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## Navigating Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy: The Interplay of Domestic Dynamics and International Constraints under Mohammed bin Salman

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### Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policies under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), divided into three phases. The first phase focused on establishing MBS's legitimacy and consolidating power within the country, while the second phase aimed to gain international credibility. In the third phase, the focus was on consolidating power and formulating a regional strategic policy. The paper is grounded in various theoretical frameworks from international relations and foreign policy analysis, including Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and Neoclassical Realism. It argues that shaping MBS's foreign policy is closely tied to addressing the challenges arising from these phases. The research question "How has Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership influenced the interplay between Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policies?" is answered by highlighting that the interplay between Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy has shifted significantly under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership, resulting in a more assertive and revisionist foreign policy. The paper provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between domestic and foreign policies in Saudi Arabia and the country's challenges in achieving its

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ambitious goals. It concludes by emphasising the implications of the findings for future research on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, stressing the urgent need for further exploration of this crucial topic and its broader implications for the region and beyond.

### **Keywords**

Saudi Arabia, Foreign Policy, Domestic Policy, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Neoclassical Realism

### **Introduction**

Saudi Arabia's domestic policies have significantly impacted its foreign policy, particularly its relationship with Western countries. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS, 's ascendance trajectory and hypernationalistic approach have also notably influenced the Kingdom's foreign policy. Moreover, MBS's Vision 2030, an ambitious plan to diversify the country's economy and reduce its reliance on oil, has been instrumental in shaping the Kingdom's foreign policy in recent years. The potential of Vision 2030 to reshape Saudi Arabia's future is immense, offering hope and optimism for a more diversified and sustainable economy. Yet, Despite the ambitious Vision 2030 plan, serious concerns remain about the country's continued dependence on oil revenues, human rights abuses, and the ability to implement key reforms.

One of the most contentious aspects of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in recent times has been its involvement in the Yemen war. The Saudi-led coalition has been accused of committing human rights abuses and war crimes in Yemen, leading to criticism from the international community. Some attribute MBS's hypernationalistic approach as a factor in the Kingdom's decision to become involved in the conflict and pursue a more assertive foreign policy. However, the Kingdom's participation in the conflict is also driven by national security concerns and the desire to prevent the spread of rival influence in the region.

Succession issues have also impacted Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. One of the critical challenges MBS faced in his quest to consolidate power as the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia was sidelining prominent royal family members,

including Crown Prince Miqrin and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef. MBS's rise to power was marked by a series of bold moves, including the arrest of dozens of royal family members on corruption charges, which many saw as a move to neutralise potential rivals. Crown Prince Miqrin was removed from his position as Crown Prince in 2015 and replaced by Mohammad bin Nayef, who was seen as a key ally of the United States in the fight against terrorism. However, in 2017, MBS orchestrated a palace coup and removed Mohammad bin Nayef from his position as Crown Prince, effectively consolidating his power and cementing his position as the most influential figure in Saudi Arabia. Despite opposition from some royal family members, MBS has continued consolidating his power and pushing forward with his ambitious reform agenda. In "Mystique of Monarchy: The Magic of Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia," Al-Rasheed (2018) analyses Saudi Arabian politics. She offers a nuanced perspective on Saudi politics' unpredictable and irrational nature, attributing it to the anaesthesia of unreason and irrational impulses.

However, according to Stenslie (2020), the crown prince has complete control over the military, the SANG, and the security system in Saudi Arabia. All senior princes are now under his control, and there are no personal territories within the Saudi state; it has become much more complicated to organise coups due to new technology that allows MBS to monitor his family members' phones and emails. Following the arrests of high-ranking royals in November 2017, there is growing fear within the House of Saud. Previously, princes were essentially "immune" due to their royal status, but MBS has shown that he can strip his elderly relatives of power, money, and privilege. Opposition is now very risky, and everyone is careful to express their absolute loyalty to MBS in the king's presence. Ironically, MBS has been seen as a critical figure in the successful generational transition of power in the Kingdom; the Kingdom has been able to transition to a new generation of leaders while maintaining relative stability and advancing its foreign policy initiatives. Moreover, MBS has played a more prominent role in shaping its foreign policy.

Mohammad bin Salman's Vision 2030 plan aims to transform the country's

economy and society, reducing its dependence on oil revenue and diversifying its sources of income (Vision 2030, 2016). The plan outlines ambitious goals, including creating a thriving private sector, developing a world-class tourism industry, and investing in cutting-edge technologies (Ottaway, 2021). However, despite the plan's lofty ambitions, many experts remain sceptical about its prospects for success. Firstly, concerns have been raised about the plan's continued reliance on oil revenue, which still accounts for most of the country's income (Van Den Beukel, 2016). This means that the plan's success is closely tied to the global oil price, which is highly volatile and subject to geopolitical factors. Secondly, there are doubts about the ability of the plan to attract foreign investment, particularly given recent political developments such as the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the ongoing conflict in Yemen. While the government has tried to improve the business environment and attract foreign investment, many investors remain cautious. Finally, there are concerns about the government's ability to implement key reforms, particularly in education and women's rights. While progress has been made in some areas, significant challenges remain, particularly in changing deeply entrenched cultural attitudes. Overall, while the Vision 2030 plan represents an ambitious and forward-thinking vision for the future of Saudi Arabia, it is clear that there are significant challenges to be overcome if it is to be successful.

### **1- Literature Review: The Role of Domestic Policy on Foreign Policy**

The literature review on the role of domestic policy in foreign policy further highlights the significance of the relationship between Saudi Arabia's domestic policies and its foreign policies. The review illuminates how domestic politics, such as leadership transitions and economic reforms, can shape a state's foreign policy decisions. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his ambitious Vision 2030 plan have had a significant impact on the country's foreign policy. The literature review provides a theoretical framework for understanding the impact of domestic policies on foreign policies, which is crucial for analysing the intricacies of Saudi Arabia's

foreign policy decisions.

