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# From ‘Soft’ to ‘Hard’ to ‘Moderate’: Islam in the Dilemmas of Post-2011 Saudi Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** Due to its specific history, Saudi Arabia’s domestic and international politics are inextricably linked together. In the shaping and implementation of the kingdom’s essentially defensive international behavior, Islam has kept a central position as a legitimizing factor and as a tool of ‘soft power’ foreign policy. This paper firstly aims to explore the position that religion holds in the Saudi perceptions of stability in the post-2011 era, where safeguarding the status quo remained the priority, while the new administration responded to external pressure by shifting towards a ‘hard power’ foreign policy with questionable results. Furthermore, the paper explores the links between foreign policy choices and the promotion of a new, modern image for the kingdom whereas the regime has appropriated for itself the notion of ‘moderate Islam’ in order to restore its international image and attract investments for the ‘Vision 2030’ reform program. Finally, it proposes a discussion of the position of Islam in the future direction of the country, amidst an increasing authoritarian rule.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia; Islam; foreign policy; Arab Spring; Gulf; salafism; Iran; Muslim Brotherhood

## 1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia’s international attitude in recent years has been labeled aggressive, reckless or even outright dangerous, in contrast with decades of cautious reserve and status quo-oriented foreign policy. This departure from the traditional mentality of restraint has been described as a shift from “defensive realism” to “offensive realism”. According to this approach, “defensive realism stresses moderate, cautious policies in the pursuit of security. Survival is best realized through a mentality of restraint that tends towards small, incremental and non-disruptive actions in security seeking”, whereas offensive realists consider that in the quest for survival “there is no such thing as an adequate level of security; states must hoard as much as possible” by maximizing their power at the expense of their rivals and adopting unilateral behavior and regional hegemony to secure their survival (Rich 2019).

Indeed until 2015, the Saudi monarchy demonstrated a cautious, status quo foreign policy in line with its main priorities of domestic stability and external security (Gause 2018). Effectively unable to project hard power, Saudi Arabia displayed a foreign attitude based on diplomacy and balancing through regional alliances, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), while delegating its external security, and most importantly the secure flow of its oil production, to the US security umbrella (Nonneman 2006). Domestic stability effectively meant the secure flow of revenues from oil production, upon which the Saudi economy and the unity of the regime depended, itself built upon a patronage system running through all segments of Saudi society, whilst relying on the *ulama* (religious scholars) for legitimacy. Therefore, the internal stability heavily relied on external security of its borders and the uninterrupted trade through the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy orientation has relied upon two pillars which allowed it considerable freedom of maneuver; financially, its position as an oil giant gave it a leading role within the OPEC and the global oil trade. Spiritually, the custodianship of Islam’s holy places gave the monarchy and

religious authorities the mobilization capacity of over a billion Muslims, while the pact between the royal family and the religious establishment provided the moral grounds of internal legitimization. The Saudi state has relied heavily upon these two elements of soft power, religious ideology and financial largesse (Korany and Moataz 2008), to attain its foreign policy objectives. The accumulation of wealth in the second half of the twentieth century made it possible to project its native religious discourse to other Muslim countries through its *da'wa* (proselytizing) mission via a number of state and independent religious institutions and organisations such as the Muslim World League (MWL), the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and international offices affiliated with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and through the courses offered by the Islamic University of Medina and the Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh (Commins 2015).

Furthermore, throughout the 1950s and 1960s the dual pillars of this strategy kept the kingdom from external rival ideologies such as Nasserism and Baathism and positioned it as the defender of the *umma* (the Muslim community) against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As new perceived external threats rose in the following decades, Saudi religious diplomacy was deployed as a foreign policy tool in order to face the danger of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Islamist opposition expressed by diverse groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) following the Gulf War in 1991, and jihadism following 9/11 (Mouline 2020). Following the 2001 attacks, and as in previous times of crisis, this tool was further deployed in order to whitewash the image of the regime and to clarify that extremism in fact emanates from distorted interpretations of Islam, namely by the Muslim Brotherhood and violent jihadism. Hence, religion is incorporated in Saudi Arabian foreign policy as a tool of “soft power” in order to serve geopolitical objectives and used as a “space for expressing conventional geopolitical rivalries” (Mandaville and Hamid 2018). This has become particularly evident since 2003, when the Saudi-Iranian rivalry entered a new era of tension.

Regionally, the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq left vacuums that the main rival of Saudi Arabia in the region was swift to fill, thus creating a context of sectarian divisions, violence and heightened tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia in what was called the “new Middle East Cold War” (Gause 2014). Iranian expansionism mainly in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, as well as the added challenge of jihadist attacks on its own soil, was at the core of the Saudi regime’s threat perceptions until the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011.

The consequent transition processes and civil wars that followed the revolts added new layers of crisis in the region, further challenging Saudi Arabia on multiple levels: on the ideological level, its primacy was contested by the strengthening of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam narratives which caused further fragmentation within the Sunni world. The rise of the Islamic State and the territorialization of Salafi jihadism also challenged the Saudi perception of being the Islamic state *par excellence*. On the geopolitical level, the weakening of the relations with the US under the Obama administration and the nuclear deal reached with Iran in 2015 exacerbated Saudi security dilemmas, thus imposing a rethinking of foreign policy objectives and the means to achieve them.

The new foreign policy dogma and the shift towards an offensive realist attitude materialized under King Salman and especially since the promotion of his son Mohammad Bin-Salman (MBS), emboldened by the arrival of President Trump and his intense anti-Iran rhetoric. However, this strategy quickly produced very mixed results, considerably damaging the regime’s international image. Parallel to the demonstrated aggressiveness, the Saudi leadership promotes a renewed “soft power” policy under the banner of “moderate Islam” and the modern “Vision 2030” internal reform program. While these coincide with a recent turn towards diplomacy, they are perceived more as a public relations tool, complementary to the current aggressive tactics, rather than a complete U-turn towards the former behavior pattern, resembling the definition of defensive realism.

