

Journal of Religion & Society (JR&S)

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>Print ISSN: [3006-1296](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19614485) Online ISSN: [3006-130X](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19614485)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19614485)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19614485>**Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Strategies under Vision 2030: From Religious Authority to Global Image-Building****Sarah Qaiser**Department of International Relations, Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of Saudi Arabia's soft power strategies, tracing the shift from traditional religious legitimacy to a diversified, state-led framework of global image-building under Saudi Vision 2030. Guided by the theoretical framework of soft power developed by Joseph Nye, the study explores how Saudi Arabia has reconfigured its international role in response to changing regional and global dynamics. The central research question of this study is: How has Saudi Arabia transformed its soft power strategy from a religion-based model to a multidimensional, state-driven approach under Vision 2030? Overall, the paper argues that Saudi Arabia's soft power has shifted from a predominantly religious model to a multidimensional, state-driven strategy of global attraction, demonstrating how emerging powers strategically adapt soft power tools to achieve both domestic transformation and international influence in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Soft Power, Vision 2030, Muhammad Bin Salman, Public Diplomacy.

Introduction

In contemporary international relations, power is no longer understood solely in terms of military strength or economic coercion. Instead, the ability of states to shape preferences, influence perceptions, and build legitimacy has become increasingly central to global politics. This shift is captured in the concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, who defines it as the ability of a country to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than force or payment (Nye, 2004). Soft power derives primarily from culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy, and it has become an essential tool for states seeking influence in an interconnected and media-driven world. Against this theoretical backdrop, Saudi Arabia presents a particularly important and evolving case. Traditionally, the Kingdom's international influence was grounded in its religious authority as the custodian of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, alongside its role as a major oil producer and financial donor to the Islamic world. These sources of influence allowed Saudi Arabia to exercise significant soft power across Muslim-majority countries. However, the effectiveness of this traditional model has gradually been challenged by global political transformations, regional instability, and increasing scrutiny of governance practices and human rights issues.

In response to these changing dynamics, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a major strategic transformation under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman through the introduction of Saudi Vision 2030. Launched in 2016, Vision 2030 seeks to diversify the Kingdom's economy away from oil dependency, modernize its society, and reposition Saudi Arabia as a globally competitive and attractive state.

Beyond its economic objectives, Vision 2030 also represents a deliberate effort to restructure the Kingdom's soft power base by expanding cultural diplomacy, tourism, entertainment, sports, education, and media engagement. This transformation reflects a broader recognition that in the twenty-first century, international influence depends not only on material capabilities but also on reputation, credibility, and symbolic appeal. As a result, Saudi Arabia has increasingly invested in

nation branding strategies and global image-building initiatives designed to project a modern, reform-oriented identity (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016)

However, Saudi Arabia's soft power transformation is not without complexity. While Vision 2030 has generated significant international attention and opened new avenues of engagement, the interplay between domestic restructuring and foreign policy objectives raises important analytical questions about

whether soft power can be successfully engineered from above, or whether it must be grounded in deeper institutional and societal change.

This paper, therefore, examines the evolution of Saudi Arabia's soft power strategies, tracing their historical foundations and analyzing their transformation under Vision 2030. It argues that Saudi Arabia has shifted from a primarily religion-based soft power model to a diversified, state-driven strategy of global image-building. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on emerging powers, nation branding, and the changing nature of influence in international relations.

Conceptualizing Soft Power

Power is defined differently by different scholars. Political scientist Robert Dahl defines power as "the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not do" (Nye, 1990. P 177). However, to make others do what someone wants them to do certainly requires some resources. These resources must be measurable and tangible. In the past, it was easier to evaluate and estimate power resources like population, territory, weapons etc. With the Industrial Revolution and advancement of science and technology, the concept of power has changed. At the international level, states having modern technology, developed economies and infrastructure, an educated and skilful population, an independent foreign policy etc. are more powerful. Thus, both tangible and intangible aspects of power turn out to be significant and essential (Nye, 1990. P 178-180). "The second face of power" (Bachrach & Baratz, 1963) bases itself on directive or command power manifested through inducement and threats. There is also indirect co-optive power where states agree to comply (Nye, 1990. P 181). Joseph S. Nye Jr explains cooperative power in the following words:

Co-optive power can rest on the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express.... The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. This dimension can be thought of as soft power, in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength (Nye, 1990. P 181).

Thus, the old notion of power has changed. Rather than aspiring for hard power, states are now counting on the soft power paradigm. According to Joseph S Nye Jr.:

A country's soft power can come from three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye, 2006).

