




## A Comparative Study of the Impact of the Domestic Driving Forces on the Regional Conflicts in the Middle East from the Perspective of Diversionary Foreign Policy: Case Studies of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq

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### Abstract

The conflicts and foreign policies of the Middle Eastern countries are often analyzed through regional and international lenses, with little attention to the impact of domestic driving forces. In this respect, this study aims to provide a comparative explanation of how domestic driving forces, drawing on the concept of legitimacy, affected the Middle Eastern conflicts of Iraq, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), the Kurdish issue (2013-2019), and Saudi's proxy involvement in Syria (2011-2016). The hypothesis is that domestic problems and crises as significant internal driving forces in Iraq, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, leading to the legitimization problems, were influential in shaping their diversionary motives to enter into or initiate regional conflicts/crises, with a focus on the aforementioned cases. The methodology is qualitative comparative analysis. The data were collected through documentary research and analyzed using the diversionary theory of foreign policy. This article suggests that reinforcing the legitimacy of the state and good governance plays a sustainable role in resolving regional conflicts, as well as strengthening peace and stability in the region. From this perspective, the domestic reforms in Saudi Arabia, and structural transformations in post-2003 Iraq have led to considerable changes in their Middle Eastern strategy and

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conflicts. In contrast, Turkey's Middle Eastern policy, characterized by a reduction in the use of soft power during the second decade of the AKP's rule, still has persisted; given the absence of significant changes in domestic policies and the democratic backsliding during this period.

### **Keywords**

Domestic Driving Forces, Legitimacy, Middle Eastern Conflicts, Comparative Study, Diversionary Foreign Policy

### **Introduction**

During 1960s, approaches to foreign policy analysis (FPA) emerged largely as a reaction to the dominance of realism in the analysis of states' foreign policy. They have abandoned the structural and unitary view of states' foreign policy and focus on decision-making in foreign policy of states (close to the Agent-oriented theories). From the outlook of such approaches, states' behavior is derived from decisions made by human individuals in interaction with various internal and external factors. Nowadays, when it comes to explaining the behavior of states in the international arena, it is broadly acknowledged that international politics is innately considered as *linkage politics*. As notably stated by Tip O'Neill, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1980s, *all politics is local*, the segregation between domestic and foreign policy seems practically impossible; since domestic politics and foreign policy are profoundly interconnected.

In the contemporary history of Middle East countries, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq, as three important regional actors, significant domestic elements and driving forces can be cited as *turning points* with a prominent impact on the foundation of these countries' foreign and regional policies. To exemplify such facts, crucial elements would consist of the discovery of oil in 1938 and establishing the old *oil-for-security* deal between Saudi Arabia and the United States, as a keystone of strategic relationship between two countries; the escalation in Riyadh's oil revenues since the 1960s led to a dependence on economic tools in foreign policy; the effects of various challenges within Saudi society, in addition to the increasing concerns originated from the domestic

effects of the Arab Spring, as both of them regarded as existential threats, formed Saudi Arabia's more aggressive foreign policy from 2011 to 2019. Furthermore, these examples can be mentioned in relation to Turkey and Iraq: the fundamental influence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's thoughts on Turkish foreign policy foundations (the quest of EU membership and the lack of attention to the political issues in East and West Asia); the thorough overhaul of Ankara's foreign policy after the rise of the Justice and Development Party to power (focus on the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia); the significant impact of this party's triumph in the 2011 parliamentary elections on foreign policy; the formation of the phenomenon of *Erdoganism* within the structure of foreign policy, thanks to a shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system, and the divergent regional policies of Iraq during Ba'ath Party era compared to the post-Saddam period as a result of different domestic structures.

In this regard, the main question that the study seeks to answer is: How did domestic driving forces, manifesting as *legitimation problems*, affect the Middle Eastern conflicts of Iraq, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, with a focus on the subjects of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), the Kurdish issue (2013-2019), and Saudi Arabia's proxy involvement in Syria (2011-2016)? The research hypothesis is that domestic problems and crises as significant internal driving forces in Iraq, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, leading to the *legitimation problems*, were influential in shaping their diversionary motives to enter into or initiate regional conflicts and crises, with a focus on the subjects of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990), the Kurdish issue (2013-2019), and Saudi Arabia's proxy involvement in Syria (2011-2016). The key objective of this article is to comparatively explain how *domestic driving forces* (independent variable), drawing on the concept of legitimacy, affected the *Middle Eastern conflicts of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq during the aforementioned time periods* (dependent variable) by applying the diversionary theory of foreign policy. The contribution of this survey lies in its comparative approach, which demonstrates how internal driving forces, operating through the notion of *domestic legitimacy*, can significantly shape foreign policy and regional conflicts in numerous ways. In fact, this article argues

that *legitimacy* acts as a crucial driver for shaping foreign policy behavior and regional conflicts. The methodology of the current study is *qualitative comparative analysis* utilizing the deductive research strategy. The data were also collected through documentary research and analyzed using the diversionary theory of foreign policy.

It is worth mentioning that exploring the foreign policy of Middle Eastern countries from an *inside-out perspective* is not incompatible with the international relations theories, but rather seeks to complement them by highlighting the role of domestic variables often overlooked in these theoretical frameworks. In other words, it is crucial to shift one's analytical attitude from the regional and international levels of analysis toward the domestic level of analysis to clarify how regional conflicts have been instrumentalized for the very aim of domestic legitimacy. As a matter of fact, the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy in non-democratic regimes or regimes with democratic deficit is depicted at specific points in time, exemplifying how internal driving forces, manifesting as *legitimation problems*, are one of the key influential factors in shaping foreign policy.

## 1. Literature Review

In his book *The Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia: Foreign Policy, Bilateral Relations, and Regional Order*, Mehdi Alikhani reviews the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East region through constructivism, neorealism, geopolitics, and synthesis of all (Alikhani, 2022). Yehuda Blanga, in his article titled *Saudi Arabia Motives in the Syrian Civil War*, ascertains the origins of Riyadh's engagement in Syria as an 'intra-Islamic Cold War' (a geopolitical outlook), locating the Shia camp commanded by Iran against the Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia, accompanied by other Persian Gulf monarchies, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey (Blanga, 2017). In an article entitled *Strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia regarding the Syrian Crisis*, Ali Nejat analyzes Riyadh's and Tehran's strategies regarding the Syrian civil war through the standpoint of regional balance;

arguing that the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime could reestablish the regional balance unsettled by the developments of the Iraq War and Arab uprisings (Nejat, 2014).

Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour and Seyedeh Asieh Kheradpisheh Hashemi, in a joint article titled *Continuity and Change in Iraq's Foreign Policymaking from 1920 to 2020*, scrutinize the fundamentals of Iraq's foreign policy as a result of three kinds of changes within this country's the political system (Sajjadpour & Kheradpisheh Hashemi, 2022). Drew Horn, in his article titled *Beyond Diversion: Regime Security and 1990-91 Gulf War*, probes into the reasons behind Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 through the notion of *dilemma of regime insecurity* (Horne, 2022). Kilic Bugra Kanat, author of a study titled *Leadership Style and Diversionary Theory of Foreign Policy: The Use of Diversionary Strategies by Middle Eastern Leaders during and in the Immediate Aftermath of the Gulf War*, scrutinizes leadership characteristics of Hafez al-Assad (Syria), King Hussein (Jordan), and Saddam Hussein, thereby examining the foreign policy of their countries (Kanat, 2011). Gregory Gause, in his article titled *Iraq's Decisions to Go to War in 1980 and 1990*, argues that regime insecurity led Saddam Hussein to wage war against Iran and Kuwait (Gause, 2002).

Some of the most important investigations in relation to the analysis of Turkey's policy towards the Kurdish issue consist of the following research studies. Through the mediator variable of the 'degree of polarization' of the leaders' speeches of Turkish government, Burak Kazim Yilmaz, in a study titled *Economic Hardships, Polarizing Rhetoric, and Diversionary Use of Force*, examines Ankara's domestic conflicts against the PKK and its military operations in Syria (Yilmaz, 2021). Jaber Gasemi and Amirali Madadi, utilizing James N. Rosenau's theory of change and continuity in their article titled *An analysis of the New Turn of Turkish Foreign policy towards the Middle East*, argue that Erdogan's authoritarianism, governmental bureaucracy, tense environment of society, the redefinition of Turkish role in the region, and the transformation of power in the international system are the most important

components in changing the foreign policy of Turkey towards the Middle East region (Ghasemi & Madadi, 2021). Saeed Shokoohi et al. observe the effects of Europeanization and de-Europeanization on Turkish foreign policy in an article titled *The Impact of Europeanization and De-Europeanization on Turkey's Foreign Policy* (Shokoohi, et al., 2022).

In the three groups of the above-mentioned studies, the impact of the political legitimacy (domestic legitimacy) on foreign policy has not been analyzed within a comparative analysis. The innovative contribution of the present article lies in its comparative examination of how domestic driving forces - centered around the notion of legitimacy - have influenced the regional conflicts of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq in the Middle East. This subject will be examined through case studies of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (1990), Saudi Arabia's proxy involvement in Syria (2011-2016), and the Kurds-Turkey (2013-2019).

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Diversionary Theory of Foreign Policy**

Generally speaking, diversionary studies as a key approach in *foreign policy analysis (FPA)*, highlight the effects of specific domestic variables on shaping foreign policy. Diversionary studies mainly claim that vulnerable leaders at risk would manipulate foreign policy to enhance their internal political status. Joe Hagan, an outstanding contemporary theorist in this field, specifies diversionary theory of conflict (and war) as one of the significant domestic political descriptions about foreign policy. These theories contribute to one's recognition of how domestic politics would form foreign policy, and in particular the use of force, the risk of war, or its escalation (Hagan, 2017: 124). On the basis of *diversionary theory*, leaders exposed to domestic problems, crises, or disagreements have recourse to war or conflict with another state to increase public support and distract attention from domestic political, social, and economic problems. In fact, political leaders of governments, whether in democratic or non-democratic ones, rationally adopt to involve in active and adventurous foreign policy or make crises out of the country as a means of short-term escapement while averting public attention from domestic issues when they

have been confronted with unpopularity, domestic pressure, and potential threats to maintain power. Shifting focus from domestic status to international arena, this event of foreign policy would involve the objectives of leaders pursuing adventurous foreign policy or diversionary conflict including consolidation government's position, domestic political support, enhancing domestic cohesion, and making the most of state legitimacy for re-election (Kanat, 2014: 16). The threat or use of force can summon domestic support in three ways: nurturing nationalism, portraying robust and effective leadership, or proceeding exorbitant national security agendas beside powerful supporting groups (Hagan, 2017: 124).

The *diversionary theory of foreign policy* or the *diversionary theory of war* stands in contradiction with the traditional realist perception by asserting that foreign policy is inseparable from domestic politics (Li et al., 2009: 369). The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato was one of the first researchers to assert in his work, *The Republic*, the tendency of governments to wage war as a means of sidetracking public attention from their problems. Through widespread studies on war, Quincy Wright concluded that many countries exhibit an inclination for war due to internal difficulties (Meernik, 2017: 8). Joe D. Hagan hypothesizes that, on the very basis of historical research, the leaders of the five world powers faced increasing domestic opposition in the decades prior to World War I. Subsequently, they adopted newly diverse political strategies to restrain dissent, and diversionary motives and other political incentives indirectly played a significant role on the eve of war (Hagan, 2017: 127). The beginning of the initial studies regarding the diversionary theory of war dates back to the 1960s and 1970s. Over the years, a reductionist approach was dominant in the study of the diversionary theory of war, since researchers concentrated on the diversionary motivations of leaders merely while they used force against other states. Researchers such as Hagan and Levy progressively extended the scope of dependent variables in the studies of the diversionary theory of war. This revision infers that embattled leaders may resort to other less costly and risky alternatives such as the threat to use force and escalatory discourse to divert attention from

domestic issues to foreign affairs, albeit only temporarily. (Kanat, 2014: 16-19). Joe Hagan, Patrick James, Bradley Lian, John R. Oneal, Karl DeRouen, and Jack Levy are among the distinguished scholars in the field of the diversionary theory.

A section of the literature on the diversionary theory of war inspects the *facilitating elements* or what Hagan entitled the term the 'contextual conditions' in the diversionary use of force. These components would be categorized into two groups: 1) international conditions, encompassing 'enduring rivalries' and 'contested issues, particularly territorial conflicts,' and 2) domestic conditions regarding how 'types of regimes,' namely democratic and authoritarian regimes, facilitate or hinder the diversionary use of force. As for the first group, three motifs are posed: 1) the constant and sustainable rivalry among states with the historical backgrounds in this issue leads to the realization of the goal of *rally around the flag* effect; nonetheless, this depends largely upon the type of regime. 2) Neighboring states would be more likely to engage in territorial disputes involve in territorial and conflicts over the treatment of similar ethnic groups abroad. From the perspective of Jaroslav Tir, professor of political science, the diversionary argument regarding territorial disputes has strong empirical support (Hagan, 2017: 133-134). 3) States with 'incompatible geopolitical preferences' retain justifiable reasons for 'intensifying' violent conflicts with the aim of diversionary motive (Haynes, 2017: 343). The second group of studies address domestic conditions, including regime types and transitions. Authoritarian regimes are more prone to the use of diversionary force due to the relative lack of political restrictions (Hagan, 2017: 140-142). The majority of authoritarian leaders know that the use of force is not a viable option in the long-term period. Hence, devising supplementary strategies to maintain power seems crucial; that foreign policy is one of such alternatives. Democratic leaders may also distract public attention towards an external event to achieve sufficient time to manage or resolve domestic problems. Moreover, it is notable that initiating war does not hold true for democracies with *strong democratic institutions* against their counterparts. The literature on the diversionary studies is bustling with examples of leaders utilizing foreign policy for domestic purposes (Kanat, 2014: 21-22).