Based on academic literature on Saudi Arabian foreign policy and more recent empirical observations, this paper aims to examine the recent developments in Saudi Arabia’s international behavior and to observe the role of Islam in current security dilemmas and policy objectives, taking into account the geopolitical factors that weighed on the leadership’s threat perceptions pre- and

post-2011 reconfigurations. Furthermore, it aims to show that under King Salman the foreign policy direction shifted towards an offensive realist attitude in pursuing three main objectives; (1) to gain a hegemonic role in the Gulf region, (2) to contain Iranian expansionism and (3) to contain political Islam as manifested through Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations and their patron states in the Middle East. Finally, it intends to examine the (geo)political and ideological motivations behind the notion of 'moderate Islam' promoted by the Saudi leadership. Acknowledging that this is an ongoing process whose results remain to be seen, this paper attempts a discussion on the nature of Islam to which Saudi Arabia wishes to adhere, at a time when internal developments point towards a merge of Salafism and nationalism, amidst an intensifying authoritarian rule (Blin 2016).

## 2. Saudi Arabia Post-2011: Responding to the Challenges through 'Hard Power' and 'Moderation'

### 2.1. Arab Spring Reconfigurations

In order to better gauge the impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi perceptions of threat and the quest for regime survival within a complicated geopolitical context, it is useful to examine it through the framework of the "New Middle East Cold War", as analysed by Gause (2014).

The current geopolitical context in the Middle East bears striking resemblances to what was called the Arab Cold War in the 1950s-1960s when the domestic struggles of weak regional states constituted the theater of confrontation, in which the main actors exerted their influence through local state and non-state actors. While the main camps were not always united, a measure of success was also found in the ability of actors to juggle different alliances, thus crossing the main lines of conflict. In the current Middle East Cold War, the leading roles are played by Iran and Saudi Arabia in a balance of power game that witnesses no military confrontation, but plays out in various local and regional theaters.

When the uprisings began, Saudi Arabia was already alarmed by Iran's expansionism, dating back to the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the subsequent power vacuums created, which the Iranian leadership swiftly filled. During the 2000s the Saudi leadership retained its reserved and non-confrontational way and worked behind the scenes in order to find a regional modus vivendi with the Iranians, thus refraining from any openly hostile relations. Sectarian tensions were a major element in the conflict and were played by both sides, however in a way that served their geopolitical objectives within the renewed "cold war" context, which goes beyond a simplistic sectarian line of "Sunni versus Shi'a" divide. For example, during the Iraqi transition period, Saudi Arabia strongly supported Iyad Allawi, a secular politician but Shi'a by birth and whose coalition was cross-sectarian and thus hardly a Sunni bloc. Hence a multitude of variables add to the equation, such as the dynamics of domestic conflicts, transnational affinities and regional state ambitions, feeding into the complicated geopolitical context, but not driving it on their own (Gause 2014).

In the immediate outbreak of the Arab Spring, the various reactions of Sunni powers in the region caused realignments that went on to provoke serious divisions among them and further amplify the Saudi security dilemmas. Saudi Arabia immediately took the lead of the counter-revolutionary bloc along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—and later post-Morsi Egypt—that saw the uprisings as an existential threat to their internal stability and survival and sought to "maintain the status quo at all costs" (Gerges 2016). The prospect of a democratic Islamist type of government which became clear after the parliamentary election and constituent assembly elections of 2011 in Egypt and Tunisia respectively, was deeply unsettling for the kingdom. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and the Salafi Nour Party took nearly 70% of the seats between them. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi won a very close race against Mubarak's last prime minister in the 2012 presidential election. Although in Tunisia the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate did not fare so well, the trend was clear and the Saudi leadership saw in it the danger of a regime that could "credibly contest its role as leader of the Sunni Muslim world, and even present an alternative form of Sunni Islamist politics to the Saudi monarchical model" (Gause 2014).

The deep mistrust towards the Brotherhood caused further rifts among Sunni powers. On the one hand Saudi Arabia and the UAE, sharing the same aversion for the Brotherhood, deployed enormous funds towards containing the perceived danger of political Islam. Both countries generously funded General Abd-al Fattah al-Sisi's takeover following the coup that overthrew Morsi in 2013, as well as the Libyan General Khalifa Haftar in his operation against the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). In Tunisia, the Saudis supported a coalition of secularists and old-regime officials during the elections. On the other hand, the pro-revolutionary bloc consisted of those who actively backed the revolutionary movements throughout the region: Turkey and Qatar rallied behind the revolts and supported Mohammad Morsi in Egypt, MB-linked parties in Libya and the Tunisian Ennahda. Following Morsi's overthrow, Qatar provided refuge to Brotherhood leaders, deepening the polarization with Saudi Arabia and culminating in the kingdom designating the MB a terrorist organisation in 2014, thus equating it with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The spat also led to a brief break of diplomatic ties between some GCC members and Qatar, adding another axis of confrontation to an already complicated context that has locked the pro- and counter-revolutionary blocs in a conflict over what the proper political role of Islam should be in the Sunni world (Gause 2014).

Saudi Arabia thus found its predominant ideological position within the Sunni world challenged by those forces that emerged during the transitions and the civil wars that ensued; mainly those represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, but also by the reconfigurations within the Salafi trend as these were expressed in its three main currents: the violent Salafi jihadi current, the quietist and largely apolitical current and the activist Salafi current which was clearly strengthened in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Among them, the most visible challenge emanated from the jihadi Salafi movement, mainly through the Islamic State's re-emergence in Iraq, Syria and beyond, in its territorialized version. Through its adoption of violent practices and aspiration to control a certain space and a certain population, the Islamic State not only challenged Saudi Arabia's legitimacy as the Islamic state *par excellence*, it also targeted the kingdom on its own territory in the same manner as Al-Qaeda did since 2003 (Bonnefoy 2018).