Joshua Kurlantzick, in his book *Charm Offensive*, (2007), explains that, "soft power has changed overtime." He defined soft power as "anything outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations" (Rengma, 2012).

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr. in the 1990s, has turned out to be a popular concept in international politics. Presently, at the global level, countries are trying to strengthen their soft power potential and project it well. This trend has emerged due to developed economies, modern technologies and well-informed public. Countries like US, China, Russia, Brazil, Egypt, India, Bangladesh and many others have embraced soft power as a strategy to achieve their national interests. Soft power is about the future standing and perceived image of powers in international community. Monocle, an English Media Company, conducts a soft power survey every year:

... It ranks nations according to their 'soft power'; the amount of attractiveness and thus influence a country has within the world. Ranking nations according to their standard of government, diplomatic infrastructure, cultural output, capacity for education and appeal to business, the list is calculated using around 50 factors that indicate

the use of 'soft power', including the number of cultural missions, Olympic medals, the quality of a country's architecture and business brands (Who Rules the World, 2012).

The *Rapid-Growth Markets Soft Power Index* report (2012) has mentioned thirteen variables of soft power for emerging market economies. These are divided into three categories: global image (a country's popularity globally), global integrity (country's respect for its own citizens and respect for others neighbours) and global integration (a country's interconnectivity with the rest of the world) (Earnest & Young, 2012). The global image category includes media exports, language enrolments, Olympics, Time's 100 and most admired companies as its indicators. Indicators included in the global integrity category are rule of law, freedom index, voter turnout, and CO2 emissions; and the global integration comprises of immigration, tourism, university rankings and English fluency as its indicators (Earnest & Young, 2012. P 7-9).

It is a narrow assumption that soft power is more related to foreign policy (political) objectives. However, it also has its economic dimensions too, which are hard to ignore. The emerging economies or emerging markets are an example to cite. The developing economies of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India and China), N-11 (Next 11 are Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Vietnam, South Korea, Nigeria, Mexico, Pakistan and Philippine) and CIVETS (Colombia, Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa, and Vietnam) will play an important role in the world economy and politics. This belief is based on the following factors: financial stability, foreign direct investment, world-famous companies and brands, economic contribution in international organizations like UN, viable economic model etc. On the other hand, international domination is linked with the soft image of a country where countries have to compete in terms of soft power to obtain foreign direct investment, development aid, economic assistance and access to foreign businesses and global production networks. These are the indexes that link economy with soft power.

Evolution of Saudi Arabia's Soft Power: A Historical overview

The historical foundations of Saudi Arabia's soft power were deeply rooted in religion, humanitarian engagement, and its leadership role in the Islamic world. Long before the contemporary reforms associated with Saudi Vision 2030 under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom exercised influence primarily through religious legitimacy, financial assistance, and diplomatic outreach to Muslim-majority countries. These traditional sources of attraction enabled Saudi Arabia to shape regional and global perceptions, maintain regime legitimacy, and reinforce its status as a central actor in the Muslim world. In theoretical terms, these instruments correspond closely to the concept of soft power articulated by Joseph Nye, who defined soft power as the ability of a state to achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Nye, 2004).

Historically, Saudi Arabia's most significant source of soft power derived from its custodianship of Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. The Kingdom's control over these sacred locations provided it with unparalleled religious authority and symbolic legitimacy within the global Muslim community. Each year, millions of Muslims travel to Saudi Arabia to perform the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, creating sustained religious, cultural, and economic interactions between the Kingdom and the broader Islamic world. This religious centrality enabled Saudi Arabia to cultivate a unique form of influence that extended beyond traditional diplomatic channels. As scholars note, religious legitimacy has been a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's international identity and a key mechanism through which the state projected authority and prestige (Apostolov, 2024). The title "Custodian of the Two Holy

Mosques," adopted by Saudi rulers, further reinforced this symbolic role and strengthened the Kingdom's leadership position among Muslim nations.

In addition to religious authority, Saudi Arabia expanded its soft power through the global promotion of Islamic institutions and religious education. Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating during the oil boom of the 1970s, the Kingdom invested heavily in building mosques, Islamic centers, and religious schools across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. These initiatives were designed to disseminate Islamic teachings, strengthen religious solidarity, and foster long-term relationships with Muslim communities abroad. According to Nonneman (2003), Saudi Arabia's sponsorship of religious

institutions served not only spiritual purposes but also strategic political objectives, including the consolidation of ideological influence and the cultivation of diplomatic alliances. Through scholarships, educational exchanges, and theological training programs, Saudi Arabia positioned itself as a guardian of Islamic values and a leader of the global Muslim community.

