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# Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Decision-Making in the Era of Mohammad Bin Salman

Andrew Brown
*Missouri State University*, ab9938s@MissouriState.edu

# SAUDI ARABIA'S NUCLEAR DECISION-MAKING IN THE ERA OF MOHAMMAD BIN SALMAN

A Master's Thesis

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Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Andrew Brown

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## ABSTRACT

Strategic culture plays a crucial role in shaping countries' decision-making in regard to security and foreign policy. In the context of nuclear proliferation, strategic culture can significantly impact a country's willingness to pursue nuclear weapons and how it calculates the risks and benefits of such a decision. This thesis examines Saudi Arabia's decision-making under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), who has brought about significant changes in the country's strategic culture through aggressive top-down reform. While much of Saudi Arabia's traditional strategic culture has remained intact under MBS and his father, King Salman, some elements have shifted dramatically. This raises questions about whether Riyadh's nuclear calculus has or will change. To address these questions, I summarize traditional Saudi Arabian strategic culture and nuclear thought, identify areas of Saudi strategic culture MBS has changed, and analyze whether these changes portend an evolution in Saudi nuclear thought. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on strategic culture and nuclear proliferation and fill a gap in the literature on Saudi Arabia's defense and nuclear decision-making, which has yet to catch up to the country's rapid evolution in recent years.

**KEYWORDS**: strategic culture, foreign policy, national defense, strategy, nuclear proliferation, nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, Mohammad bin Salman

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Approved:

Kerry M. Kartchner, Ph.D., Thesis Committee Chair

Gary L. Geipel, Ph.D., Committee Member

Jonathan D. Trexel, Ph.D., Committee Member

Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

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# INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, situated at the heart of the Arab and Muslim worlds, has over 35 million inhabitants and is an absolute monarchy, governed by Islamic law, and one of the richest counties in the world due to controlling around 17% of the world's petroleum reserves.[1] Saudi Arabia's founding family, the al-Sauds, first established their kingdom in 1744 A.D, twice lost it, and three times revived it. The family-state connection is one of many unique characteristics of Saudi Arabia, which is the only country on earth created by and named after a family. Beyond that, for decades, the country's oil wealth has provided society with a living standard far divorced from its actual productivity. In no country have forces of tradition and modernity clashed and melded more than in Saudi Arabia.

In 2015, the status quo in Saudi Arabia was thrown into flux when King Abdullah succumbed to cancer and his half-brother, Salman, ascended to the throne. Soon after, King Salman empowered his son, Mohammad bin Salman[2], also known as MBS, as the de facto leader of the country. The enigmatic MBS is determined to lead Saudi Arabia into modernity and onto on its perceived rightful pedestal as one of the most influential countries in the world. In 2016, MBS announced Vision 2030, a strategic framework to modernize and diversify Saudi Arabia. Modernization has been quick, vast, and forced on the country in a top-down manner. Today, the country is almost unrecognizable from a few years ago. Even those in neighboring Arab countries cannot comprehend it until they visit themselves. Saudis now find themselves at

[1] "Saudi Arabia facts and figures," Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, 2022, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm.

[2] The term "bin," also sometimes written as "ibn," means "son of." It is part of the patronymic Arabic naming system and is used to communicate fatherly and familial association.

concerts, cinemas, operas, and festivals. Gender-mixing is allowed and women can drive and are not required to be veiled. Stores stay open during prayer times and religious police no longer roam the streets. But not all of the changes have been liberal. The country has also become more autocratic. MBS has shifted the gravity of the country's power to himself, and this shift is strictly enforced. Throughout history, the al-Saud family galvanized a strong coalition of religious clerics, tribes, merchants, and the royal family to maintain peace in Saudi Arabia through consultation and consensus building. Today, MBS and his father have stunted the traditional stakeholders, who now find that their long-established relationships with the monarchy are being renegotiated. This has had a trickle-down effect on broader Saudi culture, including its foreign policy and defense thinking.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how Saudi Arabia, under the de facto leadership of MBS, thinks about nuclear proliferation. This thesis utilizes a strategic culture lens to provide an in-depth exploration of Saudi Arabia, through which key factors in its decision-making process are distilled. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of strategic culture and explains its importance to foreign policy and strategic decision-making. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of Saudi strategic culture prior to the rise of MBS and is structured around key pillars of identity, values, norms, and perceptual lens. Chapter 3 explains the manifestations of Saudi strategic culture, which are a result of its strategic culture. Chapter 4 introduces MBS and details the changes he has implemented in Saudi Arabia, including to its strategic culture. Chapter 5 subsequently assesses if and how these changes will change Saudi Arabia's nuclear thought and the status quo of non-proliferation. Lastly, Chapter 6 summarizes the findings and considers implications for U.S. security policymakers.

# CHAPTER 1

## STRATEGIC CULTURE: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

Strategic culture studies emerged from "national character studies" in the 1940s and continue to develop today.[3] There is no authoritative definition for strategic culture, but this study considers the definition offered by Johnson, Kartchner, and Larsen to be the most complete and accurate one available: "Strategic culture is that set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives."[4] Strategic culture analysis can provide immense value by contextualizing a state's decision-making within the cultural context from which it originates. This is not groundbreaking in the field of cross-cultural psychology but defense studies have lagged behind in applying such concepts. As Adamsky writes, "Anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists agree that culture conditions behavior and thinking style. The latter insight is directly relevant to, but underdiscussed in, security studies."[5]

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[3] Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism," Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, October 31, 2006, https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/stratcult-claus.pdf, 4.

[4] Kerry M. Kartchner, Summary Report of the "Comparative Strategic Culture: Phase II Kickoff Workshop", Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, Washington, D.C., February 13 2006, quoted in Jeffrey Lantis, "Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism," Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, October 31, 2006, https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/stratcult-claus.pdf, 16.

[5] Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2010), Kindle, location 273.

Strategic culture studies seek to fill this gap, with the ultimate goal of facilitating more effective foreign policy and defense decision-making.

**The Value of Cultural Studies**

Contextualizing behavior and decision-making within the appropriate cultural context provides a first level of defense against mirror-imaging, a phenomenon by which an entity incorrectly assumes that another shares its same values, norms, and interpretations of the world. That is, "if I think this way, so must you," which is all too often not the case. The United States has an unfortunate proclivity for mirror-imaging: "Despite vast information resources and exposure to exotic cultures, Americans continue to overemphasize similarity and assume that other social groups have values and aspirations in line with their own."[6] Cultural miscalculations can come at a heavy cost, as the failed U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan show. The need for cultural awareness permeates every level of operations, from the tactical to the strategic. For example, detained Iraqis were often forced into a prostrate position with their heads on the ground, a posture forbidden in Islam except when praying to God.[7] This, understandably, was unforgivably offensive for both detainees and observers. Another misstep, despite its tactical utility, was allowing male soldiers to search Iraqi women, which, as is explained later in this study, violates the honor of a woman's entire family.[8] Cultural violations such as these "can turn

[6] Jeannie L. Johnson and Matthew T. Berrett, "Cultural Topography: A New Research Tool for Intelligence Analysis," *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 55, No. 2:2, https://www.cia.gov/static/Cultural-Topography.pdf, 2.
[7] Anthony P. Arcuri, "The Importance of Cross-Cultural Awareness for Today's Operational Environment," U.S. Army War College, March 30, 2007, http://wohlstadterj.faculty.mjc.edu/Colonel%20Anthony%20Arcuri.pdf, 6.
[8] Rad Malkawi, "Up Close and Personal: Cultural Awareness and Local Interaction as Experienced by U.S. Military Personnel During Deployment Overseas," *American Intelligence Journal* 34:1 (2017): 136, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26497129.

a welcoming population into a hostile mob."[9] On the strategic level, and at the risk of oversimplifying the issue, Sunni tribes were largely excluded from the U.S. plans to rebuild Iraq, which ultimately fomented a Sunni insurgency. This is not to say it would have been easy or even possible to create Sunni-Shi'a-Kurdish cooperation, but rather that cultural analysis might have signaled that empowering a single group would perpetuate Iraq's sectarian divides, not minimize them.

Seemingly small gaps in cultural proficiency can have big impacts. Decades of missteps have unfortunately fomented dislike for the United States across the globe, particularly within the Arab world. Margaret Nydell, a Middle East researcher and Arabic professor, observes, "In the forty years I have been listening to political discussions in Arabic, among Arabs who were talking to one another and not to me, I have never heard resentment expressed about anything American except for foreign policy. Middle Easterners in general care only about American activities that negatively affect their own lives."[10] The strategic culture perspective may not only serve as a buffer against negative outcomes, it can amplify positive ones. Speaking specifically about cultural concepts in defense, Lantis writes, "while the lack of cultural understanding may not be sufficient to cause deterrence failures, defence planners should more openly embrace the theme of variation in instruments and incentive structures associated with deterrence of specific threats."[11] Utilizing cultural studies in defense and foreign policy can create more accurate decision-making inputs, by which outputs will naturally improve.

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[9] Arcuri, "Importance of Cross-Cultural," 6.
[10] Margaret Nydell, *Understanding Arabs: A Contemporary Guide to Arab Society* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2012), Kindle, location 250.
[11] Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture and Tailored Deterrence: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice," *Contemporary Security Policy* 30:3 (December 2009): 479, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260903326677.

Despite the utility of cultural knowledge, it is not a silver bullet. In his 1973 essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," anthropologist Clifford Geertz cautions that cultural analysis can never be considered fully complete:

> The danger that cultural analysis, in search of all-too-deep-lying turtles, will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life—with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men everywhere are contained—and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest, is an ever-present one….To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action—art, religion, ideology, science, law, mortality, common sense—is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of de-emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them. The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said.[12]

This thesis, which is in no way an anthropological study, encourages readers and practitioners to approach strategic culture with the humility expressed by Geertz. Accordingly, this thesis understands that culture does not create or determine hard truths–physical, political, and economic realities–but that it does influence how individuals and societies interpret, justify, and react to them. As Tellis writes, strategic culture practitioners should not try to uncover "specific causal linkages between a country's ideational inheritance and its strategic behaviors—a goal that seems to have eluded even the best theorists of strategic culture thus far. Rather, they offer insights about how the symbolic inheritance and constructs of a nation shape its predispositions and, by extension, color its approach to security competition in international politics."[13] From such a perspective, cultural studies can have great explanatory power and utility.

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[12] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), https://philpapers.org/archive/GEETTD.pdf, 323.

[13] Ashley J. Tellis, "Overview: Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific," in *Understanding Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific*, eds. Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michel Willis, The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016, https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sa16_overview_tellis.pdf, 19.

**Culture 101: The Basics**

Why do Americans shake hands, but Arabs shake hands and also kiss on the cheek? Why is hand-holding between members of the same sex a sign of a romantic relationship in some societies but a sign of friendship in others? Why do Americans arrive to parties on time, but Arabs arrive half an hour or more after the time they are told? These differences all stem from culture. A definition of strategic culture has already been offered, but a definition of culture alone is also necessary. Like strategic culture, there is no one accepted definition. The term, which comes from the Latin root for "to cultivate," is defined by Robert Kohls in this way:

> Culture is an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society… the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does, and makes—its customs, language, material artefacts, and shared systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation.[14]

Offering a different definition, the Hofstede Country Comparison Tool defines culture as "the collective mental programming of the human mind distinguishing one group of people from another."[15] Such definitions suffice, but one can also use the definition of strategic culture offered by Johnson, Kartchner, and Larsen, with a few adjustments, for a similarly comprehensive definition: "…culture is that set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives (both oral and written), that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for [actions and behavior]."[16] All three definitions are wide-reaching, the reason

[14] "Defining Culture," City of Good, n.d., https://cityofgood.sg/community-matters/shaping-culture/defining-culture-in-the-context-of-communities/.
[15] "Country Comparison Tool," Hofstede Insights, accessed August 5, 2023, https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=saudi+arabia*%2Cunited+states.
[16] Kartchner, Summary Report.

being that everything that happens in a society reveals something about it. Holidays reveal shared values and beliefs, art displays cultural emotions and tells stories, and language sets the parameters of thought and governs what can and cannot be expressed. Beyond that, no society has a singular culture and "to reference 'culture' in the singular for any particular polity is typically an error; there is rarely just one internal variety."[17]

Because the concept of culture is so broad and layered, it requires segmentation in order to be useful. One way to do this is with Hofstede's 6D Model. In 1980, Geert Hofstede published *Culture's Consequences: International differences in work-related values*, one of the most-cited social science books of all time, which offered "a parsimonious national culture framework consisting of multiple cultural dimensions."[18] In the years after this work, two additional cultural dimensions were adopted, for a total of six dimensions (hence "6D"), each measured on a 100-point scale:

- Individualism-collectivism: the degree to which individuals, as members of larger groups, feel independent versus interdependent; a high score correlates with individualism and a low score with collectivism
- Power distance: a high score indicates that less powerful members of groups accept and expect unequal power distribution, whereas a low score indicates that such inequality is less accepted
- Uncertainty avoidance: the degree to which a society accepts ambiguity and uncertainty; countries with a high score maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas, whereas countries with a low score are more open to new ideas and processes
- Masculinity-femininity: these terms relate to values, not gender; a masculine-leaning society will prize achievement, competition, and success, whereas a feminine-leaning society will value caring for others and quality of life
- Long term-orientation: low scores in this dimension correlate with normative societies, which abide by time-honored traditions and norms and view social change with suspicion; high scores indicate that a culture encourages thrift and innovation, and sees modern education as a way to prepare for the future

[17] Johnson and Berrett, "Cultural Topography," 4.
[18] Sjoerd Beugelsdijk, Tatiana Kostova, and Kendall Roth, "An Overview of Hofstede-Inspired Country-Level Culture Research in International Business since 2006," *Journal of International Business Studies* 48:1 (2017): 31, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26169989.

- Indulgence: the degree to which people try to control their desires and impulses; weak control ("indulgence") correlates with a high score, while strong control ("restraint") correlates with a low score

Because the dimensions are imagined constructs, there could be many more.[19] Nonetheless, the six dimensions provide a helpful starting point from which to deconstruct culture into manageable and understandable segments. For example, using the Hofstede Country Comparison Tool to compare Saudi Arabia and the United States reveals that the societies are dissimilar in every way except for long-term orientation.[20] According to the tool, Saudi society, in general, accepts power imbalances, is collectivist, values well-being over competition, expects rigid rules (even if they are not followed), prefers tradition to innovation, and does not value leisure as much as work. The United States also highly values tradition, but expects greater egalitarianism and individualism, and values competition over well-being and leisure more than work.

Another model for understanding culture was published by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner in their 1997 book, *Riding the Waves of Culture*. This model divides cultural dimensions into human relationship, time, and environmental categories. The human relationship category includes spectrums of rule universality versus particularism; individualism versus communitarianism; specific versus diffuse orientations; neutral versus affective emotional expression; and achievement versus ascription. The time category includes spectrums of past, present, and future orientation; short-term versus long-term outlook; and sequential versus synchronic time orientation.[21] Some of these dimensions correlate with those in the Hofstede

[19] "The 6-D model of national culture," Geert Hofstede, n.d., https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/.
[20] "Country Comparison Tool," Hofstede Insights, accessed August 5, 2023, https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=saudi+arabia*%2Cunited+states.
[21] "The 7 Dimensions of Culture," Trompenaars Hampden-Turner Consulting, n.d., https://www3.thtconsulting.com/models/7-dimensions-of-culture/.

model, yet use different terminology. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner also compare culture to an onion. At its core are basic assumptions about life, referred to as "implicit culture," with the layers closest to the core representing values and norms. The more outward layers are those of the "explicit culture," such as artifacts and products.[22] This concept serves as a reminder that actions often connect to deeper cultural concepts. For example, in Chapter 4, the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi is contextualized within a deeper cultural context that provides a more sufficient explanation of why Saudi government officials acted so aggressively and brutishly.

Lastly, anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who is credited as the founder of the field of intercultural communication, offers a three-dimensional model of culture. In *Key Concepts: Underlying Structures of Culture*, Hall and co-author Mildred Reed Hall compare culture to a "giant, extraordinarily complex, subtle computer" with programs that "guide the actions and responses of human beings in every walk of life."[23] They argue that culture is essentially communication, which can be divided in (1) words, which "are the medium of business, politics, and diplomacy"; (2) material things, which are "indicators of status and power"; and (3) behavior, which "provides feedback on how other people feel and includes techniques for avoiding confrontation."[24] Elsewhere, Hall argues that differences in culture/communication come down to context, space, and time. Cultures can be high context (communication is indirect and context has heightened importance) or low context (communication is more direct and clear),

[22] Trompenaars Hampden-Turner Consulting, "The 7 Dimensions of Culture."
[23] Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2000), https://www.csun.edu/faculty/sheena.malhotra/Intercultural/Key%20Concepts%20-%20Hall%20and%20Hall%20-%201.pdf?origin=publication_detail, 199.
[24] Hall and Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences,* 199.

have high territoriality (personal space and belongings are of high importance) or low territoriality (the personal space bubble is much smaller), and be monochronic (time is rigid) or polychronic (time is malleable).[25] Similar to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's onion, Hall argues that culture/communication is like an iceberg, in that only a small segment of culture is immediately obvious, while the rest is shrouded beneath the surface.[26] Surface culture includes things like literature, art, and food, while subsurface culture includes communication style, values, concepts of time, beliefs about life and death, and much more.

Cumulatively, the models provided by Hoftstede, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, and Hall provide a comprehensive method for comparing and contrasting different cultures. In this regard, identifying similarities is generally less useful than distilling differences. Rational country actors will share many characteristics with each other, so it is the differences that are most likely to reveal culturally-moored decision-making and actions. According to Johnson, it is "the distinctness of another's strategic culture that we are most interested in – those attributes which are alien enough from our own ways of thinking and doing that we misread, mispredict, or misapply foreign policy in the common global arena."[27] Herein lies the value of multiple models: the more comparison that is possible, the more distinctness that may be noticed.

In a 2017 interview, Hofstede was asked about the relationship between personalities and cultures, to which he responded, "You could compare culture and personality to a jigsaw puzzle and its pieces. A jigsaw puzzle is made of different pieces, just as all personalities within a

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[25] Andreas Kyprianou, "Unlocking Hall's cultural dimensions: the secret to opportunity abroad," Preply Business, July 19, 2022, https://preply.com/en/blog/b2b-hall-cultural-dimensions/.
[26] Rashmi Singanamalli, "Understanding The Iceberg Model of Culture to Drive Organizational Success," Empuls, updated October 3, 2023, https://blog.empuls.io/iceberg-model-of-culture/.
[27] Jeannie L. Johnson, "Strategic Culture: Refining the Theoretical Construct," Defense Threat Reductions Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, October 31, 2006, https://irp.fas.org/agency/dod/dtra/strat-culture.pdf, 10.

culture are different. But all together they make up one particular puzzle and not another puzzle…Societies are made out of individuals and culture makes an imprint on the individuals who are born there."[28] Even as this relationship exists, there may be multiple layers of identities between the individual and society writ large that funnel cultural information up and down. For example, an individual may interpret society-wide trends through the lens of his or her family or peer group. To this end, Jon B. Alterman offers a "pyramid of allegiances" for understanding the traditional social structures in the Arab world, including in Saudi Arabia. The base of the pyramid is the individual and, moving upward, family, clan, tribe, and finally the pyramidion, a ruler or state.[29] Arab culture, of which the above Hofstede Tool's description of Saudi Arabia is a microcosm, is heavily collectivist and Alterman's construct is therefore helpful for Western readers to understand the social ordering of the Arab world, which differs significantly from the more individualist West.