The relationship between domestic and foreign policy is a topic of great importance in political science and has been subject to rigorous study for many years. Scholars have delved into the intricate ways in which domestic policy shapes a state's foreign policy decisions. In this literature review, we will examine the existing literature on the role of domestic policy in foreign policy, illuminating the major themes and findings.

One of the literature's most complex and intriguing themes is the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy. Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has significantly contributed to International Relations (I.R.) theories. As the focus on domestic politics and decision-making has increased, FPA is uniquely positioned to offer valuable insights to enhance liberalism, constructivism, and realism in I.R. theory. Several scholars have begun to link FPA research with each of these traditions in I.R. theory. (Kaarbo, 2015; Walker & Schafer, 2006; Houghton, 2007; Ashizawa, 2008; Clunan, 2009; Ripsman, 2009). The presence of influential interest groups can mould a state's foreign policy towards a specific country or issue. Similarly, public opinion can curtail the government's capacity to pursue specific foreign policy objectives. The nature of domestic institutions and their influence on decision-making further complicates the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Tsebelis, 2002).

Another critical theme in the literature is the role of leadership in shaping foreign policy. Leaders' personalities, beliefs, and values can significantly influence foreign policy decisions. According to Putnam (1988), leaders' cognitive and psychological biases can lead to irrational decision-making, significantly affecting foreign policy outcomes. For example, leaders may pursue aggressive foreign policies to boost their domestic popularity, even if such policies are not in the state's long-term interests. On the other hand, effective leadership can help to build international coalitions and support foreign policy initiatives (Snyder & Bruck, 2001; Houghton, 2013).

In addition to the impact of domestic politics and leadership, scholars have

also examined how domestic economic policies can affect foreign policy. Economic interests can shape a state's foreign policy towards trade, investment, and aid (Gowa, 1995). For example, a state's foreign policy towards a particular country may be influenced by its economic dependence on that country. Similarly, trade sanctions can be used as a foreign policy tool to pressure other countries (Pape, 1997; Lim, 2011).

Furthermore, the literature has explored the relationship between domestic instability and foreign policy. Domestic instability, including civil unrest, ethnic conflicts, and economic crises, can significantly affect a state's foreign policy decisions. States experiencing domestic instability are more likely to engage in aggressive foreign policies to distract attention from domestic problems (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). On the other hand, domestic instability can also limit a state's ability to pursue its foreign policy goals (Luard, 1992; Hironaka, 2003).

Moreover, some scholars have investigated the impact of domestic institutions on foreign policy. Democratic institutions tend to be more peaceful in their foreign policy behaviour than non-democratic institutions (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995). Similarly, institutional constraints on executive power can limit a leader's ability to pursue aggressive foreign policies (Kernell, 1986).

Finally, the literature has also examined how changes in domestic policy can affect a state's foreign policy. Changes in public opinion or changes in the balance of power between interest groups can significantly affect a state's foreign policy decisions (Gertz & Drezner, 2019).

Neoclassical realism has changed dramatically from its intellectual predecessor, with its focus on domestic politics and decision-making factors. Rejecting neorealist arguments that unit-level characteristics are unimportant and that I.R. theory is separate from foreign policy theory, Neoclassical realists have sought to create a coherent realist perspective on foreign policy (Brooks, 1997; Wivel, 2005; Barkin, 2009; Lobell et al., 2009). Neoclassical Realism places primacy on the international system and relative material capabilities but sees these as filtered through the state. State responses are affected by a wide range of domestic political and decision-making factors, including perceptions,

states' motives, political traditions and identities, domestic institutions and coalition building, and perceived lessons of the past (Schweller, 2014).

Lastly, the relationship between domestic and foreign policy is complex and multifaceted. Scholars have studied and analysed various aspects of this relationship, including the impact of domestic politics, leadership, economic policies, instability, institutions, and changes in domestic policy on foreign policy decisions. While each of these factors plays a crucial role in shaping foreign policy, it is essential to understand that they do not operate in isolation but rather interact and influence one another. As such, any comprehensive understanding of a state's foreign policy decisions must consider these factors.

Despite the significance of the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy decisions, few studies have examined this relationship in the context of Saudi Arabia. Nonneman (2005) suggests that Saudi Arabia, like the other conservative GCC states, is an "omni-balancer". This means that the country balances between threats and resources at the domestic, regional, and global levels simultaneously. This explains why Saudi Arabia has a more reserved position towards the military role of the United States in the Kingdom and the region, as well as towards the Bush administration's global and regional policy positions that emerged around the beginning of 2002.

As per Talbot's analysis in 2015, in order to understand the reasoning behind Crown Prince Mohammad's strategy, one needs to consider the importance of creating domestic legitimacy for his new style of governance. The Crown Prince's approach reflects modernity by promoting a globalised model of society and providing access to high-tech, along with an assertive domestic and regional policy.

Dazi-Héni (2021) argues that the ongoing transformation of the Saudi Kingdom since early 2015 has raised questions about Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's legitimacy. To consolidate his power and bring significant changes in domestic governance and foreign policies, the Crown Prince balances his defiance of the royal family with the support of Saudi youth. However, the assertive regional policy under King Salman and his heir has created tensions

due to their divergent world views caused by a generational gap. Consequently, the Saudi leadership in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has become incoherent and downgraded.

The three pieces of literature focus on domestic politics and Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decision-making process. While each piece of literature has its unique perspective, it shares some common themes and ideas.

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In summary, all three pieces of literature suggest that domestic politics is crucial in shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions. While Nonneman and Talbot focus on the balancing act that Saudi Arabia performs at different levels, Dazi-Héni highlights the tension that arises from the generational gap between the leadership and the youth. This situation highlights the impact of domestic

decision-making on actors' choices in foreign policy, contributing to the theoretical debate that integrates foreign policy analysis into International Relations (IR) theory.

