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## New Dimensions of Saudi Arabia's Soft Power

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### *Summary*

To maintain its prestige and strengthen its power status while effectively competing for regional dominance against Shia Iran and Turkey, Riyadh's authorities have rationalized their selection of foreign policy tools, shifting the focus from hard power to soft power. The shift resulted from the fact that Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman started to perceive soft power as the most effective means to stabilize the regional situation, which is a prerequisite for implementing the infrastructure giga-projects under Saudi Vision 2030, diversifying the Saudi economy, putting emphasis on sportswashing, the blue economy and the progressive liberalization of socio-cultural life, aimed at engaging foreign capital in the kingdom, attracting mega-investments and increasing tourism revenues to outcompete the UAE, as well as facilitating Riyadh's leadership among Sunni Arab states and reducing dependence on the USA. From the perspective of Riyadh, the shift towards soft power is intended to portray Saudi Arabia as a modern, innovative, open, and tolerant monarchy.

*Keywords:* Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, Middle East, Soft Power, Sportswashing, Saudi Vision 2030

### 1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia, as a major power in specific sectors and a regional power with hegemonic ambitions, plays a key role in shaping the Middle Eastern balance of power. Thanks to its economic instruments (natural resource reserves), cultural influence (the central hub for Sunni Islam), military capabilities (possessing and continuously increasing its arsenal with the latest military equipment through agreements with the USA), and political instruments, it fits perfectly into the competition among extra-regional powers (the USA, Russia, China, India) for influence in the Middle East. In the mid-2020s, to maintain prestige and strengthen its position as a great

power while effectively competing for regional dominance against the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey, the authorities in Riyadh employ both hard power (as in the case of Yemen) and soft power measures. However, of key importance is the selection of these measures and the assessment of their effectiveness in pursuing Saudi Arabia's national interest.

It is worth underlining that Joseph Nye popularized the concept of soft power in the late 1980s. From his point of view, soft power contrasts with hard power. He generally explained that power is the ability to affect others in order to get the outcomes one prefers, and that can be accomplished by coercion, payment, attraction, and persuasion (Nye, 2021). Hard power focuses on using coercion and payment. Soft power is obtaining desired outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment. Soft power can be wielded not just by states but by all actors in international politics, such as NGOs or international institutions. Soft power is also considered by some an example of the second face of power. A country's soft power, according to Nye, rests on three resources: 1) its culture – in places where it is attractive to others; 2) its political values – when it lives up to them at home and abroad; 3) its foreign policies – when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority (Nye, 2011, pp. 83-85).

It should be noted that in recent years there has been a fundamental reshaping of the foreign policy conducted by the authorities in Riyadh. Soft power instruments have significantly outweighed the hard power measures. This was evident in Riyadh's decisions such as: attempting to de-escalate the conflict with Iran (signing an agreement to restore bilateral relations); restoring Syria's membership in the Arab League (effectively ending the regional isolation of Bashar al-Assad's regime); resolving the diplomatic dispute with Qatar; making efforts to improve Saudi-Turkish relations; taking actions to end the war in Yemen; making use of sportswashing; and focusing on the blue economy. Soft power policy is perceived by the Saudi authorities as the most effective means to stabilize the region. The gradual cessation of armed conflicts and the increase in regional security are considered the *conditio sine qua non* for achieving the ambitious Saudi Vision 2030, enabling Riyadh to be the leader among the Sunni Arab states, and effectively reducing its dependence on the USA.

The research objective of this paper is to verify the hypothesis that soft power constitutes the leading tool in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, particularly promoted by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (known by his initials as MBS). From the perspective of the authorities in Riyadh, for shaping a positive global image of Saudi Arabia, stabilizing the region, strengthening its position therein, maintaining close relations with Western countries while striving for independence from the USA, as well as effectively implementing the Saudi Vision 2030 program

– which aims to make the Saudi economy independent from oil export revenue by transforming the country into a technological and business hub – the soft power measures remain far more significant and effective. A modern Saudi Arabia – innovative, reform-undergoing, globally open (including to the West), and tolerant towards women – aims to attract foreign tourists and investors across nearly all economic and cultural spheres and sectors. A reformed Saudi Arabia is also envisioned to play the role of an effective negotiator in regional conflicts (similar to the roles played currently by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt).

To verify this hypothesis, the author of this paper will attempt to answer the following research questions: What soft power tools does Saudi Arabia utilize to implement its foreign policy objectives? What are the intra- and extra-state reasons for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy being dominated by soft power instruments? What are the results of using soft power tools in Saudi Arabia's policy? How are Saudi soft power initiatives perceived by leading intra- and extra-regional players (Iran, Turkey, the USA, Russia, China, India)?

In verifying the hypothesis and answering the research questions posed in the paper, four major research methods will be utilized. These are: the historical method, which will enable the presentation of the genesis of Saudi dominance, and the shaping of its political-economic-military power; the systemic analysis, which will capture the relations between the specific Saudi political system (absolute monarchy undergoing reforms) and the necessity of employing soft power instruments; the content analysis method and critical analysis of sources (including Saudi sources); as well as the causal analysis, which will identify the main intra- and extra-state factors conditioning and determining Riyadh's use of appropriate soft power tools. When the causal analysis is used, the independent variables will be the tools used to create a positive image of Saudi Arabia as part of MBS's foreign policy. In contrast, the dependent variables will be Saudi Arabia's evolving position and role in the regional and global arena.

The paper consists of five parts. These include an introduction outlining the methodological assumptions, followed by the second part which focuses on highlighting the leading intra- and extra-state reasons and factors determining Riyadh's use of soft power tools. The third and fourth parts put forward an analysis of specific examples (case studies) of soft power tools used as instruments in Riyadh's foreign policy. Finally, the conclusions present the main findings of the analysis, including an assessment of the effectiveness of Saudi soft power initiatives and how they are perceived by key players in the regional and international arena.

