

Continuity And Change: Saudi Arabia's Diplomatic Strategies in the Arabian Gulf

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	<p>This study examines Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Arabian Gulf from 2011 to 2023, focusing on the key factors, motivations, and influences shaping its diplomatic strategies during this period. It investigates Saudi Arabia's decision-making processes, the role of its religious influence, its regional standing, and how these elements have defined its foreign policy under King Salman's leadership. By analyzing Saudi Arabia's responses to various regional challenges, including interventions, conflicts, and political instability, the research offers a detailed understanding of its strategic approach in the Gulf region. Using a multi-faceted methodology, the study draws on primary sources such as interviews, official statements, and policy documents, alongside secondary scholarly works, to provide valuable insights into Saudi Arabia's diplomatic maneuvers. The findings highlight the complex interplay of religious influence, regional stature, and strategic objectives in shaping Saudi foreign policy, revealing the underlying motivations behind its actions. This research offers practical implications for policymakers, analysts, and stakeholders by enhancing understanding of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy dynamics. The findings contribute to assessing the Gulf's geopolitical landscape and offer recommendations to strengthen regional stability, promote cooperation, and address tensions through diplomatic initiatives and dialogue.</p> <p>Keywords: Diplomacy; Foreign Policy; GCC; Gulf; Saudi Arabia</p>

INTRODUCTION

The Gulf region has undergone significant geopolitical transformations in recent years, driven by events such as the Arab Spring and the leadership transition in Saudi Arabia from King Abdullah to King Salman. These developments have profoundly influenced Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, particularly in its relations with neighboring Arabian Gulf States. During this period, Saudi Arabia faced notable diplomatic challenges, including its rift with Qatar (2016–2017) and its involvement in the protracted Yemeni conflict. As a key player in the Gulf, which is critical to global energy security—accounting for nearly 20% of the world's oil transit—Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has far-reaching regional and international implications.

Despite shared historical, cultural, and religious ties among Gulf nations, the region remains politically dynamic and volatile, ranking outside the top 50 in the Global Economy Political Stability Index (2022). Saudi Arabia, the largest and most politically influential Gulf nation, plays a pivotal role in shaping these dynamics (Nonneman, 2005; Saleh, 2023). However, scholarly research on Saudi foreign policy within the Gulf context remains limited, with most studies focusing on its rivalry with Iran, the role of Islam in diplomacy, or soft power strategies (Abdullaeva, 2023; Ardovini, 2022; Helfont, 2019; Berni, 2023).

This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the key factors, motivations, and influences that have shaped Saudi Arabia's foreign policy from 2011 to 2023. It examines how domestic and regional challenges have influenced the Kingdom's diplomatic strategies, providing critical insights into its role within the Gulf's intricate political landscape and the broader implications for regional stability. Specifically, the study seeks to uncover the underlying drivers of Saudi foreign policy decisions and assess the impact of the Kingdom's religious authority, regional prominence, and leadership dynamics on its approach toward neighboring Arabian Gulf States.

The article is organized into five key sections. The first section provides a review of relevant literature on Saudi foreign policy, with a particular focus on its relations with Gulf nations. The second section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the study. The third section explains the methodological choices and approaches adopted for the research. The fourth section presents and analyzes the study's findings. Finally, the fifth section offers significant conclusions drawn from the findings, highlighting their implications for Saudi foreign policy and regional dynamics.

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON SAUDI FOREIGN POLICY

In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has demonstrated significant dynamism in its foreign policy, marked by a strategic recalibration of priorities. Demmelhuber (2019) introduces the concept of "hedging" to explain the Kingdom's nuanced approach, highlighting its use as a mechanism for regime survival in the face of escalating international uncertainties. Central to this shift is the Vision 2030 initiative, which underscores a strategic pivot toward the East, particularly China, while signaling a gradual departure from its historical reliance on the United States. This transformation is driven by multiple factors, including Saudi Arabia's nuclear aspirations and its pursuit of domestic economic diversification.

Berni (2023) emphasizes the increasing utilization of soft power in Saudi foreign policy, noting a growing reliance on cultural, economic, political, and social resources to achieve foreign policy objectives under the current administration. Meanwhile, Willner (2023) sheds light on the intricacies of regime survival, observing that Saudi foreign policy is carefully crafted through informal consultations among senior royal family members. This adaptive and multifaceted strategy underscores the Kingdom's adeptness in navigating geopolitical complexities while ensuring stability.