While domestic policies such as economic diversification, social reform, and counter-terrorism have significant implications for the country's foreign policy, concerns have been raised about the Saudi leadership's values, beliefs, and decision-making processes. These concerns have led to criticism of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, particularly with regard to its human rights record and its involvement in the Yemen conflict. Additionally, there have been accusations of the Saudi leadership pursuing aggressive foreign policies to boost their domestic popularity; even if such policies are not in the state's long-term interests, the relationship between domestic policy and foreign policy in Saudi Arabia is a multifaceted issue that requires a careful analysis of various factors. It is essential to acknowledge that domestic policies, such as those related to human rights, political reforms, and economic development, can have significant implications for the country's foreign policy. For instance, the country's international reputation is primarily influenced by how it handles issues such as women's and minorities' rights and political freedoms. Furthermore, economic policies that affect the country's oil production and export can also impact its relations with other nations. Thus, understanding the intricate relationship between domestic and foreign policies is crucial for anyone seeking to comprehend Saudi Arabia's position in the global arena.

## **2- Theoretical framework**

Foreign policy analysis (FPA) and Neoclassical Realism are two theoretical frameworks that provide a comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of the complex relationship between domestic policy and foreign policy in the context of Saudi Arabia.

FPA focuses on studying foreign policy decision-making processes and explores the factors that influence them, including the role of leaders, bureaucracies, interest groups, public opinion, external actors, historical events,

cultural factors, and psychological factors (Kaarbo, 2015). On the other hand, Neoclassical Realism emphasises the role of domestic political institutions, economic conditions, societal factors, military capabilities, strategic culture, and systemic constraints in shaping foreign policy decisions (Foulon, 2015).

When combined, FPA and Neoclassical Realism provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions. In particular, the combined insights can help to explain how the interaction between domestic and international factors drives Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour. For example, FPA can provide insights into the role of regional actors, historical events, and leaders' psychology in shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, while Neoclassical Realism can provide insights into the importance of domestic political institutions, economic conditions, and the international system. Moreover, FPA and Neoclassical Realism can help analysts identify the most significant aspects shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and prioritise them accordingly. By considering all of these factors, policymakers and analysts can develop more informed and effective foreign policy strategies with Saudi Arabia.

In the context of systemic constraints, it is also essential to consider the emerging world order, characterised by a shift in power dynamics and the rise of new economic and political actors. As the global system continues to evolve, policymakers must adapt their policies to account for these changes and anticipate their potential impact on their country's national interests.

For instance, the growing influence of emerging economies such as China and India is challenging the traditional dominance of Western powers in the global system. This shift in power dynamics has significant implications for foreign policies, such as trade agreements, alliances, and military interventions. Policymakers must navigate these changes carefully, considering the potential systemic constraints and the long-term impact on their country's national interests. Additionally, the emerging world order is characterised by growing interdependence and interconnectedness, which requires a more collaborative approach to policy-making. Policymakers must work together to address global

challenges such as climate change, cybersecurity threats, and economic inequality, recognising that these issues are interconnected and require a coordinated response.

In conclusion, the combination of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and Neoclassical Realism provides a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between domestic and foreign policies in the context of systemic constraints. This approach is precious to academics and analysts who seek to comprehend the dynamics of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and the foreign policies of other countries facing similar systemic constraints and domestic challenges. Notably, this understanding is of utmost importance for analysts and scholars who seek to gain a deeper insight into Saudi Arabia's foreign policy dynamics and the interplay between its domestic politics and foreign actions.

This research investigates the influence of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership on Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policies. To achieve this, several independent variables integral to understanding this relationship have been identified, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ascent to power and his hypernationalistic approach, the implementation and ramifications of Vision 2030 on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, and the intricate succession issues and power consolidation within the Saudi royal family.

Concurrently, the dependent variables impacted by these factors are being examined. These encompass Saudi Arabia's assertiveness and decision-making in its foreign policy initiatives, the Kingdom's positioning and involvement in regional conflicts such as the Yemen war, as well as Saudi Arabia's evolving relationships with Western countries and other global stakeholders.

Through a comprehensive analysis of these variables, valuable insights into the intricate web of influences that shape Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policies under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's leadership are being sought.

### **3- The Ages of bin Salman**

This paper will explore the intricate relationship between domestic and foreign policies, with a focus on Saudi Arabia. In order to thoroughly analyse Mohammad bin Salman's foreign and regional policy, it is essential to consider the various stages of his political journey since 2015. Each major policy decision must be scrutinised within the context of the prevailing evidence at that stage. These stages can be categorised into three main chapters: the first is to establish domestic legitimacy and consolidate power, the second is to gain international credibility, and the third is to consolidate power and initiate a regional strategic policy formulation. With that in mind, I will now examine these policies in their phased context.

#### **3-1- The initial phase: MBS's pursuit of domestic legitimacy.**

Soon after his father ascended to the throne, MBS was appointed Minister of Defence, marking the start of his journey to the top of the ladder. From the beginning, it was clear that MBS had an unwavering desire to acquire absolute power in the Saudi Kingdom. However, his path to the throne was not without its obstacles; He faced opposition from older, more experienced Al-Saud princes, such as Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz and Vice Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Nayef, who posed a substantial challenge to his ascendancy. Moreover, being a relatively young prince at the time, MBS was viewed as inexperienced and untested by both the people of the Kingdom and outside powers (Henderson, 2015), which further complicated his quest for power. Nevertheless, despite these hurdles, MBS remained resolute in his ambition to acquire supremacy and become the sovereign of Saudi Arabia.

The reign of King Salman has been marked by a more proactive foreign policy, reflecting the regional vision of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This shift has been notable, given the traditionally cautious approach that previous Saudi rulers have followed in their foreign policy. The new approach has been evident in the Kingdom's more assertive stance on regional issues, such as the Yemeni civil war and the Qatar blockade crisis, as well as its efforts to diversify the economy and attract foreign investment through initiatives such as

Vision 2030.