## 2. Intra- and Extra-State Determinants of Soft Power Dominance in Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

Throughout the subsequent decades of the 20th and 21st centuries, the dominance of the Wahhabi current caused Saudi Arabia to either pursue a path of liberal reforms towards an absolute monarchy undergoing reforms or to remain in the conservative stagnation of Sharia law in accordance with the 18th-century ideology of Wahhabism (*Saudi Arabia...*, 2017, pp. 14-22). It is worth adding that Wahhabism is the Islamic reform movement founded by Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century in Najd, central Arabia, and adopted in 1744 by the Saudi family. In the 20th and 21st centuries, Wahhabism has been prevalent in Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Blanchard, 2006). Adherents often refer to themselves as Salafis – followers of the pious forebears. They characterize themselves as unitarians, underline the absolute oneness of God (tawḥīd), reject all acts that they see as implying polytheism, such as visiting tombs and venerating saints, and advocate a return to the original teachings of Islam as incorporated in the Quran and the Sunnah (traditions of Muḥammad), with condemnation of all other sources of doctrine as innovations (Wiktorowicz, 2001, p. 20). Wahhabi theology and jurisprudence are based on the teachings of theologian Ibn Taymiyyah and the legal school of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. They stress literal interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah and the establishment of an Islamic society based only on these two bodies of literature (Al-Fahad, 2004).

It is important to note that nearly 60% of Saudi Arabia's population is under 30 years of age. The Saudi society is young, and it is also considerably diversified. On the one hand, there are individuals who are eager for change, open to reforms and view Saudi Arabia as a rising power. This segment of the population is expected to drive reforms, digitalization and the overall transformation of the country. On the other hand, Saudi society is still deeply rooted in religious conservatism and even Islamic fundamentalism, stemming from a strong sense of Saudi Arabia's unique role and place in the Muslim world and the predominant influence of Wahhabism (Benjamin, 2016, pp. 97-120).

Saudi Arabia is viewed as the cradle of Islam. In the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia is seen as a symbolic state, and its role is dominant, especially within Sunni Islam. In this context, for decades, the authorities in Riyadh have consistently pursued the goal of global expansion of Islam and rivalry with Shia states and groups perceived as adversaries (particularly the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran) (Yağmur, 2016, pp. 57-85). Saudi hegemonization in the Persian Gulf subregion fits perfectly into the intra-Muslim competition for influence, the export of Sunni Islam (including its extreme version), and building its position as a great power in the Muslim world (*The World...*, 2017, pp. 314-326).

Riyadh's domestic and foreign policies are heavily influenced by the stability or instability of its neighbours (Benjamin, 2016, pp. 151-174). For instance, of immense significance are: the civil war and the world's largest humanitarian crisis in Yemen (partially resulting from Riyadh's military intervention which started in March 2015); the policy of the UAE which, despite its small size, has recently taken various actions to attain the regional power status, competing with Saudi Arabia; Qatar's policy, which supports extremist terrorist organizations like ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood and maintains close ties with the antagonistic Iran (the 2017 diplomatic crisis); the destabilization of Iraq, caused initially by the US military aggression in 2003, followed by the emergence of ISIS on parts of Iraqi territory; and finally the dominance of the Shia majority leaning towards Iran (Potter, 2017).

When addressing the issue why the authorities in Riyadh have chosen soft power tools as the most effective means of building Saudi Arabia's influence and power at the beginning of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is essential to highlight the key document that forms the theoretical foundation of the modern and transformed Saudi Arabia – Saudi Vision 2030, the role of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman as the actual decision-maker in Saudi politics, as well as new external factors such as the Abraham Accords and attempts to normalize bilateral relations with Israel, the resumption of diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and efforts to reduce dependence on the USA.

### *2.1. Mohammed Bin Salman – A Pivot in Foreign Policy*

The figure of Crown Prince and heir to the throne of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), has undoubtedly been one of the most crucial factors shaping Saudi domestic and foreign policy in the last decade. Born in 1985, thus representing the younger generation of the Saudis, MBS stands (or portrays himself) as a symbol of change and modernization in the Kingdom. It should be noted that since 2015 the formal power in the state has been held by his father, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. However, due to the king's advanced age, it is actually the young Crown Prince who makes political decisions and governs the Kingdom.

MBS gained political experience first as Minister of State in 2014-2015, then since 2015 as Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, in the period 2015-2022 as Minister of Defence and First Deputy Prime Minister, and since 2022 as Prime Minister. On 21 June 2017, MBS, then nearly 32 years old, was appointed Crown Prince by royal decree and announced as heir to the throne of Saudi Arabia, which involved a change in the traditional line of succession in the Kingdom. MBS superseded Mohammed bin Nayef, an influential prince with deep ties to Washington, who was expected to inherit the throne after the king's death. This was seen as a symbolic transition from the aging sons of the country's founder

to a younger coterie of royal family members, bypassing the intermediate generation (Mallat, 2018).

The influential figure of MBS, despite his reformist and soft power profile, remains highly controversial both domestically and internationally. His image and actions are dual-faceted. On the one hand, he has taken actions that he had promised to take before assuming the position of Crown Prince, such as implementing a dynamic program of economic and social reforms, including plans to diversify the country's economy, efforts to ensure and expand women's rights as well as open Saudi Arabia to Western culture. On the other hand, his tenure is marked by controversial decisions such as initiating military intervention in Yemen and suppressing any political dissent both in the society and among the Saudi political elite. For instance, in March 2020, several members of the royal family, including MBS's younger brother and former heir to the throne, along with numerous employees from the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior, were arrested in what was seen as a preventive move to secure his power. However, the most significant shadow cast over MBS's image is the case of Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi dissident journalist and political commentator who was murdered and dismembered on MBS's orders by Saudi operatives inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 (House, 2019).

