experienced numerous challenges and crises in recent decades. Saudi Arabia is regarded as one of the most important actors in this strategic region. The country has played a prominent role in the Middle East following the extensive developments associated with the Islamic Awakening. Over the past several decades, Saudi Arabia, as a major Middle Eastern actor, has been known for adopting a conservative approach to foreign policy and has generally been characterized as a status quo-oriented actor and a staunch opponent of change. This study employs a descriptive–analytical approach and library-based research method, using note-taking as a data-collection technique to examine relevant sources. Drawing on constructivist theory, it seeks to investigate the factors influencing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in West Asia from 2011 to 2023. Accordingly, the following research question is posed: What factors have influenced Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in West Asia? In response to this question, the following hypothesis is proposed: Wahhabism and support for terrorist groups constitute influential factors shaping Saudi Arabia's regional policy in West Asia. The findings indicate that Saudi Arabia is among the identity-based and ideologically oriented political systems in the region, and that these ideological orientations have exerted a substantial influence on all dimensions of its political system, including its foreign policy. The country's foreign policy is founded on two principal pillars: first, leadership of the Islamic world; and second, alliance, coordination, and alignment with the West and the United States. Furthermore, over the past several decades, Saudi Arabia has been identified as a major source of support for and expansion of takfiri groups across the Islamic world, particularly in the Arab world.

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia, foreign policy, legitimacy, West Asia, monarchy, Wahhabism*

Introduction

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has moved away from passivity and stagnation and has adopted active responses to regional issues. Within the framework of this assertive foreign policy, Saudi Arabia has employed various instruments, including support for takfiri groups, in an effort to manage regional developments and prevent external transformations from spilling over into the country. The monarchical political system can be regarded as the principal domestic source of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. This component constitutes one of the main variables influencing the country's foreign policy.



The principal function of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is to ensure stability and security and to prevent value-based, identity-related, and physical threats to the monarchical system. Moreover, the structure, configuration of interests, and values of the monarchy constitute the principal factors influencing Saudi foreign policy. The accession of King Salman created the conditions for changes in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. These changes reflected a different perception, on the part of King Salman and the country's foreign-policy decision-makers, of the threats and opportunities facing Saudi Arabia, as well as their distinctive assessment of the country's foreign-policy orientations. This development has been interpreted as a transition in Saudi foreign policy from relative conservatism toward a more assertive and offensive approach.

Wahhabism equipped the Saudi leadership with a new instrument that was fundamental to the consolidation and expansion of Saudi rule. The outcome of this consolidation enabled the Saudi leadership to expand its presence in the region. The Wahhabi doctrine and the strengthening of the role of Sharia within Arab society were among the fundamental demands of the Wahhabi movement. Wahhabism provided the Saudi leadership with a new instrument that was essential to the consolidation and expansion of Saudi rule. The primary objective of Saudi foreign policy has been to expand the country's influence in Muslim states through the promotion of Wahhabism. Another dimension of Saudi foreign policy, shaped by Wahhabi doctrine, has been to exert influence over Arab countries and consolidate Saudi Arabia's political position among them, particularly among neighboring states.

Saudi Arabia has consistently sought to employ Wahhabi discourse instrumentally, expand Salafism, and support extremist Islamist groups aligned with its policies as some of the most important and prominent instruments for broadening its regional influence and advancing its overarching foreign-policy objectives. In its pursuit of regional hegemony, Saudi Arabia follows an assertive foreign policy in the Middle East, the clearest manifestation of which can be observed in its approach toward Yemen. With the rise of Mohammed bin Salman to power in Saudi Arabia, the country's foreign policy underwent a transformation, shifting from relative isolation toward a more assertive foreign policy characterized by greater involvement in regional and international affairs.

Saudi Arabia has consistently been one of the most important identity-based states in the Middle East. The Wahhabi sect played a major role in the formation, political continuity, and survival of the Saudi state and currently constitutes one of its principal sources of political legitimacy. Saudi Arabia is one of the identity-based political systems of the Middle East in which identity-related considerations, particularly Islam, constitute major sources of legitimacy for the country's political system.

In its foreign policy, in addition to being influenced by Wahhabi ideas and teachings and facilitating the expansion of Wahhabism throughout the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia behaves in a markedly realist and security-oriented manner.

Accordingly, it may be argued that Saudi foreign policy is directed toward expanding the influence of Wahhabism and shaping other currents and developments that, at the regional level in the Middle East, as well as at the international and even domestic levels, affect the security of the country.