**Making the Leap to Strategic Culture**

The jump from cultural studies to strategic culture studies is not far, because the latter builds upon the former. Just as making the concept of culture useful requires segmentation, using cultural data to reveal insights about a strategic issue requires a framework. Unlike in anthropology, within strategic culture studies, cultural data on its own is not useful; it must be applied. Historian Jiyul Kim asserts that "cultural proficiency at the policy and strategic levels

[28] "Geert Hofstede: A Conversation About Culture," interview by Marianna Pogosyan, *Psychology Today*, February 21, 2017, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/between-cultures/201702/geert-hofstede-conversation-about-culture.
[29] Jon B. Alterman, "Ties That Bind: Family, Tribe, Nation, and the Rise of Arab Individualism," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/ties-bind-family-tribe-nation-and-rise-arab-individualism, 14.

means the ability to consider history, values, ideology, politics, religion, and other cultural dimensions and *assess their potential effect on policy and strategy* [emphasis added]."[30] Strategic cultural studies require operationalizing culture knowledge. Johnson and Berrett offer the a methodology as a way to do this that includes (1) identify the issue of strategic interest; (2) select key actors for focused study; (3) research actors through the INVP; (4) assess the impact of cultural factors on key actors; and (5) develop a tailored set of policy levers.[31] The third step is of special importance because it is when researchers begin evaluating how different cultural influences impact decision-making on a particular issue. This requires assessing culture through four lenses:[32]

- Identity: character traits the group assigns to itself, the reputation it pursues, and individual roles and statuses it designates to members
- Values: material or ideational goods that are honored or that confer increased status to members
- Norms: accepted and expected modes of behavior
- Perceptions: filters through which this group determines 'facts' about others.

Collectively, these are referred to as the "IVNP."

A society's IVNP does not appear out of thin air. Rather, it develops over time and from a number of inputs and sources. Cultures differ because these inputs and sources differ. Lantis notes that sources can be both material and ideational and divides them in physical, political, and social categories. Factors he cites include geography, climate, natural resources, technology, generational change, historical experience, political system, elite beliefs, military organizations,

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[30] Jiyul Kim, "Cultural Dimensions of Strategy and Policy," Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, May 2009, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep11318.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Aad8c52c52f9d3a538335e5e3429111a1&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1, vii.
[31] Johnson and Berrett, "Cultural Topography," 5-7.
[32] Johnson and Berrett, "Cultural Topography," 6.

myths and symbols, and defining texts.[33] Moore similarly discusses sources of strategic culture, adding that geography and historical experience can heavily influence how entities perceive and react to external threats, arguing that "the former Soviet Union's desire for buffer states is a manifestation of her memory."[34] Tellis meanwhile describes sources as macro factors such as environmental, political, social, culture, and institutional factors.[35] Understanding a culture's IVNP provides insight into the present time, but understanding its sources explains why such IVNP exists and how it is likely to evolve.

A society's strategic culture is controlled by "keepers," entities that maintain and transmit shared assumptions and decision rules.[36] Keepers may be individuals, organizations, or institutions, and most often they have influence over the whole of society, or at least large swathes of it. Lantis notes that contemporary works "argue that strategic culture is best characterized as a 'negotiated reality' among elites. Leaders clearly pay respect to deeply held convictions such as multilateralism and historical responsibility, but…they [decide] when and where to consciously move beyond previous boundaries of acceptability in foreign policy behavior."[37] By nature of being *keepers* of strategic cultures, these entities can influence when and how strategic culture is applied. Notably, keepers do not necessarily have to operate in the foreign policy and defense realms to impact them. For example, as is discussed in Chapter 2, one of Saudi Arabia's main strategic culture keepers is its religious community, which has no formal link to these realms.

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[33] Lantis, "Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz," 17.
[34] Russell A. Moore, "Strategic Culture—How It Affects Strategic 'Outputs,'" Marine Corps War College, 1998, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA525913.pdf, 12.
[35] Tellis, "Overview," 13.
[36] Lantis, "Strategic Culture," 19.
[37] Lantis, "Strategic Culture," 20.

As noted earlier in this chapter, there are non-cultural elements that factor into decision-making. This means that belief systems will not always be deterministic in decision-making. On this point, Holsti argues that there are conditions under which strategic culture has greater sway, including highly ambiguous situations that require interpretation, extraordinary situations that go beyond the existing rules and procedures, unanticipated events, and long-range policy planning.[38] Similarly, Kartchner posits that strategic culture plays a greater role in decision-making involving situations that threaten a group's identity, resources, or existence; when there is a strong cultural basis for group identity; when leadership uses cultural symbols to support national aspirations and programs; when there is a high degree of homogeneity in strategic culture; and when historical experience predisposes a group to perceive threats.[39] In any such situations, strategic culture is likely to factor into decision-making more than in normal situations, even if it comes at the expense of practicality.

**Putting It All Together**

The main purpose of this thesis is to understand how Saudi Arabia, under the de facto leadership of MBS, thinks about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Saudi nuclear question is an issue on which strategic culture will have a strong influence, as per the criteria put forth by Holsti and Kartchner (this is discussed in depth in Chapter 3). To understand the question at hand, it is important to first understand the context from which decision-making in Riyadh takes place. The country's stance on nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation is the

[38] Ole Holsti, "Foreign Policy Formation Viewed Cognitively," in *Structure of Decision: The Cognitive Maps of Political Elites*, ed. Robert Axelrod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 18-54.
[39] Kartchner, Summary Report.

result of a complex interplay of cultural influences and stakeholders. Accordingly, Chapter 2 draws on Johnson and Barrett's Cultural Topography methodology, and in particular the IVNP model, to examine Saudi strategic culture and identify factors that Saudi strategic thought.

# CHAPTER 2

# TRADITIONAL SAUDI STRATEGIC CULTURE

This chapter outlines the history of Saudi Arabia and describes its "traditional" strategic culture, which is used here to refer to the country's strategic culture prior to 2016, which is when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman began to gain power and influence. This delineation serves to establish a strategic culture baseline for subsequent analysis of if and how MBS is revising Saudi strategic culture. The analysis in this chapter includes an exploration of sources of Saudi strategic culture, followed by a discussion of cultural data segmented into identity, values, norms, and perceptions (IVNP), which are discussed on both the social and strategic levels. There is often significant overlap between elements of the IVNP because the elements work in a feedback loop to reinforce one another.

## A Brief History of Saudi Arabia

Evidence of human presence on the Arabian peninsula dates back 15,000 to 20,000 years, when bands of hunter-gathers roamed the land and survived off of wild plants and animals.[40] Agricultural practices from Mesopotamia slowly spread to the Middle East and brought with them advances such as domesticated animals and pottery, which made food storage possible, which facilitated more permanent settlements, which ultimately led to language, writing, political systems, art, and architecture.[41] Around 610, according to Islam, the angel Gabriel visited the Prophet Mohammed and delivered revelations to him. Mohammed began preaching these

[40] "History," Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States, n.d., https://www.saudiembassy.net/history.
[41] Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States, "History."

revelations and tribes in the area were inspired to establish an empire based on them, pulling the region out of its state of relative isolation.

Modern Saudi Arabia's destiny became intertwined with Islam, today the world's second-largest religion, in the mid-18th century when preacher Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab was exiled from his hometown in the Najd region of Arabia for his aggressive stance against polytheism (*shirk*).[42] Al-Wahhab believed that people needed to denounce all secular pleasures and return to the austere practices of the earliest Muslims, known as the Salaf.[43] In exile, he found an audience with Muhammad ibn al-Saud, the tribal leader of the nearby Diriyah who would eventually found the first Saudi state. The two shared a vision to unite the tribes of Arabia and return them to a pure practice of Islam.[44] In 1744, al-Wahhab and al-Saud entered into a religio-political pact that stipulated that the Wahhabis would aid the king in battle in exchange for imposition of Wahhabism as the official form of Islam.[45] Although the al-Saud's kingdom collapsed twice, the agreement survived and provided the basis for the three-time re-establishment of the kingdom. This pact persists today and since 1744 has provided the al-Saud with legitimacy to decide "the collective moral ordering of society, from the behavior of individuals, to institutions, to businesses, to the government itself."[46]

In the early 1900s, the al-Saud family capitalized on its partnership with descendants of al-Wahhab descendants to form a new Saudi-Wahhabi state under the rule of Abd al-Aziz ibn

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[42] Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study,* Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1992, http://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/.
[43] Carol E.B. Choksy and Jamsheed K. Choksy, "The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad," *World Affairs* 178:1, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43555279, 25.
[44] "Saudi Arabian Culture," Cultural Atlas, accessed March 3, 2022, https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/saudi-arabian-culture.
[45] Choksy and Choksy, "The Saudi Connection," 26.
[46] Metz, *Saudi Arabia.*

Abd al-Rahman al-Faysal al-Saud, known as Ibn Saud. In 1902, Ibn Saud and his formidable fighters, the *Ikhwan* ("Brothers"), seized the oasis town of Riyadh and declared it their capital. Over the next three decades, Ibn Saud and the Ikhwan went on to conquer the four main regions of Arabia, the Hijaz, Hasa, Najd, and Asir regions. In 1932, the modern-day state emerged when Ibn Saud drew on his family namesake and renamed his lands the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**Sources of Saudi Strategic Culture**

Sources of strategic culture are the roots of a society's common experiences and accepted narratives. Sources of Saudi strategic culture include the history of the Arabs, the religio-political agreement through which the modern state was founded, Salafi Islam, exposed geography, and energy capital.

*The Arab Experience*

Saudi Arabia is at the heart of the Arab world, which has a shared history. Until recently, borders in Arabia did not exist and thus history was not segmented by lines on a map. The Arab world is united by two main features: (1) Islam, as approximately 90% of the Arab world is Muslim, and (2) the Arabic language.[47] Saudi Arabia not only shares these ties with the rest of the Arab world, it is the land from which they, through the original Arab tribes, emerged. In addition to a history of shared bloodlines, religion, and language, today the Arab world also has a collective yearning for the restoration of lost historic greatness.[48] During medieval times, the

[47] Algumzi, "Impact of Islamic Culture," 11.
[48] Dan Schueftan, "Israel's Regional Alliances: Strategic Relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in Historical Perspective," in "Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the New Regional Landscape," ed. Joshua Teitelbaum, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04754.16, 87.

Arabs made rich contributions to philosophy, literature, medicine, architecture, art, mathematics, and the sciences, many of which are unknown or unacknowledged in the West.[49] The Arabs also experienced the *Nahda* ("awakening" or "renaissance"), a period between 1870-1950 that inspired Arab models of nationalism and secularism, Islamic revival, linguistic reform and translation, and the emergence of the Arab novel and new forms of education.[50] The movement was partly a reaction to European colonialism, which exposed the "need for reform and revitalization in the face of European military superiority and the stagnation of the late Ottoman empire."[51] The rich cultural heritage of the Arabs does not reflect in the state of the region today and, for many, the Nahda feels unfinished.

*The Al-Saud Theo-Monarchy*

The political pact between Ibn Saud and al-Wahhab was the seed from which the modern state of Saudi Arabia grew, and it continues to be the heart of the country, in both domestic and regional eyes. Saudi Arabia is a "theo-monarchy," which Al-Atawneh defines as a monarchy "that draws power from long-standing religio-cultural norms."[52] It is impossible to separate religion from culture because Islam is considered a system that should be applied to all aspects of life. Within Islamic thought, a fundamental principle of governance is that sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) is expressed through human authority-holders (*wulat al-umur*) but ultimately

[49] Nydell, *Understanding Arabs,* 621.
[50] Ursula Lindsey, "A Nuanced Account of the Arab Nahda," *Al-Fanar Media,* November 2, 2018, https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2018/11/a-nuanced-account-of-the-arab-nahda/.
[51] Lindsey, "A Nuanced Account."
[52] Muhammad Al-Atawneh, "Is Saudi Arabia a Theocracy? Religion and Governance in Contemporary Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45:5, 2009, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40647150, 722.

belongs to God, the source of all authority.[53] The main authority-holders are religious scholars (*'ulama' al-deen*) and political rulers (*umara'*), who should be obeyed as long as they act in accordance with Islamic law (*shari'a*).[54] Legitimacy, therefore, does not come from elections or popular opinion, but from upholding Islamic social and political order.[55] The Quran is the embodiment of Islamic law and the closest equivalent of a constitution.[56] The shari'a system is Saudi Arabia's only legal system because there is no differentiation between the sacred and the secular and thus no separate civil and religious courts, as in some other Muslim countries.[57] Within this system, governance and religion are inseparable and public administration is a religious act.[58]

Under the religio-political pact, the role of the 'ulama' is to interpret the law while the umara' implement it, as well as rule on issues not covered directly in Islamic law, such as traffic violations. Under this arrangement, the al-Sauds remained in charge of politics, while the religious establishment oversaw culture, society, and religion.[59] Importantly, this gave the al-Sauds the ability, when necessary, to blame lack of reform on the 'ulama', thereby remaining favorable in the eyes of their Saudi subjects. The 'ulama' also play the integral role of calling for obedience to rulers who defend Islam, which Salafist doctrine explicitly demands as long as a

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[53] Al-Atawneh, "Is Saudi Arabia," 725-726.
[54] Henceforth, the paper includes Arabic words that include apostrophes. The apostrophe represents the Arabic letter "ع", which linguistically represents a hard glottal stop.
[55] David Rundell, *Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2020), Kindle edition, 38.
[56] May Darwich, "The Ontological (In)Security of Similarity: Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy," German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07672.
[57] "Legal and Judicial Structure," Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States, n.d., https://www.saudiembassy.net/legal-and-judicial-structure-0.
[58] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 167.
[59] Eman Alhussein, "Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia," European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21640.

ruler does not violate Islamic law.[60] This is a sharp contrast to Islamic revivalists such as the modern-day Muslim Brotherhood, "who have no compunction about openly denouncing rulers or even striving to depose them."[61] In sum, the 'ulama' have reinforced two key political habits that are central to the al-Saud's legitimacy: hereditary political power and absolute submission to rulers.[62]

Insofar as the al-Saud theo-monarchy derives legitimacy from Islam, it also draws from tribal social structures and long-standing cultural norms.[63] Throughout history, the al-Saud's have been intentional about creating alliances, in particular through marriage, with tribes as a means of shoring up power and preserving their rule. During his reign, Ibn Saud married into families with tribal, religious, and political sway, a precedent that was continued by all of his sons and grandsons.[64] The result of generations of this is that the al-Saud family is essentially "a unifying super-tribe, and the only institution that encompasses most of Central Arabia's traditional elites."[65] This is not to say the family is united on all issues, however, and "balancing rival factions and maintaining consensus within the royal family has always been an important part of a Saudi king's job description."[66]

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[60] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 176.
[61] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 39.
[62] Lawrence G. Potter, "Saudi Arabia in Transition," *Great Decisions* (2017): 54, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44215463.
[63] Al-Atawneh, "Is Saudi Arabia," 726.
[64] David Rundell, *Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads*, New York: I.B. Taurus, 2020, Kindle edition, 227.
[65] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 227.
[66] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 227.

*Salafi Islam*[67]

Salafi Islam has been a part of Saudi Arabia's history since the beginning, as mentioned in the previous section. Al-Wahhab, the movement's founder, despised shirk and secular influences, including images, saints, festivals, music, dancing, and socializing, and called for a return to fundamentalism.[68] Salafism interprets the Quran literally and posits that Islamic governments and societies have three objectives: to believe in Allah, to ensure good behavior, and to forbid wrongdoing.[69] It emphasizes behavior, including conformity in dress, prayer, and other activities, as a visible sign of inward faith. As such, "public opinion becomes a regulator of individual behavior."[70] This religious interpretation correlates strongly with Saudi Arabia's well-known and oft-criticized emphasis on public decency and control. As a half of the dual religio-political agreement through which the country was founded, Salafism has impacted nearly every aspect of life in Saudi Arabia, as well as how the country has positioned itself in the broader Muslim world, which accepts its custodianship of Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest cities.

*Exposed and Barren Geography*

Saudi Arabia is the world's largest country without a river and is mostly a harsh, dry, and sandy desert.[71] The geography is both a blessing and a curse. During the time of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish invaders dismissed the inhabitants of Arabia as "savage Bedouins of the

[67] Salafism is sometimes referred to as "Wahhabism" outside of Saudi Arabia. Adherents to Salafi Islam generally disdain the term Wahhabism because Al-Wahhab, the movement's founder, preached against elevating scholars and preachers, including by naming movements after them. As such, "Wahhabism" is sometimes considered derogatory and slur.
[68] Choksy and Choksy, "The Saudi Connection," 25.
[69] Metz, *Saudi Arabia.*
[70] Metz, *Saudi Arabia*.
[71] "Saudi Arabia," Central Intelligence Agency, last modified May 4, 2022, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/saudi-arabia/#introduction.

desert," and understand that geography would be an impediment to their military success in the area: "Troops would have to be sent on sailing ships and marched great distances overland, in terrible heat, with long and vulnerable supply lines."[72] Such logistical challenges remain today, even for Saudi Arabia itself. The geography, as well as the tribal nature of the region, also meant that there were no fixed borders in the peninsula until the 1900s because they were subject to ever-changing power dynamics and tribal alliances.[73] Even today Saudi Arabia's borders are more fluid than definite, and the borders with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, and Yemen remain largely undefined.[74]

*An Energy Superpower*

While the aforementioned sources of strategic culture have existed for hundreds of years, Saudi energy capital is relatively new. Oil was discovered on March 3, 1928, near the city of Dhahran when an American-owned oil well was drilled into what would soon be classified as the world's largest source of petroleum.[75] This discovery changed the course of Saudi Arabia's history and, over the next several decades, made it one of the world's most important energy suppliers. Early on, Saudi Arabia was more a victim of Western powers than a beneficiary of the activity within its borders. In 1949, for example, Aramco, today a public Saudi company that routinely breaks and re-breaks the record for most corporate profit in history, was owned by American companies. That very year, the company made three times the profit of the Saudi

[72] Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2017), 75.
[73] Bader Al-Saif, "Along the Kuwaiti-Saudi Border, Stability Is Built on Flexibility," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2021, https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/03/31/along-kuwaiti-saudi-border-stability-is-built-on-flexibility-pub-84131.
[74] Metz, *Saudi Arabia.*
[75] "Mar 3, 1938 CE: Oil Discovered in Saudi Arabia," National Geographic Society, updated August 8, 2023, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/oil-discovered-saudi-arabia/.

government and, because it was owned by American companies, the United States made more on tax revenue than Saudi Arabia did.[76] Highlighting its uniqueness in the region, Riyadh did not have an anti-colonial rush against Aramco and the Americans. Instead, it sought to maintain the efficiency of its oil industry and the U.S.-Saudi security relationship and thus purchased rather than took Aramco from Chevron and Exxon Mobil.[77]

The reason oil has become a source of strategic culture is that it impacted not just the Saudi economy, but social, political, and human geography as well. A rush of infrastructure, technology, and wealth transformed the traditionally nomadic society into an urban nation. Most of the country's infrastructure was constructed only as recently as the 1970s, but today 80% of the population lives in five major cities.[78] In addition to hastening urbanization, the discovery of oil had the peripheral effect of solidifying Islam as a source of strategic culture. For example, oil revenues resulted in better school systems, which helped forge a more coherent religious identity at a societal level.[79]

In addition to facilitating domestic development, oil also gave the politically featherweight desert kingdom international clout. Today, Riyadh controls the world's second largest oil reserves and is the world's second largest oil producer and biggest oil exporter.[80] Its geopolitical power outstrips its size because it is the only country in the world that cannot just reduce its oil production, but significantly increase it in order to cover naturally or politically created gaps. This is "neither easy nor inexpensive; it is a calculated political policy, not an

[76] Rogan, *The Arabs*, 450.
[77] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 273.
[78] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[79] Alhussein, "Saudi First," 3.
[80] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."

efficiency-driven commercial choice."[81] Because of this, Riyadh has global sway and even the global superpowers must consult with it when trying to accomplish oil-related geopolitical goals.