The quietist Salafi trend (*salafiyya ilmiyya* or *da'wiyya*), the one most closely associated with the Saudi *da'wa*, was caught on the opposite side of the popular protests due to its prescribed strict obedience to the Muslim ruler. Their support to status quo regimes saved the quietist Salafis from repression, while during the revolts they were rallied to engage in favor of these regimes, as for example in their support for Muammar Qadhafi at the beginning of the Libyan uprising. By merit of their apolitical stance quietists are considered moderate, although in terms of creed their views are rather radical. Quietist networks in various countries have developed strong links with a number of Saudi *ulama* who have a transnational following, such as Rabi al-Madkhali (Bonnefoy 2018). The failure of the political experiment in Egypt and the rapid deterioration of the security and social situation in other countries allowed the quietist branch to maintain relevance in the eyes of militants. In the Libyan case, they became influential through their alliance with General Khalifa Haftar, in his fighting against the GNA with generous support from Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Salafi fighters and militias constitute an important force used by Haftar, especially since his operation to retake the capital, Tripoli (International Crisis Group 2019).

The emerging politicization of activist Salafism (*salafiyya harakiyya*) is perhaps the most important aspect of the reconfigurations that took place in the post-Arab Spring societies. The emergence of the al-Nur party in Egypt and other Salafi parties, such as the al-Rashad in Yemen, the Ansar al-Sharia movement in Tunisia or the al-Fatih mosque in Bahrain signaled a passage to politics, in a clear break with their apolitical past (Bonnefoy 2018). Activist Salafism emerged as a rejection of quietism and of the Saudi monarchy in the 1990s through the Sahwa movement, a blend of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi thinking that has expressed the most serious Islamist opposition to the regime since the Gulf war in 1990. Although engaged in the public sphere in various countries since their emergence, they never presented a serious alternative to nationalist or MB-linked political forces who were already engaged in the democratic process. As their politicization intensified post-2011 in Egypt, Tunisia

and Yemen, but remained less dynamic in Saudi Arabia, it has become clear that Salafism is a truly transnational phenomenon that adapts to both regional and local circumstances. This is evident in the Yemeni case for example, where local Salafi movements emerged as both pro- and anti-Saudi in the 1980s, as in the case of Muqbil al-Wadi'i who was critical of the policies and the legitimacy of the Al-Saud. Later on they repositioned themselves towards closer ties with Saudi Salafi networks, whilst demonstrating different levels of support for the Saudi military intervention in Yemen after 2015. As Laurent Bonnefoy notes: "[...] the capacity of Saudi Arabia to control outcomes and exercise 'soft power' through Salafism is far from certain. [...] such a development highlights the increasingly transnational character of Salafism and shows the extent to which Saudi Arabia, while playing a special role, is not the sole driver of the development of Salafism across the Muslim world" (2013).

With regards to the Iranian expansionist threat, the Arab Spring was another cause of serious concern to the Saudi regime, which saw an increasing Iranian role in the civil wars in Syria, Yemen and in the Bahrain revolt, and thus a serious threat in the Arabian Peninsula. The Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad was the only revolt where Saudi Arabia in which took the side of the opposition, albeit not driven by any anti-Alawite sentiment, but rather seeing it as the only opportunity to roll back Tehran's influence. Although slower than Turkey and Qatar in supporting the opposition forces, Saudi Arabia's initial support for the more secular Free Syrian Army later shifted towards Islamist and more specifically Salafi groups. Furthermore in Bahrain, the Saudi-led suppression of the revolt took place in the context of the GCC and was the first time in decades that Saudi troops were sent into the field, in order to save a mini-patron dynasty from demands for legitimate rule rather than a purely sectarian, Shi'a contestation of its power. In Yemen, the Saudis were able to reaffirm their central position in the country's politics by negotiating Ali Abdallah Salih's resignation, but remained increasingly alarmed at the Huthi progressive gains, which they saw as an Iranian encroachment effort. Although the Iranian influence over the Huthis is widely overestimated, the Saudi leadership saw in the movement's intense anti-American and anti-Israel discourse further proof of the Iranian connection (Gause 2014).

Apart from the perceived Iranian role in the Arab uprisings, the Saudi security dilemmas were also exacerbated by the clear advance in nuclear negotiations between Iran and Western powers, as well as the US reluctance in taking up a leading role during the Arab Spring. The P5+1 negotiations over Iran's nuclear program were stepped up following the election of moderate President Hassan Rouhani, leading to the November 2013 interim agreement; the Joint Plan of Action agreed in 2014 was set to ease the sanctions against Iran while setting a timeline for the agreement implementation in early 2015. Largely seen as a reward towards the Iranians, despite Barack Obama's visit to Riyadh to ease the Saudi displeasure, the nuclear deal was perceived as another setback in the Saudi effort to roll back Iran's growing gains in the region (Blin 2016). The Obama administration supported the transitions instead of backing old allies in Egypt and elsewhere, thus sparking a fear among Gulf monarchies that they could be next, in the case of internal destabilization. Additionally, in Syria and Iraq, US interests went beyond the narrow balance of power game between Iran and Saudi Arabia, thus pointing to a perceived "inconsistent" and "passive" policy signaling an imminent retreat from the region (Gause 2014).

Domestically, the Arab Spring presented another potential challenge, as it gave new impetus to Sahwa-linked and liberal Islamists, albeit not very visible. The Sahwa embraced the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, and the overthrow of President Morsi marked a point of renewed criticism against the Saudi regime's role in General Sisi's coup. Protests took the form of street demonstrations, sit-ins at symbolic places, prisons, and governorates; and petitions were widely disseminated through social media (Lacroix 2014). The Saudi Grand Mufti Abd al-Aziz Ibn Abdullah Al al-Sheikh was quick to denounce the uprisings as "planned and organised by the enemies of the umma" (Murphy 2011), while the government reacted using a carrot and stick strategy. In spring 2011, King Abdullah announced economic stimulus amounting to around \$130 billion and civil servants (roughly two-thirds of the workforce) received a 15% raise in wages and a bonus of an extra two months' pay. However, it also cracked down hard against protesters and brought about widespread arrests, especially from 2014

onwards, as the MB designation as a terrorist organisation provided the regime with the ability to label and arrest any opposition voice under this pretext (Hoffman 2019).