Rich and Moore-Gilbert (2019) argue that Saudi foreign policy has transitioned from a defensive posture to a more offensive one, analyzed through the lens of defensive and offensive realism. In contrast, Bozorgmehr (2021) suggests that the Kingdom has shifted toward dialogue and engagement, particularly in response to the Democratic administration's return to power in the United States. Alvand and Hosaini (2021), employing a neoclassical realism framework, characterize Saudi foreign policy as "aggressive," asserting that it actively safeguards national interests, including its leadership within the Muslim world. Kosach (2019), however, reframes this assertiveness as "tightening," attributing it to a blend of internal and external factors that influence Saudi decision-making.

Li (2019) highlights the role of economic diplomacy in Saudi foreign policy, analyzing foreign aid through political, economic, and religious dimensions. The study identifies dual objectives: advancing South-South cooperation and promoting Saudi Arabia's brand of Islam. However, since 2015, the Saudi government has taken measures to regulate the religious agenda due to its perceived threats. Similarly, Machmudi (2020) examines the domestic and external impacts of Saudi foreign policy, focusing on its support for friendly regimes post-Arab Spring to curtail external influences and reduce internal demands for political participation.

Islam and Saudi Foreign Policy

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as the birthplace of Islam, inherently ties its foreign policy to its religious identity. Helfont (2020) notes that this association shapes its interactions with countries where Islam exerts significant influence. Mabon (2019) underscores the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a contest between differing Islamic orientations—Salafi Sunni and Shia—deepened by geopolitical competition. The study highlights a period of cooperation before the Iranian Revolution, which transformed the relationship into one characterized by sectarian and strategic rivalry.

Athanasoulia (2020) discusses the role of Islam in Saudi Arabia's pursuit of stability, particularly post-2011. The study describes a shift toward "hard power" foreign policy and efforts to promote "moderate Islam" as part of Vision 2030 to enhance the Kingdom's international image and attract investments. Korany (2019) examines Saudi Arabia's Islamic theory of international relations, arguing that its worldview, modeled on the original Islamic state, influences its relationship with the West. Abdullaeva (2023) further explores this proactive foreign policy, emphasizing its alignment with both unilateral and multilateral initiatives.

Contrarily, Helfont (2019) challenges the popular notion that Wahhabi interpretations of Islam dominate Saudi foreign policy, suggesting a more nuanced approach. These diverse perspectives reveal the profound yet evolving influence of Islam on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which balances religious principles with pragmatic considerations.

Saudi Foreign Policy beyond the Middle East

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy extends beyond the Middle East, reflecting its global ambitions. Cengiz (2020) examines Saudi-China relations, identifying internal and external factors—such as Vision 2030 and shared

strategic interests—that have strengthened their ties. However, unresolved issues like Syria's fate and Sino-Persian relations could limit this partnership.

Historically, Saudi Arabia has maintained a strong alliance with the United States, particularly in security matters. However, as Hokayem (2022) observes, this relationship has increasingly strained, exemplified by the October 2022 OPEC+ crisis, where Saudi Arabia prioritized its energy and financial interests over its security alliance with the U.S.

Khan and Sajjad (2023) explore the dynamics between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan, highlighting Pakistan's balanced approach in maintaining ties with both rivals due to shared Islamic identity. In the Horn of Africa, studies by Mahdi (2023) and Lotfi and Adami (2023) reveal Saudi Arabia's growing influence, driven by strategic and economic interests, particularly in Somalia and the broader region's geopolitical significance.

Saudi Foreign Policy within the Middle East

The Middle East remains central to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The Kingdom's relationship with Iran is marked by rivalry and regional competition. Darwich (2022) describes this as the "New Arab Cold War," characterized by competition across Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Ardovini (2022) highlights how both nations leverage religious legitimacy to guide their foreign policies.

Post-2011, Erdogan (2022) argues that Saudi foreign policy has become more assertive, driven by perceived threats from Iran and U.S. ambivalence. This assertiveness reflects the Kingdom's proactive measures to counter regional challenges and maintain its influence. Similarly, Bozorgmehri and Ghasemi (2021) note a shift toward dialogue and engagement with Iran and Syria, signaling a recalibration of Saudi foreign policy in response to shifting regional and international dynamics.