Research Background

- Aters, in his book *Saudi Arabia* (1), explains the traditional alliance between the religious establishment and the royal family in Saudi Arabia and examines the possibility of revolution in the world's major oil capital. By discussing developments concerning the role and status of women in Saudi Arabia's highly traditionalist and extremist social environment, as well as the digital information explosion and the emergence of popular

demands through social networks in the country, he seeks to provide researchers with a realistic and impartial understanding of Saudi society and politics.

- Masjed Jamei, in his book *Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and the Sheikdoms* (2), examines the convergence between ongoing developments and the cultural and social structures of the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf region. Countries of the region, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, constitute some of the most important and influential sheikdoms. Their vast oil and gas reserves, immense revenues derived from petroleum exports, and location in a strategically significant region have consistently attracted the attention of numerous scholars and researchers in political science and international relations.
- Mousavi Shafaei and colleagues, in their article entitled “A Model of Regional Order in West Asia Centered on Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia (The West Asian Concert)” (3), argue that order at different levels has consistently constituted one of the central challenges and questions in the discipline of international relations. West Asia has similarly remained a major focus of scholarly attention for numerous reasons, including its role in energy production, commodity transit and transportation routes, and security crises. By asking how a regional order can be achieved in West Asia, the study seeks to propose a plausible model of regional order in light of transformations in the international system.
- Kalhor and colleagues, in their article entitled “The Change in Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy and the Revival of Relations with Iran (2021–2024)” (4), state that relations between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have experienced numerous fluctuations over the past several decades. Ideological and geopolitical rivalries between these two powerful Middle Eastern actors resulted in various tensions and ultimately in proxy conflicts. Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a degree of transformation in Saudi Arabia’s policies toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Accordingly, constructive negotiations between the two countries began in 2021 and, through Chinese mediation, culminated in the “Beijing Agreement” in 2023, leading to the restoration of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran after seven years of severed relations.
- Hosseini and colleagues, in their article entitled “The Strategic Position of Yemen in Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy” (5), argue that the geopolitical relationship between Saudi Arabia and Yemen has involved numerous interactions and confrontations over recent decades, generating developments that have drawn several regional actors into these events. These include ideological and religious disputes that produced various developments and transformed bilateral relations from cooperation and convergence on certain regional issues into tension and even military confrontation.

One of the principal distinctions between the present study and previous research is its temporal scope, which has the potential to contribute to and enrich the existing literature in this field.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist Theory and International Relations

The pioneers of this important theory in international relations are generally situated, in metatheoretical terms, between positivists on the one hand and post-structuralists on the other, and, in substantive and applied debates, between the two intellectual traditions of realism and liberalism. In fact, this perspective emerged through a rejection

of essentialism, because it considers the subject to be historically and contextually constituted. Ontological issues lie at the center of constructivist inquiry, with particular attention to three important and influential components:

- a) The role and significance of influential normative, ideational, and non-material structures;
- b) The role and effects of identities in the formation and evolution of actors' interests and behavior within the international environment and structure;
- c) The reciprocal relationship between structure and agency in the pursuit of interests.

Constructivism in international relations has its roots in sociological thought and theories that emerged in the early 1970s, particularly in the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann on the social construction of reality within the sociology of knowledge. (6)

From another perspective, and as stated by Nicholas Onuf, one of the theorists in this field, constructivism begins with practices—that is, with what is done, the actions that are performed, and the words that are expressed. (7)

In fact, it may be argued that what constructivists emphasize is the social nature and character of social actors. From this perspective, states largely determine the character and nature of the international system and give it direction. What states do in their relations with other countries depends on the factors that constitute their identities and interests and on the variables capable of influencing them. Identities and interests also undergo transformation over time as certain conditions change. Such changes in identities and interests are related both to state policymaking and to developments in the international system, which they can influence substantially. It can therefore be concluded that the important question is how identities and interests are constituted. (8)

To understand identities more fully and to comprehend norms more effectively, it is necessary to examine the meanings and concepts associated with them. (9)

Constructivism is important because it offers a new substantive understanding of international relations and the international system; it is also particularly significant because of its metatheoretical contributions. The major debates of this school within epistemology and ontology enable researchers to develop deeper and novel understandings of social and political realities. Within this approach, identities constitute the basis of interests, and a profound relationship develops between national interests and identity, thereby clarifying the orientations adopted by states toward one another.