Humanitarian assistance and development aid constituted another important dimension of Saudi Arabia's traditional soft power. The Kingdom has long been one of the largest providers of financial aid in the Middle East, offering support to countries affected by conflict, natural disasters, and economic hardship. These efforts were institutionalized through organizations such as the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief), which coordinates relief operations in multiple regions worldwide. Humanitarian diplomacy allowed Saudi Arabia to enhance its international reputation as a benevolent and responsible state while simultaneously strengthening diplomatic ties with recipient countries. As noted by Nakamura, (2013), humanitarian aid serves as a powerful instrument of soft power by generating goodwill, reinforcing moral legitimacy, and promoting positive perceptions of the donor state.

Saudi Arabia also utilized multilateral diplomacy and regional cooperation as mechanisms of soft power projection. The Kingdom played a leading role in regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), using these platforms to promote collective security, economic integration, and political coordination among member states. Through diplomatic mediation, financial assistance, and political leadership, Saudi Arabia sought to position

itself as a stabilizing force in the Middle East. Gause (2009) argues that Saudi foreign policy has historically been driven by the dual objective of preserving regime security and maintaining regional influence, both of which were supported by the strategic use of soft power resources.

Another critical component of traditional Saudi soft power was its role in religious diplomacy and interfaith dialogue. The Kingdom established institutions dedicated to fostering communication between different religious and cultural communities, thereby enhancing its international image as a promoter of tolerance and cooperation. One notable example is the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), which was created to encourage dialogue among religious leaders and address global challenges such as extremism and sectarian conflict. Such initiatives contributed to the perception of Saudi Arabia as a responsible stakeholder in international peace and stability. According to Gallarotti and Al-Filali (2012), religious diplomacy can function as a form of soft power by promoting shared values, reducing ideological tensions, and strengthening cross-cultural understanding.

Despite these strengths, Saudi Arabia's traditional soft power strategy faced increasing challenges in the early twenty-first century. The global rise of transnational terrorism, regional instability following the Arab Spring, and growing international scrutiny of human rights practices weakened the effectiveness of religious legitimacy as the Kingdom's primary source of influence. Critics argued that the association of Saudi religious institutions with conservative interpretations of Islam generated negative perceptions in Western societies and complicated diplomatic relations. As a result, the Saudi leadership recognized the need to diversify its sources of soft power and adapt to changing global dynamics. Scholars such as Ulrichsen (2016) emphasize that the limitations of traditional religious diplomacy created pressure for policy innovation, ultimately paving the way for the comprehensive reforms introduced under Vision 2030.

Vision 2030 and the Transformation of Saudi Soft Power

The introduction of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016 marked a significant shift in Saudi Arabia's approach to soft power, transforming the Kingdom from a state primarily reliant on religious legitimacy to one pursuing diversified instrument of international influence. Launched under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, Vision 2030 represents a comprehensive framework for economic diversification, social reform, and global image-building. Beyond its economic objectives, the initiative reflects a strategic effort to enhance Saudi Arabia's international reputation and strengthen its attractiveness to foreign investors, tourists, and partners. In theoretical terms, this transformation

corresponds with the concept of soft power developed by Joseph Nye, who emphasized the importance of culture, values, and policies in shaping international influence (Nye, 2004).

A central driver behind the transformation of Saudi soft power was the growing recognition of economic vulnerability associated with dependence on oil revenues. The decline in global oil prices after 2014 exposed structural weaknesses in the Saudi economic model and underscored the urgency of diversification. Vision 2030 responded to this challenge by promoting new sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and cultural industries as engines of growth (Moshashai, Leber & Savage, 2020).

These sectors also function as tools of soft power by enhancing the Kingdom's visibility and projecting an image of modernization and openness. As Ulrichsen (2016) argues, economic reform under Vision 2030 is closely linked to nation branding, reflecting the increasing integration of domestic development and international reputation management.

Demographic pressures also played a critical role in shaping the transformation of Saudi soft power. With a large youth population seeking employment opportunities and social mobility, the government recognized the need to create new avenues for participation in economic and cultural life. Vision 2030 therefore introduced reforms aimed at expanding education, supporting entrepreneurship, and promoting youth engagement in sports and creative industries. These initiatives were designed not only to stimulate economic growth but also to project an image of a dynamic and forward-looking society. According to Al-Rasheed (2021), youth-focused reforms have become a central component of Saudi Arabia's modernization narrative and an important element of its global rebranding strategy.