Saudi Foreign Policy towards Gulf Nations

The Gulf countries—Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia—are deeply interconnected linguistically, historically, politically, economically, socially, geographically, and culturally. Despite this proximity, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards its Gulf neighbors. Mason (2023) offers a detailed exploration of Saudi-UAE bilateral relations, arguing that traditional frameworks such as *realpolitik* and the Islamization of Saudi foreign policy have become less relevant in the face of changing economic dynamics and uncertain returns. The study highlights new determinants shaping Saudi-UAE relations, including the youth and western orientation of leadership, liberalization, hyper-nationalism, secularization, the strategic shift towards Eastern markets, and broader economic statecraft. These factors, the study contends, now play a central role in defining the policies of both nations.

Al-Mawali (2015) examines the broader Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, emphasizing the centrality of economic growth in fostering intra-regional integration. The study underscores Saudi Arabia's influence in driving this integration, arguing that economic expansion strengthens cooperative ties among member states and facilitates the achievement of shared goals.

Recent years, however, have witnessed significant tensions among Gulf countries. A notable example is the strained relationship between Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. Mohamadi and Ahmadi (2018) investigate these internal disputes, identifying them as a key factor contributing to the perceived weakening of the GCC as a geopolitical entity. The study attributes this breakdown to unresolved political and ideological divisions, which have undermined the organization's unity and effectiveness.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into Saudi Arabia's interactions with its Gulf neighbors, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on bilateral relations or economic integration while underexploring the interplay of political, security, and ideological factors within the broader context of Saudi foreign policy from 2011 to 2023. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the long-term implications of regional disputes, such as the Qatar blockade, for the cohesion and strategic direction of the GCC. This article seeks to address these gaps by offering a comprehensive analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards the Gulf nations during this pivotal period, with a particular focus on how political, economic, and security dynamics have shaped these relationships.

Theoretical Framework

At its core, this study seeks to explore Saudi foreign policy towards the Gulf nations with a specific focus on three essential factors: religious influence, leadership dynamics, and regional standing. These factors are intricately interwoven within the overarching framework of neoclassical realism, a theoretical approach that enables a nuanced analysis spanning multiple levels of analysis.

Neoclassical realism, as the guiding theoretical framework, serves as a valuable tool for dissecting the complex landscape of foreign policy. One of its key strengths lies in its ability to conduct a multilevel analysis, scrutinizing both unit-level components, including the role of government and leadership, and the broader systemic factors operating at a macro-level.

This means that the research will examine Saudi foreign policy by considering not only the internal dynamics and leadership decisions but also the broader international system within which Saudi Arabia operates. For example, the systemic factor of Saudi Arabia's regional status will be dissected to understand its impact on foreign policy. This entails analyzing how Saudi Arabia's regional prominence influences its interactions with Arabian Gulf States. The leadership's role in shaping foreign policy will then be scrutinized to comprehend how it responds to these systemic influences. In essence, neoclassical realism provides an intricate lens through which to investigate the multifaceted dimensions of Saudi foreign policy in the Gulf region.

Neoclassical realism was conceived to address the perceived limitations of neorealism and its variants, which struggled to provide a comprehensive tool for foreign policy analysis (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009). By delineating a clear distinction between the international system and the internal characteristics of states, neoclassical realism bridges the gap and accommodates specific situational features (Ripsman, 2011). This approach enables the theory to offer more nuanced explanations, recapturing the intricacies of foreign policy that distinguish it from neorealism.

Neoclassical realism is particularly apt for this research, allowing for an analysis of Saudi foreign policy towards the Arabian Gulf States through an exploration of the international system to which these states belong. For instance, Saudi Arabia's regional status, a systemic factor, is isolated first, followed by an examination of the Saudi leadership's role in shaping foreign policy within the region. Therefore, neoclassical realism serves as the most suitable theory to expound upon this aspect of the study.

Additionally, this study is informed by constructivism, which emphasizes non-material factors often overlooked by mainstream international relations theories. In contrast to materialism, constructivism focuses on ideational factors, offering an alternative perspective (Adler, 2013; Zehfuss, 2002). A fundamental tenet of constructivism posits that meaning is socially constructed. Alexander Wendt underscores this by stating that individuals act based on the meanings they ascribe to objects, including other actors (Wendt, 1992). In the context of this research, constructivism proves instrumental in elucidating the influence of factors like religious legitimacy, which materialist theories such as neoclassical realism or liberalism cannot adequately account for.

The key variables of this article include Saudi foreign policy in the Arabian Gulf (dependent variable), religious clout and regional status (independent variables), and government and leadership (intervening variable). Saudi foreign policy in the Arabian Gulf, the dependent variable, represents the outcomes of Saudi Arabia's decisions, stances, and actions towards its neighboring Gulf nations, focusing on how it engages with and influences these states.