An important point is that, among constructivist theorists in international relations, considerable attention is devoted to the social construction of reality and to the role of language and linguistic practices. Some focus on culture, others emphasize discourse, while still others place considerable emphasis on norms, prescriptions, prohibitions, rules, or related phenomena. Overall, constructivism in international relations sometimes shifts the center of debate from epistemology toward ontology. For this reason, constructivists' acceptance of the significance of material reality distinguishes them from post-structuralists. (10)

The development and elaboration of the constructivist approach in international relations have witnessed the emergence of various forms of constructivism with different concerns and analytical capacities. In this regard, numerous scholars have attempted to provide systematic classifications of the principal currents of constructivism. For example, John Ruggie, himself a prominent constructivist thinker, distinguishes among neoclassical, postmodern, and naturalistic constructivism, while Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner classify constructivism into conventional, critical, and postmodern variants. (11)

Reus-Smit divides constructivism into transnational and domestic (social) forms, emphasizing the role of international norms at the international level and societal norms at the domestic level. Accordingly, social practices

that constitute an identity cannot refer to interests that are inconsistent with the practices and structures through which that identity is constituted. Within this approach, behavior becomes meaningful under intersubjective social conditions. Because actors seek to develop and understand themselves through norms and practices, the exercise of power and the manifestation of behavior in the absence of norms are devoid of meaning. Under such conditions, constitutive norms define an identity by specifying behaviors that induce others to recognize that identity and respond appropriately to it. (12)

The identities of actors, whether within the international system or in the domestic environment, constitute important factors shaping their interests, roles, and behavior. In constructivist terms, identities reveal motivations that facilitate the understanding of behavior. Owing to its distinctive identity characteristics and the elements constituting them, Saudi Arabia has defined particular interests and roles for itself.

This study adopts a descriptive–analytical approach and draws on constructivist theory, particularly the concept of identity, to examine Saudi Arabia’s identity and the factors influencing its foreign policy, especially in West Asia, during the period from 2011 to 2023. It should be emphasized that Wahhabism constitutes a prominent and influential factor in the identity-related dimensions of the Saudi state.

Saudi Arabia’s Strategic Policies in the Region

In implementing its overarching strategic policies in the region, Saudi Arabia employs two types of instruments that are naturally available to it and constitute part of its principal natural and geopolitical resources. One of the most important and influential instruments available to Saudi Arabia is oil, and revenues generated from oil exports affect virtually all of the country’s major activities, particularly economic activities in the industrial, service, and commercial sectors.

Through the substantial revenues generated by oil exports, the country seeks to achieve its principal objectives:

1. Maintaining stability;
2. Ensuring the security of the Saudi monarchy’s territory;
3. Increasing international influence and prestige;
4. Diversifying the economy by reducing its heavy dependence on exports.

Another instrument employed by Saudi Arabia to achieve its regional objectives is the instrumental use of ideology. Through the promotion of Wahhabism in the region, it pursues a variety of objectives. Since its emergence, Wahhabism has consistently constituted one of the fundamental pillars legitimizing the actions of the monarchical institution in the formation of the Saudi political system and preservation of the monarchy.

This ideology has profoundly influenced decision-making in the domestic sphere and the nature of Saudi Arabia’s behavior in foreign affairs. In its foreign policy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia has consistently attempted to use its influence and the promotion of Wahhabism within the Sunni world to consolidate its position of leadership in the Islamic world and to continue its regional activities as a claimant to the leadership of the Muslim world. Alongside Wahhabism, the legitimizing role of the Kaaba, as the qibla of Muslims and an important symbol of unity in the Islamic world, should not be overlooked. In this context, the instrumental use of these sacred sites, which are highly revered by Muslims, is reflected in the fact that Saudi monarchs refer to themselves as the Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques.

By employing these important, influential, and power-generating components, Saudi Arabia has consistently sought to manage its regional and global objectives as effectively as possible.

The principal elements of Saudi Arabia's strategic policy in the Middle East, which are continuously pursued by the country's political leaders through the use of the two aforementioned factors, include:

1. Ensuring the continuation of domestic and regional security. In pursuit of this objective, Saudi Arabia has structured its relations with other states in such a manner as to increase their perceived interest in the stability and continuity of the Saudi throne.
2. Explicit opposition to revolutionary centers and movements in the Islamic world, particularly in the Arab world, because such revolutionary movements may challenge the legitimacy of Saudi rule.
3. Strengthening and consolidating the political position of right-wing regimes governing certain Muslim countries that are aligned with Saudi regional policies, while encouraging and supporting moderate regimes in cooperating to advance the objectives of the Western bloc.
4. Emphasizing Saudi leadership of the Islamic world in order to enhance the country's role within the international system.
5. Promoting Wahhabism as the country's dominant ideology and prevailing discourse in order to expand its influence throughout the Islamic world and utilizing extremist religious groups to advance Saudi objectives.
6. Seeking to weaken and undermine the position of regional competitors, particularly the Islamic Republic of Iran, and promoting and expanding anti-Shia and anti-Iranian sentiments among regional states. This approach has contributed to transforming the Persian Gulf region into an arena of regional arms competition and a lucrative market for arms exports from Western countries, particularly the United States and European states. (13)

Saudi Arabia as a Regional Actor

For many years, Saudi Arabia adopted a conservative approach in its foreign relations in order to preserve the stability of its political structure. This approach was reinforced by Gamal Abdel Nasser's rise to power and his promotion of Pan-Arab ideology. Pan-Arabism, which stood in existential opposition to the political-religious identity of the House of Saud, encouraged increasingly close relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States. This rapprochement contributed to Saudi passivity in foreign policy aimed at preserving the regional status quo. It was within the framework of this policy that Saudi Arabia supported the monarchy in North Yemen against Nasser and the coup forces and became involved in a five-year war in Yemen. For several decades, the Arab Cold War positioned Saudi Arabia within the conservative camp in opposition to Pan-Arab states. Alongside the Arab Cold War, the international system was also characterized by the global Cold War, which indirectly and through proxy dynamics threatened Saudi Arabia's political survival. The Arab defeat in the 1967 war can be regarded as marking the end of Nasserism, while Nasser's death brought a degree of moderation to the Arab Cold War. With Nasser's death and the Western-oriented approach of his successor, Anwar Sadat, regional pressures on Saudi Arabia diminished, although the presence of Muammar Gaddafi, Saddam Hussein, and Hafez al-Assad, together with their Pan-Arab ideologies, continued to generate pressure on Saudi Arabia. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War also relieved international-systemic pressure on Saudi Arabia. Since Saudi Arabia had become a strategic ally of the United States during both the Arab Cold War and the global Cold War, the collapse of the bipolar system and the predominance of the United States provided Saudi Arabia with a considerably broader sphere of action in the Middle East. Within this framework, supported by substantial oil revenues and by the United

States, Saudi Arabia sought to overcome the structural passivity imposed upon it and expand its values—based on fundamentalist Islam with Wahhabi characteristics—throughout the Middle East and the Islamic world. (14)

Wahhabism can be regarded as the ideological and identity-based dimension of the Saudi state and as a factor exerting substantial influence on the continuity and depth of the country's foreign policy. As a central feature of the Saudi state, Wahhabism influences Saudi foreign policy in various ways. Its most significant effects include:

1. Seeking to export and expand the Saudi interpretation of Wahhabi Islam throughout the region and the wider Islamic world.
2. Claiming leadership of the Islamic world by virtue of the holy sites located in Mecca and Medina.
3. Opposing movements and developments that seek to promote democracy, with such opposition being justified through Wahhabi ideological reasoning.

Nevertheless, internal divisions within Wahhabism and its gradual differentiation into official or traditional Wahhabism, reformist Wahhabism centered on the Sahwa movement, and jihadist or radical Wahhabism have created challenges for Saudi leaders and destabilized certain foundations of the country's foreign policy over the past two decades. (15)

Saudi Arabia's Security–Military Strategies in the Region

Achieving a military balance among the Persian Gulf littoral states has been one of the most prominent strategies pursued by Western powers and regional states for approximately the past 40 years. The numerous sources of instability in the geostrategically and geopolitically important Persian Gulf region during the final decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century explain the concerns of regional states and, above all, developed Western societies. Repressive authoritarianism, single-party or military governments, the absence of the rule of law, human rights violations, high population growth rates, religious fundamentalism, tribalism, excessive dependence on foreign labor, inefficient socioeconomic infrastructure, excessive reliance on non-productive service sectors, excessive dependence on oil and gas, substantial military expenditures, transfers of advanced conventional weapons and technologies, and numerous other factors in the region constitute potential or actual sources of tension. As a pivotal state in this region, Saudi Arabia has not been immune to these challenges. In recent years, the persistence of such conditions in regional countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, has constituted a major concern for Saudi officials and other interested states. Recognizing these circumstances, Saudi policymakers and their extra-regional allies have adopted various measures to ensure regional and national security and, consistent with these security approaches, have strengthened their military capabilities. (16)

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the military, security, and strategic domains is based on preserving the country's relations with Western states.