Considering MBS as a significant factor influencing the dominance of soft power tools in Riyadh's foreign policy, it should be noted that MBS's assumption of the role of Crown Prince was (rightly) interpreted as a confirmation of the domestic and foreign policy directions. The decisions that MBS made early in his tenure were driven by the need to consolidate internal support from the elites and the public for his future rule as king, as well as by the necessity of implementing fundamental reforms in the Kingdom. MBS set two leading priorities in domestic policy: 1) implementing Saudi Vision 2030 to diversify and modernize the Saudi economy; 2) transforming Saudi Arabia into a business and transport hub connecting Europe, Africa and Asia. As far as foreign policy is concerned, six priorities emerged: 1) continuing the war in Yemen and defeating the anti-Saudi and pro-Iranian Houthis movement in collaboration with coalition partners; 2) competing for influence in the Persian Gulf subregion with Iran and taking actions to block Iran's land connection to the Mediterranean Sea; 3) pressuring Qatar to change its foreign policy course from pro-Iranian and supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood; 4) seeking to improve relations with Shia-dominated Iraq, which leans towards Iran, and supporting Sunni forces in that country; 5) exerting influence on Lebanon, an ally of Iran and home to pro-Iranian Hezbollah; 6) deepening the unofficial and informal Saudi-Israeli cooperation; 7) continuing the symbiotic political and military cooperation with the USA (Matthiesen, 2017).

Looking through the lens of nearly a decade of MBS's rule, it must be stated that the initially applied strategy, which predominantly used hard power tools, did not yield the expected benefits; on the contrary, in many areas the use of force only deepened crises and escalated tensions. For example, hard power failed in the case of MBS's strategy towards Yemen (the ongoing war in Yemen, despite temporary ceasefires, led to the internal division in that state, its total destabilization, the strengthening of AQAP and IS forces, and a major humanitarian crisis), Qatar (the 2017 diplomatic crisis – the imposition of a land, sea and air blockade on the country, which aimed to force the Emir of Qatar to limit relations with Iran and Turkey, close Al Jazeera television and expel members of the Muslim Brotherhood from Qatari territory, was unsuccessful; on the contrary, Qatar strengthened its cooperation with Iran and Turkey), or Lebanon (forcing Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri to resign while on a diplomatic visit to Riyadh only caused a diplomatic scandal without changing the position of Lebanese Hezbollah). There was still the unresolved, and even exacerbated, Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which manifested itself as proxy wars (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon) (Lima, 2023).

Taking the above factors into consideration, along with the deteriorating image of Saudi Arabia among members of the international community as well as the Kingdom's declining prestige among the regional states, MBS initiated a process of revising the hard power approach in foreign policy. The Crown Prince understood well that if instruments based on force had not succeeded, it was necessary to employ so-called soft power to achieve success and change the image of the Kingdom. It should be noted that Saudi Arabia has made several significant adjustments in its foreign policy in recent years. The most important initiatives include: attempts to de-escalate the conflict with Iran, resulting in the signing of an agreement in March 2023 to restore relations severed in 2016, facilitated by Chinese mediation; agreeing to restore Syria's membership in the Arab League, which was accomplished on 7 May 2023 at the Arab League Summit in Jeddah, effectively ending the years-long regional isolation of Bashar al-Assad's regime due to brutal repression of protesting Syrians during the Arab Spring; resolving the diplomatic dispute with Qatar in 2021; intensifying the engagement in the peace process in Yemen; striving to improve Saudi-Turkish bilateral relations (Galeeva, 2023).

To summarize, it is worth adding that the biggest traditional and new challenges to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy which the Saudi Crown Prince still has to face include: the strengthening of Iran's position in the region and its increasingly effective efforts to build a Shia Crescent with countries in Saudi Arabia's immediate vicinity; the not-so-successful privatization of part of Saudi Aramco; the decline in oil prices, which affects the ability to finance and complete the flagship gigaprojects of Saudi Vision 2030 on schedule; deteriorating relations between Riyadh



and Washington and Riyadh's efforts to reshape the bilateral relations by reducing dependence on the USA; the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's disproportionate response, which caused one of the largest humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip; the suspension of efforts to normalize relations with Israel; and declining public support for Crown Prince MBS.

## 2.2. Saudi Vision 2030

The government program Saudi Vision 2030 was first announced on 25 April 2016. It is a flagship Saudi project aimed at profoundly transforming the image of Saudi Arabia from a conservative Wahhabi absolute monarchy to a modern and advanced state. Its originator and promoter is the Saudi Crown Prince MBS.

The primary goal of Saudi Vision 2030 is to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil, diversify and modernize the economy, and develop the public services sector. It is based on three major pillars: 1) maintaining Saudi Arabia's status as the centre of the Arab and Muslim world; 2) establishing Saudi Arabia as a global investment powerhouse; 3) strengthening Saudi Arabia's strategic position in the Gulf subregion (*Saudi Arabia...*, 2024).

Although Saudi Arabia remains a member of key organizations for the energy resources extraction market, such as OPEC and OPEC+, the awareness of the necessity to expand its influence and build a great power status has made its goals broader and more global. This is exemplified by Saudi Arabia's membership in BRICS, announced in January 2024 (although in February 2024 there were indications that Riyadh was still considering its membership) (Ali, 2024). Nonetheless, it is important to note that Riyadh's turn towards the BRICS group is driven by several fundamental reasons. Firstly, Saudi Arabia aims to strengthen cooperation with BRICS countries to enhance economic diversification and reduce its dependence on oil extraction and export. Secondly, as a leading oil exporter, Saudi Arabia sees joining BRICS as an opportunity to further develop its economy and open new trade possibilities. Thirdly, membership in the BRICS group could help Saudi Arabia pursue its regional hegemonic and great-power ambitions and play an increasingly significant role on the geopolitical stage. Fourthly, which is particularly noteworthy, membership in BRICS could indirectly revive Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, as Iran has also become a member of this group. Fifthly, it would undoubtedly strengthen Riyadh's political position and create an opportunity for it to play a leading mediator role in the Arab world, presenting real competition to Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in this regard. Finally, membership in BRICS constitutes a signal for the USA that the strategic partnership does not have to continue under the current terms, as Riyadh seeks greater independence in its domestic and foreign policies (Malik *et al.*, 2024).