Within the geopolitical landscape that emerged following the Arab Spring, a series of factors served as a reminder to the Saudi leadership that rethinking and re-defining its foreign policy was an imperative should it wish to secure the stability of the country and the survival of the regime. On top of the geopolitical and ideological factors that weighed in the Saudi perceptions of threat and falling oil prices, the taking of Sanaa by Huthi rebels at the end of 2014 served as a wake-up call that Iranian expansion had reached the southern underbelly of the Arabian peninsula.

## 2.2. *The Limits of an Offensive Foreign Policy under a New Leadership*

Against the backdrop of heightened threats and challenges to Saudi security, the passing of King Abdallah in January 2015 and the ascendance of King Salman clearly mark an abrupt shift in the kingdom's foreign policy. While the behavior turned aggressive rather quickly, the three main objectives of this policy remained relatively unchanged; (1) contain the Iranian danger regionally, (2) contain the gains of political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular and (3) gain a hegemonic regional role, shielding the kingdom from any external threat that could have a destabilizing effect internally (Dazi-Héni 2018a). The new strategy - dubbed by some observers as "Salman's Doctrine" (Middle East Monitor 2015)- is characterized by more centralized decision-making and relies on two main elements: (a) high defense spending and (b) military alliance building. In light of the above definition, the new concept thus bears the characteristics of an offensive realist turn in foreign policy implementation (Nuruzzaman 2019).

With regards to foreign policy decision making, the new concept translated into the swift promotion of Mohammed Bin Salman to the position of defense minister and deputy crown prince, then to crown prince, atop a long list of other portfolios. Under MBS's leadership and with the mentoring of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammad Bin Zayed, the security sector was set to undergo considerable modernization, in order to provide flexibility and operational capacity to a force that was until then neglected. In 2018, Saudi Arabia was the third biggest military spender globally and the first in the region with \$67.6 billion in expenditure which amounts to 8.8% of its GDP (SIPRI 2019). However, what took place instead of a major overhaul was the creation of a Joint Operational Command and two new bodies handling procurements and reporting directly to MBS (Al Sayegh 2017). In June and July 2017, all counterterrorism and domestic intelligence agencies were brought under a single new body, the Presidency of State Security (PSS) (Sayigh 2018), while the National Guard (SANG) came under the command of an unexperienced yet loyal prince. Miteb bin-Abdallah, son of the late king and commander of the SANG, was ousted in November 2017 (Partrick 2018). Similarly, the ousting of the former Crown Prince and Interior Minister Mohammad Bin-Nayef, who had long experience in internal security and intelligence issues and was in close counter-terrorism cooperation with the US, was seen as the eviction of a potential rival from a crucial post (Benjamin 2018). The creation of new bodies under MBS's direct supervision further signaled the distancing from the traditional collegiality and consensus which, in the past, secured family unity by dividing the top brass posts among senior royals with long experience in state and security affairs, with the latter being a sign that "personal loyalty, not experience or expertise, is still the crucial determinant of getting ahead" (Wittes and Riedel 2018).

On top of investing in the armed forces, the Saudi government embarked on a course of creating alliances in order to support its anti-Iran objectives. First, it formed a nine-nation Arab coalition in April 2015 to fight back the Shi'a Houthi rebels that it claimed Iran was supporting (Kirkpatrick 2015). Later on, in December 2015, MBS announced the formation of a broader alliance—the 34-nation Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition. Although its vague proclaimed scope was to fight regional "extremist" forces, mainly IS and Al-Qaeda, it is hard to miss that it was created as a Saudi-led Sunni alliance, hardly obscuring its main goal of pushing Iran into retreat from Iraq and Syria (BBC News 2015). However, participation in these alliances was motivated more by the Saudi financial

largesse rather than spontaneous commitment to the anti-Iran cause. While some countries outright refused to participate, such as Pakistan and Oman, others only joined after securing guarantees in the form of oil concessions or financial aid. Sudan received \$2.2 billion in aid from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while Egypt received a Saudi \$8 billion investment commitment (Nuruzzaman 2019).

The new doctrine materialized quickly after MBS took over the defense ministry with the beginning of the Yemen campaign. The stated purpose of the Saudi intervention in Yemen was to stop the extremist Huthis from taking over the country, and to send a strong message to Iran that its advance would not be tolerated in the south of the Arabian Peninsula. The campaign also aimed at proving that Saudi Arabia was capable of mobilizing a strong Arab coalition and that the Gulf countries were ready to fight a long war—with the necessary backing from the US, UK and France. For the UAE, Saudi's main Gulf ally in the campaign, Yemen was equally important in order to demonstrate the capacity to form a genuine national army and affirm their own position in Gulf affairs (Blin 2016).

Almost five years after the beginning of the Yemen intervention, the Saudi policy seems stuck in a quagmire with no exit strategy, but with incalculable humanitarian, financial, strategic and reputational costs for the Saudis and no realistic advance of the declared objectives (Gordon 2018). According to Brookings, the monthly cost of operations is over \$5 billion (Riedel 2017a), risking to lead the Saudi economy into recession, while by mid-2018 more than 1000 Saudi troops had perished (Al-Jazeera 2018). In order to continue the campaign, Saudi Arabia relied on foreign support to resupply in weaponry and mercenary forces, which exposed the flaws in its operational capacity. As the humanitarian cost of the war drew intense media attention, international arms suppliers, such as Germany, became more reluctant or even stopped providing weapons to Saudi Arabia (Riedel 2017b). On the ground, Saudi Arabia's tactic of rallying different parts of the Sunni camp had a boomerang effect as it intensified divisions and animosity among them and further benefited the Huthi advances. It also exposed the limits within the alliance, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia pursued divergent strategic interests and supported different local allies until the UAE announced a drawdown in July 2019 (Ramani 2019). Far from deterring Iran, the campaign concentrated on a theater where its presence and interests were—at least initially—more marginal than those of Iraq and Syria, and the costs much smaller. The Saudi attempt to counter Iran's influence in this theater intensified following the Russian intervention in Syria which tipped the balance in favor of Bashar al-Assad. Unable to considerably affect the developments inside Syria, the Saudis provided military support to armed opposition groups and political support to the opposition through the Riyadh summit ahead of the UN process. They also stepped up the confrontational tone through the execution of Shi'a Sheikh Nimr-al-Nimr, causing a break of the diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tehran. Furthermore, to avoid arms ending up in the hands of Hezbollah and by extension, into the Syrian war, Saudi Arabia suspended \$1 billion arms delivery to Lebanon in February 2016 and led the GCC to designate Hezbollah a terrorist organisation (Blin 2016).