Some analysts point to instances such as the conflict between England and Argentina over the Falkland Islands in 1982 (Weisiger, 2013: 8).

### **3. Analyzing Middle Eastern Conflicts of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Turkey in Light of Domestic Legitimacy Driving Force: An ‘Inside-Out’ Perspective**

According to the foreign policy analysis literature, a cyclical relationship exists between domestic and foreign policy. Domestic driving forces in relevance to the political legitimacy (domestic legitimacy) affect foreign policy choices, while foreign policy choices also influence domestic politics and legitimization of the political system (Colombo, 2017: 60). Consequently, recognizing how internal drivers, relevant to domestic legitimacy, affect the countries' foreign policy is essential. With an emphasis on particular case studies, this important issue has been examined in the current study in relation to the Middle Eastern policy of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq during the Saddam Hussein's era.

#### **3.1. The Legitimacy Deficit in Saudi Arabia (2011-2016)**

In this section, the *legitimacy deficit* caused by traditional, political, and contemporary challenges in Saudi Arabia is explained from the 1990s until the outbreak of the Arab Spring. In the recent decades, due to various reasons such as the increased higher education and public awareness, particularly among the youth, social and political interactions in Saudi society have undergone significant transformations leading to profound effects on legitimacy, governance, and policies of the government. The challenge deriving from various intellectual and religious currents is classified as the *traditional challenge*, while authoritarianism, sectarianism, and ever-increasing anxiety regarding the internal consequences of the Arab Spring are outlined as *political challenges* and issues of modernization, women, and youth fall under the heading of *social and contemporary challenges* in Saudi Arabia. The notion of *legitimacy deficit* has been defined as a weakening of the ‘compliance pull’ of institutions [government]. The legitimacy deficit emerges when an institution remains unchangeable while its normative and political environment alter (Stephen, 2018: 97). Anthony King and Richard Rose also put forward the theory of

*Overloaded Governments*, positing that as governments encounter extreme demands, they find governing ever more challenging (Haywood, 2017: 310). The very origin of the legitimacy deficit in Saudi Arabia is rooted out to the lack of political pluralism and democracy (Haywood, 2017: 58-60). The very origin of the legitimacy deficit in Saudi Arabia is in *authoritarianism*. Authoritarianism as a type of political system is characterized by opposition to democracy and political pluralism (Haywood, 2017: 58-60). As classified in 2022 by Freedom House, Saudi Arabia's categorization is among 'Not Free' countries worldwide (Freedom House, 2022).

The growing anxiety arising from the domestic consequences of the Arab Spring exemplify another political challenge for Saudi Arabia subsequent to outbreak of the Arab revolutions in 2011. In 2011, Saudi Arabia encountered an accumulation of internal problems and growing dissatisfaction that its turning point was the Arab Spring as an existential threat this year. The Arab Spring dragged to the surface the severe legitimacy deficit of the Arab regimes in the Middle East. Even though this domino effect of Arab disturbances did not lead to the collapse of Saudi leaders, yet they were not invulnerable to its impact. The Arab Spring posed a remarkably *existential challenge* for Saudi Arabia to the point that it formed both its domestic and regional policies as well through a more aggressive foreign policy and the top-down implementation modernist reforms within the country (Tynan, 2020: 53). As Caroline Tynan states: "The Saudi regime did not need to see mass protests or an imminent threat of revolution in the kingdom to find its ruling legitimacy under existential threat. The source of such a threat has been the way in which Saudi legitimacy has been challenged by an oppositional discourse characterized by the lack of an ideology" (Tynan, 2020: 54). As a consequence, the regional revolutions in 2011, occurring following Saudi Arabia's declining traditional ideological legitimacy, endangered the authority of the Al Saud regime by exacerbating (intensifying) internal and regional challenges (Tynan, 2020: 54).

Sectarianism embodies another challenge for Saudi Arabia. The Saudi society is basically a sectarian society, a reason that traces back to the foundation of the

Saudi state itself, explicitly, the alliance between the Al Saud family and Wahhabi scholars since 1744 and the rise of the first Saudi state (Rahmanian, 2016: 45). From Courtney Freer's viewpoint, discrimination against Shiites remains a reality of life in Saudi Arabia, as the Saudi monarchy is originally legitimized through Sunni nationalism (Freer, 2019: 98). Regarding intellectual and religious currents as a traditional challenge, it is notable that since its inauguration, Saudi Arabia has faced critical movements within the country due to political blockage, the consequences of modernization, and the government's repressive approach towards critical stances. In the 1950s and 1960s, the main opponents consisted of socialists, communists, and Arab nationalists (Al-Rasheed, 2021: 212). From the 1970s, Islamism has replaced the former opposition and includes the Sahwa movement, jihadists, and reformist Islamists. Another group, intellectuals or liberals, consist of technocrats and Western-educated individuals. They advocate for transforming the absolute monarchy into at least a constitutional monarchy, democratic reforms, and a revision of societal affairs, not based on Islamic values (Ghasemi, 2018: 26). Moreover, it is indispensable to mention the subversive movements both within and outside Saudi Arabia, excluding jihadists, with the aim of overthrowing the government of the Saudi monarch dynasty in favor of a different political system (Wikiwand, 2022).

The issues of modernization, women, and youth characterize contemporary challenges for the Saudi government. Regarding modernization, it should be mentioned that since the 1990s, the Saudi government has gradually confronted increased challenges and, in general, legitimacy deficit as a systemic crisis due to advancements in telecommunications, technology, and the internet; the expansion of higher education; and the global spread of democracy (Sardarnia & Mohseni, 2019: 338). To name some of the consequences in modernization including a noteworthy increase in urban population in Saudi society (from 52.7 percent in 1972 to 84.5% percent in 2011) (Knoema, 2021), an incredible growth in literacy (Sardarnia & Norousi Amiri, 2014: 360-361), and the expansion of the new middle class (77.96 percent in 2018) (AlOmar et al., 2018) as a class

advocating democracy and political reforms, as well as the originator of social movements. This new middle class has confronted the regime with significant criticism (Sardarnia & Norousi Amiri, 2014: 362-363). Consequently, one of the primary motivations behind the preparation of Vision 2030 was to mainly address some of the demands among the middle class and prevent an explosion of public anger (Al-Rasheed, 2018: 3).