Saudi Arabia's objective in orienting itself toward Western states, particularly the United States, is to confront pro-democracy developments and any activities undertaken by radical revolutionary groups, thereby preventing the spread of revolution and instability into Saudi territory. (17)

Despite Saudi Arabia's tendency to expand military and defense cooperation with several major global powers, its policymakers continue to place relations and cooperation with the United States at the forefront of their policies.

The United States is among the countries whose military capabilities Saudi Arabia continually seeks to utilize within the security arrangements of the Persian Gulf. Given Saudi security agreements with the United States and the historical record of bilateral relations, the role and significance of the United States in Persian Gulf security

arrangements are clearly evident from the perspective of the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia seeks to benefit from its military relations, particularly those with the United States, at both domestic and regional levels and to remain under the U.S. security umbrella. Consequently, to preserve its internal and external security, it seeks to strengthen its military and defense capabilities and places arms purchases from the United States at the forefront of its military and defense programs and activities. (18)

In light of the foregoing, Saudi Arabia has spent extensively on the procurement of diverse military equipment from the United States and has accumulated substantial quantities of weaponry in its arsenals in an effort to achieve its desired foreign-policy objective of maintaining the regional status quo. (19)

Saudi Arabia devotes considerable attention to increasing its military capabilities because an effective military capacity enhances the country's bargaining power and helps protect it against potential threats, particularly the spillover of revolutionary movements into Saudi territory. Major arms purchases and the development of military infrastructure constitute key Saudi activities aimed at achieving these objectives. (20)

Saudi Arabia is among the largest purchasers of military equipment from the United States, and a reciprocal relationship between the two countries is evident in this regard. The promotion of anti-Shia and anti-Iranian narratives contributed to further strengthening this bilateral relationship.

Multiple factors influence the formulation of Saudi Arabia's security policies. The most important include Saudi Arabia's comparatively weaker position relative to Iran and its foreign-policy orientation toward preserving the regional status quo. Accordingly, following developments in the Middle East that resulted in changes to the political systems of several countries, Saudi Arabia undertook actions in the region that contributed to further insecurity. Prominent examples include its support for takfiri groups, the arming of opponents of the Assad government, and intervention in Iraqi affairs.

Saudi Arabia's Role in Destabilizing the Middle East

The strategic position of the Middle East and its vast energy reserves have consistently constituted major factors underlying instability in the region. During the past century, most major global economic powers have sought to exploit emerging opportunities to penetrate the region and expand their influence over larger parts of the Middle East. Initially, they divided the territories of the collapsed Ottoman Empire and, by fomenting ethnic and tribal conflicts and supporting one tribe against another, contributed to the creation of new states. The foundations of many of these states were based on authoritarian systems whose rulers prioritized the interests of their ruling families and Western supporters over those of their populations. Within this context, Saudi Arabia became formally recognized as a supporter of Wahhabism in the region while maintaining close relations with the United States and the West. In a subsequent stage, according to this perspective, the West established the "fabricated Zionist regime" in the heart of the Middle East, thereby sowing further conflict in the region. The Zionist regime, through its occupation of Jerusalem and Palestinian territories, entered into conflict with Muslims and Arabs. Israel is described as the principal and overt enemy of the peoples of the region. The text further argues that another adversary exists within the region itself: a state that claims leadership of the Islamic and Arab worlds while being portrayed as one of the region's principal adversaries alongside Israel. It maintains that the Wahhabi Saudi regime has, over recent decades, taken numerous actions that have contributed to unrest and instability in the Middle East, including overt intervention in the affairs of other countries and the promotion of sectarianism. According to this argument, such

measures have served the broader objective of facilitating the presence of major global powers in the region. Saudi Arabia's role in intensifying the Syrian crisis is presented as particularly evident. (21)