**Identity**

What does it mean to be Saudi? Traditionally it has meant Sunni Muslim and Arab, in that order: 85-90% of Saudis are Sunni (10-15% are Shia) and 90% are Arab (10% are Afro-Asian).[82] As will be discussed in Chapter 4, there is a new trend toward a nationalist Saudi identity and great tension exists in determining the ordering of these three identities. In addition to these identities, individuals also tend to view themselves through familial and tribal affiliations.

*Keepers of Islam*

Saudis see themselves as the protectors of Islam and the custodians of its two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. Mecca is where the Prophet Mohammad was born, the city Muslims pray toward daily, and where Muslims complete the *hajj*, one of the five pillars of Islam that requires Muslims to journey to the Kaaba at least once in their lifetimes. Medina, meanwhile, is where the Prophet was buried. This religious identity echoes in one of the titles bestowed upon the king, "Keeper of the Two Holy Mosques," as well as in the country's designation as Islam's Holy Land.[83] Prince Khalid Al-Faysal once said that the "Saudi man is different from other individuals, since God had him dwell in the neighborhood of His age-old house to which

[81] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 312.
[82] Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia."
[83] Nydell, *Understanding Arabs,* 3513.

Muslims face five times a day [for prayer]."[84] National myths of old wars reinforce the belief that God protects the country and religion. As one scholar writes, Saudis constantly remind themselves and the world that their country is "the Muslims' qibla [the geographic focus for prayer], the cradle of Islam, the bearer of the banner of Islam, and the defender of the causes of Arabness and of the Muslims in both material and moral terms in all quarters and all lands."[85] The state exists to preserve these identities.

*An Evolving Islamic Identity*

Despite being the heart of the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia's Islamic identity is dynamic, not static. When secular pan-Arabism swept across the region in the 1950s-60s, championed by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Saudi Arabia denounced it and "emphasized the imagery of the pan-Islamic umma [Muslim community] and crowned itself the defender of faith in the region."[86] In 1979, Revolutionary Iran threatened Saudi's uniqueness by adopting a similar pan-Islamic identity, to which Saudi responded by narrowing its identity from pan-Islamist to Sunni Islamist.[87] In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a rival Sunni Islamic movement claiming to represent Sunni Islam, again necessitating a shift in identity. Not only did the Muslim Brotherhood threaten Saudi's regional standing, it also encouraged domestic discontent about the legitimacy of the al-Saud family. In response, the

[84] Mirza Al-Khuwaylidi, "Khalid Al-Faysal yadu al-muthaqqafin 'li-izalat al-dabab' khilal faaliyat suq Ukaz" [Khalid Al-Faysal Calls on the Intellectuals to 'clear away the fog' during the Ukaz Market Ceremonies], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat,* August 13, 2015, http://aawsat.com/node/428986, in Norman Cigar, *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons: How Do Countries Think About the Bomb?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), Kindle version, 18-19.
[85] Norman Cigar, *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons: How Do Countries Think About the Bomb?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), Kindle version, 28.
[86] Darwich, "Ontological (In)Security," 13.
[87] Darwich, "Ontological (In)Security," 13.

kingdom forged "a new, distinctive identity narrative, not only as the sole leader of Sunni Islam in the region, but also as the upholder of a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam."[88] Saudi Arabia's Islamic identity has evolved, intentionally, from pan-Islamist to Sunni Islamist to fundamental Salafist. It continues to evolve today.

*Tribal and Bedouin Roots*

Saudi Arabia has around 60 tribal confederations and estimates of Saudi Arabians who identify with these confederations range from 50% by tribal opponents to 90% by tribal supporters.[89] The lack of a public census on the issue makes the true number unknowable, but the majority of estimates lean toward the higher side. Regardless of the percentage, tribes remain highly influential in Saudi Arabia, and tribal identities permeate society and are a source of personal pride.[90] Historically, tribal identity, which is rooted in kinship, marital relations, and customary law, served as "a powerful force of resistance to colonial powers and contributed to a collective Arab peninsular identity."[91] To understand why tribal identities emerged so powerfully, one must understand that in Arabia, an individual could not survive alone for long. Out of necessity, collective identities superseded individual identities in importance: "The understanding that your relatives would pursue those who had harmed you for the next several generations was once all that protected you and your family from violence…pursuing revenge was not an option, it was an obligation—and those who failed to seek it lost respect because they

[88] Darwich, "Ontological (In)Security," 19.
[89] Norman Cigar, "Tribes, Society and the State in Saudi Arabia: Change and Continuity and the Implications for Security and Stability." *The Maghreb Review* 36:3 (2011): 211-263, https://doi.org/10.1353/tmr.2011.0002.
[90] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[91] Sebastian Maisel, "The New Rise of Tribalism in Saudi Arabia," *Nomadic Peoples* 18:2 (2014): 118, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43123948.

endangered the security of their entire tribe."[92] From a governance perspective, although the state and tribes may seem antithetical, they overlap in a number of social, economic, and political ways. In an act of symbiosis, "the core feature of tribal cohesion, *asabiyah*, is what enabled tribes to gain political weight and state authorities to control unruly tribal groups."[93] Ironically, although they represent the essence of the traditional Saudi identity, modern-day Bedouins are looked down upon by many urban Saudis.[94]

For most modern Saudis, tribal identity has evolved away from a way of life and into a way of behaving. Indeed, "tribe in the Saudi context no longer refers to a lifestyle or occupation, but to a social network of kinship, loyalty and identity."[95] A large reason for this shift is that King Abdulaziz, through marriage and other means, ensured that no one tribe could become too powerful, instead ensuring that power structures flowed ultimately into the al-Saud bloodline. Although some of the tribal functions, including providing housing, education, healthcare, and jobs, were acquired by the al-Sauds and the state, tribal sensitivities were respected. For example, many Saudi elementary schools have less than 100 students, which is inefficient but done to appease tribes, each of which wants its own separate school.[96]

Although territories are no longer claimed, many Saudis still mentally calculate along tribal lines. The invisible divides emerge in certain aspects of life, especially relationships, as well as social, legal, and political spheres. Rarely are there cross-tribal marriages, for example, because a father would never wed his daughter to a stranger.[97] Tribal membership can only be

[92] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 153.
[93] Maisel, "New Rise," 104.
[94] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[95] Maisel, "New Rise," 103.
[96] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 159.
[97] Maisel, "New Rise," 106.

transferred through the father, so even though tribal men may marry out of the tribe, women seldom do. For example, "a tribal man can marry the girl he met in California and their children will still be part of the tribe; if his sister did the same, her children would lose their tribal status. More importantly, she could damage the chances of marriage of her sisters and even female cousins as some tribal men would not want a non-tribal brother-in-law."[98] This view permeates at the state level also, as even today women must submit for approval from the Marriage Department to marry non-Saudis.[99] In some instances, marriages between tribes may serve as a political gesture, as the al-Sauds did many times throughout their history. Elsewhere in the social sphere, tribal affiliation may be advertised, as with Saudi Arabia's three-digit license plate codes that symbolize the tribe of the driver. Just as tribal marriages preserve the tribal safety net, so does this practice, "because who wants to get caught by a Shammari policeman in a stolen Shammari car?"[100] Although the form of tribalism has changed, its purpose has remained the same: to provide a safety net, particularly in times of hardship and need.[101]

**Values**

Saudi Arabia embodies a blend of Islamic, Arab, and Bedouin values, among which there is considerable overlap. Islam defines what is proper and what is not in Saudi Arabia, and it offers "a perfect way of living" that includes behavior and lifestyle.[102] Islamic values include

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[98] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 153.
[99] "Marriage of Saudi Female to Non-Saudi Resident," Government of Saudi Arabia United National Platform, n.d., https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/servicesDirectory/servicedetails/9505/!ut/p/z0/04_Sj9CPykssy0xPLMnMz0vMAfIjo8zivQIsTAwdDQz9LQwNzQwCnS0tXPwMvYwN3A30g1Pz9L30o_ArAppiVOTr7JuuH1WQWJKhm5mXlq8fYWlqYKpfkO0eDgAbvYRn/.
[100] Maisel, "New Rise," 111.
[101] Maisel, "New Rise," 104.
[102] Algumzi, "Impact of Islamic Culture," 180.

piety, charity, cohesion, spreading Islam, and consultation (*shura*).[103] A study comparing Saudi and British moral identities found shared values included respect and honesty, but that the trait that appeared most among Saudis (and was absent from the British sample) was religiousness.[104] In line with Islamic teachings on obeying rulers, Saudi Arabia has a high degree of power distance and is one of the most hierarchical societies in the world.[105] Mainstay Bedouin values include bravery and hospitality, while Arab-Islamic values include loyalty to family, dignity, honor, morality, and social conservatism.[106]

Saudi Arabia is a collectivist society that thinks in terms of "we," not "I."[107] Unlike in the West, Saudi society does not elevate individual moral domains over collective ones. These values are articulated in Article 9 of the Basic Law of Governance, which states, "The family is the nucleus of Saudi Society. Members of the family shall be raised in the Islamic Creed, which demands allegiance and obedience to God, to His Prophet and to the rulers, respect for and obedience to the laws, and love for and pride in the homeland and its glorious history."[108] Article 10 adds that the state's purpose is to promote family bonds and Arab-Islamic values. The Saudi concept of family extends beyond Western conceptions of the nuclear family and includes the extended family, clan, and tribe.

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[103] "Basic Law of Governance," Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States, March 1, 1992, https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance#Chapter%20Three:%20The%20Values%20of%20Saudi%20Society.
[104] Mona AlSheddi, Sophie Russell, and Peter Hegarty, "How does culture shape our moral identity? Moral foundations in Saudi Arabia and Britain," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 50:1 (2020): 38-39, https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2619.
[105] Geert Hofstede, "Country Comparison Tool."
[106] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture"; Nydell, *Understanding Arabs*, 640-645.
[107] Hofstede, "Country Comparison."
[108] Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "Basic Law."

Saudi Arabia is an honor-shame culture. One must always "save face" by behaving, at all times, in a way that creates good impressions on others.[109] Behavior is guided by one's honor (*sharaf*), which is closely tied to personal dignity (*karama*).[110] One must act honorably in order to uphold a positive personal and familial reputation, of which the latter is of greater importance because of society's communal nature. Public dignity and integrity are essential because "if a person is perceived to be dishonourable, their whole family shares the shame…In some cases, a family may feel obliged to shun the member of the household that brought shame upon them in order to clear their family name."[111] The most senior male of the family is ultimately responsible for protecting his family's honor. Fittingly, Saudi culture is patrilineal, meaning that lineage is carried through the father.[112] This reflects in Saudi naming conventions, which include "son of" or "daughter of" followed by the father and grandfather's names, if not several generations more.[113]

Sharaf has its roots in Arab and Bedouin culture and refers to a man's duty to protect his wife, tribe, and village. A man's honor is dynamic—it can be acquired, augmented, diminished, lost, or regained. It can be gained through bravery, generosity, or hospitality, or lost by the lack thereof. Inversely, a woman's honor, known as *ird*, is something she inherently has, and it cannot be augmented, only lost.[114] The loss of a woman's ird is unforgivable and destroys the honor of

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[109] Nydell, *Understanding Arabs,* loc. 601.
[110] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[111] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[112] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
**[113]** "Saudi Arabia: Language, Culture, Customs, and Etiquette," Commisceo Global Consulting, January 1, 2020, https://www.commisceo-global.com/resources/country-guides/saudi-arabia-guide.
[114] Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (Tucson: Recovery Resources Press, 1973), https://www.dte.ir/Portal/file/?342712/The_Arab_Mind_-_Raphael_Patai.pdf, 100.

the men in her family.[115] This relates to another closely held value, protectiveness (*ghayrah*), which refers to the jealousy a man feels for his female family members. It often manifests in a family exercising tight control over daughters and, despite how it appears to outsiders, most Saudis see it as a willingness to do anything for one's female family members.[116] What may seem odd to Western observers is that a woman's honor tends to remain connected to her birth family and tribe, not her husband: "A woman's father and brothers can be more upset about an adulterous affair than her husband because it is their family honor, not the husband's, that she has tarnished. This essentially tribal value has had much to do with Saudi opposition to gender mixing."[117]

Saudi Arabia values religion but not religious freedom. It is unique in the Muslim world because while other countries have certain religious restrictions, such as the prohibition of evangelism, Saudi Arabia fully forbids the public practice of other religions and has no non-Muslim places of worship (this despite the expatriate community accounting for over 30% of the population).[118] Religious intolerance is an off-shoot of Saudi's powerful Islamic identity, as well as a symptom of its obsession with control, which also manifests in press censorship and Internet and social media restrictions. Article 39 of the Saudi Basic Law of Governance relates to the media directly and states that it should "strengthen unity" and that anything that causes "disorder and division" is prohibited.[119] Other regulations allow the government to appoint or remove editors and shut down media organizations, which has created an environment in which there is

[115] Patai, *Arab Mind,* 100.
[116] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[117] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 153.
[118] Nydell, *Understanding Arabs,* 3567; Central Intelligence Agency, "Saudi Arabia."
[119] Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "Basic Law."

both direct censorship and well-understood self-censorship.[120] All of these controls are justified as necessary for the protection of Saudi society.

**Norms**

Values and norms are closely related. Reinforcing the Saudi value of hospitality, for example, is the custom to host visitors for several days, regardless of the resources it takes to accommodate them.[121] Family values are reinforced through reverence for elders, as well as the expectation that children should live with their parents until marriage. Because Saudi culture is patrilocal, a newlywed husband will move into his own apartment within the family building or complex, with his wife joining him to integrate with his family. Men are expected to provide income, safety, and security, while women are expected to be nurturers of the domestic space. It is common for spouses to share economic control and for an expatriate maid to assist with domestic duties.[122]

Saudi Arabia's gender norms have historically been among the most conservative in the world. Women were traditionally excluded from the social space, particularly due to notions of honor and the perceived need for protection by male relatives.[123] The country had a long-standing guardianship system under which women needed permission from a male relative to travel, marry, attend school, and obtain medical care.[124] The mixing of sexes was strictly prohibited in public, and women were expected to be fully covered in an *abaya*, a long robe, and

[120] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 215-216.
[121] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[122] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[123] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[124] Scott Weiner, "Guardianship, Women, and Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, November 2020, https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1334731/download.

a *niqab*, a hair and face veil.[125] Buildings were built with separate entrances and areas to preserve gender separation. The evolution of gender segregation norms correlates with Saudi Arabia's shifting Islamic identity that became increasingly conservative in the mid- and late 1900s. Segregation existed before, but not to the same degree. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, many restrictions on women have lifted in recent years, under MBS's Vision 2030 plan.

Reinforcing family ties and stratification, male relatives gather often for a *majlis*, a family meeting to discuss anything from gossip to serious issues.[126] This norm relates to the principles of consultation (*shura*) and consensus-building (*ijma*).[127] Out of respect, the meeting takes place at the eldest male's home. Women may do this as well, but on a less frequent basis. Family is so central to Saudi culture that Steffen Hertog asserts that in Saudi institutional design, "form follows family."[128] Structures of Saudi's developing institutions were tailored to the royal family's needs, which "consistently loomed larger than other considerations when it came to negotiating institutional change."[129]

The practice of *wasta* is one of the most important aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, as well as the broader Arab world. The concept is difficult to translate due to its culturally dependent context, but the closest Western understanding is akin to a type of socially acceptable nepotism. Algumzi describes it as "the intervention of a patron in favour of someone else, to access benefits and/or resources from a third party."[130] Similarly, Nydell writes, "The designation of

[125] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[126] Cultural Atlas, "Saudi Arabian Culture."
[127] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 236.
[128] Steffen Hertog, "Shaping the Saudi State: Human Agency's Shifting Role in Rentier-State Formation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39:4 (2007): 543, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30069487.
[129] Hertog, "Shaping the Saudi State," 555.
[130] Algumzi, "Impact of Islamic Culture," 54.

one person to act as an intermediary between two other persons is very common in Arab society. Personal influence is helpful in getting decisions made and things done, so people often ask someone with influence to represent them. In Arabic this process is called *wasta.*"[131] It can refer to the act of intervening ("I need wasta") or to the patron ("my wasta"). The concept implies that every member of a family or tribe has a responsibility to afford services and assistance to kin when asked.[132] Often, wasta extends beyond just the family or the tribe. As Algumzi explains, "Wasta can be considered a source of corruption, nepotism, and preference, especially by individuals who ignore or do not have it. For those without it, wasta is a tool that governs decisions without reference to qualifications and merit."[133] In order to understand Saudi Arabia and the Arab world, one must understand that the wasta system is a societal bedrock. The practice encourages loyalty to those who benefit by binding them to their wasta. Within tribal settings, wasta binds tribesmen together and has an element of transactionalism: "If you belong to a tribe, you help your fellow tribesman and expect him to help you…Your actions have consequences. If you do not hire the applicant from your tribe, perhaps no one will show up at your daughter's wedding or your father's funeral."[134] It is utilized for finding jobs, closing business deals, resolving disputes, and myriad other social issues. Wasta becomes an understandable phenomenon when one connects it to Arabia's history, for much of which families and tribes were all that protected individuals from destruction. In this way, wasta reinforces family and tribal values and identities. It also serves to preserve honor, as having an intermediary saves face for both parties in the event that a request is not granted.[135]

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[131] Nydell, *Understanding Arabs,* loc. 769.
[132] Algumzi, "Impact of Islamic Culture," 55.
[133] Algumzi, "Impact of Islamic Culture,"167.
[134] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 155.
[135] Nydell, *Understanding Arabs*, 769.

Internally, Saudi Arabia has traditionally approached governance through the lens of family, with forgiveness and cooperation prioritized when possible. Ibn Saud, the country's founder, was a great example of this. Although the wars and conquests leading to the creation of the state were brutal, Ibn Saud nonetheless showed great restraint with those he wished to rule. He relied heavily upon the principles of shura and ijma to unify his kingdom, and these concepts are to the Saudi state what campaigns and elections are to Western democracies.[136] The Ikhwan had been Ibn Saud's key to successful conquest, but in the late 1920s, Saudi Arabia was changing. As a central government began to form, taxes and restrictions on raids were implemented while, at the same time, technology was introduced and the non-Muslim British appeared to hold some degree of sway over Ibn Saud. Eventually, the increasingly disgruntled Ikhwan revolted: "These zealots of the desert had helped Ibn Saud build up his empire, they had fought for the puritan primitiveness of the desert and their desert faith, they hated cars, wireless and airplanes as inventions of the devil, as anti-religious witchcraft not foreseen by Mohammad and his companions."[137] Their reasons for revolt were not purely puritanical as, for example, motor vehicles threatened their livelihoods as transport camel breeders.[138] Early on, Ibn Saud tried repeatedly to peacefully win over his former allies, demonstrating "patience and forbearance, a wise magnanimity and an astonishing lack of savagery," even convening the Riyadh Conference in 1928 to try to resolve the issue.[139] It was to no avail. Eventually, Ibn Saud felt his hand was forced and crushed his technology-fearing enemies in battle with automatic

[136] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 236.
[137] Hans Kohn, "The Unification of Arabia," *Foreign Affairs* 13:1 (1934): 98, https://doi.org/10.2307/20030644.
[138] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 72.
[139] Kohn, "The Unification of Arabia," 99.

weapons mounted on motor vehicles.[140] As a victor, Ibn Saud showed forgiveness and a desire for reunification. Camels his forces had confiscated were returned, the son of a rebel was appointed keeper of all of his camels, and widows of the Ikhwan received monthly pensions.[141] From Saudi Arabia's inception, a consistent al-Saud norm has been to extend forgiveness to those willing to reconcile and prioritized unity over revenge, yet crush those who refuse to submit.