The issue of women symbolizes another key challenge for the Saudi government. According to the World Economic Forum's reports on the 'Global Gender Gap' in 2011 and 2015, Saudi Arabia's overall ranking was 131st and 134th out of 135 and 145 countries, respectively (Hausmann et al., 2011; World Economic Forum, 2015a). Another contemporary challenge confronting the Saudi government refers to the issue of *youth* that has been interconnected to two phenomena: the *onset trend of the modernization process since the 1960s* and the *internet and social media*, because the initial effects of these phenomena are mostly apparent among the youth and the middle class. Modernization in various fields has led to the *silent revolution* in beliefs of youth, *revolution of rising expectations* and the formation of a platform for revisionist and transformational currents. The emergence of silent revolution occurred among Saudi youth in the second half of the 1990s (Sardarnia, 2016: 3). Nowadays, Saudi youth demand equal opportunities and respect for civil rights, discernibly expressed on social media platforms (Al-Rasheed, 2021: 220).

### **3.2. Analyzing Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy towards Syria in Light of the Legitimacy Deficit (2011-2016)**

Preceding a remarkable alteration in Riyadh's Middle Eastern policies in light of reforms, predominantly development of economic programs, the abovementioned domestic driving forces were influential in shaping the diversionary motivations for Saudi Arabia to enter into conflicts or escalate geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East from 2011 to 2019. The current article does not refute the role of regional driving forces, namely making efforts to increase regional influence and dominance (from a geopolitical perspective); nevertheless, it underlines that internal driving forces, by themselves, were one

of the influential factors in shaping the motives behind Saudi Arabia's involvement in external conflicts or functioned as a factor for their escalation. According to the diversionary theory of foreign policy, leaders who encounter domestic challenges with their lack of immediate solutions may resort to active and adventurous foreign policy as a 'temporary' solution to turn away public attention from internal issues. In most cases, the diversionary strategy aims to cease public concentration from domestic problems (domestic politics) towards a 'successful foreign policy' (Kanat, 2014: 16). The diversionary conflicts or their escalation demonstrate leaders' abilities to the public, while distracting attention from factors declining their popularity over time or from the threats and challenges to their hold on power (Weisiger, 2013: 50). In this regard, anxiety arising from severe domestic challenges and the internal consequences of the Arab Spring played a role in shaping Saudi Arabia's military engagement in Syria during 2011-2016, in order to drag public perception towards foreign policy rather than internal problems. Regarding the impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi Arabia's domestic and regional policies, it should be noted that not only for Riyadh but also for all members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, the fundamental demands of the Arab Spring, including freedom, effective democracy, free elections, and justice, posed a tangible threat to the survival of their regimes (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2019: 37-40).

On the basis of aforementioned explanations, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the form of proxy warfare in Syria, can be explained through the lens of this country's internal developments as well, not only from the perspective of power politics. Riyadh's entry into Syria, not as an 'existential' threat to the monarchy, (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2019: 49); coincided with the Arab Spring developments; this occurrence was influential in distancing the Saudi public from these developments and their socio-political demands, diverting public attention from the Arab uprisings to geopolitical rivalries and foreign policy instead of focusing on domestic politics, and diminishing the inspiration of Saudi activists from the Arab Spring from 2011 to early 2016 (prior to the shift in Saudi policy towards the Assad regime). The violence and turmoil arising from extremist groups in

Syria, such as ISIS, and in general, the prolonged Syrian crisis efficiently made a barrier against the arrival of Arab Spring's liberal waves into Saudi Arabia (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019: 20-22). Theories of international relations and an external perspective, deduce Saudi Arabia's proxy involvement in Syria as a reaction to Iran's aggression against the geopolitical environment dominated by the Saudi monarchy, which resulted from the shift in the geopolitical situation of the Middle East. They ignore another factor in the country's sense of vulnerability: the spillover of the Arab Spring waves into Saudi Arabia due to the threat posed by the emergence of 'Islamic democracies' in Morocco and Tunisia, jeopardizing the survival of the monarchical regime (Colombo, 2017: 464-470). Hence, it can be inferred that one of the reasons for the formation and continuation of Saudi Arabia's proxy rivalry with Iran in Syria from 2011 to early 2016, not only related to its efforts to restore regional balance disrupted by the developments of the 2003 Iraq war and Arab revolutions (Nejat, 2014: 91), but it was also linked to Riyadh's domestic politics. In respect to the importance of domestic politics, it has been featured by the shifts in internal dynamics, namely the implementation of socio-economic reform strategy, especially the economic development programs, Saudi Arabia's regional policies in the Middle East have also undergone significant changes.

### **3.3. The Legitimacy Crisis in Iraq under Saddam Hussein**

Generally, Iraq had confronted a triad of challenges and problems after the end of the eight-year war with Iran that ultimately led to the *legitimacy crisis* of the political system. The prominent American political scientist, Lucian W. Pye defines legitimacy crisis and its origins as follows: "in a genuine legitimacy crisis the challenge is to the basic constitutional dimensions of the system and to the most generalized claims of leadership of those in authority. ...we shall therefore define a legitimacy crisis as a breakdown in the constitutional structure and performance of government ..." (Binder et al., 1971: 136). Additionally, the renowned German sociologist, Jürgen Habermas remarks: "the legitimacy crisis is regarded as the systematic creation of unfulfilled expectations within the system; these unfulfilled expectations cannot be resolved by prevailing values or

by rewarding conformity with the system” (Habermas, 2015: 106, 205). Adhering to two principles, Habermas necessitates the legitimacy of a government as 1) Democracy (popular sovereignty) and 2) human rights (Nowzari, 2014: 231-236, 250). Habermas states: “the political system requires inputs of loyalty from the masses. Crises relevant to inputs appear as legitimacy crisis; in such issues, the political system is not capable of achieving the minimum required loyalty of the masses” (Habermas, 2015: 122-123).

The three classifications of crises and challenges of Iraq in 1988 included: socio-economic problems, ever-increasing concern arising from ethnic-religious developments, and developments in the international system. As regards the first category of problems, it is worth mentioning that in 1990, due to its costly war with Iran, Iraq’s economy had been completely devastated. The war had resulted in extensive capital exhaustion, reduced oil production and exports, and substantial demolition of foreign assets and currency reserves. It is estimated that the total cost of the war for Iraq equaled approximately \$452.6 billion, equivalent to eight years of Iraq’s Gross Domestic Product at the time. Some of the most significant consequences of the Iran-Iraq war for Iraq included the following: in spite of its plentiful water resources, Iraq was obligated by the end of the war to import 75% of its agricultural needs; a loss of oil revenue approximately \$160 billion; damages to infrastructures estimated at \$90 billion; 680,000 deaths and missing persons, and an external debt of \$80 billion (the third largest debt in the world) (Shariati & Ghaffari, 2019: 50-51). Furthermore, Saddam Hussein’s efforts to do economic reforms, including liberalization and privatization measures carried out in 1985-1986, 1987, and 1990, failed (increasing inflation, unemployment, and economic inequality). This economic crisis itself led to social harms and the public antagonistic dissatisfaction (public hatred) with Hussein’s dictatorial regime (Kanat, 2011: 128-130). As a result, on the one hand, the Ba’athist government confronted an accumulation of unfulfilled expectations in 1988, as Habermas’s view, and on the other hand, it encountered a failure in its performance in accordance with Lucian Pye’s theoretical perspective; in such a way that the political system was no longer capable of achieving the minimum

required loyalty of the masses that ultimately led to the legitimacy crisis of the political system.