Religious clout, as an independent variable, reflects Saudi Arabia's influence derived from its role as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. This is measured through leadership in Islamic organizations and the global impact of religious edicts (e.g., fatwas). Regional status, another independent variable, encompasses Saudi Arabia's economic and military power, diplomatic influence, and leadership within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), demonstrating how its standing within the Gulf shapes its foreign policy decisions. The intervening variable, government and leadership, mediates the relationship between the independent variables and Saudi foreign policy. Leadership decisions translate religious influence and regional status into specific foreign policy actions, as leaders may prioritize religious interests or assert Saudi Arabia's regional standing in diplomatic engagements. Together, these variables create a causal pathway through which religious clout and regional status indirectly shape Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, with government and leadership dynamics serving as the crucial mechanism that links these influences to policy outcomes in the Arabian Gulf.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for studying "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy in the Arabian Gulf (2011–2023)" adopts a systematic, mixed-methods approach to analyze the complex dynamics of Saudi foreign relations. The process begins with identifying the research problem, conducting a comprehensive literature review, and developing a conceptual framework to guide precise research questions. Given the exploratory nature of the topic, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews with policymakers, diplomats, and experts, alongside content analysis of official speeches, policy papers, and media sources, are combined with quantitative analysis to ensure a holistic understanding.

The study emphasizes ethical considerations, efficient resource allocation, and strategies to enhance validity and reliability. Interviews offer insider perspectives on Saudi motivations and strategies, while content analysis traces policy evolution, revealing the role of religious clout and regional stature in shaping foreign policy under King Salman. By triangulating data, the research aligns with theoretical frameworks like neoclassical realism and constructivism, addressing gaps in existing studies and offering practical insights for policymakers, academics, and the public. This approach ensures a robust contribution to understanding Saudi Arabia's geopolitical strategies in the Gulf region.

This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing non-numerical data to uncover patterns and insights related to Saudi foreign policy in the Arabian Gulf from 2011 to 2023. Key sources include official documents, policy statements, speeches, and diplomatic communications, analyzed through thematic and content analysis to identify recurring themes and policy shifts. Semi-structured interviews with policymakers, diplomats, and regional experts will provide context-specific insights into decision-making processes and the role of religion and regional dynamics in shaping strategies. These qualitative methods enable a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted factors influencing Saudi foreign policy.

A purposive sampling strategy will guide participant selection, focusing on individuals with direct involvement or expertise in Saudi foreign policy, such as policymakers, diplomats, and scholars. This approach ensures that the data collected is relevant and offers diverse perspectives. The study population includes those shaping, implementing, or analyzing Saudi foreign policy and extends to relevant official documents and communications.

The unit of analysis comprises specific foreign policy actions, including alliances, negotiations, and regional engagements, to uncover patterns and shifts in Saudi Arabia's geopolitical strategies. Purposive sampling ensures depth and relevance, prioritizing participants and data sources that align with the study's objectives.

The sample size will be determined by thematic saturation, continuing data collection until no new insights emerge. This iterative process emphasizes data richness over quantity, allowing for an in-depth examination of Saudi foreign policy within the specified timeframe.

Thematic and content analysis will form the basis of data interpretation. Thematic analysis involves coding and categorizing data to identify recurring patterns, while content analysis focuses on systematically examining textual sources for key themes and phrases. These methods will be applied concurrently to enhance the reliability and depth of findings.

Primary data will include official documents and policy statements issued by Saudi authorities, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Media analysis of news articles and editorials will also capture public discourse and perceptions of Saudi foreign policy. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough examination of official and public narratives, providing a well-rounded understanding of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy dynamics in the Arabian Gulf.

FINDINGS

The analysis identified four major themes, each encompassing several subthemes. These include: Motivations and Determinants of Saudi Foreign Policy, Religious Influence on Saudi Foreign Policy, Regional Leadership and Stature, and Government and Leadership Dynamics.

Motivations and Determinants of Saudi Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards the Gulf region between 2011 and 2023 was shaped by a blend of strategic, economic, and geopolitical imperatives. These priorities reflected the Kingdom's broader goals of ensuring stability, fostering economic growth, and navigating a complex regional environment, particularly in its dealings with Iran and intra-Gulf relations.