The departed King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz had established the position of Vice-Crown Prince for the first time in the country's history, and the Allegiance Committee, consisting of prominent Al Saud princes, which was also one of his initiatives, granted this position to Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz. It was emphasised in the king's decree, which the Allegiance Committee approved, that after the death of the King, Prince Muqrin automatically became the heir-apparent of the new king. With the death of King Salman, Muqrin, in theory, should become king. He, thus, should not have been removed in any way.

Following the departure of King Abdullah and the consequent ascension of King Salman to the throne, the appointment of a new crown prince was necessary per the established protocol of succession. In this context, Prince Muqrin was automatically appointed as the new crown prince. However, the situation was further complicated by the fact that Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who was a relatively young and inexperienced defence minister, was not considered a suitable candidate for the position of successor to the crown prince. To address this challenge, choosing a seat-warmer who could help navigate the complexities of succession and ensure a calm transition of power in favour of MBS was necessary. One option was to appoint Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN), a well-respected and experienced member of the Royal Family. This approach would have helped to address MBS's ambitions while ensuring that the earlier promises of rejuvenation and passing the Kingdom to second-generation princes were upheld. It is worth noting that Prince Muqrin while possessing years of experience as head of the Saudi Security Agency, was only a half-brother of King Salman bin Abdulaziz. Furthermore, his mother's commoner status made him more vulnerable to being deposed (Stenslie, 2016: 124). These factors would have made it less costly for King Salman to remove him from the position of Crown Prince. In addition, Prince Muqrin did not align with the hawkish Saudi sentiments on boiling issues such as the crisis in Yemen. As a result, he may have been seen as less favourable among the younger population who were fervent for the war. The complex nature of Saudi Arabia's monarchy meant that

a combination of factors, including familial ties, political views, and personal networks, can all play a significant role in determining the fate of a Crown Prince.

Given the circumstances surrounding Prince Muqrin's position as Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman saw an opportunity to improve his position while removing potential competitors from the scene. MBS's decision to launch a military offensive on Yemen was a bold move that had significant implications for the region and the Kingdom. By taking such “decisive” action, bin Salman was able to portray himself as a strong leader who was willing and able to take bold steps to protect and advance Saudi interests. As Juneau notes, MBS's decision to launch the Yemen offensive was motivated by his desire to establish himself as a strong and decisive leader capable of protecting Saudi interests and projecting regional power Juneau (2024: 14). This move also helped improve his position within the royal family hierarchy, demonstrating his ability to take decisive action in the face of the “enemies”.

The decision to launch a military offensive in Yemen had its drawbacks. The conflict has resulted in significant loss of life and has had a destabilising effect on the region as a whole. Moreover, it has been reported that MBS was warned about the dangers of his actions and the unlikelihood of the operation being finished in a matter of weeks. Both heads of the main security services and military leaders, MBN and Prince Mutib bin Abdullah, along with other senior members of the royal family, expressed their concerns regarding the decision. However, their apprehension was disregarded (Hubbard, 2020: 110-111). Nevertheless, the decision to launch the offensive was a calculated move on bin Salman's part, which has had far-reaching consequences for the region and the Kingdom.

The commencement of the Yemen invasion, known as Asefat al-Hazm, marked a significant milestone in Mohammed bin Salman's political career. While the operation was ostensibly aimed at achieving foreign policy objectives, bin Salman's decision to wage war in Yemen's primary purpose was to cement his position as a trustworthy *de facto* leader in the eyes of the Saudi public

(Hubbard, 2020: 14). By successfully executing this military campaign in its first few weeks, he hoped to demonstrate his strength, resolve, and leadership skills, thereby earning the trust and support of his people.

After a military assault on Yemen that was authorised by King Salman, Mohammed bin Salman, who was serving as the defence minister at the time, they have launched an extensive public relations campaign to present himself as a brave and competent leader to the people of Saudi Arabia. The state-controlled media and a large number of social media accounts were deployed to spread this image to the broader public. Suddenly, cyberspace was flooded with propaganda material, photos and clips featuring epic themes in support of "war commander Mohammed bin Salman". Numerous propaganda images showing Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman, alongside the military personnel, were widely spread on the internet. These images were celebrated with the word "*Muhammadein*" (the two Mohammads), which identified with the alliance of Muhammad Al Saud and Muhammad Abdul Wahhab at the First Saudi State.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has undergone significant changes in its line of succession after King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud ascended the throne in January 2015. These changes have been viewed as unprecedented and have significant implications for the kingdom's future (Stenslie, 2018: 70). Salman has been pursuing an assertive foreign policy, which has led to these shifts in the line of succession. The most notable change has been the removal of the sitting Crown Prince Muqrin, the half-brother of Salman, and the promotion of his nephew, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN), as the new Crown Prince. Salman also made his son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the new third in line to the throne. These changes have been endorsed by the Allegiance Council, the committee of the sons and grandsons of Ibn Saud, which has been responsible for selecting the next generation of royals for years.

These changes had significant implications for the kingdom's future. By promoting his nephew and son, King Salman has passed the torch on to the next generations of the royal family. It is worth noting that since 1902, the Kingdom

has been ruled by the founder of the modern Kingdom, Ibn Saud Abd Al Aziz, or his sons, and Salman will be the last son to reign. The new lineup was considered pro-American but doubtful about American reliability. The new ruling elite believed that the George W. Bush administration foolishly let Iran gain dominance in Iraq and feared that the Barack Obama administration was too eager for a nuclear deal with Iran and a grand rapprochement with Tehran. Despite repeated assurances by Obama and concrete support for the Yemen war, Saudi doubts about America persisted.