The second group of problems of the Ba'athist regime was the ever-increasing concern arising from ethnic and sectarian developments within the country after the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Since its foundation after World War I, Iraq has had a heterogeneous ethnic and sectarian context. Under Saddam Hussein's rule, the country was fragmented along ethnic, sectarian, political, and tribal lines. The Kurdish minority in the north and the Shiite majority in the south were especially two important issues for the regime. Hussein made extensive efforts to coercively assimilate, utilizing the Sunni dimension of the ideology of Arab nationalism. The Arab nationalism, in practice, did not recognize equal social and political rights to the Shiites and Kurds, and Hussein's main strategy included the implementation of various oppressive measurements against both groups, particularly the Kurds. The Ba'ath regime's oppression was not merely confined to the Shiites and Kurds; Sunni Arabs suffered from the Ba'ath regime as well (Khosravi, 2010: 66-67). Among Hussein's strategies of suppression were the forced extensive expulsion of the Iraqi Kurds from northern Iraq (Iraq: Forcible expulsion, 2003), and most painfully, the Anfal campaign in 1988, utilizing chemical weapons to demolish the Kurdish rustic habitats (Joost, 2008). Hence, while Habermas argues that the key criterion for legitimacy is the adherence to the standards of 'human rights,' Hussein's tyrannical Ba'ath regime failed to observe even the minimum standards of human rights during the course of its rule. The third challenge for the Ba'ath regime related to developments in the international system. The downfall of totalitarian communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe subsequent to the revolutions of 1989, besides Iraq's deprivation from its traditional allies, created panic and jeopardy for the survival of the authoritarian Ba'ath regime. The confirmation of this issue can be found in Hussein's concern regarding the execution of Ceausescu, pronounced during his interviews with foreign journalists (Kanat, 2011: 134-135).

### **3.4. An analysis of Saddam Hussein's Invasion of Kuwait in Light of the**

### Legitimacy Crisis

Iraq during the Saddam Hussein's era embodies another illustration in the Middle East where the linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy was apparent within an autocratic system. The accumulation of the aforementioned three-fold problems triggered violence and turbulence in Iraqi cities, along with a growing frustration within society, epitomized by three assassination attempts against Saddam Hussein between 1988 and the Gulf Crisis. In these circumstances, even the use of violence, the suppression of opponents, and ethnic cleansing could not repress protests and ensure the regime's political survival. Generally speaking, throughout his time in power, Saddam Hussein resorted not only to oppressive policies but also utilized *diversionary strategies*; in this way, he could divert public opinion from domestic problems, even temporarily. According to the theory of diversionary foreign policy, even authoritarian regimes are aware of their certain capability for suppressing the public. Studies show that most authoritarian leaders realize that the use of force is not a sustainable long-term strategy. For that reason, they must have complementary strategies to remain in power; utilizing foreign policy and aggressive rhetoric are among these options (Kanat, 2014: 21). Hussein's major diversionary tactics during his protracted authoritarian rule comprised of inventing enemy, harsh rhetoric, and war against Kuwait. Through inventing enemy within the triangle of *Imperialism-Zionism-Iran*, (as he called it), he constantly announced the enemies as the culprits for internal problems, pretending they were conspiring against Iraq (Kanat, 2011: 154). In reality, Hussein pursued to shift public opinion away from despair, public resentment, and discontent of regime towards foreign enemies or reinforce support for warfare.

The theory of diversionary foreign policy elucidates the points of *ambiguities* related to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait by interlinking domestic and foreign policy dynamics. In 1990, Saddam Hussein was confronted with an accumulation of crises with no prompt resolutions on his own. He had to resort to a tactic to divert

public attention from these crises and the 'dilemma of regime insecurity,'<sup>1</sup> (Horne, 2022: 61) and to create the *rally round the flag* effect, thereby postponing fundamental public demands and making the nation fail to recall painful events like the Anfal campaign. Subsequently, Hussein publicized Kuwait as an external adversary accountable for the suffering of the Iraqi public. The diversionary rhetoric (harsh rhetoric) commenced by Saddam Hussein against Gulf Persian States, Israel, and the West, step by step turned into a diversionary use of force (the invasion of Kuwait) (Kanat, 2014: 25). As arguments stated by prominent political science scholars like Jaroslav Tir, Sara Mitchell, and Clayton Thyne, territorial disputes provide powerful diversionary opportunities, as they seem to be more persuasive to the public and are related to notion of national identity (Hagan, 2017: 134). Indeed, geographical proximity and persistent conflicts provide the context for diversionary contentions or rivalries. Kuwait qualified these essential characteristics; as a conflict between Kuwait and Iraq historically persisted until the rise of an independent Kuwaiti state, alongside disputes regarding Rumaila oil field and the Warbah and Bubiyan Islands. These aspects justified Saddam Hussein's mobilization of the public against Kuwait (Jafari Valdani, 2012: 72-73). Eventually, he presented Iraq's socio-economic problems not as consequences of his own style of governance, but rather as implications of Kuwait's economic warfare against Iraq and the collusion of foreign powers; a narrative that both justified the invasion of Kuwait and could be regarded as an appropriate diversionary target for him.

### **3.5. The Decline of Legitimacy in Turkey**

Paying attention to the type of governance and countries' domestic politics is essential for comprehending their foreign and regional policies. In this regard, comprehension of Turkey's foreign and regional policy exclusively through the perspective of the balance of power or the expansion of influence is regarded fundamentally inadequate. This section aims at illustrating the *decline in*

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<sup>1</sup>. Fragile states in social and political terms face the 'insecurity predicament' generated by social, religious, and ethnic groups, and occasionally by popular uprisings. As a result, *regime security* is regarded as a chief concern and priority for the leader, contrary to *state security* (Horne, 2022: 61).

*legitimacy* by outlining significant political and economic developments within Turkey (domestic politics). The subsequent section will analyze Turkey's Middle East policy, with a focus on the Kurdish issue and in light of the decline of *legitimacy* during the second decade of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule, thereby validating the linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy. The AKP had a very successful economic performance from 2002 to 2014 (roughly the first decade of its rule). During this period, Turkey experienced steady economic growth (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021: 3061), (with the exception of the year 2009 due to the global economic crisis in 2008) (Ghasemi & Madadi, 2021: 226). The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increased from \$201.75 billion in 2001 to \$957.80 billion in 2013 (World Bank Group, n.d.-a), and GDP per capita augmented from \$3,100.46 in 2001 to \$12,578.19 in 2013 (World Bank Group, n.d.-b). These factors not only increased the popularity of then-prime minister Erdoğan during this period, but also led the AKP to win three consecutive general elections, attaining a parliamentary majority for the first time in Turkey's political history (Arayesh & Bagheri, 2021: 1). Furthermore, Ankara initiated the peace process with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and pursued a political resolution for its long-standing Kurdish issue from 2003 to 2014 (Bagheri Dolatabadi, 2019: 35). To sum up, the Turkish government lacked any *legitimacy challenge*.