Another important factor influencing the shift in Saudi soft power was the growing importance of reputation management in contemporary international relations. Following regional instability in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and increased international scrutiny of governance practices, Saudi Arabia faced challenges in maintaining a positive global image. Policymakers increasingly recognized that traditional sources of influence, such as religious authority and financial aid, were insufficient in shaping international perceptions in an era of global media and digital communication. Consequently, the Kingdom expanded its investment in public diplomacy, cultural exchange, and international partnerships aimed at promoting economic opportunity and social reform. These efforts reflect broader trends in global politics, where states actively use communication strategies and symbolic initiatives to enhance credibility and legitimacy (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2012).

A defining feature of the transformation of Saudi soft power under Vision 2030 has been the shift from traditional religious influence to a multidimensional strategy based on culture, tourism, sports, and innovation. Rather than relying solely on its historical religious role, Saudi Arabia has adopted proactive

measures to engage international audiences and reshape its national identity. Investments in cultural festivals, heritage preservation, and international sporting events have enabled the Kingdom to expand its global presence and attract new sources of economic and political support. Scholars describe this approach as a form of strategic nation branding, in which states seek to construct positive narratives about modernization and progress to enhance their global standing (Samuel-Azran, 2020). Institutional reform has further strengthened the implementation of Saudi Arabia's new soft power strategy. Vision 2030 established specialized government bodies responsible for tourism, entertainment, and cultural development, providing the administrative capacity needed to coordinate large-scale initiatives. This institutionalization of soft power reflects a broader shift toward strategic governance, where influence is managed through long-term planning and policy coordination rather than informal or ad hoc measures. As Moshashai, D., Leber, A. M., & Savage, J. D. (2020) notes, the effectiveness of Vision 2030 depends largely on the ability of state institutions to translate ambitious policy goals into tangible outcomes.

New Instruments of Saudi Arabia's Soft power

The transformation initiated under Saudi Vision 2030 has led to the emergence of a diversified set of instruments through which Saudi Arabia seeks to project influence and reshape its international image.

Moving beyond its traditional reliance on religious authority and humanitarian diplomacy, the Kingdom has adopted a multidimensional soft power strategy that integrates economic modernization, cultural outreach, and global engagement. Under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi policymakers have increasingly recognized that influence in the contemporary international system depends on visibility, credibility, and attractiveness across multiple domains, including sports, culture, tourism, education, and media. This shift reflects the broader evolution of soft power as conceptualized by Joseph Nye, who emphasized that states enhance their global standing by cultivating appealing institutions, values, and cultural products rather than relying solely on traditional diplomatic tools (Nye, 2004). Consequently, Saudi Arabia's new soft power instruments are not isolated initiatives but components of a coordinated strategy aimed at strengthening regime legitimacy, diversifying the national economy, and positioning the Kingdom as a modern and globally connected actor. The following subsections examine these emerging instruments in detail, highlighting how each sector contributes to the consolidation of Saudi Arabia's soft power in the twenty-first century.

Cultural Diplomacy and Entertainment Sector

Cultural diplomacy involves sharing ideas, arts, sports, education, languages, and other cultural aspects between countries to promote mutual understanding. The Saudi government supports the sports sector, and Turki Al-Shaikh, chairman of the General Sports Authority, has worked to revive Saudi sports media as part of Vision 2030. Sports help promote peace, development, and international cooperation. (Elshaer, 2023). Saudi Arabia's recent investments in sports have been significant, including over \$1 billion in the Professional Golf Association (PGA) Tour (if a deal is finalized) and hundreds of millions of dollars to recruit soccer stars to play on Saudi-based teams or serve as tourism ambassadors. These efforts have led to accusations of "sportswashing," which means trying to improve its international image through sports. Saudi Arabia's big financial investments in sports are part of its Vision 2030 plan to diversify the economy away from oil, create more private sector jobs for Saudi citizens, and ensure a sustainable future when the oil runs out (Hausheer Ali and Stansbury, 2024). Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) is very motivated to achieve the ambitious goals of Vision 2030. Despite the current war between Israel and Hamas, MBS remains focused on his reform and development agenda. Sixty-three percent of Saudi Arabia's population of over thirty-two million is under the age of thirty. If the reforms are not successful by the time the oil runs out, the Kingdom will face serious challenges. MBS is focused on metrics and performance. In a September 2023 interview, he stated that he doesn't care about criticism regarding "sportswashing" as long as his strategy leads to the desired results, such as GDP growth. (Kosárová, 2020).

Incentives in Transport Sector

Riyadh Metro has officially launched by King Salman on November 27, 2024. It is a dreaming project by King Abdul Aziz for the Public transport in Riyadh. This metro system is designed to support the city's public transportation and it is a step towards the needs of people of Riyadh. The Riyadh metro is a very modern project that is offering affordable, comfortable and time-saving travel options for the residents. This system is consisting of six metro lines, 85 stations, 80 bus routes, 2860 bus stops, and 842 buses, and all these are connected to make easy commute across the city. These metro lines connect all the important places like ministries, universities, hospitals, shopping areas, and government buildings and it covers the area of 176 km.