It is important to stress that Saudi Vision 2030 is not a single project, but a series of various initiatives that aim to transform Saudi Arabia and the functioning of its economy and society by 2030 using soft power. The program is divided into three main parts. The first is entitled “A Vibrant Society”. It focuses on improving the quality of life for all Saudis, *inter alia* providing greater opportunities in education, healthcare and leisure activities. The goal of reforms in this sector is to create an inclusive, tolerant society that is open to the world. The second part is “A Thriving Economy”. This section addresses the need to diversify Saudi Arabia’s economy and shift the focus of revenue generation from oil to other sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, digitalization, and other modern technologies, especially artificial intelligence. The aim of this part of the program is to create a vibrant private sector that can provide employment opportunities for Saudis and contribute to the overall economic growth of the country. The third part is entitled “An Ambitious Nation”. This part deals with the necessity of building a strong and effective government capable of achieving the vision’s goals. It includes initiatives aimed at improving the government services sector, increasing the transparency of government actions as well as combating corruption and bureaucratization. The goal of this part of Saudi Vision 2030 is to build a modern and fully professional government that can support and implement the modern transformation of Saudi Arabia (Sharma, 2024, pp. 2-13).

It is also worth noting that within the framework of Saudi Vision 2030, there are plans to reduce arms imports and replace them with more local production. Prior to the program’s inception, the share of weapons purchased from the local industry was around 2%, while in the long term, it is expected to reach 50% of military equipment spending. These actions aim, among other things, to reduce dependency on foreign arms imports and thus achieve greater independence from the USA in this sphere. To secure funding for the program, Saudi Arabia issued 5% of the shares of the national oil company Saudi Aramco on the Saudi stock exchange in 2019 (*Vision 2030*, 2024).

The Saudi Vision 2030 project defines the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s aspirations to become a global centre for tourism, culture, sports, and entertainment, which are to be facilitated by Saudi Arabia’s advantageous geostrategic location. Its foundation lies in giga-projects, whose impact is meant to be significant not only domestically but also on the international stage (on a macro scale). These giga-projects, combined with efforts to reduce dependency on oil and significantly increase tourism to Saudi Arabia, aim to revolutionize the functioning of the Saudi socio-cultural and event sectors (especially the sports sector). Thus, Saudi Vision 2030 represents an open invitation for global cooperation, innovation and exploration in the area of events which can be organized on a grand and unparalleled scale in

the Kingdom. The futuristic Saudi giga-projects are designed to showcase a nation in motion, highlighting Saudi hospitality, tolerance, passion, ingenuity and mega-creativity. They aim to astonish and captivate the world, building a vision of Saudi Arabia as a modern, exciting, inspiring and futuristic state with unlimited possibilities in every field (Winarni, 2022).

### *2.3. The Abraham Accords and Attempts to Normalize Relations with Israel*

One of the crucial factors in Saudi Arabia's soft power strategy remains the establishment of a lasting, official and formal agreement with Israel. Normalization of bilateral relations is in the interest of both parties, and they have been cooperating in various fields for several decades. However, it is important to note that Saudi Arabia, as the cradle of Islam, home to the two holiest cities to Muslims, Mecca and Medina, and the annual pilgrimage of Hajj, has long been cautious about formalizing cooperation with Israel due to its prestige in the Muslim world, particularly the Arab world. Cooperation with Israel could be perceived as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and collaboration with the enemy.

Over the past decade, especially during Donald Trump's presidency, the geopolitical landscape regarding Arab-Israeli cooperation has shifted, allowing Riyadh to adopt a more flexible approach toward establishing an official agreement with Israel. In this case, the so-called Abraham Accords proved to be extremely helpful, with the United States and Saudi Arabia playing a key role in their signing. In August 2020, peace agreements were signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and between Israel and Bahrain. The same year saw the normalization of relations between Israel and Sudan (October) and Israel and Morocco (December) (Yossef, 2021). These events were a central component of President Trump's Middle East plan. It is worth recalling that in 1979, the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab state – Egypt – was signed. This was made possible through American mediation and a meeting one year before between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and US President Jimmy Carter at the US presidents' summer residence at Camp David. Subsequently, in 1994, a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan was also signed, again with American mediation. By 2024, five Arab states and Sudan were formally cooperating with Israel ("Rocznik...", 2021, pp. 309-321), breaking away from the longstanding policy of non-recognition of Israel since its establishment in 1948. These agreements were motivated by national security concerns – cooperation to curb the imperial ambitions of Shia Iran and neo-Ottoman Turkey – as well as economic and diplomatic interests. This situation provided the authorities in Riyadh with a favourable opportunity to also sign an agreement with Israel without significant negative implications for their own image.

It should be noted that although Saudi Arabia and Israel did not maintain diplomatic relations, they have been systematically strengthening unofficial ties over the past decade, partly due to their converging perception of the threat from Iran. The Saudi-Israeli cooperation has focused on the collaboration between their intelligence services. Saudi Arabia has been a recipient – usually through intermediaries – of Israeli security technologies, including digital surveillance tools and solutions used in the renewable energy sector. The anti-Israel rhetoric in the Saudi public debate has softened. Contacts have expanded in areas such as sports and interfaith dialogue (Podeh, 2018). In 2022, Saudi Arabia opened its airspace to flights from Israel. However, the establishment of official relations remains subject to a number of conditions.

Nevertheless, despite the deepening cooperation, the Palestinian issue and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policies remained a fundamental challenge for bilateral relations. These policies included expanding Jewish settlements on the West Bank, rejecting the two-state solution, and employing force against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. While striving to normalize and formalize relations with Israel, the authorities in Riyadh continuously emphasize that without concessions on the Palestinian issue, establishing bilateral relations would be impossible. Riyadh could not afford to betray the Palestinian cause, despite its complex and conflict-ridden relationships with both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA).