The offensive Saudi policy was further emboldened following the arrival of the Trump administration. In his first foreign trip as US President, Donald Trump was received during a lavish reception in Riyadh in the presence of numerous Arab leaders, at which he denounced extremism and intolerance and signed an equally extravagant deal of \$110 billion-worth of defense procurements (White House 2017). Trump's bellicose discourse against Iran as the world's foremost sponsor of terrorism and his commitment to tear up the 2015 nuclear deal fell wholly in line with the Saudi thinking, leading observers to "speculation that the Saudis and Israelis may concoct a Palestinian 'peace' agreement, under US auspices, on the way to forming a united front against Iran" (Tisdall 2017). Just days after the Riyadh Summit, Saudi Arabia translated this perceived "green light" into the naval and air blockade of Qatar, a direct consequence of the animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood following the 2011 uprisings, causing an unprecedented rift in the GCC. Friction between the Al-Saud and the Al-Thani families is old, but the current spat, which began back in 2014, led the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt to recall their ambassadors from Doha accusing Qatar of "supporting terrorism" and of actions aiming at "destabilizing the region in accordance with the Iranian tactics in the Gulf and beyond" (Saudi Press Agency 2017). In this instance, Qatar was presented with an

ultimatum and a list of 13 conditions with which to comply, including shutting down Al-Jazeera and a Turkish military base, essentially demanding that Qatar gave away its sovereignty. This was preceded by a fierce Saudi-UAE media war against Sheikh Tamim in Doha, by mobilizing hacking and fake news (Cafiero 2017), to which the Emir replied by deploying a sophisticated public relations strategy internationally, in order to counter the effects of the blockade and secure financial stability, provisions, and the uninterrupted connection of the emirate to the outside world throughout the crisis (Dazi-Héni 2018b). Riyadh sought to push Qatar to the breaking point through the blockade, while attempting to internally destabilize the al-Thani by backing a renegade member of the family as a potential successor of the emir (The National 2017) and to de-legitimize Qatar's Wahhabi past using a demand from 200 descendants of the Abd-al Wahhab family to rename the Doha mosque named after Ibn Abd-al Wahhab, "for it does not carry its true Salafi path" (Reuters 2017). The 2017 rift has resulted in a bizarre standoff, as the Saudi strategy backfired, incapable of convincing the international community and lacking an alternative plan, while Qatar survived the blockade by cultivating stronger diplomatic, military, and commercial ties with Turkey and Iran (Nakhleh 2017).

The brief detention and forced resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was seen as another "aggressive, zero-sum and revisionist stance which aimed to forcibly alter the political character of a foreign power" (Rich 2019). The reasoning behind this move was continuing Saudi displeasure with Hariri's limited moves in curbing Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon. While failing to convince the international community, the Saudi move backfired again as it resulted in renewed international support for Hariri and increased his popularity across the sectarian spectrum at home (Daher 2018). To add to these embarrassing strategic miscalculations, the attacks on two major Aramco oil installations in September 2019 halted almost half of the Saudi oil production, or 5% of global production, and fueled criticism towards MBS over his capacity as defense minister to shield the country from terrorism. Although these attacks were later claimed by the Huthis, MBS has insisted that Iran was behind the attacks and called for strong and firm deterrence, yet adding that he would prefer a "peaceful solution" (Reuters 2019).

Hence, the limits of this strategy became clear during the first years of its implementation, through a series of military and diplomatic failures. Even if it was conceived as a proper "doctrine" in imitation of the US concept, it was based more on the expectation of a swift "victory" on various regional fronts that would give Saudi Arabia a preeminent regional role and less a long-term strategic plan to provide external security and regime stability. Yet, despite the aggressiveness in international behavior, largely blamed on the hotheaded and unexperienced character of the crown prince and his entourage, observers also argue that the need to demonstrate success in his domestic priorities would have a constraining effect on his foreign policy (Saab 2018). Indeed, recent diplomatic moves point towards a more pragmatic direction instead of excessive belligerence.

In late 2019, some discreet steps were made towards ending the feud with Qatar (Strobel 2019), with the Qatari foreign minister participating in the Riyadh Summit and the successful organisation of the Gulf Cup in Doha (Henderson 2019). Despite some reasonable optimism, ending the Gulf rift will be a longer, 'incremental process' of serious engagement and dialogue (AFP 2019). Signs of good will from Riyadh underline an attempt to mend MBS's image internationally rather than a genuine desire for a solution, which seems more in line with the UAE's harder stance on the issue (MEMO 2019). Similarly, in Yemen the Saudi leadership has moved towards talks with the Huthis in an effort to de-escalate the conflict, in a clear sign of recalculating the risks undertaken following the oil refinery attacks. According to Rob Malley, 'the sudden willingness to pursue diplomacy in Qatar and Yemen, reflects a Saudi desire to solidify its regional posture at a time of uncertainty and vulnerability' (Walsh and Hubbard 2019). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia reacted cautiously to the US elimination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, leader of the IRGC's Quds military force and architect of much of the Iranian strategy in Iraq and Syria, despite the Saudi press hailing the end of a "decades-long dark Iranian shadow over the region" (SPA 2020). The killing may impact the kingdom directly by way of

retaliation in the form of Huthi attacks on its soil, as well as in its eastern provinces, where Iran has the capacity to mobilize Shi'a organizations hostile to the regime (Farouk 2020).