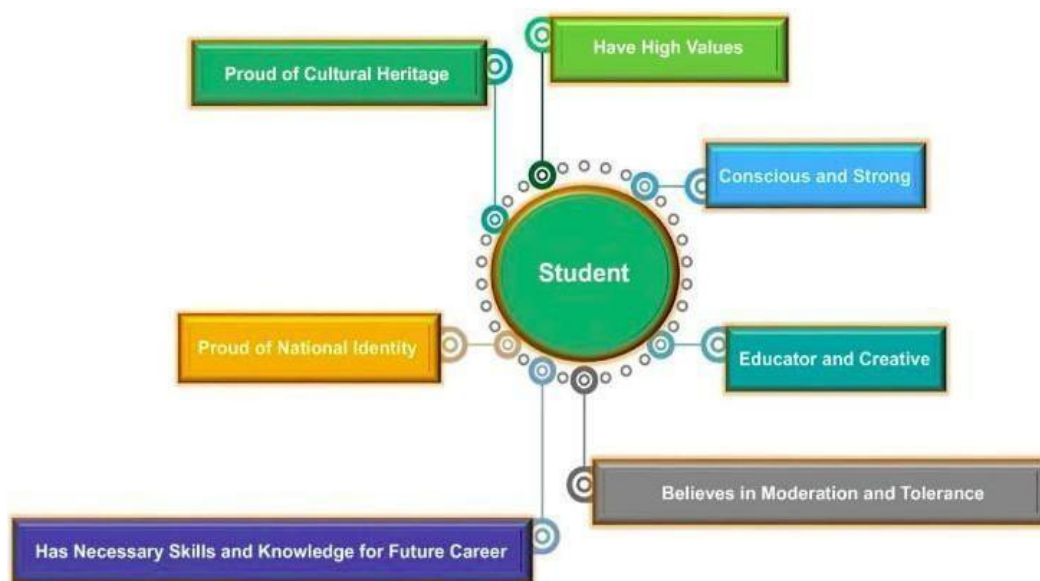
The stations are designed uniquely with modern architecture, providing fully air conditioning, internet access, passenger information systems and even there are some shops and parking available at some locations. This project aims to reduce traffic congestion and pollution by supporting people using more public transport rather than private cars. Currently, 90% of Riyadh residents totally rely on personal cars, as compared to just 12% in Japan and 30% in the UK. The metro aims to change the concept of using own cars and giving transport to 3.6 million passengers daily, and aiming to resolve the issues of city's long-standing traffic. This project is supporting Saudi Arabia's environmental goals and reducing carbon dioxide emissions from cars. The Riyadh metro was

creative thinking of King Salman about 15 years ago when he gave his idea to the late King Abdullah. His vision showed an understandable plan of city's growing needs of easy commute and the importance of advanced transport system. (Hafiz, 2024).

Education and Human Capital Diplomacy

Saudi Arabia no doubt is a multicultural society with a great rich history of diversity. Pilgrims and merchants from different regions travelled the Arabian Peninsula and contributed to environmental and cultural exchange. Saudi Arabia is a hub for workers from different countries who bring their values, culture and languages. Saudi Arabia is a home for Muslims who have various ethnic backgrounds, including Sunni, Shia and others. Diversity in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also includes differences in class, national origin, gender, ethnicity and individuals with special needs (Alzubaidi, Taubasi & Hawamdeh, 2019). The country's history has played a major role in shaping its education system. While during the Ottoman Empire, education was bound only to religious teaching in Mecca and Medina. Earlier, informal schools were introduced called *Katateeb* where children learned Quran and basic literacy. When King Abdul Aziz became the ruler of Saudi Arabia, education became more modern and organized. The Directorate of Education whom later became the Ministry of Education, generated a unified curriculum and set agenda for teachers. From the very beginning, Education in Saudi Arabia is free for Saudi students, but they made sure to have gender segregation from elementary to higher education in line with Islamic rules (Alzubaidi, Taubasi & Hawamdeh, 2019). During the period of 2006 and 2015, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia invested heavily in education through the Scholarship Program of King Abdullah. The aim behind this program was to give Saudi students the opportunity to study abroad, have global experience, and come back with valuable skills and knowledge to give benefit to country. The goal behind this all process was to prepare students for leadership roles and have growth personally and professionally (Alzubaidi, Taubasi & Hawamdeh, 2019). Then the turning point came and in 2016 Vision 2030 launched, a plan which has an aim to transform the country's economy and education system by the year 2030. This plan focusses to address challenges like a lack of creativity, critical thinking, and life skills among students. These challenges link to weaken the teacher training, outdated curriculums, and traditional teaching methods. Vision 2030 has come with the agenda of fostering values like respect, responsibility, creativity, and moderation while providing students with skills needed for future careers. Vision also highlights to improve education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to face the international standards (Alzubaidi, Taubasi & Hawamdeh, 2019). The Ministry of Education have ambition to train and prepare students to succeed globally. While local education only focuses on Saudi-specific knowledge, Vision 2030 has introduced broader curriculum that includes global perspectives, especially in humanities and social sciences.