Nonetheless, in the second decade of AKP's governments, Turkey has witnessed a downward trend and a turbulent period economically and politically (Kubilay, 2022). Turkish economic indicators have depicted poor performance since 2014. During 2014 and 2022, GDP was on a declining trend, decreasing from \$957.80 billion in 2013 to \$907.12 billion in 2022, with the biggest drop in 2020 (\$720.34 billion) (World Bank Group, n.d.-a).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the cost of living crisis still persists in a critical level (Kucukgocmen, 2023). Since 2014,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, notwithstanding GDP growth in 2023 and 2024, Turkish economy is considered as highly inflationary economy struggling with price instability, unless significant economic reforms are carried out (Trading Economics, n.d.; FX and inflation; Turkey, 2022).

the Turkish lira has been losing its value against the U.S. dollar (Taskinsoy, 2022: 2), mainly due to Ankara's tense foreign policy and domestic political shifts (democratic backsliding) (Emami, n.d.; Taskinsoy, 2022: 56-57). As a result, people's well-being has markedly diminished. The exchange rate average of the U.S. dollar to the Turkish lira remained stable between 2006 and 2011, but the lira's value against the dollar has started to decline swiftly since 2016, the year of the failed coup (Taskinsoy, 2022: 2). Inflation rate (according to the consumer price index) also showed an abruptly mounting trend between 2016 and 2022, as it rose from 7.78 percent in 2016 to 72.31 percent in 2022 (Macrotrends, n.d.-b). Turkey's external debt has been on the rise since 2011 (\$320.99 billion in 2011 and \$458.70 billion in 2022) (Macrotrends, n.d.-a). Moreover, the authoritarian turn (a serious political challenge) has had severe effects on economic institutions since 2016. Following the failed coup in July 2016, the country has experienced Erdoğan's interference in shaping macroeconomic policies and deciding on the appointment of key governmental positions, which has damaged the institutional power of macroeconomic management (Kubilay, 2022: 1,4). According to experts, some of Erdoğan's actions, such as the sharp reduction in interest rates, has shattered the independence of the Central Bank. As a consequence, this compilation of severe economic and political problems has resulted in a marked decline in the 'state legitimacy index,' reducing from 5.9 in 2011 to 7.70 and 7.40, respectively, in 2018 and 2024 (TheGlobalEconomy.com, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> In other words, from 2011 onwards, the domestic legitimacy has been on a downward trend (a decline in domestic legitimacy).

Its analysis of political risks in 2020, The Eurasia Group, referred to this issue as Erdoğan stepping into a *period of steep political decline* (Bremmer & Kupchan, 2020). According to a poll-survey published by the Pew Research Center in October 2024, the unfavorable opinion of Turks towards Erdoğan increased from 33 percent in 2012 to 51 and 55 percent in 2015 and 2024,

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<sup>1</sup>. State legitimacy index is ranked based on '0-10' that '0' is the highest level of legitimacy and '10' is the lowest degree.

respectively, (signifying a decline in Erdogan's popularity over time). Furthermore, based on this Center's survey, 50 and 67 percent of Turkish adults were dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy in their country, in 2019 and 2024, respectively (Clancy et al., 2024). Consequently, the abovementioned developments and data indicate a decline in the legitimacy.

### **3.6. An Analysis of Turkey's Foreign Policy Regarding the Kurdish Issue in Light of the Decline in Domestic Legitimacy (2013-2019)**

The case of Turkey is an excellent example that shows the interrelation between domestic politics and foreign policy; on the one hand, approach and measurements of foreign policy have affected domestic politics, and on the other hand, internal factors have influenced foreign policy behavior. In general, during the first decade of AKP's governance, Turkey experienced steady economic growth and its GDP increased significantly. Indeed, its economic prosperity turned into a successful and inspiring model in the Middle East region (Ghanbarloo, 2013: 92). This issue derived from Ankara's main strategy of foreign policy, known as the *Europeanization* process, domestic reforms, and the doctrines of *zero problems with neighbors* and *strategic depth* (expansion of relations with neighboring regions) (Alpan, 2021: 115-123; Torun, 2021: 329-330), along with the favorable global liquidity conditions and the significant attraction of foreign direct investment (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021: 3061). In fact, through a combination of *cautious foreign activism (particular to middle powers) based on soft power* advocating economic power instead of hard military power) (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021: 3052; Omrani & Majdi, 2024: 131) and *addressing its domestic issues, rather than involvement in the Middle Eastern conflicts and crises*, Turkey enjoyed an upward trend in economic growth during this period; two important components that boost one another and there is also *much interplay* between them.

After the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East underwent a fundamental transformation; the pro-Western Kemalist discourse in foreign policy was substituted with the *neo-Ottomanism* discourse in foreign policy (Simbar et al., 2018: 89-94). Ankara

progressively abandoned its cautious and realist approach (Shokoohi et al., 2022: 165) and turned into a more active player in the Middle East and by adopting an assertive foreign policy (Ghasemi & Madadi, 2021: 236) and coercive diplomacy, turn into a more proactive actor in the Middle East region - beyond its material capacity as a middle power in the international system (Kutlay & Onis, 3051). The characteristics of abovementioned period include detaching from the 'zero problems' policy, shifting the center of foreign relations from economic cooperation and diplomatic initiatives to interventionism (in countries such as Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq), an ever-increasing inclination for using hard power over soft power, moving away from the European Union (Omrani & Majdi, 2024: 138-149), attempting to balance relations with the great powers and, in practice, moving closer to Russia and China<sup>1</sup> in some particular cases (Kutlay & Onis, 2021: 3054), and individualization of decision-making process in foreign policy (Erdoganism) (Shokoohi et al., 2022: 169; Golmohammadi et al., 2016: 90). This period is also referred to as the *de-Europeanization* process; indicative of Ankara's distance from the West and the EU and, in this framework, movement away from the long-standing goal, i.e., the EU accession (Shokoohi et al., 2022: 164-168). The economic development has constantly been a strategic objective for political elites as well as the Turkish state is classified as a *trading state* (Ghanbarloo, 2013: 76). Hence, taking into account Turkey's economic developments as a fundamental component in legitimizing the political system is essential. On the one hand, the decline in the performance of economic governance is regarded as a consequence of activism in Turkish foreign policy during the second decade of AKP's rule, and on the other hand, it is associated with a decline in political governance, i.e., backsliding from democratic indices (democratic backsliding), in a way that the latter has resulted in poor economic performance and ultimately, a decline in the legitimacy.