Thus, it can be argued that, at this time of vulnerability and regional volatility, a more cautious and less belligerent posture is preferred so as to avoid any accident that could lead to direct confrontation and regime instability. Such a scenario would add to an already negative image and have unimaginable domestic costs at a time when external stability and a solid regional role are sought in order to secure the prince's uninterrupted access to the throne.

### 2.3. Promoting a "Moderate" Islam: Realist u-Turn or PR Strategy?

Parallel to the new "hard power" dogma, a "soft power" policy was also put forward in order to appeal to Western governments, business and religious circles and to showcase an image of tolerance, modernity, and conscious social reforms. An intense discourse over "moderate Islam" and a series of high-profile intra-faith and intra-Muslim meetings were coupled with the promotion of 'Vision 2030', the Crown Prince's ambitious plan for reforming all aspects of the economy and modernizing society. 'Vision 2030' mainly aims at moving Saudi Arabia away from its oil revenue dependence, reforming the state bureaucracy and strengthening the private sector, while incorporating modern tools of soft power, such as green energy, tourism and entertainment. Since becoming crown prince in 2017, MBS undertook a series of foreign trips to promote his reformative agenda -not the first comprehensive modernization program announced by the leadership- and thus to establish his royal credentials and secure his future while his father is still alive.

In the context of promoting Vision 2030 abroad, the crown prince has taken up a new religious diplomacy, stating that he wishes to return Saudi Arabia to "moderate Islam" while also arguing that in the past decades the country has steered down a problematic path and that it is time to 'get rid of it' (Chulov 2017). He has stated that "[w]e only want to go back to what we were: a moderate Islam that is open to the world, open to all religions". Yet, he has also added that the young Saudi generation that he represents "will not waste 30 years of our lives in dealing with extremist ideas. We will destroy them today" (Batravi 2017). Furthermore, 'Vision 2030' describes "a tolerant country with Islam as its constitution and moderation as its method"; however, elaborating on his perception of moderation has raised more questions than answers. First of all, the term "moderate" as opposed to "extremist" becomes problematic as it is used to compare moderation not only to Iran's revolutionary ideology and Salafi jihadism, but to the Muslim Brotherhood as well, since Saudi Arabia considers them both terrorist with no further distinction. However, the Brotherhood's rejection of violence as a means to domestic political change and its participation in pluralist electoral processes sets the organization within the realm of moderation, as examined by recent scholarship on political Islam. Among various approaches that go beyond the purpose of this paper, the inclusion-moderation hypothesis posits that "political groups and individuals may become more moderate as a result of their inclusion in pluralist political processes" (Schwedler 2011), thus rendering MBS's "moderate" argument somewhat contradictory. To the contrary, it helps apprehend the Saudi aversion to the organization as a potential competitor in the realm of Islamist politics.

A second point that merits attention is the term "return" and what it refers to. In MBS's vision, "return" alludes to the country pre-1979 and Iran's revolution (Hellyer 2018a), during the reign of King Faysal, a reformer who tried to open up the country and limit the role of the religious establishment. Yet as the late Jamal Khashoggi has suggested, the 1979 narrative is rather weak as Saudi Arabia "was never moderate" and there is no concrete dividing "before-and-after" line in these events (POMED 2018). Related to this is also the contradiction in the notion of "moderation as its method", as the Hanbali school of jurisdiction followed in Saudi Arabia is in its essence the most strict and exclusionist of the four schools of interpretation of Islam's holy texts (Al-Rasheed 2017).

In this context, since 2016, a series of initiatives and changes within the Muslim World League (WML) have pointed to the direction of this renewed religious diplomacy. The WML Secretary General, Abdallah Al-Turki, an influential and conservative member of the Council of the Senior Ulama, was

relieved of his duties after sixteen years of service and replaced by a more moderate and more docile cleric, Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Karim Al-Issa. His mandate has been clear since taking up his position; aiming to convince international partners of the moderate turn of the country's religious credentials, he set out on foreign trips, meetings with religious dignitaries and intellectuals, and intra- and interreligious conferences. Al-Issa advocates a reconciliation of the religious and the national identity of Muslims worldwide, while insisting on the fact that they must respect the laws of their respective countries, whatever their origin. Furthermore, he defends equality among people and respect and tolerance for different cultures and denounces terrorism at every opportunity, while tempting a redefinition of jihad through its "defensive nature", thus maintaining that attacking civilians is overall forbidden, even in Israel (Mouline 2020). The renewed discourse is complemented by high-profile bilateral meetings and events of a clear symbolic nature. Al-Issa has met and signed cooperation agreements with Pope Francis and members of the Pontifical Council (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat 2018), with Patriarch Kyrill of Russia (Arab News 2019), while Christian dignitaries have been received in Riyadh on many occasions. Most notably, he has officially recognized and denounced the abominable crime of the Holocaust, visited the Holocaust museum in Washington in 2018, and participated in commemorations in Auschwitz in early 2020 (Al-Issa 2019). Furthermore, regional and international summits have been organized in recent months and a number of declarations issued, in which Muslim leaders asserted their and their governments' commitment to religious tolerance. Whilst in previous years these summits were organized in various Muslim countries, the back-to-back organisation of the GCC, OIC, and Arab League Summits in Mecca in 2019 is seen as an attempt to reaffirm Saudi authority in Muslim affairs, as well as a "religious outbidding" of competing co-religionists (Sheline 2019). The geopolitical timing of the summitry is telling, as Saudi Arabia was under intense pressure from the Huthis in Yemen, while the GCC rift remained largely unresolved. However, as Qatar was invited to the summits, presenting an image of unity was clearly intended vis-à-vis Iran (Riedel 2019).