The removal of Muqrin has raised questions about the reasons for his replacement. The official statement from the royal palace was that Muqrin himself asked to be replaced, but no reason was given. However, Muqrin's lack of enthusiasm for bin Salman's war in Yemen may have played a role in expediting his removal. As a former head of national security and a former fighter pilot, Muqrin understood the limits of Saudi land and air power and may have had doubts about the operation's wisdom.

In contrast, the new crown prince, MBN, was famous for his counter-terrorism efforts, particularly his four-year campaign against Al Qaeda in the Kingdom. He is also known for surviving at least four assassination plots. MBN's father, the late Crown Prince Nayef, was known for his conservative views and was nicknamed the Black Prince. However, MBN studied in the United States and has worked closely with the FBI and Scotland Yard. He also holds the position of chairman of the Kingdom's security and political committee, which coordinates all security issues (Riedel, 2015).

MBS, on the other hand, was the face of the Yemen war and has been appearing regularly on Saudi TV to direct the war effort. He became known for his ruthlessly ambitious nature and close relationship with his father. MBS was also the chairman of several young people's organisations in the Kingdom and seeks to portray himself as the leader of the next generation of Saudis. He chaired the robust development and economics committee coordinating economic policies, including oil price and supply.

A significant segment of the Saudi public bought into this propaganda. They

viewed regional problems through the prism of the Sunni-Shi'ite divide and were influenced by anti-Iranian propaganda. Since the start of the Arab Spring protests, they have felt embarrassed by the repeated losses of Saudi-backed forces in Syria and Yemen. Thus, many Saudis who were exposed to anti-Shia and anti-Iranian propaganda perceived the Yemen attack as a move against the Iranian/Shi'ite axis, which they believed to pose a threat to their country's security. It was also seen as a demonstration of Saudi Arabia's ability to safeguard its interests in the region by all means possible.

At the beginning of the war on Yemen, the Arab Coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, made some swift advances. This increased Mohammed bin Salman's popularity among a large portion of the Saudi population. As Ottaway observed, "Initially, the invasion was highly popular with the Saudi public, arousing a sense of nationalistic pride that the kingdom was finally standing tall in opposing Iranian expansionism. Before long, however, it would become an albatross around MBS's neck, seen internationally as an early example of his recklessness in foreign policy" (Ottaway, 2021: 21). As a country stranger to the legitimacy of the ballot box, this popularity allowed Mohammed bin Salman to gain the approval and legitimacy of the street, or at least a big chunk of it. Consequently, he could easily remove Prince Muqrin from his position as Crown Prince. Only a month after Saudi military operations in Yemen began, Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz was forced to resign.

After the semi-automatic advancement of Muhammad bin Nayef to the position of Crown Prince, Bin Salman began to work towards his ultimate goal of obtaining complete control of the KSA. He did so by positioning himself as the successor to the Crown Prince. This move brought him yet one more step closer to his final goal. After two years, Bin Salman saw an opportunity to use the blockade of Qatar as a means to consolidate his power further. He masterfully used the securitisation associated with the Qatar blockade to his advantage, ousting Mohammed bin Nayef from his position, securing his spot as the Crown Prince and becoming the de facto ruler of the Kingdom.

Bin Salman's premeditated and carefully tailored approaches towards

amassing power have cemented his position as a shrewd leader. His willingness to take risks and make the best of given opportunities has shown the world that he is a force to be reckoned with. To clarify, in June 2017, the Saudi Arabian government blockaded Qatar. It was used as a political decoy to prevent any public objection to the dismissal of MBN, which was issued only sixteen days later, on June 21, 2017. By securitising political debate in Saudi society, Mohammad bin Salman prevented any objections or dissent from the elders of Al Saud and ordinary citizens simultaneously.

After reviewing this phase of bin Salman's political life, it could be suggested that MBS's foreign policy decisions, from the start of the Yemen war to the blockade of Qatar, were heavily influenced by domestic politics and internal competition dynamics. To elaborate further, it can be inferred that MBS's primary objective was to establish himself as the dominant figure in Saudi Arabian politics by consolidating power within the Kingdom. As a result, his foreign policy decisions were heavily influenced by the domestic conditions, which ultimately shaped the country's regional and international stance. This approach signifies a strategic use of foreign policy to bolster his political legitimacy and strengthen his grip on power within the Kingdom to amass and project power inside and outside the Saudi territory.

In addition, under MBS's leadership, Saudi Arabia is experiencing a shift towards secular nationalism. The new nationalist project aims to consolidate power and promote a more progressive image, mainly targeting the country's young population (Alhussein, 2023).

For decades, Saudi Arabia's identity has been closely tied to religion. However, under the leadership of MBS, the country is undergoing a significant transformation towards a new form of hypernationalism that prioritises secular nationalism over religiosity. Despite this, religion remains a fundamental aspect of Saudi Arabia's identity, both internally and externally.

The new nationalist project promoted by MBS aims to consolidate power and restore authoritarian rule in Saudi Arabia. This project is primarily targeted towards the young population of Saudi Arabia, which accounts for

approximately 63% of the country's population. While this new form of nationalism was initiated under King Abdullah, it has accelerated under MBS, who sees it as a means to increase government control over the population (Dazi-Héni, 2022).

The purpose of this new nationalistic project is to deprioritise religiosity as the sole source of identity for the state and to promote secular nationalism. Nevertheless, religion will continue to be a crucial component of Saudi Arabia's identity.

In summary, the rise of Mohammed bin Salman to power in Saudi Arabia was characterised by his unflinching desire to attain absolute authority in the Kingdom. Despite facing vehement resistance from older and more experienced Al-Saud princes, he remained steadfastly committed to ascending the throne. His decision to launch a military offensive in Yemen was a bold strategic move that had far-reaching implications for both the region and the Kingdom. It served to establish his reputation as a reliable leader and demonstrated his readiness to take decisive action to safeguard and advance Saudi interests. Furthermore, bin Salman's policies have been imbued with a strong sense of nationalism aimed at bolstering Saudi Arabia's standing in the region and beyond. While his policies have been the subject of considerable controversy, bin Salman's enduring influence in the Middle East cannot be denied, and his accession to the throne holds significant implications for the future trajectory of Saudi Arabia and the wider region.