Many of Saudi Arabia's societal norms reflect in its strategic norms. Saudi Arabia's traditional approach to foreign affairs has been characterized by non-confrontation and discreteness, while simultaneously emphasizing domestic cohesion in the face of threats. Most often, Riyadh has "relied on discretion, proxies, and covert action" and "avoided confrontations and preferred the role of mediator to that of active participant."[142] Henry Kissinger, describing Saudi Arabia's support to the United States during the Cold War, wrote, "Often I found through other channels a helpful Saudi footprint placed so unobtrusively that one gust of wind could erase its traces."[143] In another instance, he wrote that Riyadh was so cautious that it "elevated indirectness into a special art form."[144] Even with its oil wealth established, Saudi Arabia remained docile in the foreign arena and carefully cultivated relationships with most countries. Even with Iran, which since 1979 has been viewed as an existential threat, Riyadh has tread lightly and showed a preference for non-military means such as economic and political sanctions

[140] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 78-81.
[141] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 84.
[142] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 286.
[143] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), 633.
[144] Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 136.

to dissuade Tehran from achieving its goals.[145] This approach appears to reflect Saudi values related to cohesion and consensus building.

**Perceptual Lens**

*The Shi'a Threat*

Since 1979, Saudi Arabia has perceived Iran as its greatest threat. That year, the countries went from competitive friends to foes when Iran experienced the Iranian Revolution and transformed into a fundamentalist Shi'a theocracy. The revolution's leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, turned the movement into revolution meant to expand far beyond the country's borders. Under Khomeini, Iran was "an Islamic Revolution first, and an Islamic Republic second. The revolution did and does not exist to perfect the state; the state—the republic—is simply a means to support and perfect the revolution."[146] Iran claimed to be the true heart of Islam and took up two causes the al-Sauds had, at times, appeared to falter on: support for the Palestinian cause and opposition to Western imperialism. The religious incompatibility between the two is especially clear in the self-ascribed titles of the countries' leaders: "The official title of Iran's Supreme Leader is Guardian of the Muslims, while the Saudi king's title is Servant of the Two Holy Sanctuaries."[147] Beyond religion, Tehran views itself as a prosperous and ancient civilization and only respects similarly ancient civilizations like China, Egypt, and Turkey. It holds little regard for Arab

[145] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 70.
[146] Najat AlSaied, "Sectarianism and ideology: The cases of Iran and Saudi Arabia," Middle East Institute, August 27, 2021, https://www.mei.edu/publications/sectarianism-and-ideology-cases-iran-and-saudi-arabia.
[147] Meir Litvak, "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Religious and Strategic Rivalry" in "Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the New Regional Landscape," edited by Joshua Teitelbaum, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04754.10, 50.

nations like Saudi Arabia that, in its view, only rose to prominence because of oil.[148] The events of 1979 threatened key pillars of the al-Saud's legitimacy and put Iran on a collision course with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Islamic world.

In response to revolutionary Iran, Saudi Arabia evolved its entire religious identity, a tell that it viewed Tehran as an existential threat. Both countries began using religion for soft power, which inflamed dormant differences between the Sunni and Shi'a. Khomeini touted the al-Saud family as "not sufficiently virtuous" to act as custodian of Islam's holiest sites, a sentiment that struck a chord with some in the region.[149] Such rhetoric motivated a Sunni Islamist insurgency group to seize the Grand Mosque of Mecca in November 1979, "in a direct challenge to the House of Saud's leadership in the Holy Land."[150] Iran's criticism had not only emboldened Shi'a Muslims against the al-Sauds, but also competing Sunni voices, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The November 1979 insurgency confirmed Saudi fears that Iran directly threatened it both regionally and domestically. To try and secure its legitimacy, Saudi Arabia went down a path toward fundamentalism. The al-Saud family became more conservative and overtly pious, the religious component of state school curricula was strengthened, and Saudi-funded evangelism became more organized and energetic.[151] Both Saudi Arabia and Iran viewed themselves as the legitimate heart of Islam but were coming from opposite sides of the Islamic spectrum. The identities were irreconcilable.

[148] Author interview with a senior U.S. State Department diplomat stationed in Saudi Arabia who wished to remain anonymous, April 2023.
[149] AlSaied, "Sectarianism and ideology."
[150] AlSaied, "Sectarianism and ideology."
[151] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 328.

In addition to religion, the Saudi-Iran rivalry also revolves around competition over regional order, land and maritime border disputes, and economic tensions over oil prices.[152] Economic issues have proven particularly contentious because Tehran has proven capable of disrupting Saudi economic activities. Religious legitimacy is the cultural core of the al-Saud's legitimacy, while economic provision is the non-cultural core. The traditional Saudi social contract hinged on the al-Sauds economically providing for their subjects. In part because of the country's geographic challenges, Saudi oil and gas infrastructure is especially vulnerable to attacks, a weakness Iran has exploited.[153] In addition, much of Saudi Arabia's oil travels through the Hormuz Strait, one the world's most vital maritime arteries, which Iran has long terrorized, including in an infamous 1988 incident in which Iranian speedboats attacked a Saudi-owned tanker traveling through the Strait, resulting in the severing of diplomatic relations between the two.[154] The always-present threat of Tehran blockading the strait keeps fear alive that Iran can severely hinder both the Saudi and global economies.

Tehran and Riyadh also offer competing political visions for the Middle East. The latter envisions a Westphalian order of sovereign nation-states "in which governments have strong centralized authorities, regardless of the type of government in each country (democratic or autocratic; monarchy or republic)."[155] Meanwhile, Iran envisions "nation-states with weak sovereignty, in which centralized authority is fragile and non-state actors play a prominent

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[152] Litvak, "Iran and Saudi Arabia," 49-50.
[153] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 56.
[154] "Saudi Arabia Breaks Ties with Iran," *Washington Post,* April 26, 1988, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1988/04/27/saudi-arabia-breaks-ties-with-iran/316d8d94-7a2c-471b-abac-bb9dae336206/.
[155] Abdulmajeed Saud Manqarah, "Competing Models in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran," King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, July 22, 2019, http://kfcris.com/en/view/post/220, 5.

role."[156] The two also have different sources of power. Whereas Iran's power originates from purely domestic bases, Saudi Arabia's stems from domestic and economic bases, as well as its security alliance with the United States.[157] Iran has lambasted Riyadh for the latter, in particular for allowing the non-Islamic United States to maintain military bases in the Muslim Holy Land. This is Saudi Arabia's oldest foreign alliance, and it makes it unlikely that Iran could mount a major direct challenge against Saudi Arabia, which is partly why Iran has an affinity for asymmetric warfare. [158,159] Since 2012, Saudi Arabia has spent nearly three times that of any other Arab country on arms imports, while Iran has solidified itself as a military theocracy, building up its forces not out of fear of Saudi Arabia, but of a U.S. invasion a la the 1990 Gulf War and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.[160] Despite deep-rooted tensions between Tehran and Riyadh, they have at times maintained diplomatic relations, but this is not a sign that the fundamental issues of their relationship are being resolved.

*The Jewish Threat*

Saudi Arabia and Israel have a contentious past and have never maintained official diplomatic relations, yet they have long been known to collaborate to mitigate threats emanating

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[156] Manqarah, "Competing Models," 5.
[157] Mohammed Nuruzzaman, "Chasing the Dream: The Salman Doctrine and Saudi Arabia's Bid for Regional Dominance," *Insight Turkey* 21:3 (2019): 50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26776102.
[158] David Ottaway, "Is the U.S.-Saudi Security Alliance in Trouble?" Wilson Center, October 2017, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-us-saudi-security-alliance-trouble.
[159] Anthony H. Cordesman, Max Markusen, and Eric P. Jones, "Saudi Arabia," in "Stability and Instability in the Gulf Region in 2016: A Strategic Net Assessment," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23340.11, 218.
[160] Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Changing Military Dynamics of the Middle East and North Africa," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 26, 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201020_Cordesman_Changing_Security_Dynamics.pdf, 91.

from Iran. Not only have the two countries never directly warred, Saudi Arabia was the country that announced peace initiatives to resolve Arab-Israeli conflicts in both 1981 and 2002.[161] In many ways, their relationship is characterized by the sentiment that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," and the enemy is Iran.[162] Saudi Arabia views Tehran as its greatest threat, while instability between Israel and Palestine is largely fueled by Iran-backed domestic groups and its support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. Although Israel and Saudi Arabia converge on the Iranian issue, "Israel emphasizes the nuclear threat, while Saudi Arabia fears Iran as a regional hegemon and emphasizes Iran's missiles, drones, and support to proxies."[163] A formal, public relationship between the two would endanger the al-Saud's legitimacy both domestically and regionally. For all of the Arab world, the issue of Israel-Palestine is arguably the most galvanizing issue of all time, and "Arabs from Morocco to the Gulf always mention the Palestine issue as one of their top concerns."[164] For its part, Iran has sought to leverage anti-Israel sentiment in the Arab world by claiming that the al-Sauds are descended from a Jewish tribe that fought against the Prophet Mohammad.[165] This claim has been perpetuated in order to insinuate that the al-Saud family has been an enemy of Islam since it began, illustrated further by its openness to cooperation with Israel.

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[161] Elie Podeh, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018," *Middle East Journal* 72:4 (2018): 563, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26933006.
[162] Schueftan, "Israel's Regional Alliances," 92.
[163] Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Israel: Normalization at a Snail's Pace," Institute for National Security Studies, August 15, 2022, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep42591.
[164] Nydell, *Understanding Arabs,* 2690.
[165] Litvak, "Iran and Saudi Arabia," 54.

*Moral Threats*

Saudi Arabia's censorship and control reveal its concern about moral threats from the non-Muslim world. This has traditionally expressed itself in hard prohibitive measures, such as import prohibitions. Prohibited items include adult toys, alcohol, magic games, playing cards and items used for gambling or games of chance, pornography in any form, "any materials that will be offensive for the Muslim Culture," and "items offensive to [the] Saudi Royal family, Saudi politics, habits, culture, or traditions."[166] Public dress codes for both sexes, as well as media censorship, are intended to prevent forbidden (*haram*) influences from perverting Saudi society. As Saudi Arabia progresses with its Vision 2030 initiative, it has begun to open up to the world, yet still maintains stringent controls to prevent what it perceives as moral contamination. Vision 2030 is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

This chapter has provided an overview of the sources of Saudi strategic culture and analyzed it through the IVNP framework. The next chapter builds on this analysis in order to distill the manifestations that result from Saudi strategic culture. Manifestations include the uniquely Saudi approaches to counterterrorism, foreign policy and, of most importance to this thesis, nuclear posture.

[166] "Saudi Arabia Prohibited and Restricted Items," FedEx, accessed March 3, 2022, https://crossborder.fedex.com/us/assets/prohibited-restricted/saudi-arabia/index.shtml.

# CHAPTER 3

# MANIFESTATIONS OF SAUDI STRATEGIC CULTURE

This chapter connects the analysis of Saudi strategic culture in Chapter 2 to actual manifestations of strategic culture. Manifestations may sometimes appear similar to policy, but they are not the same. Unlike policy, which can change frequently, manifestations are enduring modes of thinking and acting.[167] Manifestations of Saudi strategic culture discussed in this chapter include the al-Sauds' approach to counterterrorism and foreign policy. Also provided is a detailed, in-depth exploration of the manifestation most important to this thesis, Saudi Arabia's nuclear thought.

## Counterterrorism

Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism program was born in the aftermath of al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. It is one of the most salient manifestations of Saudi strategic culture. Fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 terrorists were Saudi citizens, influenced by the country's post-1979 turn to fundamentalism. Not only was al-Qaeda targeting the al-Sauds, the group's inroads in Saudi society caused severe strain on the U.S.-Saudi relationship. Criticism of Riyadh was growing in Washington because of extremist elements in public school curricula and the fact that al-Qaeda-affiliated Sunni Salafists were illicitly moving "hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons"

[167] Nayef Al-Rodhan, "Strategic culture and pragmatic national interest," Geneva Centre for Security Policy, July 23, 2015, https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/strategic-culture-and-pragmatic-national-interest.

through the country.[168] Saudi Arabia had a homegrown terrorist problem that would require a homegrown solution.

The solution the al-Sauds came up with was a "very Saudi approach" that outsiders described as "not only successful but highly original."[169] In reality, however, the approach mirrored Ibn Saud's approach to the Ikhwan in the 1930s. Drawing from the deep well of their legitimacy, the al-Sauds confronted al-Qaeda on theological terms, but never politically. The al-Sauds, leaning on shura and ijma as they had done time and time again, operationalized every Saudi stakeholder, most especially the 'ulama' and the tribes. The al-Sauds had observed the mistakes of essentially every other Arab country–Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria–and were committed to not turning the army against their own people. Because al-Qaeda's teachings resonated with many Saudis, the al-Sauds had to win the public opinion war. Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN), then with the Ministry of Security of Affairs, was the mastermind of the program. He went on the offensive, telling his fellow Saudis, "Terrorists stole the most valuable things we have…They took our faith and our children and used them to attack us."[170] He referred to the Saudi terrorists who were killed not as criminals or terrorists, but as victims of an evil ideology, and summed up the purpose of the program: "We try to transform each detainee from a young man who wants to die into a young man who wants to live."[171]

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[168] Choksy and Choksy, "The Saudi Connection," 29; Cordesman, Markusen, and Jones, "Saudi Arabia," 244.
[169] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 266.
[170] Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (New York: Crown, 2020), Kindle edition, 61.
[171] Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (London: Hutchinson, 2009), 257.

Just as Ibn Saud prioritized reunification with the Ikhwan, the Saudi counterterrorism program, while it sanctioned the arrest or killing of active terrorists, went to great lengths to reintegrate radicalized young men back into society. Understanding the need to ensure society stayed on the state's side, the program avoided collective punishment and torture (it had used these methods before), and instead undertook initiatives to "save face" for the rehabilitated men. For example, police officers, rehabilitation center staff, and senior Ministry of Interior staff attended the weddings of rehabilitated men, which the government sometimes funded.[172] Women made up only a sliver of those in the deradicalization program but, in another honor-saving effort, "the women's program was conducted in their respective homes, in the presence of their family members, rather than in prison."[173] Religious re-education was another key element of the program, and respected religious scholars worked with participants to "improve their understanding of Islam—particularly, the concepts of holy war (*jihad*) and excommunication (*takfir*). They stressed that only the head of state can call for *jihad*, and only senior religious scholars can declare someone a *kaffir* or nonbeliever."[174] Tribal sheikhs, meanwhile, were called on to help the government locate wanted tribesmen. The government was careful to never blame the tribes, and sometimes the names of those arrested were not released so as to not embarrass a specific tribe.[175] Once the men were released and out of the government's oversight, their social networks and familial obligations were expected to keep them on the right path.[176] Society was won over, and the program contained al-Qaeda within the country, a feat that had proven

[172] Christopher Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, September 2008, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp97_boucek_saudi_final.pdf, 20.
[173] Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft,'" 21.
[174] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 260.
[175] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 265.
[176] Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft,'" 21.

impossible in many other parts of the world. The government claimed an 80-90% success rate for those who were selected for the program.[177] The program's unique qualities were a result of Saudi strategic culture. In sum, al-Qaeda threatened the stability of Saudi Arabia and the al-Sauds' legitimacy. In response, the family deployed a whole-of-society approach, utilized all key keepers of its strategic culture, leveraged religious legitimization, and leaned on family and tribal values to ensure popular support.

**Foreign Policy**

Another manifestation of Saudi strategic culture is found in its traditional approach to foreign policy, which has been characterized as avoiding direct confrontation and leveraging soft power. Tactically, the al-Sauds have relied on discretion, proxies, and covert action. Accordingly, Hicks describes Saudi strategic behavior as operating in a sub-environment in which it uses discursive power that does not trigger interference, unless that interference is actually desired.[178] Strategically, Riyadh has leveraged three main foreign policy tools: (1) cooperation with the regional superpower (first Britain, currently the United States); (2) manipulation of oil production and revenue; and (3) the use of its status as the leader of the Islamic world.[179] Unlike other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia's independence was "the result not of a struggle against Western powers but, in part, because of an alliance with them."[180] As a result, Saudi Arabia developed a self-confidence (not to be equated with belligerence) in the face of the West. As King Fahd said when considering forging an alliance with the United States

[177] Boucek, "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft,'" 21.
[178] Gareth Hicks, "Saudi Arabia's Strategic Culture," University of Exeter, thesis, https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/127774, 141.
[179] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 286.
[180] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 288.

during the Iran-Iraq war, "We have taken this country from stones and bushes and built it into a nation that has few equals in the world…We have done this through joint ventures with foreigners…The Saudi people have no complexes. We want to cooperate with others."[181] Sometimes to Washington's frustration, Riyadh has cooperated with Beijing and Moscow. Notably, this self-confidence in foreign relations also relates to the value of saving face, which on the strategic level translates into never appearing to make concessions under pressure.

The roots of Saudi Arabia's soft power are both religious and economic. Its capacity to ramp up oil production when needed provides the base of its economic soft power. On the religious front, soft power comes from being the heart of the Islamic world, a position that it is intentional about reinforcing. In the Balkans, for example, Saudi Arabia has fostered support and had a significant cultural impact through the funding of cultural centers that provide Arabic lessons and emphasize religious customs.[182] Even with Iran, Saudi Arabia's greatest threat, it has shown a preference for soft power: "Riyadh has effectively opted against–or been deterred from–taking action against Iran, even when Tehran was organizing sedition amongst Saudi Arabia's own Shiites and making trouble at the pilgrimage."[183] This posturing may be purposeful or perhaps it is a sign of Riyadh's lack of confidence in its hard power capabilities. As to Saudi threat perceptions, "the dominant theme in Saudi efforts to improve relations with China, Iraq, Israel, Russia, the UAE, and the United States has been containing Iran."[184] With Iran and most of Saudi Arabia's other key non-economic issues, the challenge has involved its identity. Hicks

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[181] Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 272.
[182] Arlinda Rrustemi, et al., "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," in "Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans," Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, September 30, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19582.9, 57.
[183] Joshua Teitelbaum, "Saudi-Israeli Relations: Balancing Legitimacy and Security," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, December 17, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04569.
[184] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 389.

summarizes the typical foreign policy cycle in this way: (1) cultural factors are weaponized against the Saudi regime; (2) leadership develops "identity anxiety"; and (3) Riyadh coordinates a response to delegitimize the opponent and emphasize its own unique identity and religious legitimacy among the Umma [Muslim community].[185]

Like the Saudi counterterrorism approach, the Saudi approach to foreign policy is a manifestation of its unique strategic culture. Its preference for non-confrontation stems from values and norms of consensus building and the biggest threats are those that are perceived as challenges to the al-Saud family's legitimacy. The foreign policy tools Riyadh has most often leveraged stem from its historical experience of cooperating with the superpowers of the day and from its religious and economic soft power.

**Saudi Arabia and the Bomb**

Another manifestation of Saudi Arabia's strategic culture is how it approaches issues relating to nuclear weapons. As noted in Chapter 1, there are certain conditions in which strategic culture is expected to be more influential than others. According to Holsti and Kartchner, these conditions include situations that go beyond the ordinary, involve long-range policy planning, and threaten a group's existence or identity.[186] The Saudi nuclear question stretches beyond ordinary policymaking and defense planning. It naturally involves long-range planning because proliferation does not happen overnight, especially in a country like Saudi Arabia that has only a small domestic civilian nuclear program. As has been established, the country has a strong basis for a dominant shared identity and society is highly homogenous, plus

[185] Hicks, "Saudi Arabia's Strategic," 141-142.
[186] Holsti, "Foreign Policy Formation," 18-54; Kartchner, Summary Report.

the Saudi nuclear question revolves around threat perceptions that, in Riyadh's view, threaten the core of its identity and therefore its very existence. As such, strategic culture is likely to have a strong influence on Saudi nuclear thought.