As for Hamas, the contentious issue was its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, viewed in Saudi Arabia as a terrorist threat to the Kingdom's security and regional stability. Regarding the Palestinian Authority, the problematic aspect was the reduction of financial support for the politically inept Fatah and cooperation with the Trump administration to forge a Saudi-Israeli agreement. This was particularly noticeable as Crown Prince MBS did not unequivocally support a pro-Palestinian stance and declared a policy of openness to change. From the USA, which was especially interested in Saudi-Israeli reconciliation, MBS demanded security guarantees, the ability to purchase advanced weaponry, including fifth-generation F-35 stealth multi-role fighter jets, assistance in developing a civilian nuclear program (officially for peaceful purposes), and cessation of criticism regarding Saudi Arabia's military involvement in Yemen and human rights violations by the Saudi government (Oluwashakin and Aleyomi, 2023).

The normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel would thus represent a step of enormous political and symbolic significance in the relationship between the Arab world and Israel. By mid-2023, all indications suggested that reaching an agreement was merely a formality, requiring only the finalization of a few details. In September 2023, John Kirby, the White House National Security Council coordinator for strategic communications, announced that a framework

for normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel had been established. However, the situation was deliberately complicated by Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. One of the aims of this attack was to derail efforts to finalize the planned Saudi-Israeli agreement. In the short term, Hamas succeeded in this regard. Given the plight of the Palestinians, who were brutally treated by Israel, the escalation of a highly ruthless military operation by Israeli forces in Gaza leading to its destruction and dysfunction, and accusations of genocide by the Israeli army against Palestinians – Riyadh could not remain indifferent and officially continue talks regarding an agreement with Israel. As an Arab state, Saudi Arabia could not officially allow itself to betray the Palestinian cause. Consequently, efforts to reach the agreement were temporarily suspended. It is important to keep in mind that it is a suspension, not a termination, which shows how crucial the pact will be for both countries. They will likely sign it once there is gradual stabilization in the Gaza Strip (Cooper, 2024).

#### *2.4. Resumption of Diplomatic Relations with Iran and Cooling of Relations with the USA*

Saudi Arabia and Iran had not maintained official relations since 2016, when protesters attacked Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran in response to the execution of prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, carried out at the behest of Saudi authorities (Chitsazian, 2020). Nevertheless, on 6 April 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to reopen their embassies and resume official visits following an agreement to normalize their relations, signed on 10 March of the same year in Beijing. During the negotiations regarding the agreement, it was decided that the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran would meet to implement the accord, arrange the return of their ambassadors, and discuss ways to strengthen bilateral relations. The signed agreement included a confirmation of mutual respect for the sovereignty of both states, including non-interference in each other's internal affairs. Furthermore, the parties committed to resuming the implementation of previously signed but unimplemented bilateral agreements, such as the *General Agreement for Cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, investment, technology, science, culture, sports, and youth* signed on 27 May 1998, and the *Security Cooperation Agreement* signed on 17 April 2001. The trilateral format – Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China – proved so effective in its endeavours that the parties expressed strong determination to make every effort to promote regional and international peace and security (*Great Expectations...*, 2024, pp. 1-18).

It is important to highlight that the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has added a new dimension to the balance of power in the Middle East. This agreement is beneficial for both parties primarily for economic reasons. For Iran, it cre-

ates opportunities for development despite it being a state under international sanctions, while for Saudi Arabia, it presents the potential for substantial investments in Iran. However, economic cooperation does not mean an end to the Saudi-Iranian competition for dominance in the Middle East or attempts by each side to establish hegemony in the Persian Gulf subregion. The contradictions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are too deep and multifaceted to be minimized by a single agreement, especially since these countries pursue different foreign policy visions within their religious spheres – Shia (Iran) and Sunni (Saudi Arabia) (Zeiha, 2016, pp. 176-213). Nevertheless, they are united by a common, overriding, existential interest: reducing tensions in the Middle East and achieving at least relative stability in the region. This would make it easier for both countries to achieve their strategic economic, military and political goals.

However, it should be stressed that the Saudi-Iranian agreement conflicts with the efforts to sign a Saudi-Israeli agreement. For Israel, Iran remains the greatest threat to its existence and security. Therefore, the future and shape of Saudi-Israeli relations remain uncertain in the context of potential further rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Equally important, as demonstrated by the Saudi-Iranian agreement, is the fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran do not need the United States to achieve their goals in the Middle East, with China easily filling the vacuum left by the USA. While the situation is clear for Iran – the USA and Iran do not maintain diplomatic relations and the USA is the leading initiator of sanctions against Iran – the situation is much more complex for Saudi Arabia. For decades, and indeed since the end of World War II, successive American administrations have aimed to bring Riyadh into their sphere of influence (and have consistently pursued this goal), and even to make Saudi Arabia a client state. This relationship has been described as a symbiotic partnership, particularly in recent decades, despite a temporary cooling of US-Saudi relations following the attacks of 11 September 2001, which revealed connections between the Saudis and Al-Qaeda (Jalal *et al.*, 2023).

However, the last decade, marked by the rise of Crown Prince MBS and his foreign policy vision, has seen an increasing distance in the US-Saudi relations. This situation resulted in part from President Joe Biden's persistent criticism regarding human rights abuses by the Saudi authorities. President Biden called for accountability with regard to MBS's role in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and publicly criticized Riyadh's involvement in the Yemen war, including its military operations and support for one side of the conflict. Biden accused Riyadh of contributing to the humanitarian disaster in Yemen and partially suspended arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the US government did not respond to attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure in 2019, and Saudi Arabia did not positively respond to American

appeals for greater involvement in shaping global oil prices to prevent Russia from profiting after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The USA also reacted negatively to Saudi Arabia's decision of March 2023 to approve the memorandum granting the Kingdom partner status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes China, India, and Russia. Similar reactions were seen from the USA regarding Saudi Arabia's decision to join BRICS (Blanchard, 2023, pp. 1-29).