Vision 2030 and international Muslim and business summitry thus serve a double strategy: Regionally, positioning Saudi Arabia as the champion of "moderate Islam" would exclude the "extremists" –namely Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and their affiliates- from challenging its hegemonic role and its interests in the Gulf and Middle East region. To further strengthen the anti-Iran front led by the US, this "religiously tolerant" diplomacy was framed as King's Salman desire to consult with his Muslim allies in response to aggression from Iran; most importantly, the new "moderation" adds legitimacy to the rapprochement with the state of Israel (Sheline 2019). Internationally, this strategy promotes a modern and tolerant image to potential Silicon Valley mega-investors, who would finance the futuristic, green energy, robot-run NEOM city at the border with Jordan and Egypt (Tonet and Nasi 2020) and who would be more willing to turn a blind eye to alarming signs of domestic authoritarianism and regional brinkmanship, or, as it has been put in the Jamal Khashoggi case: "the fashioning of an exculpatory fig leaf for an atrocity" (Benjamin 2018).

These observations raise the question of the Saudi perceptions on how Islam should relate to the state as it moves towards a new era of modernity, as Mandeville and Hamid recall (Mandaville and Hamid 2018). In other words, it is worth examining whether Vision 2030 frames the path from a religiously defined state to a politically defined one (Devji 2018). Interestingly, 'Vision 2030' envisages the "Kingdom's leading role and ambitions at the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds" by "strengthening the sense of national belonging", all this within the context of the chapter on National Character Enrichment (Saudi Vision 2017a). Additionally, the Hajj and Omrah Program aims to open up the Hajj by improving services in Mecca and Medina and to boost its tourism industry by promoting "world-class cultural sites" along with recent extensive tourism campaigns (Saudi Vision 2017b). Hence 'Vision 2030' also aims to boost a Saudi national sentiment, whilst expanding the kingdom's "human and social legacy" and "realizing the message of Islam" in its Salafist purity and liberated -in the eyes of MBS- from the dangerous course it has taken after 1979. Louis Blin maintains that the new leadership is outlining a synthesis of nationalism and Salafism as a foundation of a "salafised patriotism", in accordance with modernity and in the service of blocking Iranian

expansionism (Blin 2016). In a more global approach, Mandaville and Hamid also pay attention to the way religious soft power is used by certain states within a context of moving towards a post-liberal or post-Western world order and “how other kinds of ideas and narratives are gaining traction not just within states but in how they conduct themselves abroad. That is not to say that these ideas will necessarily be antithetical to the liberal international order, but rather that it may be increasingly possible—and useful—for countries to put a culturally specific spin on liberal economics and to parse their security interests through religion” (Mandaville and Hamid 2018).

In this light, the moderate Islam that MBS promotes would be one that is more amenable to the renewed perceptions of the Saudi economic model and would voice no opposition to those reforms that seem too Western-like and risk alienating the society from its conservative norms. Interestingly and ironically enough, the first steps MBS has taken with regards to his vision of moderate Islam resemble a “variable” of Wahhabi Islam found in the only other state in the world that follows this doctrine: Qatar. The emirate has managed to maintain its Wahhabi character and keep its decision-making independent from the religious establishment, whilst demonstrating a certain openness towards non-Wahhabi Muslims and non-Muslims overall. As James Dorsey notes, “MBS may be discreetly looking towards Qatar’s direction in dealing with religion, even though he wouldn’t admit it” (2018). However, upending the deeply-rooted relationship with the religious establishment could prove less straight-forward than hoped, whereas moving the country away from its endemic corruption, patronage system, and tribalism may stumble upon opposing interests within the business and royal elite (Takeyh 2017). In his attempt to simultaneously deal with all aspects of potential opposition and clear his way to the throne, MBS has demonstrated a level of authoritarianism that is considered excessive even by Saudi standards. The massive crackdown on activists, moderate intellectuals, and human rights activists points to further contradictions with regards to his professed modernization and moderation plans.

The Council of Senior Ulama, the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia, remained largely unscathed during the sweeping wave of arrests in September 2017, even with respect to hardline clerics who have expressed extreme postures in the past and have openly opposed the reforms. Although the Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh has openly denounced reforms such as the creation of the General Authority for Entertainment, the re-opening of cinemas, and various events as a “depravity” (Ottaway 2018), the core of the official religious establishment has rallied behind MBS’s policy choices, by reversing its own fatwa on women driving and by issuing one condemning Qatar for its links to the Muslim Brotherhood, thus legitimizing the blockade. By refraining from censuring even the most controversial clerics within the official establishment, as long as it provides religious justification for his policies, MBS is ‘underlining the inequality of the relationship but still far from breaking it’ (Ulrichsen and Sheline 2019). A variety of tactics has been used in limiting the outreach of ultraconservative clerics, mainly through blocking social media accounts and tv-appearances, bringing the issuing of fatwas under government control and reminding the religious principle of showing allegiance to the king. As David Ottaway notes, given the extent of the repression, it is hard to assess whether the unease of ultraconservative clerics could translate into outright rebellion in the near future or if they will carry on adapting to yet more change (Ottaway 2018).

The picture is different when it comes to independent clerics and intellectuals, especially within the context of the Sahwa movement. Some clerics have distanced themselves from the Sahwa and have demonstrated an overt support for the crown prince, such as popular figures Aidh al-Qarni and Mohammed al-Arifi; this “repentance”, their regional critics argue, validates the regime’s appropriation of “moderate Islam” and legitimizes the crackdown on any sign of opposition (Raihan 2019). On the other hand, moderate figures who have voiced opposition to the reforms or who have failed to rally behind MBS’s policy choices, namely the blockade against Qatar, were persecuted during the 2017 repression including many Sahwa members (Farouk 2018). The most telling example is moderate cleric Salman al-Awda, an influential figure of transnational Salafism with over 21 million followers on Twitter, well beyond the kingdom. With a long history of cooptation and imprisonment by the Saudi

regime since the 90s, Al-Awda was arrested again in 2017 and has stood trial on numerous charges, yet a decision on the death penalty is still pending, which shows how deeply political the issue is (Freer 2019). Awda's execution would bear a rather important cost. Apart from causing the ire of his supporters and human rights organizations (Amnesty International 2019), the marginalization of the true "moderate" voices would create a vacuum in the uncontrolled sphere of the Internet and social media that more activist Islamist – or jihadi - voices would see as an easy field to fill. Furthermore, an execution would have a negative impact on the image of tolerance that the recent international summitry has attempted to promote (Riedel 2019).