It is important to note that although the transformation in Turkey's Middle Eastern policy (the new neo-Ottoman policy or post-Kemalist approach) has led to an increase in its regional influence (Simbar et al., 2018: 92), it has had

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<sup>1</sup>. For example, Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system can be cited.

domestic consequences as well. Researchers attribute Turkey's poor economic performance principally to the interaction of two components: *tense performance in foreign policy* (Emami, 2025) and a *declining political trend* at home. Ankara's declining political trend has begun since 2013 with the government's stringent reaction to the Gezi park protests on May 28th of this year. The second significant event was the replacement of the parliamentary system with a presidential one, subsequent to the coup attempt of July 15th in 2016 (Ghasemi & Madadi, 2021: 78-79). Eventually, the culmination of these two components has resulted in a *decline in the legitimacy*. In addition, Analysts refer to two variables regarding Ankara's tense performance in the foreign policy domain: Risky measurements and unusual middle power activism in the foreign policy arena (Kutlay & Onis, 3056) and tense relations with the EU and the U.S. (Emami, 2025). On the whole, the tense performance of a middle power in the foreign policy domain leads to severe economic problems or impasses. In this regard, the Eurasia Group stated in its 2021 report: "Erdogan's misadventures will boomerang painfully against the economy ..." (Bremmer & Kupchan, 2021). The Eurasia Group also noted in its report of the same year: "As geopolitical pressures drive Turkey's financial risk premium higher, the odds of a balance-of-payments crisis will rise, making Ankara look more like the economic basket case that it was in the 1990s than the emerging-market darling Erdogan led until the 2010s" (Bremmer & Kupchan, 2022: 17). Tensions in relations between Turkey and the United States (the second variable) also undesirably disturb investors' investment in Turkey. Additionally, the move towards centralization of power leads to weakening of the rule of law and ineffective domestic governance in all areas, including the economy. For example, Critics point to the impact of Erdoğan's monopolization of power on the noticeable reduction of the independence of the Central Bank (Emami, 2025; Kubilay, 2022: 5-6). Therefore, the outcome of domestic (authoritarian turn), regional (increased foreign policy activism) and international (tense relations with Europe and the U.S.) variables has not only negatively affected the Turkish economy as a fundamental component of Turkey's domestic and foreign policies,

but has also led to a decline in the legitimacy of the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party.

Generally, since the second decade of AKP's rule, Turkey has subsequently faced domestic problems deriving from *tense performance in the foreign policy domain* and an *authoritarian turn/democratic backsliding*.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, Turkey's assertive foreign policy<sup>2</sup> has provoked negative domestic consequences, particularly within the economic scope; on the other hand, economic challenges and domestic political changes (the latter, i.e., democratic backsliding) have prompted the reassertion of its assertive foreign policy in order to influence domestic audiences and drag public attention away from internal problems. In this respect, the Eurasia Group stated in its 2021 report: "These dynamics (political pressures driven by the fallout from the coronavirus, a lack of cheap credit, rising unemployment, and plummeting household incomes) will not only stoke social tensions ..., but they will also lead to more foreign-policy adventures to stoke nationalist sentiment and distract Erdogan's supporters" (Bremmer & Kupchan, 2021). The Eurasia Group also noted in its 2022 report: "Erdogan's foreign policy positions will remain combative as part of an effort to distract voters from the economic crisis" (Bremmer & Kupchan, 2022). Regarding the decline in the popularity of the AKP in its second decade of rule, one can point out the general elections of June 2015 and the municipal elections of March 2019<sup>3</sup> (Sajedi, 2020: 245); issues that has been influential in shaping the diversionary incentive of AKP's leaders to enter into conflicts abroad.

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<sup>1</sup>. For further reading on authoritarian turn, see Cengiz (2023).

<sup>2</sup>. As a whole, Turkey's foreign policy following the developments of the Arab Spring has become more interventionist, signifying that the use of coercive diplomacy as well as military involvement (hard power) has increased (Omrani & Majdi, 2024: 144–145).

<sup>3</sup>. The Justice and Development Party lost its absolute majority in the parliamentary elections on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and in the municipal elections on March 31, 2019, metropolitan cities such as Istanbul and Ankara were entrusted to the candidates of the opposition bloc.

In such framework, Turkey's approach to the Kurdish issue can be mentioned. Ankara's mainly security-centric approach to the Kurdish issue and the demands of its large minority population, rather than following a political approach and solution, has provided an opportunity to avert public attention from the mismanagement of political elites to Ankara's conflicts with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the country, northern Iraq and the Syrian Democratic Forces. In fact, embattled leaders can use violent non-state actors (VNSAs) like the PKK to distract their voters, chiefly when the threats from those groups would be adequate to divert public attention (Yılmaz, 2021: 43, 76). Operations such as Euphrates Shield (December 2016), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019) helped the AKP in distracting public attention from domestic problems (Kutlay & Onis, 3055). In general, following the coup of July 15, 2016, Turkey adopted a more militarized and securitized foreign policy, most clearly reflected in its intensified efforts to contain the Kurds. This security-based approach has provided an opportunity to shift public attention from the poor performance of political elites to Ankara's conflicts with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It should be noted that, apart from the Kurdish issue out of Turkey (in northern Syria), Turkey's intervention in Libya (2019) can be analyzed within the framework of the diversionary theory (Yılmaz, 2021: 50-51). As a result, all the above-mentioned examples illustrate how political elites may use external conflicts to divert public attention from internal challenges or crises.

#### **4. The Comparative Study of Case Studies: Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq**

All the three case studies of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq during the Saddam Hussein's era underlined the interplay between domestic politics and foreign policy. The present article, by applying the *diversionary theory of foreign policy* as a *theory of the linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy* and drawing on the concept of *legitimacy*, revealed that the political elites of all three countries resorted to different diversionary strategies at specific points in time. During his dictatorial regime, Saddam Hussein utilized several diversionary strategies, including harsh rhetoric, creating foreign enemies, and war (the

invasion of Kuwait). The main driving force for diversion was the *legitimacy crisis*. Historical conflict with Kuwait until the emergence of the independent state of Kuwait, as well as the territorial conflict (Jafari Valdani, 2012: 71-78), served as contextual conditions (facilitating elements) for the diversionary use of force. Regarding the case of Turkey, the main driving force behind the diversion has been the *declining legitimacy* of the AKP's government from 2011 onwards. The non-state terrorist actor (the PKK), and external insecurity (the Democratic Union Party) signify the contextual conditions. The use of force in the context of cross-border military operations in northern Syria is the diversionary strategy within the framework of the diversionary theory. Concerning the case of Saudi Arabia and its proxy involvement in Syria from 2011 to 2016, the predominant driving force was the *legitimacy deficit* and the contextual condition included type of regime (non-democratic regime). The last final point, whereas diversionary strategies in both Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Saudi Arabia (2011-2016) temporarily succeeded in distracting public attention, those diversionary strategies imposed ample cost on both countries. In Iraq, domestic conflicts were aggravated, eventually the diversionary-adventurous foreign policy led to the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the fall of Hussein (Sajjadpour & Kheradpisheh Hashemi, 2022: 90). The financial cost of Riyadh's proxy war in Syria counted to millions of dollars (Black, 2013); but in the end, this country opted for a top-down reform strategy addressing economic and social problems (Zibae et. al., 2024: 42-49) rather than engaging in costly regional conflicts and rivalries. Finally, Turkey's increasingly assertive and interventionist foreign policy itself has been one of the main reasons for its poor economic performance and it has imposed costs on the economy. Consequently, diversionary strategies not only cannot be considered as a sustainable solution to resolve domestic problems, but also they exacerbate domestic challenges, impose costs, and lead to a further decline of political legitimacy in the medium to long term.