*Theories of Proliferation*

In *Nuclear Logics*, Etel Solingen explores cases of proliferation and non-proliferation in East Asia and the Middle East, which together account for two-thirds of today's known nuclear aspirants. She applies neorealist, neoliberal, constructivist, the democratic peace hypothesis frameworks to each, yet none is able to predict all of the cases accurately due to an overemphasis on state security and underemphasis on domestic economics, politics, and models of political survival.[187] In place of these frameworks, Solingen argues that the cases of proliferation and non-proliferation in East Asia and the Middle East are best explained by models of domestic political survival because leaders "interpret security issues through the prism of their own efforts to accumulate and retain power at home."[188] Outward-facing leaders and ruling coalitions that gain power by advocating for economic growth through international integration have much to lose from nuclearization, while internal-facing leaders and ruling coalitions are less dependent on international connections and may rely on nuclear weapons programs to reinforce nationalism platforms that secure their political survival.[189] For external-facing leaders, nuclearization is not attractive and is costly due to domestic, regional, and international reasons. Inward-facing

[187] Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia & the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), Kindle, 54.
[188] Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, 17.
[189] Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, 17.

leaders, on the other hand, face lower domestic barriers to nuclearization, and in fact may have domestic incentive to do so.

*Regime Survival and Saudi Strategic Culture*

Presently, Saudi Arabia is in the nuclear non-proliferation camp. One of the most authoritative works on Saudi nuclear thought is Norman Cigar's *Saudi Arabia and Nuclear Weapons*, which was published in 2016, before MBS solidified himself as the de facto leader of Saudi Arabia. Cigar ultimately concludes that "if Iran were to continue to develop its nuclear program and achieved a nuclear breakout at whatever time in the future, there is a very strong likelihood that Saudi Arabia would seek to also acquire nuclear weapons….[Non-proliferation] is potentially only temporary and conditional, depending as it does on the key variable of future Iranian conduct."[190] Within Solingen's theory of regime survival, Saudi Arabia's non-proliferation stance makes sense, not because Saudi Arabia, through its oil, is heavily integrated and dependent upon the international economy, but rather because Iran does not yet have nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear Iran threatens Saudi Arabia, but not beyond a threshold that Saudi Arabia's international integration cannot make up for. That calculus could change with a nuclear Tehran. Iran has long been exporting its revolution throughout the Middle East and would only be more emboldened by having nuclear weapons.

Were Tehran to go nuclear, Riyadh's nuclear calculations would likely change for reasons of regime survival. In democratic systems, ruling regimes may change routinely and this may be an accepted reality. In Saudi Arabia it is the opposite. The state exists not for the people, but for the al-Sauds. This reality is enshrined in the narrative that "the very creation of the Saudi

[190] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 212.

state is seen as having been 'a miracle' wrought by the Al Saud family."[191] As established in Chapter 2, the al-Saud regime's survival depends on maintaining legitimacy, which emanates first and foremost from its religious identities and duties, both domestically and within the Umma. Cigar's analysis coalesces with the strategic culture analysis in Chapter 2, and he writes, "In Saudi Arabia's case, legitimacy depends on an aggregate collection of security, economic, religious, and symbolic elements in relation to the existing system, which is embodied in the monarchy, and intersects directly with concrete threats."[192] The country, as the heart of the Arab and Muslim worlds, has an onus to protect them, and the al-Saud's power comes from upholding these duties. Iran is actively vying for this position, as discussed in Chapter 2. Cigar's analysis captures this dynamic, and he argues that "the case of Saudi Arabia, in particular, confirms the significance of the country's identity, political and ideological foundation, and national interests, in shaping threat perceptions, objectives, and policy, and, in particular, in stimulating and legitimizing the need to acquire nuclear weapons."[193]

Public statements made by Saudi leaders support the assertion that Saudi Arabia would seek a nuclear option if Iran proliferated. Prince Turki Al-Faysal has often served as the mouthpiece for communicating Saudi nuclear thought and in 2011 he remarked, "What would be wrong with acquiring a nuclear force to confront the Iranian [nuclear] force if international efforts to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons fail?"[194] Months later, while in discussions with NATO, he expressed Saudi Arabia's bottom line, albeit somewhat cryptically: if Iran went nuclear, it would compel Saudi Arabia "to pursue policies which could lead to untold

[191] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 18-19.
[192] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 23.
[193] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 215.
[194] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 79.

and possibly dramatic consequences."[195] Statements such as these confirm that Saudi nuclear decision-making hinges not necessarily on developments in Riyadh, but in Tehran.

Solingen's analysis stresses the importance of leaders maintaining domestic support for nuclearization. In the case of Tehran going nuclear, this would not be difficult. Most domestic Saudi coalitions would support Saudi nuclearization. According to Cigar, "…the acquisition of nuclear weapons would probably be a popular decision among Saudis in any event, and the government [need] only to crystallize and channel such inchoate support rather than having to create it from scratch."[196] The al-Sauds have a proven track record in corralling support from major Saudi stakeholders, of which the counterterrorism program is a visceral example. The 'ulama' were central to that effort, and they would be central to legitimizing nuclearization as well. Not only could a nuclear deterrent be justified with Quranic decrees, as briefly discussed in Chapter 2, it is likely that the 'ulama' would demand a Sunni bomb to counter a Shi'a bomb. It could be a religious imperative for the Sunni leader of the Islamic world.

At first glance, Cigar's conclusion appears to be incompatible to the theory posited by Solingen. This is not necessarily the case. Saudi Arabia is indeed highly integrated into the global economy and depends on it to secure the economic pillar, which reinforces legitimacy, yet the deeper, longer-existing root of its legitimacy is as the leader of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The latter is likely to outweigh the pull of the former, but only in the last-case scenario in which all non-proliferation efforts have failed and Tehran will imminently or already has acquired nuclear weapons capabilities. In such a situation, Saudi Arabia's economic integration would not hinder it from nuclearization, and could instead serve to insulate it from global backlash. Its

[195] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 79.
[196] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 89.

energy capital and long-standing foreign policy approach of maintaining ties with a plethora of global powers, including those with opposing views, would moderate other countries' responses. It would be nearly impossible to isolate Saudi Arabia because of its global energy importance, as well its status as the leader of the Umma.[197] Saudi Arabia would bet on a muted international reaction in light of Iranian proliferation, and Saudi leaders would call the step necessary in light of both Iranian and Israeli capabilities. It would be framed as a last resort option in light of the international community's failure to meet its obligations to act effectively.[198] This in mind, Cigar's analysis does not disprove Solingen's theory, but rather adds nuance. In the case of a nuclearized Iran, Saudi Arabia's strategic culture would prioritize preservation of identity over economic well-being as most necessary for regime survival. When facing legitimation threats, the al-Sauds have always looked inward, not outward, to secure their power.

*Viability of a Nuclear Umbrella*

Some observers argue that Saudi Arabia has never needed to seek its own nuclear capabilities, and will never need to, because of its alliance with the United States. Such observations are misplaced. Although Riyadh has always sought relationships with international partners, it has never sought full dependence. With the United States in particular, Riyadh has deep reservations about U.S. reliability, despite the enduring relationship. During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia stayed close to the United States. While Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen became Soviet clients at one point or another, "Riyadh did not try to play Moscow off against Washington, never bought Soviet military equipment, and never sent officers for training in the

[197] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 224.
[198] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 223.

'Godless' Soviet Union."[199] Harkening back to the roots of its power, Saudi Arabia also tried to bring the other Muslim countries back to the U.S. side, using religion as the justification. As Prince Bandar bin Sultan explained, "We said 'the Communists are atheists, they do not believe in God and we are fighting them for religious reasons.' We galvanized the Muslim World behind us, which fitted perfectly with a strategy for fighting the Soviet Union in places the United States could not influence as well as we could."[200] Despite this, Saudi Arabia never fully depended on the United States and maintained ties with other global powers, such as a rising China, during that time. In more recent years, Saudi Arabia has maintained ties with Russia as well, turning to Moscow when Washington proves too difficult for it to work with.

The U.S.-Saudi relationship took a negative turn after 9/11. Since then, polls have shown that no more than 7% of Americans have had a "very favorable" view of Saudi Arabia, while no more than 37% have had even a "somewhat favorable" view of the country.[201] Meanwhile, the Saudi view is that the United States has a demonstrated track record of being unreliable. There are grounds for such an opinion. The United States quickly abandoned deposed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak; handed "Iraq to Iran on a golden platter"; refused to uphold the Obama administration's red-line in Syria; and entered into nuclear negotiations with Iran.[202] The Iran nuclear deal was the most explosive issue of all. In addition to pointing out the technical flaws in the deal, Riyadh understood that the deal legitimized Iran as a nuclear state in all but name.[203] Even more damning, the deal came as a relative surprise to the Arab countries and gave

[199] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 292.
[200] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 329.
[201] "Country Ratings," Gallup, n.d., https://news.gallup.com/poll/1624/perceptions-foreign-countries.aspx.
[202] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 65-66.
[203] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 89.

the impression that the United States had no regard for its long-time Gulf allies and showed a preference for the Persian, Shi'a terrorizer of the region.[204] Not only did these decades of U.S. missteps create uncertainty in Riyadh, they also revealed the Saudi pattern of maintaining relationships with other partners as well. During the Iran nuclear negotiations in 2014, for example, Riyadh looked to Moscow to pressure Washington on the deal. In a nutshell, Riyadh is highly unlikely, in the event of Iranian nuclearization, to trust the United States to provide a credible nuclear umbrella. Instead, Saudi Arabia would almost surely pursue its own capabilities.

*Technical Considerations for a Homegrown Nuclear Program*

Strategic culture matters in nuclear decision-making, but so do reality and practicality. These are the so-called hard truths of decision-making. Were Riyadh to pursue nuclear weapons capabilities, how would it go about doing so? Iran has a decades-long head start in nuclear development, and Saudi Arabia's domestic nuclear capacities are by comparison severely underdeveloped. Saudi Arabia has nonetheless sought to strengthen its civilian program, which is viewed as an element of national pride. When controversy arises about the program, Riyadh has been quick to call out Western hypocrisy and state its right to have at least the same level of program as Tehran.[205] Despite some advances, it is unlikely the Saudi domestic program will be capable of proliferation for decades to come.

According to most analyses, the most likely scenario is that Saudi nuclear proliferation would occur by purchase. Bahgat explains that this is the most likely avenue for proliferation because Saudi Arabia has the funding to do so, and purchase would save the Kingdom from

[204] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 190.
[205] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 172.

preemptive strikes on nuclear facilities.[206] Cigar echoes this, writing that "based on history and existing connections, the most likely source for a nuclear weapon would be Pakistan, although additional know-how or technology might also be forthcoming from other countries."[207] Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have a long-standing relationship in the field of nuclear power, plus Saudi Arabia was key to helping Pakistan overcome sanctions following its 1998 nuclear test.[208] Pakistan's willingness to share such technology is not certain and Bahgat notes that "since the dawn of the nuclear age in 1945, experience has shown that nuclear weapons are not for sale."[209] That said, Riyadh has immense influence that makes it at least a possibility.

For a nuclear deterrent to be effective, an effective delivery method is needed. In this regard, the Saudi strategic rocket force and surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) would be integral.[210] In terms of force structure, garnered from Saudi patterns during the Gulf War, command and control would remain in the hands of the al-Saud family, "even if foreign advisers were required to maintain and operate the actual equipment."[211]

*WMD Ethics from a Saudi Religious Perspective*

In the event of proliferation, Saudi Arabia would need a nuclear strategy, but the form this would take remains unknown. Saudi Arabia has never had nuclear weapons so the extent of its strategic values in this regard are unknown. However, the Quran provides standards of civilian immunity, proportionality, and deterrence by which Islamic countries can judge warfare

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[206] Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 60:3 (2006): 441-442, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4330280.
[207] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 91.
[208] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 91.
[209] Bahgat,"Nuclear Proliferation," 442.
[210] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 117.
[211] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 120-121.

and weapons. The elderly, women, children, and noncombatants are to be immune from attacks.[212] In addition, fellow Muslims should not be killed, and the consequences of doing so are harsh: "And whoever kills a believer intentionally, their reward will be Hell—where they will stay indefinitely. Allah will be displeased with them, condemn them, and will prepare for them a tremendous punishment" (4:93).[213] Of note, many Sunnis do not consider Shi'a Muslims to be real Muslims, so this stipulation may not apply. A punishment should also be proportional to the crime, even as patience and forgiveness are blessed by God.[214] Deterrence is mentioned explicitly as well: "Prepare against them what you believers can of military power and cavalry to deter Allah's enemies and your enemies as well as other enemies unknown to you but known to Allah…." (8:60).[215] Most Quranic prohibitions relate to disproportional, offensive actions, yet there is flexibility in determining what constitutes "defensive" action. A number of Saudi religious scholars have published theological pieces on WMD and their publication can be viewed as an implicit acknowledgement of their validity by the government, which itself rarely shares information regarding its nuclear thought. One such scholar is A'id Al-Qarni, who published a legal treatise on WMD, in which he argues that WMD are legitimate weapons for Islamic countries, promotes a strategy of active deterrence, and argues that Islam allows for the first-use of such weapons.[216] He ultimately concludes that "the Muslims' governments must

[212] Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, "Islam and the Bomb: Religious Justification For and Against Nuclear Weapons," Belfer School for Science and International Affairs, January 2011, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/uploads/Islam_and_the_Bomb-Final.pdf, 23.
[213] Quran, 4:93.
[214] Mowatt-Larssen, "Islam and the Bomb," 24.
[215] Quran, 8:60.
[216] Norman Cigar, "A Saudi Cleric's Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction: Integrating Religious Morality and Realpolitik," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 44:3 (Spring 2021): 28-34, https://doi.org/10.1353/jsa.2021.0006.

strive to acquire these weapons [i.e. WMD] or to manufacture them, so that they can safeguard their religion, countries, beliefs, and sovereignty by intimidating their enemies and by deterring the latter from attacking or committing transgressions against them [i.e. the Muslims]."[217] Thus, in Saudi Arabia, Islamic values are interpreted to align with, not prohibit, the acquisition and use of WMD, including nuclear weapons. Further, religious interpretations could facilitate a first-use policy, as some influential Saudi thinkers, such as Islamic scholar A'id Al-Qarni, have argued that preemptive WMD strikes are permissible in some situations, as is escalating a conflict with weapons stronger than what an enemy has used.[218]

At the time of Cigar's analysis, MBS had not yet risen to power and was still only Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince. In the time since, MBS has become the de facto ruler of the country and has implemented aggressive top-down changes that have changed facets of the traditional Saudi strategic culture. Follow-up analysis is needed to determine how these changes will impact the Saudi nuclear case, which for now has been one of non-proliferation. Chapter 4 summarizes MBS's rise to prominence and details how he is changing Saudi strategic culture, while Chapter 5 provides an updated analysis about Saudi nuclear thought based on these changes.

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[217] A'id Al-Qarni, "Al-Hurub al-nawawiya wa'l-kimawiya wa'l-biyulujiya fi al-mizan al-fiqhi" [Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Wars on the Scale of Jurisprudence], *Al-Jundi Al-Muslim [The Muslim Soldier]* 106 (March 2002), http://jmuslim.naseej.com/Detail.asp?InNewsItemID=66247&q=, in Norman Cigar, "A Saudi Cleric's Perspective on Weapons of Mass Destruction: Integrating Religious Morality and Realpolitik," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 44:3 (Spring 2021): 30, https://doi.org/10.1353/jsa.2021.0006.

[218] Al-Qarni, "Al-Hurub al-nawawiya."

# CHAPTER 4

# ONE-MAN EARTHQUAKE: HOW MBS IS CHANGING SAUDI ARABIA

This chapter describes MBS's rise to power and assesses areas of Saudi strategic culture that have changed in the years since he has been in power. In identifying the factors, this chapter also discusses the implications of top-down change and the motivations behind the country's tectonic shifts.

## Arabia's Machiavelli

In January 2015, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud assumed the throne after the death of King Abdullah (2005-2015). As Abdullah's health declined, Salman's position as Crown Prince solidified, but the chain of succession beyond him was still in flux. For months, rumors had swirled that a little-known prince named Mohammed bin Salman, King Salman's low-profile seventh son from his third wife, was in the running. It was not particularly clear to observers why this was, as he was low in the succession chain birth-wise, had no political experience, and was considered a bit brutish, having earned the nickname *Abu Rasasa* ("Father of the Bullet") for his cutthroat business tactics. Regardless, his father had a clear affinity for him. At some point it became clear that King Abdullah's chief of staff, Khalid Al-Tuwaijri, was trying to maneuver MBS out of the ascension process, and one tactic he employed was deflecting anytime MBS called for updates on King Abdullah's health. It came as a surprise then for then-Crown Prince Salman and MBS when King Abdullah died. They hurried to the hospital and met Tuwaijri in the hallway:

> Salman had had enough of the man. He hit the court chief across the face with a slap that rang through the hospital corridor loudly enough to be heard through the wall in the

> waiting room. Tuwaijri knew then that he'd wagered big on trying to marginalize Salman and lost it all. With a slap to the face, the new king and his young son beside him announced the beginning of a new reign unlike anything since the kingdom was a patchwork of fiefdoms raiding each other for camels and food and gold.[219]

This event marked the moment Saudi Arabia's trajectory changed. The country, under King Salman and his son, MBS, would no longer be run the way it had for decades prior.

Soon after ascending to the throne, King Salman appointed MBS as Minister of Defense and, breaking with tradition, Deputy Crown Prince. MBS's ascension as the country's de facto leader continued with his appointments as Crown Prince in 2017 and Prime Minister in 2022. MBS's rise was not about maintaining a certain tribal bloodline–many princes older and more experienced shared the same bloodline. Rather, King Salman made a deliberate decision to replace those princes with one who was "harder-working, more strategic, more willing to shatter traditions, and, at times, more brutal than anyone else—a truly Machiavellian prince."[220] Unlike most of the royal family, MBS, by nature of his birth order, had never studied abroad nor taken childhood vacations outside of the country, as had most of his cousins. Instead, he was steeped in Saudi culture, which ultimately benefited him: "His deep understanding of the kingdom and its society would enable him to successfully execute moves that few thought possible before he pulled them off."[221] In the time since MBS was appointed to his first government position as Minister of Defense, the country no longer looks like the place it did in 2015.

Under King Salman and MBS, Saudi Arabia is undergoing significant economic and social transformation through the implementation of Vision 2030, a comprehensive plan that aims to diversify the country's economy, reduce its reliance on oil, and increase efficiency across

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[219] Bradley Hope and Justin Scheck, *Blood and Oil: Mohammed bin Salman's Ruthless Quest for Global Power* (New York: Hachette Books, 2020), Kindle version, 26.
[220] Hubbard, *MBS,* 356.
[221] Hubbard, *MBS,* 39.

all sectors. MBS has said that he wants the Middle East to become the new Europe during his lifetime and has three objectives to help achieve this: achieve political stability at home, ensure sustainable economic development, and "open the Kingdom to the global system precisely to end Riyadh's relative socio-political isolation."[222] These changes are inherently positive, but nonetheless the country has been marred with controversy since MBS burst onto the scene.