With the beginning of the Syrian developments, Saudi Arabia sought, through financial support for takfiri groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, to deepen instability in Syria; the text further states that the subsequent fall of the Assad government and the rise of al-Jolani intensified the deterioration of the country's situation. Alongside Saudi Arabia, the Zionist regime, several European countries, and the United States provided military and political support to these takfiri groups. Another dimension of Saudi Arabia's alleged attempts to destabilize the region can be observed in developments in Iraq, where sectarian violence expanded and was attributed in the text primarily to Saudi-linked militants and al-Qaeda. The argument advanced is that Saudi Arabia sought to stimulate sectarianism in Iraq in order to counter popular unrest within its own territory. In other words, Saudi officials are described as attempting to foment sectarian conflict in Iraq and elsewhere in order to justify the repression of Shia communities in Qatif Province and other Shia-populated areas. The overt support of the House of Saud for al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Iraq and the flight to Saudi Arabia of Tariq al-Hashimi, former deputy to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who was accused of establishing death squads in Iraq, are also presented as examples of Saudi activities contributing to regional instability and insecurity. In Bahrain, following the beginning of the popular uprising in February 2011, the Al Khalifa regime, Saudi Arabia, and other Persian Gulf states used affiliated media outlets to portray the uprising as exclusively Shia. However, the arrest or killing of some Sunni political activists undermined this narrative. The text argues that these governments initially sought to set Shia and Sunni communities against one another and suppress the uprising through sectarian conflict, but failed to do so. Consequently, Saudi security forces were ultimately dispatched to Bahrain and participated in the severe suppression of protesters. Within Saudi Arabia, several institutions are described as playing significant roles in destabilizing the Middle East, most notably Saudi intelligence organizations and religious and fatwa institutions. Saudi muftis, through controversial fatwas—including rulings permitting the killing of Shia Muslims or calling for jihad in Iraq and Syria—are described as facilitating the movement of takfiri militants into those countries. According to a report by the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups from 82 countries entered Syria through Jordanian and Turkish borders to fight the government of Bashar al-Assad. Following Prince Bandar bin Sultan's appointment as head of Saudi intelligence in 2012, Saudi activities intended to destabilize the region are described as reaching their peak. Bandar bin Sultan, a nephew of Abdullah bin Abdulaziz and former Saudi ambassador to the United States, is presented as having been involved in violent developments from Syria and Lebanon to Iraq and Bahrain. His background indicates extensive experience in arming and financing insurgent groups. During the 1980s, Bandar bin Sultan assisted the CIA in equipping the mujahideen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan, some of whom subsequently became part of the organizational foundations of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. (22)

The text argues that this Saudi prince subsequently sought to revive his former role by providing financial, military, and training assistance to Islamist militants. From Syria and Lebanon to Iraq and Pakistan, the escalation of regional violence is characterized as being, to a considerable extent, a joint project involving Bandar bin Sultan and Israel. The sudden escalation of Washington's military threats against the Assad government in September is likewise attributed to pressure and incentives from this Saudi-Israeli alignment. However, when Washington refrained from launching a military attack on Syria, Saudi and Israeli relations with the United States deteriorated, and the issue even resulted in explicit Saudi criticism of U.S. policy toward Syria. Overall, the text characterizes Saudi Arabia and Israel as two complementary actors contributing to instability in the Middle East. An examination

of leaked reports and news, according to this account, indicates close relations between the two governments in the Middle East. The relationship between Zionism and Wahhabism is described as having developed to such an extent that Yahya Abu Zakariya, a researcher from the Islamic world, is cited as stating that Jerusalem was taken from Muslims by Jews, while Mecca and Medina were taken by Wahhabis. He argues that Wahhabism was created to undermine Islam and that Wahhabi media outlets financed by oil revenues from the Arabian Peninsula present a highly negative image of Islam, which, according to him, corresponds to the objectives of the United States and Israel. (22)

Regional Competition with the Islamic Republic of Iran

The first decade of the twenty-first century was accompanied by significant transformations in the U.S.-led global order. The September 11, 2001 attacks led to U.S. military intervention in the Middle East, followed by the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Following the September 11 attacks, the political map of the Middle East changed considerably, producing a new reconfiguration of political equations in the region. In this sense, the Middle East before September 11 differed substantially from the Middle East that emerged afterward, leading to the use of the term “New Middle East” to characterize this period.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein, a longstanding adversary of the Islamic Republic of Iran located in Iran's immediate neighborhood, enabled the Islamic Republic to pursue new initiatives aimed at strengthening Shia political power on its western and southwestern fronts. Developments in Iraq, particularly the existence of a Shia majority, facilitated extensive Iranian influence among Iraqi Shia groups. Ultimately, a political system emerged in Iraq that demonstrated a considerable inclination toward supporting the Islamic Republic of Iran's regional policies. The trajectory of political developments in Iraq and the increasing political power of Shia groups angered Saudi Arabia to the extent that it refused to recognize the Shia-led government of Ibrahim al-Jaafari. These developments marked the beginning of intensified regional competition between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The 33-day war constituted a peak in this rivalry. During Israel's attack on southern Lebanon and the actions undertaken by Israel, Saudi Arabia, together with other states concerned about Iran's increasing power, including Egypt and Jordan, accused Hezbollah of adventurism and of generating regional crises. Following the war, numerous analysts used the concept of a regional Cold War to describe what they called the New Middle East. Israel's failure to eliminate Hezbollah generated fears of expanding Iranian influence extending to the Mediterranean Sea. This development prompted a hostile Saudi reaction and intensified regional competition with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The U.S. Secretary of State characterized this competition as a rivalry between “extremist” states and forces—the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Axis of Resistance—and “moderate” forces—Saudi Arabia and the conservative Arab camp—in the Middle East. Other observers interpreted the Saudi–Iranian rivalry during this conflict as a form of balance-of-power politics within a realist framework. Regardless of the terminology employed, however, regional developments after the fall of Saddam Hussein and Israel's failure in the 2006 war intensified regional competition between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. (23)