Of course, the growing divergences in the US-Saudi relations do not imply that they have lost their strategic nature. The mutual ties and dependencies are too deep for events such as the Saudi-Iranian agreement or differences in views on the Gaza conflict (with Riyadh firmly supporting the Palestinians and the USA backing Israel or remaining a neutral observer) to disrupt this strategic relationship. Nevertheless, China's increasing involvement and successes in advancing its vision for the Middle East policy (pursuing a multipolar order) should make the USA aware that Saudi Arabia has become a more demanding and assertive partner. In the vision of the Saudi Crown Prince, Saudi Arabia will no longer be a client state, but aims to be an equal partner, which involves the gradual loosening of ties with the USA, the policy to increase independence from American capital, and looking towards other significant partners, with China being the primary example.

### **3. Soft Power Tools in Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy – Case Studies**

Riyadh's policy of utilizing soft power tools involves not only adjustments in foreign policy but also, and perhaps most importantly, mega-investments in sports, infrastructure, architecture, tourism, and social sectors (such as improving women's status). These mega-investments have two parallel dimensions. The first is the commonly declared aim of building national branding, spreading awareness of Saudi Arabia's growing power, and fostering a perception of the country's status as a great power. The second, undeclared dimension focuses on issues such as: the need to unite Saudi society around the royal family (especially around Crown Prince MBS, who is still rebuilding his image following the Jamal Khashoggi murder scandal); strengthening MBS's internal position; shifting the media discourse from Saudi Arabia's failure in the Yemen war to successes in other areas (including sports and organizational achievements); and marginalizing the monarchy's inability to defend extraction infrastructure against attacks by Iranian militias.

#### *3.1. Sportswashing*

To highlight some of Riyadh's largest and most significant soft power initiatives, it is essential to start with the widely publicized sports dimension. International sporting events organized by Riyadh have become a very accessible and extremely effective tool for creating a positive image of the host nation (Grix, 2016), elevating

the kingdom's prestige both regionally and internationally, as well as gaining favour and even acceptance of other international arena actors for the Saudi authorities' actions in various fields.

For the authorities in Riyadh, sporting events have become a convenient element of public diplomacy aimed at national branding, which includes: increasing the country's international recognition, creating positive associations and perceptions about the host nation, continuously enhancing knowledge about the host country, as well as activating and engaging audiences to support the authorities' positions on key issues (Alhusein, 2022).

In the sports sector, Saudi authorities are seen as engaging in sportswashing<sup>1</sup> – unprecedented investments in sports to enhance their image both domestically and internationally. Since MBS became the crown prince, Riyadh has been making efforts, aligned with the Saudi Vision 2030, to position the Kingdom as the host of major global sporting events. This aims to portray Saudi Arabia as an open, modernized and safe country. The financial resources at Riyadh's disposal have enabled them to achieve remarkable successes in this field, which has sparked considerable controversy (Boykoff, 2022).

For example, in 2019, Saudi Arabia hosted the heavyweight boxing world championship. Since 2021, the prestigious Formula 1 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix has been held. In 2022, the Kingdom launched the LIV Golf League, funded by the Public Investment Fund directly managed by MBS, which took over the PGA Tour – the institution organizing the world's most important golf tournaments to date (Ingle, 2023). In June 2024, the Kingdom hosted the 9-ball World Pool Championship and organised the Esports World Cup 2024. In the years 2023-2027, Jeddah, one of Saudi Arabia's largest cities, will host the annual ATP Next Gen Finals tournament for the best tennis players under 21. From 2024 to 2026, the prestigious WTA Finals, the season-ending event for women's tennis featuring the top players of the season, will be held in Saudi Arabia. In 2024, Riyadh hosted the prestigious UFC Fight Night.

Particularly noteworthy is that since 2021, the Saudis have primarily invested in football, as the world's most popular sport. In 2021, the Saudi Public Investment Fund purchased the renowned English football club Newcastle United. They began attracting the world's biggest football stars to Saudi Arabia. In 2022, one of the most popular and best footballers in history, Cristiano Ronaldo, joined the Saudi club Al-Nassr. His contract, worth EUR 200 million per season, made him the highest-paid

<sup>1</sup> The term was originally coined to describe the use of sports as a tool for a state's reputation-laundering; it was first used in 2015 when the first European Games were held in Baku, Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government used this sporting event to shift attention away from human rights concerns, such as silencing journalists and political activists (Sainz, 2025).



footballer in history. In 2023, other football stars like Karim Benzema, Neymar, Jordan Henderson and Sadio Mane also joined the Saudi football league. In total, Saudi clubs spent nearly EUR 607 million on player transfers in 2023 (excluding player salaries). These transfers proved highly profitable, as bringing in world-class footballers increased sports channels' interest in Saudi football league broadcasts. After Ronaldo's transfer, the Saudi league signed broadcast deals in over 130 countries at prices four times higher than the previous season (Timms, 2024). Additionally, the Saudis paid the Italian and Spanish football federations to host their national super cup matches in Saudi Arabia, bringing top teams like Real Madrid, FC Barcelona and Juventus Turin to Riyadh. Furthermore, Riyadh has extensive future plans for sports investments. In 2027, Saudi Arabia will host the Asian Cup. Saudi efforts to secure the rights to host the men's FIFA World Cup were also successful, with FIFA granting the Kingdom the 2034 World Cup. It was also announced that the 2029 Asian Winter Games will be held in the futuristic city of Neom, which is also being considered as a potential host for the Winter Olympics. Additionally, Riyadh is consistently seeking the opportunity to host the Summer Olympics, especially since it will host the Asian Games in 2034 (Francavilla, 2024).