Universities are focusing on introducing and cover more international topics, but still there is more effort needed to meet Vision 2030's goals. These initiatives consider Saudi Arabia's commitment to creating a modern, inclusive education system that supports its long-term growth plans (Alzubaidi, Taubasi & Hawamdeh, 2019).



Source: https://www.ijicc.net/images/vol12/iss8/12808_Aldegether_2020_E_R.pdf

Media and Humanitarian Diplomacy

Media and journalism play a crucial role in promoting peace by accurately representing each through both official and unofficial agencies. In the past three decades, the Kingdom has made significant progress in humanitarian aid, relief work, and fostering regional and international cooperation (Alkatheeri & Khan, 2019).

Saudi Arabia has a long history of providing humanitarian aid globally, helping those affected by crises. The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief), established in May 2015 under King Salman's guidance, has provided aid to various countries across four continents, working with local, regional, and international partners. Educational exchange programs have helped Saudi Arabia maintain its leadership in the Muslim and Arab world. These programs allow Saudi Arabia to share its values, norms, and culture with Arab, Muslim, and non-Muslim nations. The Kingdom has built many mosques and educational institutions worldwide. These exchange programs create interactions that lead to mutual understanding and respect for different cultures and norms (Cochrane, 2007).

Role of Ministry of Culture

In early 2021, the Ministry of Culture established the Cultural Development Fund (CDF), which is connected to the National Development Fund (NDF). This fund is part of Vision 2030 and aims to promote the growth and transformation of various cultural sectors in Saudi Arabia. According to CDF leader Badr bin Hussein Al-Zahrani, efforts are being made to boost Saudi art and culture, which is expected to increase the GDP by about \$1.2 billion (Konopka & Strykhotskyi, 2021). The Ministry of Culture has also launched initiatives to support the development of Saudi art, help artists, and encourage global cultural exchange. One of the first initiatives, introduced in 2019, was "cultural residence," which offered foreign artists the right to permanent residence in Saudi Arabia. In January 2020, the Al-Balad Art Residence Project was announced in Jeddah. This project is open to both Saudi and foreign artists, writers, and cultural managers. For six weeks, the artists can work on their own projects with the support of ATHR. By 2023, a unique museum of modern digital art called TeamLab Borderless Jeddah will be built in Jeddah by the Japanese company TeamLab. This museum will be the fourth of its kind worldwide, following similar interactive museums in Tokyo, Shanghai, and Macau. The opening of this museum is part of a campaign to promote Saudi Arabia's cultural values, helping to diversify its economy and create a more open image of the country as part of Vision 2030. Gallery, one of the leading contemporary art galleries in the Kingdom (Konopka & Strykhotskyi, 2021).

Women Empowerment

When Saudi Arabia first allowed gyms for women in 2017, 40-year-old Sara Rahimaldeen was one of the first to join. As a young mom of two children, she wanted to "regain her energy." Six years later, Sara is now a competitive athlete and works as a coach and personal trainer. "Now I'm changing people's lives just as my life was changed," she said. (Reuters, 2017). In 2017, when women were allowed to get driver's licenses, new opportunities opened up for female Saudi athletes. Two years later, Reema Juffali, the first Saudi woman to hold a racing license, participated in an international racing competition in the country (Arab News, 2022). In 2020, Saudi Arabia hosted its first professional international golf tournament, the Ladies European Tour, where Saudi women played alongside international female players. "Before we could drive, we had to go outside the city at four in the morning to run," Sara recalled. "It was so difficult to convince someone to take us." Now, the government organizes public marathons through the new triathlon federation, where men and women run in the streets together. The same year that local municipalities started issuing business licenses for women's gyms, the Education Ministry allowed physical education in schools for both girls and boys. Kevin Kerns, a former American tennis player who competed in the US Open, recently started teaching tennis at schools across Saudi Arabia. He began the tennis training program in thirty schools and expects to expand it to 290 schools this year, reaching over 70,000 kids. "Tennis is more than a sport. It teaches goal setting, how to work with others, and life lessons on winning and learning. We're teaching kids to engage in sports for a lifetime," explained Kevin (Ramachandran & Modongal, 2026).