Saudi efforts to facilitate the participation of al-Qaeda-affiliated forces from European countries and Russia's autonomous republics in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon—for jihadist warfare against those whom they identified as unbelievers and deviants—contributed to the recruitment of such forces from different parts of the world to the Middle East. The 2008–2009 Gaza War added another dimension to regional tensions and competition between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. This conflict also reflected changes in the nature of regional politics

in the Middle East and reproduced dynamics already evident in the 2006 Lebanon War. Although Saudi Arabia and Egypt sought to contribute to Gaza's reconstruction, they characterized Hamas as a pro-Iranian force in the Gaza Strip and the Sunni world that facilitated the expansion of Iranian influence in both the Arab and Sunni worlds. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic of Iran demonstrated greater attention to the Palestinian issue than many Arab governments, thereby strengthening Iran's influence regarding the Palestinian question. Within this environment, Arab media led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar sought, despite broad public sensitivity toward the Palestinian issue in Arab societies, to replace anti-Israeli sentiments with anti-Hamas and anti-Hezbollah narratives. The Arab uprisings brought these rivalries into a more explicit and overt form. Open competition and proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran became particularly evident in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. (23)

Saudi Arabia's Regional Approach

Compared with other Arab countries in the strategically important Persian Gulf region, Saudi Arabia has adopted a considerably more independent approach in its foreign policy and in its interactions and relations with major global powers, particularly the United States. This orientation differs fundamentally from that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran has maintained a negative view of the presence of extra-regional powers, particularly the United States, regarding such involvement as contributing to regional insecurity. Saudi Arabia's approach derives from important features of its geopolitics and power position, particularly in the post-September 11 environment. Saudi Arabia does not consider itself removed from regional threats and consistently seeks to establish a balance among major powers in its foreign policy while preserving its regional relations with other states within this framework.

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia has consistently been concerned about the increasing power and role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's assistance to Hezbollah in Lebanon, its extensive support for Palestinians, and its efforts to influence political developments in Iraq. Saudi Arabia has therefore sought to diminish Iran's regional role.

Developments in recent years, particularly those following the Islamic Awakening in the Middle East, which contributed to the expansion of Iranian and Shia influence and activity, have heightened Saudi concerns regarding the erosion of its own regional role and influence. These more recent concerns, together with Saudi Arabia's longstanding sensitivity and suspicion toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, have prompted Riyadh to undertake measures aimed at altering the regional balance.

Historically, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq were regarded as the principal states of the Persian Gulf region. An alliance between any two of these three countries was sufficient to exert considerable influence over major regional issues and developments. Saudi Arabia consistently sought to use Iraq as an instrument for enhancing its own regional role. Saudi sensitivity toward the expansion of Iranian and Shia influence in Iraq should be understood from this perspective.

Saudi Arabia has consistently portrayed itself as a staunch defender of Sunni Muslims and has expressed concern about the declining role of Sunni communities in Iraq, Lebanon, and neighboring states such as Bahrain, because increasing Shia political power could potentially produce extensive political and social transformations within Saudi Arabia itself. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly been accused of employing extremist groups as instruments for destabilizing regional conditions and supporting anti-Shia forces undertaking various activities in Iraq and Syria; this is an issue toward which the Islamic Republic of Iran is expected to remain particularly sensitive.