Strategic Security and Stability

Saudi Arabia prioritized regional security and stability, driven by the upheavals of the Arab Spring and the threat posed by terrorist groups like ISIS. As Participant 3 highlighted, the Kingdom's approach emphasized "common security" to counter shared challenges. Saudi Arabia's intervention in Bahrain during the Arab Spring, through the deployment of the Peninsula Shield Forces, underscores this commitment. Participant 4 noted, "The revolutionary movement in Bahrain coincided with the Arab Spring revolutions, prompting Saudi Arabia to take decisive measures to support stability." Counterterrorism also featured prominently, with Participant 6 emphasizing Saudi Arabia's increased collaboration with Arabian Gulf States to address the rise of ISIS.

Economic Imperatives

Economic factors were pivotal to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, particularly after the launch of Vision 2030. This strategic framework underscored the need for regional stability to attract investments and diversify the

economy. Participant 1 remarked that Vision 2030 aimed to “foster a suitable climate for economic and investment prosperity.” Joint economic initiatives with Arabian Gulf States were crucial, as noted by Participant 2, who explained, “These projects align with Vision 2030’s goals and ensure the continuity of investment flows.” Despite its economic focus, Participant 4 highlighted that “security takes precedence over the economy in this region,” underscoring the interplay between these drivers.

Geopolitical Dynamics

Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy was also shaped by the region’s geopolitical context, particularly its rivalry with Iran. Participant 4 stated that Iran’s actions, such as “inciting Shiite sects in Arabian Gulf States,” heightened tensions. The severing of ties with Iran in 2016, following the execution of Shiite leader Nimr al-Nimr, exemplified this rivalry. Additionally, Saudi Arabia’s leadership within the Sunni Muslim world, as Participant 4 noted, was

integral to its strategy to counter Iran’s influence and consolidate its regional position.

In summary, Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy during this period reflected an interplay of security, economic, and geopolitical objectives, all aligned to strengthen its regional influence while addressing immediate and long-term challenges.

Religious Influence on Saudi Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy in the Gulf region was profoundly shaped by its religious identity, particularly its role as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and its leadership within the Islamic world. This section examines how these factors, coupled with efforts to balance religious and secular goals, defined the Kingdom’s foreign policy.

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques

As the custodian of Islam’s holiest sites, Saudi Arabia leveraged its religious identity to bolster its moral authority. Participant 1 explained that this responsibility extends to “supervising the sanctities and supporting Muslims globally,” a role reflected in initiatives like the King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Action. These actions underscore Saudi Arabia’s use of religious diplomacy to enhance regional unity and stability.

Islamic Leadership

Saudi Arabia’s leadership in the Islamic world played a significant role in its foreign policy. Participant 2 noted that the Kingdom aimed to “promote moderation and Sunni unity,” while Participant 4 highlighted efforts to counter Iranian influence through the promotion of Wahhabi Salafism. This leadership enabled Saudi Arabia to assert its position as the preeminent power in the Islamic and Gulf regions.

Balancing Religious and Secular Goals

While religion remains central to Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy, it is carefully balanced with secular objectives. Participant 5 observed that the Kingdom “used its religious role to promote Sunni Islam, counter Shia influence, and shape regional alliances,” integrating these efforts with broader geopolitical and economic goals. Vision 2030 further demonstrates this balance, with initiatives promoting interfaith dialogue and regional collaboration. Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy skillfully integrates its religious identity with pragmatic goals, reinforcing its leadership while advancing its strategic ambitions.

Regional Leadership and Stature

Saudi Arabia’s role as a regional leader and powerhouse within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the broader Middle East has been a cornerstone of its foreign policy between 2011 and 2023. As the largest country in the Arabian Gulf by landmass, population, and economic capacity, Saudi Arabia exerts substantial influence over regional dynamics. Its strategic geographical position—sharing borders with all Arabian Gulf States and situated near critical waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, and the Suez Canal—solidifies its indispensable role in addressing the Gulf’s security, economic, and political challenges.

Saudi Arabia’s leadership is further bolstered by its historical and cultural significance. As the birthplace of Islam and the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the Kingdom wields unparalleled religious authority, which it integrates into its foreign policy to build alliances and mediate disputes across the region. Coupled with its vast economic resources, including its oil wealth and Vision 2030-driven diversification initiatives, Saudi Arabia has leveraged its stature to promote regional stability and foster economic integration. This multifaceted leadership is exemplified in its active participation in security alliances, economic partnerships, and diplomatic mediation, underscoring its dominance in Gulf regional politics.

This analysis explores Saudi Arabia’s regional leadership across three interconnected dimensions: security and strategic alliances, economic and political weight, and diplomatic strategy. Together, these elements highlight

the Kingdom's comprehensive approach to consolidating its influence and navigating the complexities of Gulf politics.