Traditionally, Saudi society was suffering from violation of basic human rights, like ban on driving of women, they were not allowed to drive the car without mahram, but after recent shift, that change has welcomed by Saudi society. However, sudden change of westernize moderation is disbalancing the Saudi society. However, the economic factor will be very important because on the one hand, Muhammed Bin Salman is pursuing mega projects like NEOM city, and on the other hand, he needs to clarify his stand on Isreal and United States. And on this way their future will have clear picture. (Author conducted the interview of Dr Qandeel on 2nd December, 2024). The scale of Saudi Arabia's cultural transformation can be seen in the numbers: In 2019 alone, the country saw over 5,000 books translated into Arabic, 161 Saudi novels published, 11 Saudi universities offering fashion design programs, 101 Saudi-produced films, and 300 international awards won by Saudi theater groups participating abroad.

Sports diplomacy and Mega Events

Saudi Arabia is officially announced as the host of the FIFA 2034 world cup. Saudi Arabia declared its plan to bid for the 2034 FIFA World cup on October 4, 2023, and by the October, they sent an official to FIFA headquarters. Later that month, after Australia withdrew from race, Saudi Arabia became the only country bidding to host the tournament. Saudi Arabia will become the second Middle Eastern country to host the World cup after Qatar, who was the host in 2022. Saudi Arabia no doubt investing heavily in sports sector and this hosting will give a growing reputation to the Kingdom in the global sports (Obeid, 2024). According to the report released by FIFA Bid Evaluation, Saudi Arabia's bid earned the score of 419.8 out of 500, which highest technical score is given to the World Cup bid. This achievement was spotlighted by Saudi Press Agency (SPA). "Growing. Together," is Kingdom's campaign slogan, exhibit its vision and interest towards the event. Saudi Arabia has a master plan to host the world's first 48-teams FIFA World Cup in a single country. Kingdom has planned that matches will be held across 15 stadiums in five major cities and they are Riyadh, Jeddah, Khobar, Abha, and the futuristic city of NEOM. (Obeid, 2024). Saudi Arabia preferably using 15 stadiums for the 2034 FIFA World Cup, with eight in Riyadh, four in Jeddah, and one each in Abha, NEOM, and Al-Khobar. In Riyadh, the King Salman stadium is all set to host the opening and finale matches. Once it will be built, it will provide accommodation to more than 92,000 watchers, and the kingdom is working hard to make it largest venue for the event. Another remarkable stadium in Riyadh is the King Fahd Sports City Stadium known for its special fabric roof inspired by traditional Saudi tents. It can grasp almost 70,000 people and is among the

one of the suggested venues for the World cup. These stadiums show Saudi Arabia's dedication to create state-of-the-art facilities for the giant global event. (Obeid, 2024).

Soft Power and Saudi Foreign Policy

Under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has undergone a notable transformation characterized by a more proactive and multidimensional approach that integrates traditional security objectives with emerging soft power strategies. This shift reflects the broader reforms introduced through Saudi Vision 2030, which reposition foreign policy as a tool to support economic diversification, international reputation management, and long-term regime stability. While Saudi foreign policy has historically prioritized regime security and regional stability, the contemporary approach increasingly emphasizes diplomacy, cultural engagement, and global partnerships as complementary instruments of influence. In conceptual terms, this evolution aligns with the soft power framework advanced by Joseph Nye, which highlights the importance of attraction, credibility, and international legitimacy in shaping state behavior (Nye, 2004).

Traditionally, Saudi foreign policy has been closely linked to the political structure of the Kingdom, where the ruling Al Saud family plays a central role in decision-making across economic, religious, and security domains. Scholars argue that the primary objectives of Saudi foreign policy have consistently revolved around safeguarding regime survival, protecting territorial integrity, and maintaining leadership within the Islamic world (Nonneman, 2003). However, regional instability following the Arab Spring in 2011 exposed vulnerabilities in the Middle East and prompted Saudi policymakers to adopt more assertive and innovative strategies to preserve influence and stability (Del Miño & Martínez, 2019).

In response, the Saudi leadership recognized that traditional reliance on military power and financial assistance alone was insufficient in addressing complex regional challenges, thereby encouraging the integration of diplomatic and soft power tools into foreign policy.