Such Saudi activities could generate security consequences, particularly along Iran's Arab- and Kurdish-populated border regions. The Saudi government seeks to portray confrontation involving these fundamentalist forces as non-state activity and to attribute it to Sunni religious scholars, including those outside Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's role in the Sunni world remains significant and derives from its geopolitical position, the presence of the Two Holy Mosques within its territory, and its sustained support for Sunni communities. Given this role, if Saudi leaders perceive that the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks absolute regional predominance while disregarding Saudi Arabia's position, they may intensify Shia–Sunni tensions and use sectarian dynamics to restrict Iranian influence in the region, particularly among Arab populations. (24)

Saudi Arabia's Assertive Foreign-Policy Approach toward Yemen

Saudi foreign policy, as that of an important and pivotal regional actor, indicates that the country has sought to employ a conservative–assertive foreign policy in order to prevent the wave of regional revolutions from spreading into its domestic territory. The use of this terminology is based on the fact that, within this type of foreign policy, an actor seeks to preserve the status quo and neutralize factors capable of transforming the existing order, while simultaneously pursuing legitimacy. Such objectives may be implemented through foreign-policy diplomacy, financial support, the deployment of highly trained military forces and advanced weaponry, and even direct military occupation.

An examination and analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy following regional revolutions indicate that, in its efforts to preserve the regional order and contain political transformations, Saudi Arabia did not merely observe developments. Rather, it actively sought to preserve existing regional structures and significantly influence the factors shaping these revolutions. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf is therefore conservative in one respect because it seeks to preserve the status quo, as the emerging regional circumstances were undesirable from the perspective of Saudi rulers. Saudi Arabia consequently attempted to employ political, economic, and security instruments to direct and manage regional revolutionary processes in accordance with its interests. (25)

In the context of developments in Yemen, Saudi Arabia constitutes the most important external actor. Saudi Arabia has consistently played an interventionist role in Yemen and has regarded the country as its strategic backyard. One significant example of Saudi intervention in Yemen was its involvement in the Yemeni Civil War of 1994. (26)

Saudi Arabia also intervened in the conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthi Shia movement, participating in military operations and bombardments against the Houthis. The adoption of an assertive Saudi foreign-policy approach toward Yemen has been linked to the growing regional influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (27)

Saudi Arabia is deeply concerned about the regional influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly among Shia communities, and seeks to reduce Iran's role and influence. Indeed, countering Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Saudi Arabia's closest neighbors, Bahrain and Yemen, constitutes one of Saudi Arabia's principal regional objectives.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's reasons for adopting new foreign-policy approaches possess two interconnected dimensions, material and ideational. During the period from 2011 to 2023, Saudi Arabia sought to strengthen its regional power by pursuing newly defined foreign-policy interests and to reconstruct the balance of power in the Middle East, which it perceived as shifting in Iran's favor, thereby enhancing its own identity and position within regional foreign policy. From the Saudi perspective, this process could also generate benefits in the domestic political sphere, because an enhanced foreign-policy position resulting from the successful pursuit of national interests could increase the domestic legitimacy of the country's political system. Similarly, consolidating a stronger national identity could facilitate the pursuit of interests more easily and at lower cost, providing Saudi Arabia with a valuable advantage in both domestic and external environments. Nevertheless, the country's capacities, resources, and challenges in achieving these objectives must also be taken into consideration. Saudi Arabia is among the region's political systems possessing a distinct ideology and identity foundations. The thought of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Hanbali school has exerted substantial influence across the country's political structures, including its foreign policy. Within the Wahhabi intellectual framework, leadership of the Islamic world and alliance and coordination with the West, particularly the United States, constitute central principles.

Accordingly, the Saudi government pursues a number of specific objectives in the Middle East:

- Attaining a prominent position and status in the Middle East and Persian Gulf;
- Maintaining influence over Muslim states in the region, particularly aligned Arab governments;
- Seeking to preserve the position and status of Sunni governments and groups throughout the region;
- Expanding political, economic, and military interaction with the United States;
- Seeking to reduce the influence of Iran and other regional and extra-regional competitors, particularly in West Asia.

Recommendations

1. Saudi Arabia regards the growth of Islamist actors in the region as a threat to its Islamic and Sunni identity and to its claim to leadership of the Islamic world. Accordingly, the promotion of authentic Muhammadan Islam should be placed on the agenda of the relevant authorities.
2. Saudi foreign policy has consistently operated toward weakening identity-based competitors. Therefore, efforts to enhance coordination and alignment among Shia communities are of particular importance.
3. Efforts to reject all forms of violence can contribute to revealing the true character of Wahhabi extremist movements.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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