It is therefore important to emphasize once again that, for at least a decade, Saudi major investments in sports have been an effective soft power tool used by the authorities in Riyadh to change the perception of the Kingdom on the international stage. These investments are intended to symbolize the modernization, transformation and advancement of the country, attract foreign investors from other sectors and numerous tourists, and serve as an instrument for gaining approval and legitimacy from the Saudi society, particularly the young people under the age of 30, who make up the majority of the population. MBS, who is the face of these transfers and sporting events, uses sportswashing to create his image as a modern ruler who understands the needs of his society and works to strengthen Saudi Arabia's position and prestige on the global scale. Sportswashing is also aimed at normalizing relations between Western countries and Saudi Arabia, which will cease to be perceived as the most conservative absolute monarchy which permanently violates human rights in every dimension.

### *3.2. Rankings and Infrastructure Mega-Investments*

Various rankings provide an image of a country's popularity and reputation, as well as how it is perceived abroad. Among the most important are the Country Brand Index developed by FutureBrand and the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index. These rankings evaluate aspects such as culture, the state and potential of the economy, the quality of national products, standard of living, tourist attractions and several other factors influencing the opinions of foreign business and consumer groups.

Looking at the indicators obtained by Saudi Arabia in the Country Brand Index, it is worth noting that, according to the NBI 2023 ranking, Saudi Arabia achieved a good 54th place, an improvement from 57th place in 2022. Meanwhile, in the Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2024, Saudi Arabia ranked 18th, advancing one position from its result in 2023. In the Global Talent Competitiveness Index 2023, Saudi Arabia took 48th place and was classified as a high-income country. However, according to the World University Rankings 2024, Saudi Arabia does not have any universities in the top one hundred best higher education institutions, although Alfaisal University ranked 51st in the Times Higher Education Young University Rankings 2023 – a list of the world's best universities that are 50 years old or younger (*Saudi Arabia...*, 2024).

The selected rankings mentioned above unequivocally prove that Saudi Arabia's position on the international stage is strengthening, and its influence is consistently on an upward trend. This situation is undoubtedly another consequence of the Saudi Vision 2030 systematically implemented by MBS and the re-evaluation of instruments in foreign policy from hard to soft power, facilitated by mega-investments in the infrastructure sector. The authorities in Riyadh have invested in a number of monumental projects, among which it is worth highlighting at least a few key, controversial or most outstanding ones.

One of such ambitious projects is undoubtedly the futuristic mega-city NEOM, emerging in Tabuk near the Red Sea coast. This project is estimated to cost around USD 500 billion. NEOM, a city built from scratch over an area of 26,500 km<sup>2</sup> of desert, aims to be an innovative and sustainable global hub divided into the business, industrial, residential, and tourist zones. As a prestigious ecological project, NEOM will utilize the latest technologies with a particular emphasis on artificial intelligence. It will feature a high-speed railway, driverless cars and flying drone-taxis powered solely by renewable energy sources, ensuring a zero-emission ecosystem. The project is designed to be a broad platform for international investments. NEOM aims to become a regional powerhouse in water production and storage, based on desalination. NEOM will consist of 10 projects, referred to as regions. So far, details on four of the regions have been announced: The Line, Oxagon, Trojena and Sindalah (NEOM, 2024).

The Line is set to be the world's first vertical city. It will have a linear layout stretching 170 km, eventually housing 9 million people (with a target of 1 million residents by 2030). The project consists of two parallel linear skyscrapers, each 500 metres tall and 200 metres apart. The buildings will be covered with mirrored facades, allowing them to "blend with nature". All essential services such as schools, medical clinics, recreational centres and green spaces will be accessible within a five-minute-walk radius. A high-speed railway line will run through the city, fa-

cilitating travel and powered by an electric system based on renewable energy. According to the plans, a significant part of the project is expected to be built by 2030 (*The Line*, 2024).

Trojena is an extremely interesting project, envisioned as a resort built around a lake in Saudi Arabia's snow-capped mountain range, with elevations ranging from 1,500 to 2,600 metres above sea level, spanning an area of nearly 60 km<sup>2</sup>. Trojena is set to host the Asian Winter Games in 2029, followed by world-class sporting events, art exhibitions, concerts, and cultural festivals (*TROJENA*, 2024).

As for Oxagon, it is designed as a hexagonal port city and is set to be the world's largest floating structure and an industrial hub handling 13% of global trade, connecting Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The goal of this coastal city is to combine the best residential and industrial solutions to create a global centre for innovation, logistics, and clean energy. The majority of Oxagon will be located on the sea and built using a modular system, allowing for future city expansion. The port opened in May 2023, with the first container terminal expected to operate by 2025 (*OXAGON*, 2024).

Sindalah is an island covering over 84 hectares, intended to attract 2,400 visitors per day. It is planned to rival top global tourist destinations, offering luxury amenities year-round and positioning itself as a world-class sailing hub designed by renowned Italian designer Luca Dini Design & Architecture, as well as featuring Michelin-starred restaurants (Sindalah, 2025).

Qiddiya, hailed as Saudi Arabia's entertainment capital, is a giga-project near Riyadh that will encompass amusement parks, water parks, motorsport facilities, racetracks, and an indoor ski resort (*Qiddiya*, 2024).

Another project, Amaala, is an ultra-luxurious tourist hotspot along the northwest coast, featuring high-end hotels, gourmet dining, wellness centres, and artistic experiences (*Amaala*, 2024).

All the aforementioned giga-projects align with the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030 and the ambitious plans to transform Saudi Arabia into a regional powerhouse, attracting numerous tourists from all over the world, by utilizing primarily soft power tools.

### 3.3. Saudi Blue Economy

It is worth noting that one of the key tools of Saudi Arabia's soft power is the blue economy, which provides the Kingdom with an opportunity to diversify its economy as it pursues the ambitious plan of reducing dependence on revenue from oil extraction and exports.