The changes in Saudi Arabia are schizophrenic. It is becoming more liberal, but also more autocratic. Even as women are granted more rights, women's activists are jailed and persecuted. MBS has clamped down aggressively on corruption, yet also allegedly kidnapped then-Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri in 2017 and held him against his will in Saudi Arabia. In 2018, while MBS was courting Silicon Valley to invest in the new Saudi Arabia, a hit squad entered Canada with the intent to murder a Saudi defector.[223] Days later, the brutal murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul shocked the world. A 15-man hit crew from Saudi Arabia lured Khashoggi into the consulate, murdered him, and dissected his body with a bone saw. The world galvanized against MBS, who denied knowing about the plot: "I may bear some guilt, but not because I authorized the heinous act, because I did not, but because I may have caused some of our people to love our kingdom too much and delegated authority in a way that made it too easy for them to think they would be pleasing us by taking matters into their own hands."[224] In MBS's tightly controlled and highly autocratic Saudi

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[222] Joseph A. Kéchichian, "Saudi Arabia in 2030: The Emergence of a New Leadership," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, August 1, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20689.9, 240; "Saudi Crown Prince: The new Europe is the Middle East," *Alarabiya News,* October 24, 2018, https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2018/10/24/Saudi-Crown-Prince-The-new-Europe-is-the-Middle-East.

[223] Samuel Lovett, "Saudi Crown prince sent hit squad to Canada to kill former spy, lawsuit alleges," *The Independent,* August 7, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-crown-prince-mbs-spy-canada-lawsuit-latest-a9658706.html.

[224] Hope and Scheck, *Blood and Oil,* 307.

Arabia, it is essentially impossible that he did not know. Despite his deep knowledge of his own country, facilitated by his childhood, his lack of international experience "gave him weak instincts for how allies, particularly the United States, functioned and thought—a blind spot that would frequently lead him to miscalculate how they would view his riskier gambits."[225]

In the aftermath of the grisly murder, the West coalesced to paint MBS as an unhinged psychopath. According to most accounts, Khashoggi was murdered for his newspaper columns critical of the new Saudi Arabia, which MBS's ego apparently could not handle.[226] Such analysis misses the deeper plot. Khashoggi's grandfather had been King Abdulaziz's private physician, through which he, in an illustration of wasta, facilitated opportunities for family members that made the family rich. As such, "In the eyes of the Al Saud, everything that the Khashoggis had in the world came from them; hence, every member of the Khashoggi family owed the Al Saud their personal loyalty."[227]

At the height of Saudi Arabia's costly and unpopular war with Yemen, Khashoggi moved to a foreign capital to publicly denounce his own government, and in doing so committed the ultimate betrayal of his family, his country, and the al-Sauds. This is not to say the crime was excusable–by no means was it. But it is important to dispel the notion that MBS is nothing but hot-headed and reactive. Such a notion is counterproductive to understanding Saudi Arabia and the trajectory it is on. MBS may be brutal, but he is calculating. For him, Khashoggi's murder, the jailing of activists, and other issues are little more than numbers on charts that needed to be addressed. Surveys conducted by Western firms on behalf of Saudi Arabia highlighted them as "obstacles to Saudi Arabia gaining its foothold in the world—just like the surveys [MBS]

[225] Hubbard, *MBS*, 39.
[226] Hubbard, *MBS*, 361.
[227] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 385.

conducted at the outset that identified perceptions of religious extremism and the lack of women's rights among international audiences."[228] The need to resolve these issues was more about public perceptions than morals, ethics, or international law. This calculated approach becomes all the more apparent when assessing the changes MBS has made to Saudi strategic culture.

Before diving into MBS's impact on Saudi Arabia's strategic culture, it is important to keep one thing in mind: by and large, Saudis love MBS. Sixty-three percent (63%) of Saudis are under the age of thirty and half of them are female, and MBS is betting on this demographic–not necessarily the traditional Saudi stakeholders–being his core of support for decades to come. Appealing to the younger generations, MBS eased restrictions on women, brought entertainment to the country, and fought corruption, including at the highest echelons of society. Even more, Saudi and Arab youth have watched the region descend into chaos over the last few decades, whether due to Iranian subversion or misplaced Western meddling, and MBS has shown a willingness to stand up to both. It is no surprise that one 2018 survey found that 90% of Saudi youth and 60% of Arab youth view MBS as a strong and influential leader who will impact the region for years to come.[229] Capturing the awe of MBS's rise to power, Rundell writes, "The rise of Mohammed bin Salman was as remarkable as it was unexpected. In 2010 he was the unknown younger son of the governor of Riyadh; by 2019 he was arguably the single most prominent leader in the Arab world."[230] Taking an apparent page out of the classic al-Saud playbook, he is "determined to give Saudis a shining, prosperous future, and exercises an unflinching willingness

[228] Hope and Scheck, *Blood and Oil*, 332-333.
[229] Turki Aldakhil, "Why do they love Mohammed bin Salman?" *Alarabiya News*, July 11, 2018, https://english.alarabiya.net/views/news/middle-east/2018/07/11/Why-do-they-love-Mohammed-bin-Salman-.
[230] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 138.

to crush his foes."[231] For those that benefit, he is an inspirational figure leading Saudi Arabia into its rightful place in the geopolitical order.

**Vision 2030**

Vision 2030 serves as the most thorough public enunciation of MBS's aspirations as a leader. Like him, the plan is ambitious, far-reaching, and, in some ways, paradoxical. It is ultimately a way to preserve the rule of the al-Sauds and looks to disruptive social and economic reform as the means to do that.[232] It is a plan for the future, but also a rare acknowledgement that the country has been run incorrectly for decades. The plan has three pillars: (1) maintain the country's position as the "heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds"; (2) position it as a global investment powerhouse; and (3) leverage its strategic location between Asia, Europe, and Africa to become "an epicenter of trade and the gateway to the world."[233] In the preface of the plan, MBS refers to classic elements of Saudi strategic culture. Referencing the religious identity of the country, he writes, "We recognize that Allah the Almighty has bestowed on our lands a gift more precious than oil. Our Kingdom is the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, the most sacred sites on earth, and the direction of the Kaaba (Qibla) to which more than a billion Muslims turn at prayer."[234] He notes the rich oil and mineral resources of the country, and he appeals to the younger generations: "But our real wealth lies in the ambition of our people and the potential of our younger generation. They are our nation's pride and the architects of our future. We will never forget how, under tougher circumstances than today, our nation was forged by collective

[231] Hubbard, *MBS*, 19.
[232] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 399.
[233] "Vision 2030," Vision 2030 for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, April 25, 2016, https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf, 6-7.
[234] Vision 2030 for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia website, "Vision 2030," 6-7.

determination when the late King Abdulaziz Al-Saud–may Allah bless his soul–united the Kingdom."[235] In his parting sentences, he calls to the shared desire for a return to greatness, stating, "Our people will amaze the world again. We are confident about the Kingdom's future. With all the blessings Allah has bestowed on our nation, we cannot help but be optimistic about the decades ahead….The future of the Kingdom, my dear brothers and sisters, is one of huge promise and great potential, God willing."[236]

Vision 2030, which ultimately seeks to secure the main non-cultural pillar of the al-Sauds' legitimacy, is an economic necessity. With the current sole dependency on oil, when oil prices drop, the country's reserves fall and large budget deficits develop. In 2015, for example, the government expected revenues of around $190.7 billion but, due to a drop in oil prices, it only accrued around $162 billion, resulting in an end-of-year deficit that amounted to 15% of GDP.[237] Such instability revealed that reform needs to occur. The country must rebuild its economic base but also balance the financial time pressures with a pace of change that preserves internal stability. In the long-term, economic diversification is necessary to preserve the al-Saud's power and ensure the regime can adequately care for its subjects.

Those unfamiliar with Saudi Arabia might associate Vision 2030 with megaprojects like Neom and Oxagon, but it is far more than that. It contains an astonishing 96 strategic objectives, for which progress is monitored through over 700 key performance indicators.[238] Implementing

[235] Vision 2030 for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia website, "Vision 2030," 6-7.
[236] Vision 2030 for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia website, "Vision 2030," 6-7.
[237] Even, Shmuel and Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: Reducing the Dependency on Oil," Institute for National Security Studies, May 6, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08713, 1.
[238] Stephen Grand and Katherine Wolff, "How is Vision 2030 to Be Implemented?" in "Assessing Saudi Vision 2030: A 2020 Review," Atlantic Council, June 1, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29468.8, 17.

it has required a near-complete rewiring of the Saudi bureaucratic state, which was historically marred by corruption and inefficiency. The government has established a number of new government entities, and ministers have been made responsible for accomplishing the vision's objectives. What is clear from the wide-sweeping change is that "Vision 2030 is a far-reaching, multidimensional effort that touches upon almost every aspect of Saudi life: how citizens learn and work, cultural and entertainment options available to them, the livability of their communities, how they get from place to place, their charitable activities, and exercise habits."[239] The wide scope also reveals the depth of the control the al-Sauds have on the country and its people. Despite the near-absolute power of the al-Saud, the exciting changes being ushered in by Vision 2030 come at the cost of rewriting the traditional Saudi social contract. In doing so, it has the potential to challenge internal stability, particularly if the plan is viewed as a failure in domestic eyes.

Another sector that Vision 2030 touches, albeit less transparently than, say, the entertainment scene, is the defense sector. Vision 2030 calls for localizing the defense industry. In MBS's own words, "Although the Kingdom is the world's third biggest military spender, only 2 percent of this spending is within our Kingdom. The national defense industrial sector is limited to only seven companies and two research centers. Our aim is to localize over 50 percent of military equipment spending by 2030."[240] To accomplish this, a new military industries company, Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI), was established in 2017 through the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF). The wholly government-owned SAMI is divided between four units: air systems, land systems, weapons and missiles, and defense electronics. These four

[239] Grand and Wolff, "How Is Vision 2030," 17.
[240] Vision 2030 for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia website, "Vision 2030," 48.

elements "closely complement the Kingdom's future military requirements and build on existing local capabilities."[241] In addition to establishing SAMI for reasons of national pride and economic thrift (Saudi Arabia's defense spending reached 13% of its GDP in 2015), it was likely established with the long-term goal of diminishing military reliance on the United States, partly due to the deterioration of relations in recent years.[242]

Vision 2030 has been dismissed by many critics as infeasible. What may be missed in some of these critiques is that even if success is not achieved by 2030, the needle is moving in ways that are reverberating around the country and the region. Change is generational, and MBS and his father understand that. In a culture that deeply values tradition over innovation, Vision 2030 is an anomaly. Obviously aware of his own culture, MBS is not seeking revolution, but carefully curated evolution. This realization must underline all analysis of Saudi Arabia today and is key for outside audiences to understand the changes that are occurring.

**Identity Crisis**

Vision 2030 is a bold initiative that has had a trickle-down effect on all of Saudi society, including on the national identity. The traditional Saudi social contract required citizens to pledge loyalty to the al-Sauds and forego political representation in return for subsidized water, energy, and other services, and recusal from paying taxes.[243] This social construct ensured security and stability amidst the harsh conditions of Arabia, but modern economic realities

[241] "Key element of Vision 2030 realized with launch of new Saudi Arabian national defense company," Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund, May 18, 2017, https://www.pif.gov.sa/en/Pages/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsId-142/Key-element-of-Vision-2030-realized-with-launch-of-new-Saudi-Arabian-national-defense-company.
[242] Even and Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia's Vision," 3.
[243] Alhussein, "Saudi First," 4.

require recalculations. Saudi Arabia, as it has been, could not survive long-term in a world plagued by fluctuating oil prices and questions about the sustainability of fossil fuels. Even with oil running plentifully, Saudi Arabia's economic well-being was not always guaranteed. King Saud (1953-1964) is infamous for being forced by the family to relinquish the throne after bankrupting the country.[244] In order to become less oil dependent, Saudi Arabia must simultaneously make its citizens more productive while reducing handouts to them. Because young Saudis have grown up in a prosperous and wealthy nation and know of the traditional social contract from their parents and grandparents, MBS's vision requires a whole-of-society perspective shift. It is not easy to convince others to accept a decrease in benefits, yet MBS, building on the actions of his father and King Abdullah, has put forth a solution: Saudi nationalism.

The emerging Saudi nationalist identity has collided, sometimes loudly, with the country's historically religious identity. While many Saudis describe themselves as "Muslim" above all else, a growing number are beginning to describe themselves as "Saudi" first.[245] Whereas in the past a variety of identities "took priority over state identity in Saudi Arabia, including tribe, religion, ethnic group, city and province," society is moving toward a more primary nationalistic identity.[246] As is a pattern of the al-Saud regime, the changes taking place are not framed as new, but rather the return of the glorious past. Nationalism is not wholly foreign to Saudi Arabia as the Salafist movement contained traces of nationalism—Salafists made a concerted effort to destroy all things of Ottoman Turkish influence, plus early Salafist

[244] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 334.
[245] Mansoor Moaddel, "The Saudi Public Speaks: Religion, Gender, and Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38:1 (2006): 85, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3879795.
[246] Potter, "Saudi Arabia in Transition," 55.

anti-heresy sentiment has provided a long-running basis for conflict with the Arabs' Persian neighbors.[247] In more recent times, King Abdullah can be credited with planting the seed for Saudi nationalism with policies he enacted and which Vision 2030 builds on.[248]

The Saudi nationalist wave is intended to create a sense of pride among youth and make them more willing to accept benefit reductions and start contributing to the economy. While loyalty to the state is still demanded and political representation is foregone, the government is offering social carrots as incentive. The most notable examples of these carrots include women being allowed to drive and work outside of the home, the opening of cinemas and other types of entertainment venues, and development of the tourism industry. These reforms would appear to signal that Saudi Arabia is becoming more liberal, but aggressive repression of social and political dissent and criticism has also risen in recent years. This is because Vision 2030, carrots, sticks, and all, is not intended to make the country more liberal or democratic, but rather to preserve the al-Saud dynasty and build support for MBS. According to Alhussein, "The core purpose of the nationalist drive is to corral support around Mohammed bin Salman; the form it takes is a heightened demand for adherence to the Saudi state over any religious affiliation."[249] Because MBS's Vision 2030 is incompatible with a purely sectarian identity, a new one is being forged.[250] This is not unprecedented, however, as after Saudi Arabia was established in 1932, religious nationalism was used to keep the country from splintering.[251] Just as religious identity has been transformed as needed, so too has nationalism.

[247] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 40-41.
[248] Alhussein, "Saudi First," 4.
[249] Alhussein, "Saudi First," 6.
[250] AlSaied, "Sectarianism."
[251] AlSaied, "Sectarianism."

Illustrating that reform is not occurring for benevolent reasons, there is an unprecedented climate of fear among any group caught in disagreement with King Salman and MBS. "MBS's critics–not regicidal zealots or al-Qaeda sympathizers, just ordinary people with independent thoughts about his reforms–have gone into exile."[252] Similarly, the expansion of women's rights in the country is not inherently about rights and progress, but rather because Vision 2030 can only succeed if women are socially and economically active.[253] King Salman and MBS are by no means trying to make Saudi Arabia more democratic, but rather more economically stable and prosperous as a means of maintaining the family dynasty. One women's activist pondered why she had been jailed for calling for the same reforms being implemented by MBS, and the answer is clear: "In Mohammed's Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, reforms could only come from the top, lest citizens come to believe they could obtain their rights through protest or openly criticize the royal family. For all his liberal views, Mohammed was in general agreement with his uncles, aunts, brothers, and cousins on one thing: It was best for the Al Saud to run things."[254]

Despite crackdowns on dissent, by shifting the Saudi identity, King Salman and MBS are now more accountable to Saudi society and can no longer put blame on the religious establishment as they traditionally have. As Saudi Arabia takes on "an increasingly hyper-nationalist tone and form, the state will need to find ways to ensure that no one uses its weapon of choice against it."[255] Time will tell how effectively Riyadh is able to do this. While some form

[252] Graeme Wood, "Inside the Palace with Mohammad bin Salman," *The Atlantic*, March 3, 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/.
[253] Potter, "Saudi Arabia in Transition," 57.
[254] Hope and Scheck, "Blood and Oil," 279.
[255] Alhussein, "Saudi First," 16-17.

of nationalist identity has always existed in Saudi Arabia, it was never touted as the most important identity, as it is today.

**Culling the Keepers**

*Tribes*

As explained in Chapter 2, most Saudis are ethnic Arabs descended from Bedouins. Tribal affiliation historically contributed to a collective Arab peninsular identity. King Abdulaziz smartly divided tribes, marginalized hereditary paramount sheikhs, and married tribal women in order to ensure that his family became "the one national institution to which many tribes belonged and to which all could eventually express loyalty without a complete loss of their own status."[256] Of all the competing keepers of strategic culture, MBS has meddled the least with the tribes because other factors have eroded their influence naturally. One factor has been rural-urban migration (in 1950, around 50% of Saudi's lived in tents whereas today 85% live in towns and cities[257]). Other factors include government-provided security, prosperity, and education, which have largely surpassed the capabilities of tribal safety nets. These changes have not necessarily stemmed from the al-Sauds directly, but rather from the country's energy capital. Tribal power has declined not only in Saudi Arabia, but in the Arab world in general as well. One region-wide study concluded that the shift is partly due to rising individualism; economic austerity, which makes it harder for individual tribes to secure resources needed to garner loyalty; and shifting state ambitions in the form of intentional efforts to supplant tribal influence with state influence.[258] Of note, however, another study found that in certain Middle Eastern

[256] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 158.
[257] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 63.
[258] Alterman, "Ties That Bind," 5-6.

contexts—namely in Iraq, Yemen, and Libya—tribalism has surged, indicating that tribal identities reduce in functioning states, but increase when regimes and hierarchies cease to be stable.[259] This same study acknowledges that tribal identities and affiliations are evolving, but they are nonetheless important to Saudi Arabians. Although tribes no longer provide the security or economic benefits they did in the past, they nonetheless are still an important part of Saudi society, at least for social and cultural reasons. As long as tribes are still respected, have security, and receive financial benefits, they have little reason to challenge MBS.[260]

*The 'Ulama'*

While the power of Saudi tribes has naturally ebbed, King Salman and MBS have been more intentional about restricting the power and influence of the 'ulama'. The religious establishment has always been viewed as the al-Saud family's biggest internal threat, even while serving as its key legitimizer. For Vision 2030 to succeed, significant cultural and social changes must occur, and thus there was a need for the family to recalibrate its relationship with the 'ulama'. An underpublicized aspect of Vision 2030 is the review and certification of hadiths, which, in context, is essentially a review of Salafism. Through Vision 2030, King Salman and MBS have reinforced that "Muslim rulers were meant to exercise power, while religious scholars were meant to advise"[261] They have made this clear in a number of ways, most notably by stripping away the power of the once-formidable religious police, formally known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. With a single royal decree issued in April 2016, the religious establishment lost its biggest source of social and cultural

[259] Maisel, "New Rise," 100–22.
[260] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 162-163.
[261] Kéchichian, "Saudi Arabia in 2030," 62.

power, which "defanged the clerics, clearing the way for vast changes they most certainly would have opposed."[262] Soon after the decree, wide-sweeping changes were implemented, including requiring the call to prayer be broadcast across cities at lower volumes and allowing shops and restaurants to remain open during prayer times. These decisions prompted backlash from the 'ulama', who were quickly silenced, often through arrest. Even Saudi's most popular clerics could not escape punishment. In September 2017, Salman al-Awda was arrested a few days after tweeting about the Saudi-led boycott of Qatar, in which he said, "…may God harmonize between their hearts for the good of their people" in an apparent call for reconciliation.[263] Even this was considered out of line and he was arrested soon after and his family members were hit with arbitrary travel bans. He remains in prison today and is being tried for the death penalty on charges alleging ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and support for imprisoned dissidents.[264]

To be clear, MBS and his father have not tried to destroy the religious establishment nor the religious basis of their country, but rather have reigned it in after decades of it exercising what is now seen as too much control over Saudi society. Saudi Arabia remains deeply Islamic and the al-Saud family still draws legitimization from the 'ulama', yet it has made it unmistakably clear that they are the senior partners in the relationship. With the 'ulama' in particular, MBS has the advantage of Salafism on this side, which requires that he be obeyed as long as he does not hinder the practice of Islam.[265]

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[262] Hubbard, *MBS*, 94.
[263] "Saudi Arabia: Cleric Held 4 Months Without Charge," Human Rights Watch, January 7, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/07/saudi-arabia-cleric-held-4-months-without-charge.
[264] "Saudi Arabia: Events of 2021," Human Rights Watch, n.d., https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/saudi-arabia.
[265] Hubbard, *MBS,* 279.