### **3-2- The Phase of Seeking International Legitimacy and Prestige**

This stage overlaps with the previous one in terms of timeframe. However, as we navigate the early stages of Qatar's blockade, Mohammed bin Salman's foreign policy increasingly emphasises the importance of international recognition. MBS aimed to gain international recognition and prestige to establish Saudi Arabia as a prominent player on the global stage. It is highly probable that MBS believed that by promoting his ambitious projects and modernising the country's infrastructure, he could elevate Saudi Arabia's status and gain more significant influence and respect from other countries. His actions,

such as the implementation of the Vision 2030 plan and his involvement in high-profile projects like the NEOM mega-city development, support this hypothesis. Moreover, MBS's efforts to improve his personal image and be recognised as an influential leader with a modern vision for his country are evident in his public relations campaigns and international appearances (Bianco et al., 2018: 13-34). His participation in the Future Investment Initiative conference and his interviews with foreign media outlets showcase his efforts to portray himself as a transformative leader.

It is also worth noting that the timing of this phase coincided with the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency, which is not a coincidence. During the Obama administration, MBS made efforts to showcase his leadership credentials to the Democratic President. However, Obama decided to opt for a more experienced candidate and chose to help retain Mohammed bin Nayef in office. Bin Nayef was highly regarded for his proven track record in counterterrorism (Nahal & Gass, 2015). In May 2015, Barack Obama invited the heads of state of the GCC to Camp David to coordinate their policies related to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Mohammed bin Salman attended the meeting along with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. Obama was displeased by King Salman's absence, but bin Salman did his best to appease the U.S. president.

MBS understood that the transition from a unipolar world had led to significant changes in U.S. foreign policy. This included a shift in its strategic focus from the Middle East to the Far East during Obama's time and a move from globalisation to unilateralism under Trump. In response, MBS tried to adjust its policies accordingly.

Bin Salman's desire for recognition and acknowledgement by the major powers led him to align his goals, though temporarily, with Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ). Both leaders were young and ambitious, seeking to attain a unique status regionally and internationally. However, MBZ has more experience in the power play than Mohammed bin Salman, having become the UAE's number one man after his brother Khalifa's illness and Dubai's

economic decline in 2008. Mohammed bin Zayed attempted to form an equal strategic partnership with Mohammed bin Salman. He was aware that if he did not exercise caution in aligning with Riyadh, he might face the same fate as the King of Bahrain and end up being subject to Saudi Arabia's policies. MBZ recognised the importance of Saudi Arabia in the region and saw an opportunity in the new Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. Unlike Muhammad bin Nayef, bin Salman was a revisionist who shared bin Zayed's view of moving away from the conservative policies of the GCC Old Guard (Filkins, 2018).

The alliance between Bin Zayed and bin Salman has been touted as transformative for the Middle East region, but it is essential to approach this claim with some scepticism. While they have taken joint actions such as waging war in Yemen, designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group, escalating tensions with Qatar, and normalising relations with the Zionist regime, the long-term impact of these actions remains to be seen. Additionally, bin Salman's economic policies, which include offering 1.5 per cent of Aramco shares, attracting billions of dollars in investments, investing in startups such as Uber and Magic Leap, and unveiling the \$500 billion Neom technology city plan, maybe overly ambitious and may not yield the promised results. Furthermore, the policy of marginalising clerics who publicly oppose Western lifestyles and culture could be seen as restricting freedom of speech. It is crucial to remain critical and cautious when evaluating political leaders' claims and policies.

Upon first impression, Mohammed bin Salman's reforms may seem like those of a modernist leader striving to liberalise the economy. These efforts have brought Saudi Arabia closer to major world powers, as evidenced by the "Strategic Partnership of the 21st Century" signed during Trump's visit in May 2017 (Blanchard, 2017). However, the delay and reduction of the Aramco offering, the unjust arrests of outspoken progressive activists, the murder of Khashoggi within the Saudi embassy, and the arbitrary detention of members of the Royal Family and wealthy businesspeople at the Ritz Carlton hotel have all cast a shadow on Bin Salman's reputation as a reformist leader. These incidents serve as reminders that actual progress cannot be achieved through forceful and

unjust means.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program faces significant challenges, including political turmoil that has the potential to derail its progress. The murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the eviction of a Bedouin tribe for the NEOM project have marred the program's image and raised concerns about human rights abuses in the country. Additionally, the country's ultraconservative climate and overenthusiastic top-down planning have made attracting foreign investment and tourism difficult. However, with careful planning and a willingness to address these challenges, there is still potential for the program to succeed in transitioning the country's economy away from fossil fuels and towards a more sustainable future (Schneider, 2021). It will be necessary for the government to address these issues in order to build trust and credibility with investors and stakeholders, both domestic and international.

Mohammed bin Salman initially faced challenges in gaining international recognition due to his seemingly arbitrary actions and impulsive behaviour. However, he managed to overcome them with time. One of his tactics was collaborating with former U.S. President Donald Trump to reimpose oil sanctions on Iran. Saudi Arabia's increase in oil production in 2018 made it easier to implement Iran's oil embargo. Trump's reliance on Saudi Arabia during the oil sanctions brought MBS closer to America, enhancing his reputation. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's purchase of weapons worth several hundred billion dollars from the U.S. and a significant increase in their share of U.S. Treasury bonds helped create a closer relationship between the two leaders.