Security and Strategic Alliances

Saudi Arabia's leadership in regional security is evident in its pivotal role within military coalitions and alliances. As Participant 1 observed:

"The Peninsula Shield, the Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen, and the Islamic Military Alliance to Combat Terrorism are key platforms through which Saudi Arabia supports peace and security in the region, countering threats to stability."

Similarly, Participant 3 highlighted:

"The Kingdom plays a significant role in strengthening the Peninsula Shield Forces and ensuring stability in Bahrain and Yemen."

These remarks underscore Saudi Arabia's prioritization of security as a central pillar of its foreign policy.

The interviews reveal a consensus on the centrality of security in Saudi foreign policy. Participant 5 articulated that "security and regional stability are foundational pillars of Saudi policy," while Participant 6 emphasized the Kingdom's proactive measures to protect its borders, enhance military cooperation, and address threats. Key security concerns include Iranian influence, Yemeni instability, and terrorism, all of which significantly shape Saudi Arabia's policy agenda.

Participants consistently identified Iran's activities in Yemen and the broader Gulf as the most critical threat. For example, Participant 2 noted the role of "Iranian influence in Yemen and the region at large," while Participant 4 linked Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran to interventions in Bahrain and Yemen. Terrorism, including threats from groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, also prominently featured in participants' responses, driving Saudi Arabia's emphasis on enhanced Gulf-wide security cooperation.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy reflects its commitment to addressing these challenges through military alliances, such as the Peninsula Shield Force, and non-military initiatives, including cybersecurity and counter-terrorism efforts. Participant 6 aptly described this strategy as blending "traditional and modern approaches to protect regional security."

Economic and Political Weight

Saudi Arabia's economic and demographic dominance reinforces its regional stature. Participant 2 remarked:

"As the largest country in the Arabian Gulf in terms of landmass and population, Saudi Arabia's influence permeates all fields, enhancing its regional importance."

The Kingdom's economic clout, particularly during pivotal events like the Qatar diplomatic crisis and mediation efforts in Sudan, has enabled it to assert its objectives and shape regional policies effectively. This economic leverage, supported by initiatives such as Vision 2030, positions Saudi Arabia as a key driver of Gulf economic integration.

Diplomatic Strategy

Diplomacy is a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's efforts to consolidate its regional leadership. Participant 6 observed:

"Saudi Arabia's ability to lead a coalition against Qatar and impose an economic and diplomatic boycott demonstrates its capacity to unify Gulf positions."

Through mediation initiatives, such as hosting interfaith dialogue conferences, the Kingdom strategically blends religious and political goals to strengthen regional alliances and promote stability. Participant 5 further highlighted Saudi Arabia's success in advancing its foreign policy objectives through proactive partnerships and strategic mediation.

Government and Leadership Dynamics

The interplay between Saudi Arabia's religious influence and regional stature emerges as a recurring theme. Participants underscored King Salman's position as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" as a vital component of the Kingdom's regional authority. Participant 1 highlighted how this title enhances Saudi Arabia's "regional and international position," while Participant 3 emphasized its role in addressing "regional and international crises." Saudi Arabia leverages its religious authority not only to counter Iran's influence as a leading Shia power but also to promote Sunni solidarity and reject extremism, thereby fostering Gulf unity.

Shifts in leadership dynamics under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman are particularly notable. Participant 1 described a “qualitative transformation” in governance, marked by Vision 2030 and a modernized approach to foreign policy. Participant 4 highlighted the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement, brokered by China, as evidence of a shift toward regional cooperation. Nevertheless, continuities in Saudi policy, such as its steadfast commitment to Gulf security and economic integration, remain evident, reflecting a balance between adaptability and historical leadership.

Domestic Political Dynamics

Saudi Arabia's domestic political dynamics are foundational to its foreign policy toward Gulf nations. Political stability, economic reforms, and strategic considerations emerge as critical factors shaping the Kingdom's regional engagement.

Political stability is a cornerstone of Saudi foreign policy. Participant 1 highlights that “Saudi Arabia enjoys political stability, which is reflected in its foreign policy,” underscoring the link between internal order and external strength. Participant 6 adds, “Domestic political stability enhances the Kingdom's ability to make strong foreign decisions,” demonstrating how internal coherence empowers decisive regional actions.