The United Nations defined the blue economy as an economy that comprises a range of economic sectors and related policies that together determine whether the

use of ocean resources is sustainable (Midlen, 2021). The UN points out that an important challenge of the blue economy is to understand and better manage the many aspects of oceanic sustainability, ranging from sustainable fisheries to ecosystem health and to preventing pollution. Moreover, the organisation underlines that the blue economy focuses on the sustainable management of ocean resources, requires collaboration across borders and sectors through a variety of partnerships, and on a scale that has not been previously achieved. The UN notes that the blue economy will aid in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, of which one goal, 14, is “Life Below Water” (Marwan, 2023).

Saudi Arabia is undertaking a series of investments aimed at protecting marine areas, particularly the Red Sea ecosystem, ensuring inclusive and sustainable economic growth. It is important to highlight that Saudi Arabia’s coastline is the eighth largest coral reef habitat globally, covering an area of approximately 6,600 km<sup>2</sup>, along with 204 km<sup>2</sup> of mangrove forests and hundreds of kilometres of seagrass meadows. It is also home to over 20 newly discovered “blue holes” in the Red Sea. By investing in these giga-projects, most of which focus on marine areas and are built based on sustainable development principles in line with UN goals, Saudi authorities are promoting the blue economy (*How Saudi Arabia...*, 2024).

The implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, combined with innovative technological investments in marine areas, positions Saudi Arabia as a leader in developing a new blue economy that uses ocean data to create a sustainable knowledge-based economy. Each of these giga-projects places a strong emphasis on utilizing the most advanced available technologies, including environmental monitoring, emission-free desalination, regenerative aquaculture, digitalization in the maritime industry, and advanced coral cultivation.

In recent years, while focusing on soft power actions, Saudi Arabia has made historic commitments to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 (“Life Below Water”). Under the Saudi Green Initiative, Saudi Arabia has committed to protecting 30% of its terrestrial and marine areas by 2030, in line with the “30x30” goal established under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. During the Kingdom’s G20 presidency, the member countries approved the establishment of the Global Coral R&D Accelerator Platform Foundation (CORDAP Foundation). Thanks to a USD 100 million investment from the Saudi authorities, CORDAP aims to prevent the projected loss of 70-90% of coral reefs that is expected to occur over the next decade due to ongoing climate change (SGI, 2024).

An interesting solution within the promoted blue economy is also the WAVE initiative, supported by the Future Investment Initiative (FII). It aims to drive ocean regeneration over the next generation by bringing together Saudi authorities, the

private sector, and civil society. WAVE is designed to serve as a platform for activating public-private partnerships, launching new global programs, gathering insights about the ocean, raising awareness and engagement, as well as stimulating innovation in blue technologies (*Future Investment Initiative*, 2024).

#### 4. Conclusions – Perception of Saudi Soft Power

Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly a regional powerhouse with great power ambitions, yet it is a country marked by internal contrasts and contradictions. It is unique due to its informal status as the leader of the Sunni Islamic world, its historical ties to the origins of Islam in the Hijaz region, Mecca and Medina, the organization of the annual Hajj pilgrimage, the persistent influence of radical Wahhabism, funding of global Islamic expansion and supporting jihadist terrorist organizations. Additionally, its large territory, vast oil resources and influence on global oil prices, coupled with regional competition for hegemony with the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran, attempts at rapprochement with Israel while supporting Palestinians, and its symbiotic partnership with the United States alongside good relations with China and Russia, further distinguish it.

Saudi Arabia, a regional power with hegemonic ambitions, plays a crucial role in shaping the balance of power in the Middle East and is also competing with major extra-regional powers (USA, Russia, China, India) for influence in the region.

Saudi Arabia is thus a strategically significant state, and its foreign policy decisions have broad repercussions both regionally and internationally. This is particularly relevant given that, over the past decade, there has been a fundamental shift in Riyadh's foreign policy from hard to soft power. This state of affairs is the result of several factors, including the rationalization of foreign and domestic policy goals, such as Riyadh's failure in the Yemeni civil war, ineffective pressure on Qatar, ongoing but ineffective rivalry with Iran, the depletion of Saudi oil resources, the need for economic diversification, the desire to reduce dependence on the USA, the goal of transforming Saudi Arabia into a technological giant, and the appointment of MBS as Crown Prince along with the implementation of his flagship project, Saudi Vision 2030.

Soft power has thus become the dominant tool in Riyadh's foreign policy over the past decade, seen by Crown Prince MBS as bringing far greater political and economic benefits than the previously ineffective hard power approach.

Saudi soft power aims to create a positive global image of Saudi Arabia, stabilize the conflict-prone Middle East region, develop a new model of regional security, and thereby strengthen Saudi Arabia's position as a key player in the Middle East. It also seeks to maintain close relations with Western countries and China while gradually reducing dependence on the USA.

From the perspective of the authorities in Riyadh, the shift towards soft power is intended to portray Saudi Arabia as a modern, innovative, open, and tolerant monarchy, which will attract foreign tourists and investors across almost all economic and cultural sectors. By primarily using soft power, Saudi Arabia also sees its role as an effective negotiator in regional conflicts, aiming to take over the role of successful mediator currently held by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt.

While analysing Riyadh's role in rationalizing the means used primarily in the last decade in foreign policy, it is evident that soft power is not merely a temporary tool, but will be the leading instrument in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the coming years. Crown Prince MBS will remain the face and symbol of this soft power strategy, while the tools used to implement this soft power will mainly include sportswashing, infrastructure giga-projects, the blue economy, and the progressive (sometimes superficial) liberalization of socio-cultural life, aimed at engaging foreign capital in the kingdom, attracting mega-investments and increasing tourism revenues to outcompete the UAE.

The year 2030 thus appears crucial for the implementation of the objectives of the policy based on soft power, as it marks the deadline for the implementation of the grand modernization strategy Saudi Vision 2030, in which soft power plays a key role.

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