*The Family*

Perhaps the most shocking culling has been MBS's aggressive consolidation of power within his own family, which has subverted established family norms. In a significant departure from tradition, which called for family disputes to be peaceful and private, King Salman and MBS have shown a willingness to use force against family members who oppose them, as well as to publicly shame and discredit them.[266] Considering Saudi Arabia's honor-shame culture, the latter is particularly surprising. The most striking example is the 2017 incident at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh, where hundreds of influential Saudis were detained for months until agreeing to pay back billions in illicitly acquired assets. The sweeping anti-corruption campaign, headed by MBS, targeted influential Saudis, including members of the royal family (but no tribal leaders), and served two purposes: it shored up MBS's power by eliminating potential rivals, while also bolstering his popularity among the Saudi public, which had long been a victim of the elite's corruption:

> The aggressive Ritz move, later called the "sheikhdown" by many in the West, was the moment when Mohammed placed a bundle of dynamite on the status quo and blasted it to smithereens. By the time the detritus was swept away, he controlled all branches of the military, the police, the intelligence agencies, and all government ministries and held controlling stakes in many of the country's largest businesses through government holding companies. He wasn't the king, but he was one of the most powerful men on earth.[267]

Under MBS's leadership, the consensus-driven, power-sharing structure of the al-Saud family has been dismantled and replaced by deference to a young crown prince who has solidified his position through a mix of patronage and fear.[268]

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[266] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 43.
[267] Hope and Scheck, *Blood and Oil*, 9.
[268] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 242.

Regardless of blood, no one in the al-Saud family is safe from MBS. Most princes have lost both their sense of immunity and entitlement: "One was executed for murder, another jailed for mistreating his servants, and others lost widely publicized court cases. Royal bank accounts have been frozen… Most princes must now go through customs at the airport, some have had their right to travel limited, and others have left the country altogether."[269] MBS is even alleged to have imprisoned his own mother, Princess Fahda bint Falah Al Hathleen, for two years to keep her away from his father as insurance for his power grab.[270] Because MBS is seeking to solidify his position, those with the most power are in the most danger, as the case of Mohammed bin Nayef (MBN) shows. MBN spearheaded Saudi's counterterrorism program, through which the U.S.-Saudi relationship was salvaged in the aftermath of 9/11. His efforts earned him awards from the United States and France and also put him in al-Qaeda's crosshairs. The group targeted him four times, the closest call occurring in 2009 when he sustained psychological and physical injuries that left him on painkillers for life.[271] MBN was well-respected domestically and internationally and was appointed Crown Prince when King Salman first took the throne. This natural transition was expected to hold indefinitely, but it became clear early on that MBS was looking to subvert MBN, and in particular to damage his close relationship with Washington. Near the end of Ramadan 2017, MBN received a call to go to a palace and after hours of waiting,

[269] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 240-241.
[270] David Brennan, "Saudi Crown Prince Is Hiding His Mother From His Father To Safeguard Power Grab, U.S. Officials Say," *Newsweek*, March 15, 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-crown-prince-hiding-his-mother-his-father-safeguard-power-grab-us-846179.
[271] Bruce Riedel, "The case of Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Nayef," Brookings Institution, February 12, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-case-of-saudi-arabias-mohammed-bin-nayef/.

was told he was resigning as Crown Prince. He refused at first, but after being held all night without his medication, he acquiesced:

> Mohammed's men finally led him out of the waiting room at about 7 a.m. MBN expected to make his resignation formal later that day. But as he was led through the palace hall, a door opened. Suddenly he was surrounded by flashing cameras. A guard stood with his hand on his gun, a violation of protocol around the crown prince. And there, lurching toward him, was Mohammed bin Salman, whose deputy Saud al-Qahtani was filming. Mohammed kissed his older cousin, who mumbled a pledge of loyalty. "Now I will rest, and you, God help you," MBN said.[272]

In 2020, MBN was arrested on charges of treason and has been held incommunicado ever since, despite not facing any known legal proceedings.[273] In MBS's Saudi Arabia, no one, not even the most powerful with his own family, can challenge him and the path he has set for the country. Although the exact degree of influence the ailing King Salman has over MBS remains unclear, what is clear is that "the al-Sauds" no longer refers to a whole family, but rather one or two men. Very likely, MBS is Saudi Arabia's sole keeper. In order for his Vision 2030 to succeed, he needs the power to chart the direction of the country without interference. At the same time, his plan requires empowering new stakeholders, like technocrats and civil servants, to the same level as tribal leaders, princes, and religious scholars. Accordingly, the latter have been tightly controlled to ensure they cannot intervene.

**Aggression: A Phase or the New Norm?**

As described in earlier sections, Saudi Arabia has grown more authoritarian and autocratic under MBS. In years past, Saudi Arabia often approached governance with a priority on consensus building and cooperation. In contrast, MBS has introduced a more fear-based style.

[272] Hope and Sheck, *Blood and Oil*, 197.
[273] Riedel, "The case of Saudi Arabia's."

Dissenters are silenced and treated harshly, and even in the Ritz-Carlton detentions there were allegations of abuse, including one alleged death by torture.[274] The brutal murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul was not only an anomalous act of total aggression, but also a severe violation of international norms. In the last few years, somewhat ironically considering the reforms in the country, "many Saudis have come to fear their own government more than al-Qaeda terrorists. Saudi Arabia was never an open society, but it was not a police state. Now the highly sophisticated technical apparatus installed to thwart al-Qaeda has been turned on peaceful citizens."[275] While many norms have changed, some elements of the classic al-Saud playbook have persisted, including the pattern of appointing the family member of a disgraced person, as Ibn Saud did by appointing the son of an Ikhwan revolter to oversee the family's camels. Similarly, MBS appointed a man named Rakan Tobaishi as his protocol chief, who subsequently escorted his own father to the Ritz Carlton during the anti-corruption operation, where the father was relieved of his $100 million ranch, his horse farm, and millions more in cash.[276]

Just as there has been an uptick in internal aggression under MBS, the days of "unobtrusive" Saudi foreign policy, as Kissinger once reiterated, are gone. Under King Salman and MBS, Saudi Arabia appears to have adopted a new norm of using force and strong-arm techniques to achieve foreign policy objectives. This hawkish posture, referred to as the "Salman Doctrine," is characterized by a reliance on force, not on backdoor negotiations and financial leverage. The doctrine was originally driven by a range of objectives, including "the removal of Iran's ally Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power, an outright denial to Iran's nuclear

[274] Hubbard, *MBS*, 258.
[275] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage*, 267.
[276] Hope and Scheck, *Blood and Oil*, 228.

ambitions, the destruction of the Iran-supported Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, and Yemeni Shia militia groups, and the elimination of the ISIS."[277] To date, none of these objectives have been achieved. During this era, Saudi leadership has become more diplomatically assertive, as demonstrated by Riyadh repatriating all its students studying in Canada and expelling the Canadian ambassador in 2018 over tweets from the Canadian government calling for the release of jailed Saudi human rights activists.[278]

Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen is perhaps the best example of the Salman Doctrine. Saudi-Iranian tensions have played out through a proxy struggle in Yemen for decades but escalated in 2015 when Iran-backed Houthi rebels took control of Sana'a. Saudi Arabia, with MBS as Minister of Defense, responded in March 2015 by launching Operation Decisive Storm. The operation, far from being decisive, resulted in a prolonged stalemate and became one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern times. Iran continues to supply the Houthis with materiel and financial support, and the militia threatens not only Riyadh, but also its Gulf neighbors and the security of the Red Sea, which handles upwards of 10% of global trade.[279] While Riyadh is directly engaged in the conflict, Iran provides indirect proxy support to the Houthi rebels, which it sees not as strategic allies, but "the least costly, yet the closest, middle finger that could be raised against Saudi Arabia from its own backyard."[280] The Houthis have gained capabilities like anti-shipping missiles, sea mines, and self-guided explosive boats, and terrorist activity escalated so much in 2018 that Saudi Arabia had to temporarily halt shipments in the waterway.[281]

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[277] Nuruzzaman, "Chasing the Dream," 46.
[278] Hubbard, *MBS,* 188.
[279] Hannah Kuperman, "Threats and Challenges to Trade in the Red Sea: Should Europe Be Concerned?" *Manara Magazine,* May 18, 2023, https://manaramagazine.org/2023/05/europe-trade-in-the-red-sea/.
[280] Al-Muslimi, "Iran's Role in Yemen."
[281] Abdullah Al-Saud and Joseph Kéchichian, "The Evolving Security Landscape Around the

There are two ways to interpret the Saudi decision to go to war in Yemen. "The popular view that 30-year-old Mohammed bin Salman recklessly took his country to war and that ten sovereign states, including Britain and the United States, blithely followed him, is a misreading of history. King Salman made the decision in order to stop the 'Hezbollahization' of Yemen."[282] It may be that there is validity in both interpretations but, regardless, the war was a demonstration of Riyadh's growing military confidence. Another example of the Salman Doctrine is the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar from 2017-2021, which was a response to Qatar's alleged support for terrorism and the country being too friendly with Iran in the eyes of its Gulf neighbors.

All these examples in mind, it is not yet clear if this aggressive new posture is a phase and Riyadh will eventually correct course, or if it will be an enduring manifestation. MBS has a demonstrated weak spot of misunderstanding the international community, and it is possible that as he matures as a leader, he will rein in his foreign policy. Equally possible, however, is that this aggression stems from MBS's aggressive goals for his country and his unwavering belief that Saudi Arabia belongs in the upper echelons of the global order. If the latter, MBS's positions as the de facto leader of Saudi Arabia and the sole keeper of its strategic culture will solidify the emerging aggression as an enduring pattern of behavior.

**Washington Wanes, Beijing Rises**

Although the U.S.-Saudi relationship was resuscitated briefly under the Trump Administration, it has deteriorated beyond pre-2016 levels under the Biden Administration. This

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Arabian Peninsula: A Saudi Perspective," Istituto Affari Internazionali, June 15, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29460, 17.

[282] Rundell, *Vision or Mirage,* 394.

can be attributed to renewed fears of U.S. unreliability following the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington's willingness to resume nuclear talks with Tehran and, perhaps most importantly, President Biden's campaign trail comments (which came after the Khashoggi affair) that he would make Saudi Arabia "the pariah that they are" and "recalibrate" the U.S.-Saudi relationship.[283] Harkening back the values of honor and saving face, these comments essentially doomed the Biden administration in its relationship with Saudi Arabia by publicly shaming its leaders. Related to this, the strained U.S.-Saudi relationship may also be partly due to personalities. A 2006 analysis concluded that the U.S.-Saudi relationship never had broad public support on either side, and the relationship seemed "to be based only on ties between the elites on both sides."[284] MBS is not a classic Saudi elite. He grew up outside of the main power circles of Riyadh and reorganized the long-standing power structures of the classic Saudi elite, which has caused immense discomfort in Washington.

Since 2020, Riyadh has appeared to shun the Biden Administration, all while strengthening its alliance with Beijing. The Sino-Saudi relationship is anchored in energy and China has "become the largest market for Saudi oil exports, surpassing the United States and Japan for the first time in history. Saudi Arabia could soon overtake Russia to reclaim the title of the biggest crude oil supplier to China."[285] The significance of this situation lies not in Saudi Arabia's willingness to seek support from Beijing, but rather in the fact that China's global influence has significantly increased in the last two decades, which could ultimately shift the

[283] Ellen Knickmeyer, "Analysis: Biden retreats from vow to make pariah of Saudis," *AP News,* March 2, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/biden-retreats-saudi-arabia-sanctions-khashoggi-killing-d91d31edece5db07112d1c2d4dd3be33.
[284] Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation," 438.
[285] Camille Lons, et al., "China's Great Game in The Middle East," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 1, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21525, 27.

power balance in the Middle East.[286] The growing Sino-Saudi relationship has a nuclear element as well, as in 2020 revelations surfaced that Saudi Arabia had built an unreported facility for extracting yellowcake from uranium ore in cooperation with China.[287] Given Saudi Arabia's pragmatic approach to international relations and its lack of shared values with the United States, the U.S.-Saudi relationship could deteriorate into a greater diplomatic crisis if Riyadh perceives Beijing to be a viable replacement for Washington. This positioning harkens back to the established al-Saud norm of staying close to the superpower of the day. In 2023, that title is shared by both the United States and China.

Despite the rocky U.S.-Saudi relationship, China is incapable of fully being a stand-in for the United States. China and the United States have competing goals and China seeks order based on "developmental peace" rather than on the Western notion of "democratic peace."[288] For most countries in the Arab world, China's approach is preferable. "Governments in MENA generally welcome partnerships with Beijing because, they claim, it treats them as equals rather than junior partners or colonial proxies. Combined with its policy of non-interference in others' internal affairs, non-alignment, and refusal to engage in proxy wars, China has stayed on good terms with all conflicting parties…."[289] China has only managed to accomplish this, however,

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[286] The idea of Saudi Arabia has precedence, as during the Iraq-Iran war the country turned to China after the U.S. Congress blocked missile system purchases.
[287] Yoel Guzansky, Ephraim Asculai, and Eyal Propper, "Another Step Forward in the Saudi Nuclear Program," Institute for National Security Studies, August 12, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25516, 1-2; In 2020, *The Guardian* reported that it had obtained confidential Chinese documents confirming that Saudi Arabia had enough mineable uranium ore to supply a domestic program and produce over 90,000 tons of uranium from three major deposits around the country. Emma Graham-Harrison, Stephanie Kirchgaessner and Julian Borger, "Revealed: Saudi Arabia may have enough uranium ore to produce nuclear fuel", *The Guardian*, September 17, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/17/revealed-saudi-arabia-may-have-enough-uranium-ore-to-produce-nuclear-fuel.
[288] Lons, et al., "China's Great Game," 3.
[289] Lons, et al., "China's Great Game," 27.

because the U.S. security umbrella allowed it "to establish itself as a major economic and political player, and Beijing has no interest in upsetting this balance.[290] Summing up Beijing's position, the Rand Institute writes that in the Middle East, China is "an economic heavyweight, a political lightweight, and a military featherweight."[291] As such, for the foreseeable future, China is both unable and uninterested in replacing U.S. security guarantees in the region, which should provide a baseline buffer in the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

**A Path to Saudi-Israeli Rapprochement**

Rhetoric from MBS's Riyadh indicates that it is open to flipping the country's traditional anti-Israel stance. In 2022, MBS said, "We don't look at Israel as an enemy, we look to them as a potential ally, with many interests that we can pursue together... But we have to solve some issues before we get to that."[292] Such rhetoric is making its way down the chain of command as well, as in 2020, Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan stated that normalization between the two countries was inevitable, pending resolution of the Palestinian issue.[293] One of the biggest challenges to normalization will be dealing with public perceptions that are deeply rooted in religion and Arab history. A 2022 public opinion poll found that 80% of Saudis oppose the Abraham Accords, which represents a huge blockade to any sort of normalization.[294] The 2022 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Qatar, serves as a microcosm for the general sentiment of the

[290] Lons, et al., "China's Great Game," 15.
[291] Yoel Guzansky and Assaf Orion, "Slowly but Surely: Growing Relations between Saudi Arabia and China," Institute for National Security Studies, January 29, 2017, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08664, 2.
[292] "Saudi Crown prince says Israel 'potential ally,' *France24*, March 3, 2022, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220303-saudi-crown-prince-says-israel-potential-ally.
[293] Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Normalization with Israel," Institute for National Security Studies, October 29, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27809, 2.
[294] Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and Israel," 4.

Arab world toward Israel. Although Palestine did not qualify for the tournament, Palestinian flags dotted arenas, Palestine-themed armbands were ubiquitous, and "free Palestine" chants echoed around stadiums. Israeli media were present in Qatar, but Arab fans were dismissive. Countless videos spread on Arabic social media captured these interactions. In one video a Saudi fan tells an Israeli journalist, "You are not welcome here. Even though this is Qatar, it is still our country. There is no Israel, only Palestine." Riyadh must toe a careful line with its relationship with Israel or else risk enraging the broader Arab world. A full exploration of Saudi-Israeli relations, both past precedents and future opportunities, is outside of the scope of this thesis, but the bottom line is that MBS's Saudi Arabia does not view Israel as an existential threat. The West's engagement with Tehran has pushed the two together in shared fear of the Persian, Shi'a republic, which both see as an existential threat. Under MBS, the possibility for collaboration has only increased, particularly as he has shown a willingness to throw out long-held notions in favor of economic opportunities. However, while King Salman, who holds more traditional pro-Palestine views, remains in power, it is unlikely any major public changes in the status quo will occur.

In 2023, rumors of U.S.-brokered normalization began to swirl in policy circles. Such an agreement would have to meet Saudi demands for security guarantees from Washington, help develop a civilian nuclear program, and place fewer restrictions on U.S. arms sales.[295] Too forthright engagement with Israel, the perceived enemy of Islam, would endanger Saudi Arabia's position in the Islamic world and damage MBS's legitimacy among his own people, especially the 'ulama'. Such a deal could inadvertently strengthen Iran's regional standing because Tehran

[295] Michael Crowley, Vivian Nereim and Patrick Kingsley, "Saudi Arabia Offers Its Price to Normalize Relations With Israel," *New York Times*, March 9, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-united-states.html.

is unwavering in its support for the Palestinian cause and would use normalization as proof of Saudi illegitimacy. Accordingly, MBS's rhetoric on Israel should be interpreted as a strategic effort to slowly evolve public opinion, but not a sign of any immediate shifts. Notably, on October 7, 2023, Hamas entered Israel and slaughtered around 1,200 Israelis, the majority of whom were non-combatants.[296] Israel responded with heavy airstrikes and a ground invasion of Gaza, resulting in the deaths of over 24,000 Palestinians, the large majority of whom were also non-combatants.[297] The Arab world coalesced against Israel in support of Hamas and Palestine and, at the time of this writing, although the Saudi-Israel meeting has not been called off, it seems very likely the deal is dead.

In the time since MBS has come to power, Saudi Arabia has transformed into a country unlike the one it used to be. It has liberalized in many ways, yet become more autocratic in others. In terms of strategic culture, MBS has introduced norms of aggression, flipped governance on its head, and reined in the other keepers of strategic culture so tightly that he (and perhaps his father) appears to be the sole keeper of strategic culture for the time being. Considering these changes, Chapter 5 answers the question of whether or not Saudi Arabia's nuclear calculus is likely to change in the era of MBS.

[296] Lauren Frayer, "Israel revises down its death toll from the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks to about 1,200," *NPR*, November 11, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/11/11/1212458974/israel-revises-death-toll-hamas-attacks-oct-7.
[297] Beatrice Farhat, "Gaza 100 days: humanitarian crisis worsens as death toll surpasses 24,000," *Al-Monitor,* January 15, 2024, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/01/gaza-100-days-humanitarian-crisis-worsens-death-toll-surpasses-24000#ixzz8P124W3pw.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE PERSIAN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

This chapter uses the analysis presented in Chapter 4 to assess if Saudi nuclear thought is subject to change. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Saudi Arabia's traditional nuclear stance of non-proliferation rested upon threat perceptions about Iran, as informed by the country's IVNP. MBS has re-written key aspects of the Saudi IVNP, which necessitates an updated assessment regarding whether or not Saudi Arabia's nuclear status quo of non-proliferation will remain.