In recent months it has become evident that the main priority of the government is to restore its image and attract investors through the upcoming Saudi Aramco's Initial Public Offering (IPO) and the hosting of the G20 summit at the end of 2020, while toning down tension over regional crises and domestic authoritarianism (Cumming-Bruce 2019). However, the government's aim in advancing its economic and financial plans is not matched by any equally ambitious plan for reforming the religious establishment's role or defining a path towards civil rights, freedom of expression, and pluralism. Recent reforms such as lifting the ban on women driving and significantly curtailing the powers of the notorious religious police, the *mutawa*, were hailed as clear signs of the country's turn towards much-debated moderation and tolerance (AP 2016). In addition, a series of high-profile sporting and entertainment events were organised by the General Authority for Entertainment, aimed at boosting the tourism industry and the crown prince's support base, by attracting thousands of young Saudis. Heavyweight and wrestling competitions, formula E, golfing, and high-profile horse races (Snyder 2019) and multiple-days festivals of pop and electronic music (Nereim 2018) received wide international coverage, despite reports that foreign 'social media "influencers"' were allegedly paid by the kingdom to attend and upload content hailing a "social revolution", while lacking any mention of the Saudi human rights record (Gorman 2019). Although they constitute laudable progress in lingering social issues, these reforms and events point towards a modernization by Gulf standards, thus bringing Saudi Arabia closer to the norms followed in the UAE and Qatar, their own reciprocal human rights records notwithstanding.

To the contrary, as Courtney Freer notes, the crackdown since MBS's taking over "signals once again that political space within Saudi Arabia is likely to continue tightening for the foreseeable future" and that the crown prince has "no intention of changing course" (2019). According to human rights organizations, the crackdown on activists and human and women's rights advocates has intensified (Amnesty International 2017), whilst 179 executions were reported by the authorities during 2019 (Human Rights Watch 2020). The number of Saudi nationals seeking political asylum abroad has increased, while the regime is yet to provide full accountability for the Jamal Khashoggi murder in 2018 (Freer 2019). Attacks on freedom of expression and freedom of the press have drawn intense criticism towards the regime, including the allegation that MBS recently sought to threaten Jeff Bezos, owner of the Washington Post (Kirchgaessner and Nikhita 2020).

Activists, intellectuals and clerics are only some segments of Saudi society that have faced MBS's authoritarian style. In addition, important businessmen and high-profile members of the royal family were also detained in the highly symbolic November 2017 "anti-corruption campaign. They have faced charges of corruption, abuse of power, and money laundering (Doucet 2017), in what is seen as a continuous power grab ahead of the succession, where senior royals concerned with MBS's leadership could raise legitimate rights to the throne (Mabon 2018). Adding to this is the fact that the post of deputy crown prince has not been filled since MBS was promoted. Although any such opposition is unlikely to materialize while King Salman is still alive, observers have underlined the position of 77-year-old Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, King Salman's only surviving full brother and one of the three people in the Allegiance Council who voted against MBS becoming crown prince. Having kept a generally low profile, Prince Ahmed has recently appeared more critical towards the leadership and, according to Reuters sources, has responded to the question of whether he will challenge MBS by saying that "we will cross that bridge when we come to it" (Reuters 2019).

### 3. Conclusions

This paper demonstrated recent shifts in the foreign policy behavior of Saudi Arabia under the pressures brought to the Middle East geopolitical background by the 2011 Arab uprisings and in light of the country's special use of Islam as a foreign policy tool. As it was argued, the current context is mainly driven by a continued balance of power game between Iran and Saudi Arabia and is aggravated by additional factors such as sectarian divisions and intra-Sunni competitions, as well as the US role in various fronts.

Under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, Saudi foreign policy behavior is marked by an abrupt change from cautiousness and reserve towards brinkmanship and a destabilizing effect in the region. While regime security and survival remain the absolute priorities, the "Salman Doctrine" brought a "hard power" character to foreign policy decision-making and foreign policy implementation, as it aimed at swiftly gaining a hegemonic regional role, while containing the threats of Iranian expansionism and the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood both at home and in the wider Gulf.

However, as these foreign policy choices produced considerably negative results for the international image of Saudi Arabia, it was also shown that such excessive belligerence is now contained in favor of a more "moderate" approach, towards diplomacy and multilateralism, though without signaling a return to a foreign policy attitude that resembles the characteristics of defensive realism. In addition, the crown prince has put forward a discourse promoting a return to a "moderate Islam". As contradictory as it sounds for a country that has hardly ever demonstrated moderation in its religious practices at home and abroad, it was shown that the notion of "moderate Islam" is deployed anew as a foreign policy tool to serve a double purpose: On the one hand, it aims to promote an image of openness and tolerance that will strengthen its international image and restore its position as Custodian of the Muslim faith, whilst attracting foreign investment in the kingdom. On the other hand, it will also whitewash recent signs of authoritarianism, while justifying the recent rapprochement with Israel in a common front against Iran, thus strengthening the Saudi role in the Gulf region and beyond.

Finally, this paper reflected on the "moderate Islam" discourse as a foreign policy tool and its relation with domestic developments, namely the 'Vision 2030' program and the potential direction of the kingdom with regards to the sort of Islam to which it aims to adhere. While it is too early to predict whether Saudi Arabia will move towards a Salafi nationalism, the current external discourse on moderation seems in stark contrast with the authoritarian rule that MBS has demonstrated internally. Largely viewed as an attempt to silence any opposition and sideline any potential challenge to his way to the throne, the crackdown on religious, business, and royal figures, human rights activists, and journalists could potentially have a boomerang effect on the international level. Recent social reforms aimed at improving the kingdom's image are viewed as a mere public relations campaign, while opposition to the crown prince's path to the throne may occur from marginalized and discontented members of the royal family or the religious and business elite.

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