MBS also facilitated unofficial but public communication channels with Israel through individuals such as Prince Turki bin Faisal and retired general Anwar Eshghi. He maintained a friendly relationship with Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and chief negotiator for Arab and Israel normalisation. Lastly, MBS's lack of a solid reaction to the relocation of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem helped him regain Western recognition and improve relations with Trump's administration.

The change in the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia's approach towards the

United States during Donald Trump's presidency is a significant development in Middle East politics. As the U.S. began to disengage from the region, the Crown Prince recognised the need to establish a positive relationship with the U.S. and maintain the security it provides. To achieve this objective, the Crown Prince aligned his approach with Trump's foreign policy, which involved shifting from multilateralism to unilateralism and adopting an "America First" policy. This strategic alignment demonstrated the Crown Prince's commitment to navigating the complex political landscape of the Middle East while maintaining strong ties with the U.S.

To this end, the Crown Prince presented Vision 2030, which promised to create the world's largest government investment fund. This fund would provide significant mutual investment opportunities between the two countries and, thus, an effort towards a burden-sharing strategy that Trump advocated. In his interactions with Trump, the Crown Prince tried accommodating the "America First" policy (Zurcher, 2018). He made notable military purchases from the U.S. aimed at helping Saudi Arabia secure itself and support other American allies in the region, thereby reducing the financial burden on the United States.

Mohammed bin Salman took various measures to enhance his reputation in the United States and Europe. To this end, he imposed restrictions on certain extremist groups and clerics and provided certain rights and privileges to the people of Saudi Arabia. MBS invested significant material and financial resources (McCormick, 2019) to gain President Trump's and his administration's support, aiming to gain their trust.

After successfully managing the Khashoggi crisis, MBS gained confidence in its international standing. He believed that he had stabilised his position and that future crises similar to the Khashoggi incident would not cause irreparable damage. This gave him the assurance he needed to continue pursuing his policies and strengthen his position domestically and internationally.

### **3-3- power consolidation and the formulation of regional strategic policy**

Before delving into the "power consolidation and the formulation of regional strategic policy" phase, it is imperative to note that this phase is still in progress.

While there are manifestations of Mohammed bin Salman's long-term regional vision, an all-encompassing and definitive roadmap of his regional strategy has yet to be fully realised. With this in mind, Mohammed bin Salman's response to the drone attack on Aramco and the recent oil-price wars can be considered conspicuous indicators of the advancement of Saudi Arabia's foreign strategic outlook (Finley et al., 2020: 5-11).

In the 2019 oil war that began after the March meeting of OPEC+, several significant events occurred that support the author's hypothesis. This time, unlike the price war in 2015-2016, Muhammad bin Salman could maintain his power both within and outside the country. He was not concerned about the possibility of a popular uprising due to the drop in living standards, and he did not feel the need to appease Trump or Putin. To further assert his domestic authority to foreign countries, he arrested rival princes simultaneously as the price war began.

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the oil market experienced a sharp decrease in demand and a significant increase in production surplus. This resulted in a steep decline in the price of oil, which led Saudi Arabia to consider increasing its production to impact the American shale oil industry.

In 2016, a similar increase in Saudi oil production brought the average oil price down to \$40. However, American shale oil companies weathered the price drop by adopting strategies such as layoffs, increasing productivity through technological advancements, and taking loans from banks. Yet, during the 2019 oil crisis, the average oil price dropped even lower (reaching the \$20 range). This presented a significant challenge to the survival of shale oil, with economic analysts expressing doubt about its chances of recovery.

Mohammed bin Salman's judicious understanding of the situation and prompt response proved critical in resolving the oil crisis. Recognising the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the impending American presidential elections, the Saudi Crown Prince realised President Trump was under pressure to intervene and save the American oil industry. In this context, traditional diplomatic channels were insufficient, and President Trump could not rely on an assertive phone call with MBS to resolve the issue. Consequently, Saudi Arabia made

history by successfully persuading non-member countries in the Americas to reduce their oil production, marking the first time such an agreement was reached in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) history.

In 2019, Saudi Arabia engaged in an oil war that had an impact on neighbouring countries such as Iraq and Oman. The move was aimed at protecting the country's economic interests, but it may have been perceived as a challenge to other nations in the region. It is worth noting that the Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman, consulted with oil experts to ensure that the country was well-prepared for the situation. As a result, the U.S.'s threat to impose tariffs on imported oil did not deter Saudi Arabia, as they were aware of the limitations of U.S. domestic oil production (Johnson & Gramer, 2020). It is essential to recognise that every nation has the right to protect its economic interests, and Saudi Arabia is no exception.

The Ansarullah drone attack on Aramco's facilities in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia marked a pivotal moment that prompted MBS to reassess Saudi Arabia's long-term security strategy. The Yemeni conflict had already caused significant economic damage, and the lack of retaliatory intervention by the United States was a significant source of disappointment for Mohammed bin Salman (Hokayem, 2022). This incident had long-lasting consequences, leading him to pursue a withdrawal from Yemen and de-escalation efforts with Iran. It is manifest that this event has instigated a substantial transformation in Saudi Arabia's security approach, underscoring the need for strategic planning and action to prevent similar attacks in the future.

The negotiations between the Trump government and the Taliban for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan have raised concerns in the eyes of MBS regarding the potential withdrawal of U.S. troops from other areas of West Asia. This development has significant implications for Saudi Arabia's strategic interests, mainly if the U.S. were to prioritise its interests in other regions. It also served as a reminder of the United States' strategic shift from the Middle East to the Far East, which started during the Obama administration and continues to this day. This shift can further impact Saudi Arabia's position in the region.

MBS had hoped to establish a new 21st-century partnership with the Trump administration that would tie Saudi Arabia's security to that of the United States. However, President Trump's actions have demonstrated that the Middle East no longer holds the same importance for the U.S. as it did in the 20th century. This realisation has far-reaching implications for the region and Saudi Arabia's strategic interests.