A defining feature of Saudi foreign policy under Mohammed bin Salman has been the alignment of external relations with domestic modernization objectives. The successful implementation of Vision 2030 requires a stable regional environment, increased foreign investment, and enhanced global partnerships. Consequently, Saudi diplomacy has increasingly focused on conflict mediation, humanitarian assistance, and international cooperation as mechanisms for building credibility and fostering positive international perceptions (Borck, 2023). For example, Saudi Arabia has actively participated in diplomatic initiatives aimed at reducing regional tensions, including dialogue with neighboring states and efforts to facilitate peace negotiations in conflict-affected regions. These initiatives demonstrate how foreign policy has evolved from a primarily security-driven framework to one that incorporates soft power as a strategic resource.

In addition to diplomatic engagement, Saudi Arabia has expanded its use of religious and cultural dialogue as instruments of foreign policy. Institutions such as the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue and the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue have been established to promote tolerance, counter extremism, and encourage cooperation among diverse communities (Apostolov, 2024). These initiatives reflect a broader strategy to enhance Saudi Arabia's international image as a responsible and cooperative global actor, thereby strengthening its soft power credentials.

At the regional level, Saudi foreign policy under Mohammed bin Salman has combined assertive security measures with renewed diplomatic outreach. While the Kingdom has sought to counter perceived threats from regional rivals and maintain influence within the Gulf region, recent initiatives have demonstrated a growing emphasis on negotiation and normalization of relations. Efforts to restore diplomatic ties with regional actors and participate in multilateral dialogue illustrate a pragmatic shift toward stability-oriented diplomacy aimed at reducing conflict and fostering economic cooperation (Sager, 2025). Such developments underscore the increasing recognition that sustainable regional leadership depends not only on military capability but also on diplomatic credibility and international engagement.

Overall, the integration of soft power into Saudi foreign policy under Mohammed bin Salman reflects a broader transformation in the Kingdom's strategic outlook. By combining traditional security priorities with diplomatic, cultural, and economic initiatives, Saudi Arabia has repositioned foreign policy as a central instrument for achieving national development goals and enhancing global influence. This evolution demonstrates how soft power has become an essential component of Saudi Arabia's international strategy in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The evolution of Saudi Arabia's soft power strategy under Saudi Vision 2030 represents one of the most significant cases of state-led image transformation in contemporary international relations. The Kingdom's shift from a traditionally religiously anchored form of influence to a diversified, multidimensional soft power framework reflects both structural changes in the global system and internal imperatives of regime survival, economic diversification, and legitimacy maintenance. Historically, Saudi Arabia's soft power rested on three pillars: custodianship of Islam's holy sites, financial assistance to Muslim-majority states, and leadership within Islamic institutions. These instruments provided strong symbolic legitimacy, but their effectiveness has gradually diminished in a global environment increasingly shaped by media scrutiny, digital communication, and normative debates on governance and human rights.

In this context, the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman marks a decisive turning point in the Kingdom's strategic orientation. Vision 2030 redefined soft power not merely as cultural or religious attraction but as a comprehensive state project integrating economic reform, social transformation, and global branding. A key analytical observation is the institutionalization and commercialization of soft power under Vision 2030. Cultural diplomacy, tourism expansion, sports mega-events, entertainment industries, and infrastructure megaprojects have become central instruments of external projection. These initiatives are not isolated reforms but coordinated components of a broader nation-branding strategy designed to reposition Saudi Arabia as a modern, investment-friendly, and globally integrated state.

The expansion of Saudi soft power also reveals a deeper strategic linkage between foreign policy and regime security. While the Kingdom continues to prioritize regional stability, territorial integrity, and leadership in the Islamic world, these goals are now pursued through a hybrid approach combining coercive tools with diplomatic engagement and cultural outreach. Saudi foreign policy has therefore evolved into a dual-track strategy: assertive in security matters but increasingly adaptive in diplomatic and reputational domains. This hybridization demonstrates that soft power is no longer a supplementary tool but a structural necessity for maintaining both international legitimacy and domestic stability.

Nevertheless, the Saudi soft power transformation is not without contradictions. On one hand, Vision 2030 projects an image of openness, modernization, and reform. On the other hand, regional conflicts, governance concerns, and persistent international scrutiny of political rights create tensions that limit the full effectiveness of this rebranding effort. This tension highlights a central analytical paradox: soft power cannot be fully manufactured through economic investment alone; it also depends on credibility, consistency, and normative legitimacy in international perception. In other words, image-building strategies may enhance visibility, but long-term attraction requires structural trust.

In conclusion Saudi Arabia's case illustrates that in the twenty-first century, soft power is not only about attraction but also about credibility, coherence, and the ability to sustain a compelling national narrative in a highly competitive global environment.

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