Economic reforms tied to Vision 2030 are transformative for Saudi foreign policy. Participant 4 observes that domestic support for these reforms “enhances the Kingdom's foreign policy in the Islamic world and the Arabian Gulf States,” reflecting a strategy of leveraging internal progress for external influence. Participant 6 further notes how these reforms foster deeper economic and cultural ties with Arabian Gulf States, emphasizing the synergy between modernization and regional cooperation.

Despite evolving political orientations, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy exhibits long-term consistency. Participant 3 asserts that “Saudi Arabia's foreign policy strategy is stable and has not changed towards the Gulf region,” emphasizing strategic alignment with national interests.

The leadership's use of foreign policy to reinforce domestic legitimacy is a recurring theme. Participant 5 states that foreign policy achievements are framed to “reinforce internal stability and consolidate power,” linking regional actions to domestic cohesion. Additionally, security considerations bridge domestic and foreign policy. Participant 6 highlights how counterterrorism efforts “push Saudi Arabia to adopt foreign policies that enhance regional security,” illustrating the interplay between internal stability and external security policies.

Diplomatic Challenges

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward the Gulf has been shaped by diplomatic challenges, including security threats, regional rivalries, and broader geopolitical dynamics.

Security threats and terrorism are significant challenges. Participant 1 identifies “combating terrorism and extremist groups” and the Yemeni crisis as central concerns. Participant 6 highlights the “rise of extremist Islamic groups in countries like Tunisia and Egypt,” prompting Saudi Arabia's support for regimes to maintain regional stability.

The Yemeni crisis is a focal point of Saudi Arabia's regional strategy. Participant 4 describes Saudi Arabia's leadership in “an Arab coalition to support Yemen's legitimate government against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.” However, Participant 5 underscores the strain on regional relations and international criticism stemming from this conflict, illustrating the multifaceted challenges involved.

The Qatar diplomatic crisis (2017–2021) significantly influenced Saudi foreign policy. Participant 5 notes that Saudi Arabia “led a blockade against Qatar over alleged support for terrorism and policy disagreements,” highlighting the depth of the rift. Participant 6 emphasizes the impact on regional cohesion and Saudi Arabia's leadership role.

Intra-Gulf rivalries complicate Saudi foreign policy. Participant 4 identifies “regional competition from the UAE,” reflecting tensions within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Additionally, Participant 6 highlights Iranian interventions in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq as escalating regional instability and challenging Saudi foreign policy efforts.

Despite these challenges, Participant 3 asserts that “diplomatic conflicts have not altered Saudi Arabia's prioritization of Gulf security and stability.” This view underscores the Kingdom's commitment to core policy objectives despite external pressures.

Flexibility and coordination define Saudi Arabia's approach to GCC relations. Participant 1 notes that the Kingdom “adopts a flexible, dynamic policy with its Gulf neighbours,” while Participant 2 emphasizes political coordination. These strategies leverage the GCC as a platform for fostering collaboration.

Participant 4 highlights Saudi Arabia's role in enhancing economic cooperation through "joint economic projects" and coordinated positions on international platforms. Participant 6 adds that Vision 2030, security alliances, and mediation efforts are central to Saudi Arabia's strategy to unify Gulf ranks, aligning with broader ambitions for diplomatic, military, and economic leadership.

While Saudi Arabia's policies often align with Gulf allies, instances of divergence reflect its prioritization of national interests. Participant 3 describes divergence as a "normal occurrence in international relations," citing the Qatar crisis as a prominent example. Saudi Arabia's hardline stance contrasted with the neutrality of Kuwait and Oman, showcasing diverse priorities within the GCC.

Participant 5 highlights Saudi Arabia's military actions in Yemen and leadership of the Qatar blockade as instances of divergence from Western allies, who preferred diplomatic approaches. These differences reflect competing priorities, with Saudi Arabia emphasizing security and counterterrorism over humanitarian concerns.

Divergences reveal Saudi Arabia's strategic calculus. Participant 6 notes that security threats and its role as a "leading regional power" drive assertive policies. Participant 4 identifies Vision 2030 as a transformative milestone enabling independent policies, positioning Saudi Arabia as the Gulf's economic leader.

Saudi Foreign Policy and International Norms

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf reflects a balance between aligning with international norms, asserting regional leadership, and integrating its religious identity. Saudi Arabia aligns with international norms through counterterrorism initiatives and humanitarian efforts, as emphasized by Participant 6. However, interventions in Yemen have faced global criticism for humanitarian impacts. Participant 1 highlights the overlooked role of the King Salman Center for Relief and Humanitarian Aid, underscoring Saudi efforts to mitigate such criticism.