To conclude, Muhammad bin Salman has emerged as an important figure in international politics, demonstrating a steady hand in implementing major foreign policy strategies. Despite pressure from the U.S. and Russia, he has secured favourable oil concessions from OPEC+ countries, highlighting his diplomatic skills and leadership qualities. Bin Salman recognises Saudi Arabia's role in global oil security and seeks to convey this message to the world (El-Zobaidi, 2022). His efforts in consolidating his power domestically and neutralising rivals have contributed to his ability to lead with diplomacy and tact on the international stage.

#### **4- Acting to realign regional dynamics amid concerns over U.S. support**

The relationship between the Trump administration and the Saudi government was characterised by amicability, while President Biden pledged to pursue a different course of action by holding the Saudi government accountable for its actions and ensuring that they pay for their transgressions. However, Biden refrained from entirely severing ties by imposing sanctions on select individuals involved in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Still, he did not take any action against the Crown Prince himself.

Despite the high costs and questionable benefits, the U.S. government strives to strengthen its relationship with Saudi Arabia. In addition to the traditional justifications of oil, counterterrorism, and regional stability, the new push for closer ties is bolstered by fresh rationales, such as great power competition (with China and Russia) and the expansion of the Abraham Accords, which are subject to scrutiny (Hoffman, 2023).

The Crown Prince requested a steep price for normalisation with Israel. Saudi

Arabia has expressed its desire for a security pact with the U.S. and technical assistance in developing a nuclear power industry. Nevertheless, these demands are unlikely to garner congressional approval (Borger, 2024).

In the aftermath of the Gaza conflict, Saudi Arabia stipulated that a two-state solution must be established as a precondition for normalisation. The success of such an arrangement would hinge on a satisfied Crown Prince who received all of his desired concessions from the U.S. and a willing Netanyahu. However, even if Netanyahu or any other probable Prime Minister were open to accepting a two-state solution, they would lose the majority over such a deal, resulting in a deadlock. Moreover, even if an agreement were reached, it could be largely symbolic due to the absence of genuine American and Israeli support for a fully autonomous Palestinian state. Many experts believe the so-called peace agreement is little more than a mere political display with limited prospects for success. The Biden Administration refrained from proposing a comprehensive and detailed plan for regional peace. However, the vision it laid out assumes the mobilisation of regional support for reconstruction and governance in Gaza after Israel's war with Hamas ends. That would become a nucleus for an independent Palestinian State under the control of a "reformed Palestinian Authority". From Biden's perspective, bolstering Israel's security and the creation of a Palestinian state were compatible goals (Hadar, 2024: 3).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate interplay between domestic and foreign policies in Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's (MBS) leadership has engendered a more assertive and revisionist foreign policy, reflecting MBS's hyper-nationalistic approach. The Kingdom has encountered several challenges that have impacted its foreign policy, including the 2019 attack on Aramco facilities, the Yemen war, the oil price war, and the shifting political landscape in the United States.

The attack on Aramco in September 2019 marked a pivotal moment in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, underscoring the imperative to prioritise national

security concerns. Subsequently, MBS redirected his attention from assertive foreign policy objectives to a more pragmatic approach to safeguarding the Kingdom's interests. This shift encompassed endeavours to de-escalate tensions with Iran and engage in diplomatic initiatives to address the conflict in Yemen, which has attracted censure from the international community due to human rights violations and war crimes. An analysis through the lens of the Neoclassical realist theory of overbalancing scrutinises this overreaction. This theory posits that while a state's foreign policy is influenced by international factors such as the balance of power, domestic factors, including leadership decisions and resource mobilisation, also wield significant influence. Plausible factors contributing to Saudi Arabia's overbalancing encompass misperceptions about the "Iranian threat," domestic political pressures to project strength, and the kingdom's capacity to marshal resources effectively.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is a cornerstone of its ambitious plan to diversify its economy and modernise its society. This vision is central to reducing reliance on oil revenue and attracting foreign investment. However, the plan's success hinges on a stable regional environment. Persistent tensions with Iran pose significant challenges to achieving these goals. Consequently, de-escalation or rapprochement with Iran is essential for Saudi Arabia to optimise the potential of Vision 2030 and secure its economic future. China's growing influence in the region, including its role as a mediator between Saudi Arabia and Iran, could facilitate this process and create a more conducive environment for Saudi Arabia's economic transformation.

The evolving political landscape in the United States has presented new challenges for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The Kingdom strives to balance its domestic and regional interests to ensure security. Previously, the Trump administration had a close relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, the Biden administration has signalled a shift towards a more critical stance on human rights issues. Although there was a reconciliation between MBS and Biden, changes in U.S. policy could have significant implications for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, especially in the regional context.

To fully comprehend Mohammad bin Salman's foreign policies, it is essential to understand his political journey and the contextual circumstances that have influenced them. Despite MBS's challenges, he remains determined to gain supreme power in Saudi Arabia. His political legacy will hinge on his ability to balance competing domestic and international interests while enhancing regional stability and prosperity.

The Saudi Foreign Policy under MBS is a complex issue that can be better understood through a combined lens of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and Neoclassical Realism. FPA can illuminate historical tensions, regional geopolitical dynamics, and the role of external actors in exacerbating the conflict. Conversely, Neoclassical Realism can examine how systemic pressures, such as the region's power distribution, influence state behaviour and how domestic factors, like political leadership and societal norms, shape a state's response to these pressures. In the case of KSA under MBS, Neoclassical Realism can analyse how MBS perceives the balance of power, and how domestic factors, such as religious ideology and economic interests, influence his foreign policy choices.

Ultimately, the success or failure of MBS's policies will depend on his ability to navigate complex regional dynamics and balance national security concerns with international obligations. As Saudi Arabia continues to contend with the challenges of the 21st century, observing how MBS's policies evolve and impact the Kingdom's relationships with its neighbours and the wider world will be compelling.

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