On September 14, 2019, 18 drones and three low-flying missiles streaked across the desert toward Saudi Aramco sites in Abqaiq and Khurais. The 17-minute-long attack knocked out more than half of Saudi Arabia's oil-exporting capability, spiked oil prices, and rocked global financial markets.[298] Houthi rebels in Yemen initially claimed the attacks, but a U.S. investigation later traced some of the drones back to launch sites in Iran.[299] In either scenario, Iran was involved. The attack was a reminder to Riyadh that Tehran could wreak havoc on the country essentially unhindered because of its exposed geography and heavy reliance on oil. "Iran has much less money than Saudi Arabia to spend on weapons, but the attack showed that didn't matter. The Saudis were able to get oil production back on track within weeks only because Iran decided to graze, rather than demolish, the facility."[300] With or without MBS, Saudi Arabia remains vulnerable to its Shi'a enemy.

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[298] Bill Chappell, "U.S. Satellites Detected Iran Readying Weapons Ahead Of Saudi Strike, Officials Say," *NPR,* September 17, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/09/17/761539212/saudi-crisis-irans-supreme-leader-says-no-talks-with-u-s-during-u-n-visit.
[299] Humeyra Pamuk, "Exclusive: U.S. probe of Saudi oil attack shows it came from north - report," *Reuters,* December 19, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-exclusive-idUSKBN1YN299.
[300] Hope and Scheck, *Blood and Oil*, 319.

Despite the many changes MBS has initiated to Saudi strategic culture, rhetoric on Iran has remained remarkably consistent. In particular, MBS's own rhetoric has showed that Iran is still considered the biggest threat to the Saudi vision for the Arab and Muslim worlds. In one interview, MBS blamed Tehran for all of the region's woes while differentiating his Kingdom from it, saying, "Saudi Arabia and the entire region witnessed the spread of an awakening project after 1979 for many reasons that are not the subject of today. We have not been this way before. We are just going back to what we used to be: moderate, open minded Islam to the world and to all religions and to all traditions and peoples."[301] In another interview, he said, "Saudi doesn't spread any extremist ideology. Saudi Arabia is the biggest victim of the extremist ideology. If you see any problem in the Middle East, you will find Iran."[302] In yet another interview, in which MBS spoke on his vision for religious reform and, as in other public statements, a return to pre-1979 Islamic practice, he insinuated that Iran's Ayatollah is worse than Hitler, saying, "Hitler didn't do what the supreme leader is trying to do. The supreme leader is trying to conquer the world."[303] Despite the hyperbole, MBS made it clear that Saudi Arabia will unabashedly confront its ideological foe and not allow it to define Islam. That is, it will reassert itself as the only legitimate leader of the Umma, the most critical pillar of the al-Saud's legitimacy. As the strongest (if not sole) keeper of Saudi strategic culture, MBS's rhetoric reveals that threat perceptions of Iran remain a guiding force of Riyadh's actions. Even if MBS's statements are not

[301] Martin Chulov, "I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says crown prince," *The Guardian,* October 24, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince.
[302] Hubbard, *MBS,* 230.
[303] Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good'," *The Atlantic,* April 2, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/.

factually accurate (Saudi Arabia is not blameless), what matters is what he and those under him believe to be the issue. With strategic culture, fact is often subordinate to myth.

An analysis of some of Saudi Arabia's biggest controversies while MBS has been in power reinforces the fact that Iran is still viewed as an existential threat. For example, the alleged kidnapping of Lebanon's then-Prime Minister Hariri by MBS shocked and confounded the world. As details of the plot came out, some analysts alleged it all tied back to Iran-supported Hezbollah, which operates freely out of Lebanon. While seemingly far-fetched, it is alleged that "by forcing Hariri to resign, the Saudis had hoped to spark civil strife between Lebanese Sunnis and Hezbollah that would force Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters from Yemen, where the Saudis believed they were helping the Houthis."[304] If true this reveals two key things about MBS's Saudi Arabia. First, Iran is indeed still viewed as an existential threat and, second, it still considers itself the absolute leader of the Arab world, contributing to Riyadh's perception that it was appropriate to co-opt another Arab country's leader to achieve its foreign policy goals.

Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen also reinforces the status quo of Saudi threat perceptions. As previously mentioned, some analysis attributes Saudi Arabia's controversial, failed war in Yemen to attempts by the al-Sauds to prevent the "Hezbollahization" of Yemen, meaning Iran would use Yemen as a based from which to terrorize Saudi Arabia, just as it uses Lebanon as a base to terrorize Israel. Other interpretations of Operation Desert Storm assert that MBS, as Minister of Defense, launched the war as an opportunity to enhance his domestic power and prestige, which was necessary for him to build support for his ascent to the position of Crown Prince. Saudi Arabia's foray into Yemen has largely failed and resulted in a humanitarian crisis

[304] Hubbard, *MBS*, 237.

that has drawn international criticism.[305] Given his role in launching the war, MBS might have a personal stake in the issue against Iran. In either interpretation, Iran is still a key motivating factor. Despite all of the changes in the MBS era, there is continuity in Saudi Arabia's threat perceptions regarding Iran, the reasons for which are consistent with those pre-2016. There are competing claims about being the legitimate heart of Islam, competition over regional order, land and maritime border disputes, and economic tensions over oil prices. Adding to that, MBS has tied his legitimacy closely to Saudi Arabia's economic future. Saudi Arabia remains dependent on oil, which it must have to make Vision 2030 a reality, and thus Iran stands to threaten the very platform MBS is building for himself.

Of note, in March 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran announced that they would be restoring full diplomatic relations as a result of a Chinese-led mediation. The announcement came seven years after ties were ruptured following an incident in which protestors in Tehran ransacked the Saudi embassy in retaliation for the execution of a prominent Shiite cleric by Saudi authorities. This development, while diplomatically significant, does not change Saudi Arabia's view that Iran is its most significant existential threat, a perception that traces back to the 1979 Revolution, not to the 2016 diplomatic break. As a 2019 analysis accurately surmised, "even if there is progress in the contacts between the Iranians and Saudis, it will be a result of current, situational interests and not a manifestation of an essential solution to fundamental problems."[306]

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[305] According to UNICEF, Yemen remains one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. Conflict, large-scale displacement, and recurring climate issues have left families vulnerable and with more than 11 million children are in need of one or more forms of humanitarian assistance. "Yemen crisis," UNICEF, updated October 17, 2023, https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/yemen-crisis.

[306] Yoel Guzansky and Sima Shine, "A Possible Thaw in Iranian-Saudi Tensions: Ramifications for the Region and for Israel," Institute for National Security Studies, November 3, 2019, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19470, 4.

**The Nuclear Issue**

Not only has Saudi Arabia's threat perception of Iran remained consistent, it also appears that its nuclear thought has as well. In a 2018 interview with *CBS News*, MBS said, "Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible."[307] The key factors that led to this long-standing posture remain the same today. In the past, Saudi religious and Arab identities supported the position that Saudi Arabia would proliferate in response to Iranian proliferation. These powerful identities still exist but are beginning to integrate under a nationalist umbrella, which is creating other powerful forces of Saudi self-sufficiency and independence. Maintaining at least the option of going nuclear is both a matter of security and prestige.

Saudi Arabia could potentially repel a nuclear Iran from under another country's nuclear umbrella. The United States is the only country with the power and potential to hypothetically provide Saudi Arabia with a nuclear umbrella. At the time of Cigar's analysis this was considered unlikely; today it is even more unlikely given the state of the U.S.-Saudi relationship and the mistrust over two decades of perceived betrayal by the United States. Beyond that, there has long been an impression in Riyadh that nuclear weapons prevent invasion, as demonstrated by the Pakistani and North Korean cases. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which once had nuclear weapons, has no doubt reinforced that view. MBS's Saudi Arabia will continue to cooperate with other countries, including the United States, but it will not put its fate in their hands, just as MBS has not allowed his country's fate to be in hands other than his own. To be clear, the Saudi nuclear case is still one of non-proliferation and will remain so unless Iran

[307] "Saudi crown prince: If Iran develops nuclear bomb, so will we," *CBS News*, March 15, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-iran-nuclear-bomb-saudi-arabia/.

reaches critical mass with its nuclear program. That said, MBS's reforms have made it *more* likely that in the face of Iranian nuclearization, Saudi Arabia will have the ability to follow suit.

The fact that MBS is now essentially Saudi Arabia's sole keeper of strategic culture increases the chances of the country proliferating in the face of a nuclear Iran. In his 2016 analysis, Cigar argues that the domestic promotion of Saudi proliferation would be a top-down process, "with nuclear mythmaking national elites—not easily defined in this case, in any event, given the overlapping of personal, family, and institutional allegiances—as the executors rather than the initiators of such policies generated by the senior decisionmakers."[308] Today, this is more likely the case due to the concentration of power in MBS and King Salman, who have demonstrated a perfect record of ensuring other Saudi elites either support their efforts or are stripped of their power. Cigar also noted in his analysis that "the state" was essentially the unitary decision-making entity because of the lack of public debate and socio-political influences on the basic aspects of the nuclear issue, also naming key defense entities such as the Ministries of Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs as influential.[309] Different stakeholders within the al-Saud family used to have control of these entities as a way to distribute power, but today each is firmly under MBS's control, and thus "the state" may now be best understood as MBS and his father. Thus, the unity of "the state" is even more concentrated today than ever before. In the event of Iranian nuclearization, MBS would be able to bring the country together to achieve a shared goal faster than any of his predecessors.

Since the time of Cigar's analysis, Saudi Arabia has embarked on the path laid out by Vision 2030. Vision 2030 has called for Saudi Arabia to diversify its economy and integrate

[308] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 216.
[309] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 16.

more with the international community. As discussed in Chapter 3, Solingen's theory of proliferation posits that highly integrated countries appear to be less likely to proliferate, yet in the case of Saudi Arabia, its global economic importance could in fact provide a buffer against international backlash. Because a large part of MBS's legitimacy rests on successful economic reform, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to proliferate preemptively or for any reason other than an imminently nuclear Iran because trade-offs would not be worth it. Solingen also notes that countries and leaders may pursue nuclear weapons for reasons of national and personal prestige.[310] Vision 2030 shows that MBS does value prestige when making strategic decisions. This could be a factor in Saudi nuclear thought, although it is hard to know for sure because of Riyadh's closed-off nature. Even if the pursuit of prestige is part of Saudi nuclear decision-making, it alone is unlikely to spur Riyadh to proliferate prior to Tehran due to the economic dangers. MBS would put too much on the line and, despite popular misperceptions based on past missteps, he is not an irrational leader. That said, proliferation in light of an imminently or already nuclear Iran would, as per Cigar's analysis, blunt the possibility of international backlash and be justified as Riyadh's only option in light of the need for a regional counterweight. Further, although MBS and King Salman have reined in the 'ulama' and called for religious reform, religious validation remains the key pillar of the al-Saud's legitimacy. As such, a Shi'a bomb would almost surely force Sunni Saudi Arabia to follow suit as the leader and protector of the Islamic world.

[310] Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, 23.

**Building Domestic Nuclear Capabilities**

Perhaps the biggest change in MBS's Saudi Arabia is that, more than ever before, Saudi Arabia appears to be building its domestic nuclear capabilities as part of the larger Vision 2030 effort to be more self-sufficient. While these capabilities are focused on energy, Saudi nuclear thought has long-equated domestic capabilities as necessary if proliferation is to ever be an option.[311] Saudi Arabia has historically had almost no domestic scientific capabilities but that is changing rapidly. In November, MBS laid the foundation stone for seven scientific projects, including a nuclear reactor.[312] To be sure Saudi Arabia needs non-oil energy "in order to meet its growing energy requirements, reduce its dependence on oil, and release more oil for export, but it is fairly clear that the main motive now for its nuclear development is security interests."[313] For example, in August 2020, a *Wall Street Journal* investigation revealed that Saudi Arabia had, in collaboration with China, built a facility for the extraction of yellowcake from uranium ore. Such facilities are a necessity for civilian nuclear power generation, but the issue of interest is that Saudi Arabia did not declare this facility or other ones like it. In the same timeframe, Saudi Arabia and China also collaborated closely to develop the former's independent ballistic missile capabilities.[314] Beyond that, a 2020 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office noted that Riyadh has not agreed to sign an additional protocol to its limited safeguards agreement, which would provide the International Atomic Energy Association with more information on its nuclear-related activities, nor has it committed to "forgo nuclear fuel

[311] Cigar, *Saudi Arabia*, 49.
[312] Ephraim Asculai and Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Progress in Nuclear Research," Institute for National Security Studies, November 29, 2018, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19457, 1.
[313] Asculai and Guzansky, "Saudi Progress," 1.
[314] Guzansky, Asculai, and Propper, "Another Step Forward," 2.

production activities, a step that is called a nonproliferation 'gold standard.'"[315] It is Saudi Arabia's right to have domestic nuclear capabilities, but its approach to building these capabilities has caused doubt that they are intended for purely civilian purposes. It has established a precedent for concealing its program and is likely to continue to do so. Due to the kingdom's unique geographic and political conditions, it is unlikely the international community will be able to detect forbidden activity if there is any.[316]

Considering the circumstances, it is possible that Saudi Arabia could be attempting to build the capacity to maintain a "hedging" posture, which refers to a "national strategy of maintaining, or at least appearing to maintain, a viable option for the relatively rapid acquisition of nuclear weapons, based on an indigenous technical capacity to produce them within a relatively short time frame ranging from several weeks to a few years."[317] The Iran nuclear deal did not change Saudi threat perceptions, but only made securing a potential avenue for proliferation less urgent, at least temporarily. In the time since the deal was reinvigorated by the Biden Administration, "Iran's waning commitment to the agreement and the shortening of the time needed for an Iranian breakout to a nuclear weapon are liable to increase concern among the Saudi leadership, and to expedite its activity toward the acquisition of nuclear capability, including by way of shortcuts."[318] The combination of Saudi strategic culture under MBS and the country's approach to its nuclear development makes it possible that its civilian energy

[315] Julia Masterson and Shannon Bugos, "Saudi Arabia May Be Building Uranium Facility," *Arms Control Today* 50:7 (2020): 34, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975424.
[316] Guzansky, Asculai, Propper, "Another Step Forward," 3.
[317] Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran, "Living with nuclear hedging:
the implications of Iran's nuclear strategy," *International Affairs* 91:4 (2015): 688-689, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/INTA91_4_01_BowenMoran.pdf.
[318] Guzansky, Asculai, Propper, "Another Step Forward," 4.

development is seen as a first step to creating a proliferation option years down the road. Until that option solidifies, the purchase option would still likely be the go-to solution for rapid acquisition of nuclear capabilities to counter Iran.

This chapter has explained the ways in which Saudi Arabia's strategic culture has evolved under MBS. Today, he is arguably the sole keeper of Saudi strategic culture. Because of this, MBS as an individual is expected to have a significant influence on Saudi decision-making, including in the nuclear realm. Although key aspects of the Saudi IVNP have been revised, the threat perceptions regarding Iran, the key factor in its nuclear posture, have remained the same. As such, the bottom line remains that the Saudi case is one of non-proliferation, but a nuclear Iran would precipitate nuclearization in Riyadh. Under MBS, the cornerstones of a domestic last-resort proliferation option are being developed.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia has changed immensely under the de facto rule of Mohammad bin Salman, and it will continue to transform in coming years. The country is becoming more liberal in some ways but more autocratic in others. The Crown Prince has made significant changes to Saudi strategic culture such as fostering a nationalist identity as the predominant identity in society, making the country more internally and externally aggressive, and reducing the power of other key stakeholders to the point that he (and perhaps his father) appears to be the sole keeper of Saudi strategic culture. Saudi decision-making is no longer premised on consultation and consensus building, but rather on bolstering the religious and economic legitimacy of MBS.

These changes are significant, yet despite them, Saudi Arabia's nuclear bottom line has not changed. That is, Saudi Arabia will only pursue nuclear weapons if Iran reaches a point of no return regarding its own nuclearization. Until that point, Saudi Arabia's ties with the international market vis-a-vis oil, and its position at the helm of the Muslim and Arab worlds, provide enough of an offset to Tehran's challenge to the core pillars of the al-Sauds' legitimacy. While Saudi Arabia remains a case of non-proliferation, the changes occurring under Vision 2030 are naturally moving the country closer to a position in which it would have the domestic capabilities to proliferate if and when necessary. The country has begun developing domestic civilian nuclear capacities, continued to advance its ballistic missile program, and prioritized more domestic production in the defense industry as a whole. Although the leap between civilian and military nuclear capabilities is wide, Saudi Arabia has long equated Iranian civilian capacities as a lead-up to weapons, thereby betraying the belief that civilian capabilities are the

first step in weapons capabilities. As it stands, however, Iran has yet to proliferate and thus Saudi Arabia's posture of non-proliferation will continue to hold.

Recently, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has hit a rough patch. What is often missed in Washington is the breadth and depth of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, which dates back to the Cold War and much of which has gone unseen. Due to the shale oil revolution, the United States no longer needs Saudi oil, but it does need a stable global economy, which Saudi oil contributes to. The United States also needs Saudi religious influence because although it can kill terrorists and frustrate their finances, only Saudi Arabia and its respected 'ulama' can delegitimize Salafi extremists throughout the Muslim world. For its part, Saudi Arabia has a huge cut of the world's oil, yet no way to secure it. In these ways, the United States and Saudi Arabia are bound by common interests, even if common values are lacking.[319]

Despite the tension between Washington and MBS, MBS's egregious blunders, and the tightening ties between Riyadh and Beijing, MBS is young and likely to rule Saudi Arabia for decades. He cannot be ignored. Disengagement with Saudi Arabia by the United States would mean Washington would willfully forego the chance to exert even a minimal level of influence on Riyadh. In light of this, how should the United States engage with MBS's Saudi Arabia? Martin Indyk, a retired U.S. diplomat with years of experience in the Middle East, suggests an approach of "dignified aloofness," meaning business-like and at arms' length, that allows both parties to save face and negotiate common ground despite differences.[320] Such an approach not

[319] Anthony H. Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia and the United States: Common Interests and Continuing Sources of Tension," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 10, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23388, 4.
[320] Martin Indyk, "US-Saudi Relations: What's Next?", panel moderated by Frederic Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, video, 1:01:40, https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/20/u.s.-saudi-relations-what-next-event-7963.

only acknowledges important aspects of Saudi strategic culture, but also centers the relationship on interests, not values, which is what the historic—and largely effective—U.S.-Saudi relationship was based upon. In the nuclear realm, the United States must continue to advocate for a nuclear weapons-free Middle East, yet also support Riyadh's quest to develop its civilian nuclear program. Considering Saudi-Chinese nuclear and weapons cooperation and the current status quo of keeping secrets, nuclear engagement with Riyadh by the United States is all the more necessary if there is to be transparency around Saudi Arabia's developing program. It is in the United States' interest to support a Saudi civilian program that abides by international standards in order to ensure greater transparency, buffer against Beijing's influence in Riyadh, and create an avenue through which U.S.-Saudi trust can be reestablished. Underpinning this engagement, the United States must understand the dynamic between Saudi Arabia and Iran and seek to ensure greater transparency with Riyadh about its negotiations with Tehran. The United States must also be willing to give Riyadh the same concessions as Tehran, as different concessions will reinforce Riyadh's feeling of disenfranchisement and its perception that the United States prefers Iran over its Arab allies. Regardless of the challenges, the United States must continue to engage with Saudi Arabia because of the latter's economic importance and standing in the Muslim and Arab worlds.

Strategic culture has powerful explanatory power in explaining why countries and societies make the decisions they do and why they differ from others. By applying strategic culture concepts to analyses of Saudi issues, insight into Riyadh's thought processes can be distilled. In doing so, policymakers in the United States may be better equipped to find areas of collaboration and cooperation with an important yet sometimes difficult-to-work-with ally. By better leveraging strategic culture, the United States will learn how to operate throughout the

Middle East better than in decades past and to foster relationships based not on necessity, but on understanding.

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