Saudi Arabia's leadership aspirations occasionally conflict with global expectations. Participant 5 cites "concerns about Qatar's support for Islamist groups" as driving Saudi policies during the Qatar crisis, despite differing Western priorities. Similarly, Yemen reflects competing views on military effectiveness versus humanitarian impacts.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf is shaped by domestic political stability, transformative economic reforms, and a commitment to regional security. Diplomatic challenges—from the Yemeni crisis to intra-GCC rivalries—necessitate adaptability and assertiveness. While instances of divergence reveal the Kingdom's prioritization of national interests, its flexibility and coordination within the GCC underscore its ambition to balance leadership with regional cohesion. These dynamics position Saudi Arabia as a pivotal actor in shaping the Gulf's geopolitical landscape, navigating the complexities of domestic resilience, regional ambition, and global scrutiny.

DISCUSSIONS

The study identifies four primary drivers of Saudi foreign policy toward the Gulf region: strategic security, economic interests, religious influence, and leadership dynamics.

Strategic security emerges as a critical driver, aligning with Demmelhuber's (2019) observation of Saudi efforts to support regional allies, such as its involvement in Bahrain. Rich and Moore-Gilbert (2019) highlight the Kingdom's transition from a defensive to an offensive posture, evident in its assertiveness against terrorism and extremist movements like ISIS. Alvand and Hosaini (2021) note Saudi Arabia's leadership in the GCC rift with Qatar, resulting in Qatar's blockade and suspension. This tension significantly contributed to the GCC's decline as a functional regional organization (Mohamadi & Ahmadi, 2018).

Economic interests also play a significant role, particularly under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative, which prioritizes economic growth and diversification. A stable Gulf economic environment is critical to achieving these objectives. While economic cooperation was once central to the GCC's mission (Al-Mawali, 2015), the collapse of the organization underscores the difficulty of sustaining collaboration in the face of political tensions.

Religious influence is a defining element of Saudi foreign policy, rooted in its status as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. This grants the Kingdom significant religious prestige and reinforces its leadership in the Muslim world. The findings align with existing literature (Helfont, 2020; Mabon, 2019; Athanasoulia, 2020) by illustrating how religion shapes Saudi foreign policy while requiring a balance with secular interests.

Leadership dynamics further shape Saudi foreign policy, with domestic political stability under a consistent monarchy providing a foundation for strategic initiatives. Under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has adopted assertive policies, including interventions in Yemen and the blockade of Qatar. Neoclassical realism offers a compelling framework to explain how systemic pressures and domestic leadership priorities interact to influence foreign policy.

The findings integrate insights from neoclassical realism and constructivism to explain Saudi Arabia's motivations. Neoclassical realism highlights the influence of systemic factors and domestic leadership on security, economic, and geopolitical strategies. Constructivism underscores the role of ideational factors, such as religion and ideology, in shaping Saudi behavior. Together, these perspectives offer a holistic understanding of the complex interplay of motivations driving Saudi foreign policy in the Gulf.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a nuanced analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Gulf, revealing its intricate balance between regional aspirations, global ambitions, and domestic priorities. Driven by the pursuit of stability, countering threats, and advancing Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's strategies reflect a blend of pragmatism and soft power, leveraging its religious influence to assert authority within the Gulf and the broader Islamic world.

The diplomatic rift with Qatar highlighted the Kingdom's capacity for assertive leadership but also underscored the challenges of maintaining cohesion within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Actions such as the Yemen intervention and the Qatar blockade demonstrate Saudi Arabia's strategic ambitions but have drawn international scrutiny, raising questions about its alignment with global norms.

This research bridges gaps in understanding the interplay of power politics, ideological factors, and international norms in Gulf geopolitics. By integrating neoclassical realism and constructivism, it challenges traditional realist perspectives, offering a holistic lens for examining the dynamics of Saudi foreign policy. These findings emphasize the importance of aligning national strategies with regional stability and international expectations, both for Saudi policymakers and global actors engaging with the Gulf.

Beyond the Gulf, the study offers transferable insights into managing regional rifts and balancing national interests with solidarity in other geopolitical contexts. Saudi Arabia's pivotal role in energy markets further underscores the global implications of its foreign policy decisions, shaping energy security and economic stability worldwide. For policymakers, scholars, and practitioners, this research provides valuable lessons for navigating Gulf geopolitics and fostering cooperation in an increasingly interconnected world.

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