## **Conclusion**

The study demonstrated the interplay between domestic politics and foreign

policy. On the one hand, *domestic legitimacy* affects foreign policy behavior and regional strategy, and on the other hand, foreign policy style and actions have domestic consequences. According to the literature on foreign policy analysis, there is a cyclical relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy; domestic drivers related to the domestic legitimacy influence foreign policy choices and, in turn, foreign policy decisions affect domestic politics and the legitimization of the political system as well. The legitimacy deficit, deriving from traditional, political, and contemporary challenges, was influential in shaping Saudi Arabia's diversionary incentive for entering into the Syrian proxy war from 2011 to 2016. According to the diversionary theory of foreign policy, regimes facing domestic problems and turmoil (e.g., economic distress such as inflation or sociopolitical challenges) may pursue an opportunity to enter into (or initiate) crises and conflicts or escalate them, in order to divert public attention from domestic issues, even if for a temporary period of time. In this framework, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the form of proxy warfare in Syria can be surveyed through the lens of this country's domestic developments as well, not merely from a geopolitical perspective (power politics and balance of influence). In this regard, the diversionary theory of foreign policy can be applied. Riyadh's entry into the Syrian civil war, which was not an existential threat to the monarchy, coincided with the developments of Arab Spring; this issue was influential in shifting Saudi Arabia's attention towards foreign policy and regional rivalries instead of domestic issues, i.e., domestic politics and their sociopolitical demands from 2011 to early 2016 (prior to the change in Saudi policy towards the Assad regime). The violence and turmoil arising from the activities of extremist groups in Syria, such as ISIS, and the protracted Syrian crisis in general, efficiently made a barrier against the arrival of Arab Spring's liberal demands into Saudi Arabia.

Iraq during the Saddam Hussein's era embodies another illustration in the Middle East where the linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy was apparent within an autocratic system. The drivers of domestic politics, particularly the fundamental component of the legitimacy of the political system,

played a formative and determining role in the foreign policy (regional policies) of Saddam Hussein in the 1990s. In 1990, Iraq confronted three categories of problems and crises that eventually led to the 'legitimacy crisis' of the political system: Socio-economic problems, ever-increasing concern deriving from ethnic-sectarian developments, and growing anxiety arising from international developments. As previously discussed, both Pye's and Habermas's definitions of 'legitimacy crisis' apply evidently to the Ba'ath regime. Subsequently, Saddam Hussein resorted to numerous diversionary strategies during his long rule: inventing enemies, harsh rhetoric, and the invasion of Kuwait. Through the Kuwait War in 1990, Hussein sought to provide a temporary response to the legitimacy crisis, delay public demands and make the Iraqi people forget the most agonizing incidents such as the Anfal campaign.

Turkey offers another excellent example illustrating the interrelation between domestic politics and foreign policy decisions. This research highlighted the central role of domestic legitimacy in understanding Turkey's external conflicts, providing an alternative to security-based and geopolitical explanations. During the first decade of AKP's rule (2002-2011), Turkey experienced economic growth rooted in 'regulated external activism' based on soft power (a term also referred to as 'cautious activism' by some analysts) and addressing its domestic issues rather than entering into conflicts and crises in the Middle East, two significant components with interrelated effects on one another. Since the second decade of AKP's governance, Turkey has encountered various domestic problems due to tense performance in the realm of foreign policy and authoritarian turn. The decline in domestic legitimacy (AKP's legitimacy) in the second decade of AKP's rule has been influential in shaping the diversionary motivation of AKP's leaders to enter into conflicts abroad as a means of political survival while dragging domestic attention towards foreign policy. The research has shown that some Middle Eastern leaders exploit national security concerns and foreign threats to distract public attention from domestic problems and, they often adopt a security-based approach to these concerns rather than political and democratic solutions. Accordingly, Turkey's cross-border military operations,

including Euphrates Shield (December 2016), Olive Branch (2018), and Peace Spring (2019), helped the AKP to sidetrack public attention from domestic problems, thereby increasing popular support for the AKP.

Future research can survey the effects of new domestic developments and changes in the three countries of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Turkey on their foreign and regional policies. In line with the literature on the diversionary theory, leaders can choose between two options; i.e., escalating/continuing conflict as a means to sidetrack public attention, or resolving rivalries to free up resources aimed at addressing domestic problems. In this regard, the impact of Saudi Arabia's *focus* on reform strategy, particularly economic development programs, and addressing internal challenges on its foreign and regional policies deserves further investigation. It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia's socio-economic reforms, specifically economic development programs along with a move from the traditional legitimacy towards modern one, has progressively resulted in a significant adjustment to the country's geopolitical rivalries and changes in its regional strategy (the March 2023 agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia characterizing this shift); these regional rivalries and conflicts functioned to legitimize the regime while deviating public attentiveness from domestic problems. Concerning Iraq, surveying on the impact of Saddam Hussein's elimination from power in 2003, the formation of the federal parliamentary democracy and the shift in domestic legitimacy on its foreign policy and Middle Eastern strategy merits further investigations. While previous studies have shown that the country's political system has attempted to define its foreign policy based on national interests and democracy, moving away from ideological and identity discourses after 2003, they have not addressed the impact of Iraq's domestic developments—such as democratization and change in the political system—on Iraq's foreign and regional policies in comprehensive studies, as well as case studies. With regard to Turkey, the upcoming trend of domestic developments deserves further investigation as the direction of domestic developments (i.e., presidential election results in 2028) will not only impact profoundly on the economy but also affect the Turkish foreign policy regarding

the Middle East, Europe, and great powers.

To sum up briefly, this study suggests that in analyzing conflicts and disputes in the Middle East, merely paying attention to the regional variables and explaining them from the perspective of international relations theories is neither sufficient nor comprehensive. Thorough scrutiny can reveal that even by changing domestic elements, states achieve different outcomes in foreign policy and regional strategy as well. Regarding policy recommendations, reinforcing the *legitimacy of the state* and *good governance* is considered as a crucial and sustainable component in decreasing and resolving regional conflicts, consequently, strengthening regional peace and stability.

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