

**Saudi Arabia's Modernization and de-Wahhabization
Process: Impact on Saudi-Pakistan Relations**



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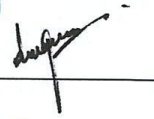
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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses and explains the modernization and de-Wahhabization Saudi Arabia is undergoing to achieve the goals set out in Saudi Vision 2030. The thesis discusses the Saudi reform and reinvention under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in terms of modernization theory, traditionalism, Islamism, and the way these are expected to impact Saudi foreign policy especially towards Pakistan. The Saudi state is deeply rooted in Islamic and tribal traditionalism and conservatism, and how it manages to uphold its traditions and values as it evolves into its Vision 2030 version can lead to drastic changes in Saudi behavior in the international arena. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan share a historic alliance based on Islamic attachment and reverence, defense and security deals, and economic assistance. Since initiating modernization reforms, Saudi Arabia has changed certain policies and patterns that existed before as a part of its bilateral relations with Pakistan. These changes are expected to create new avenues in the Pakistan-Saudi bilateral relationship.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Modernization, de-Wahhabization, Traditionalism, Islamism, Vision 2030, Pakistan

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia's current modernization is focused on decreasing Saudi dependency on oil revenues and developing public sector services which include health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. The most visible signs of modernization within Saudi Arabia are present in its public life and tourism. The Vision 2030, introduced by Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), has allowed and pushed Saudi society to open up, especially to attract and integrate with the foreign world.

It was following the death of the former King Abdullah in 2015 that the "new generation" of Saudi Arabia was brought into focus through an unprecedented change in the Saudi royal chain of succession. The chain of succession was shifted from the sons of King Abdulaziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia, to his grandsons by King Salman's royal decree ("Saudi King Replaces Crown Prince in Cabinet Reshuffle," 2015). Under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, a new vision for the country was laid out which centered on a "moderate" and "modern" image of the country. This meant developing a soft power policy which promoted the practice of "moderate Islam" and the fulfillment of the Vision 2030 aimed at bringing about modern internal reforms. At an investor conference in Riyadh in 2017 the Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman stated that, "[w]e only want to go back to what we were: a moderate Islam that is open to the world, open to all religions". He went on to expand that the generation of young Saudis he is a part of "will not waste 30 years of our lives in dealing with extremist ideas. We will destroy them today" (Batrawy, 2017). It is pertinent to understand how Mohammad Bin Salman defines "moderate" Islam. There is a significant degree of relativity when defining a set of beliefs, ideologies, or practices as "moderate" or "extreme". Mohammad Bin Salman places the idea of a "moderate" Islam for Saudi Arabia in relation with the revolutionary Islam that defined the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The Crown Prince stated in *The Guardian* that Saudi Arabia and its Islamic identity had been hijacked by extremists since 1979, as the Saudi leadership of the time did not know how to respond to the Iranian Revolution and so they strengthened the ultraconservatives in the country (Batrawy, 2017). Along with this, Mohammad Bin Salman also contests the legitimacy of "Wahhabism" stating that this version of Islamic belief was promoted by extremists who opposed the development and modernization of Saudi Arabia, and by the Islamic Republic of Iran which aimed to alienate Saudi Arabia from the rest of the Muslim world using the term

“Wahhabism” and widespread claims that Saudi Arabia had created an entirely different sect of Islam for itself (TIME, 2018). He goes on to clarify that Saudi Arabia does not adhere to any one sect of Islam and that the plurality of sects is encouraged in Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince highlights that in Saudi Arabia “we live as Saudis and there is no differentiation”. These statements have led scholars to conclude that the “moderate” Islam which Mohammad Bin Salman is working to promote in Saudi Arabia has a strong underlying message of nationalism (Blin, 2016).

The “moderate” Islam that Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman envisions Saudi Arabia to return to is that of the pre-1979 and Iranian Revolution times, as he believes at that time Saudi Arabia under the leadership of the late King Faysal was making efforts to open up the society and restrain the power religious authority had. However, there are contesting arguments on this rationale as a distinct difference between the pre-1979 Saudi Arabia and a post-1979 cannot be easily identified (*Mohammed Bin Salman’s Saudi Arabia: A Deeper Look - MEDC, 2024*). To return to the “original” Saudi identity, Mohammad Bin Salman sets out drastic social and financial reforms in the Vision 2030. These are meant to open up Saudi Arabia to the rest of the world in terms of social values as well as investment and economic opportunities by redefining the role Islam plays in Saudi public and state life. The Vision 2030 developed under the Council of Economic and Development Affairs proposes advancement in digital infrastructure to help widen the labour market for Saudi youth which in turn supports and reinforces social reforms.

It is to be noted that the ongoing Saudi modernization or de-Wahhabization does not occur in isolation from broader Saudi interests, which include geopolitical ambitions, internal politics, diplomatic relations etc. Saudi Arabia’s progress in terms of vision 2030 or modernization relies strongly on international goodwill which will translate into willingness to invest. In recent years Saudi Arabia has had to navigate certain goodwill failures which raised serious questions about the Saudi path to modernization. For instance, the arrests of royal family members, businessmen, activists, and clerics in 2017 were justified by the Saudi state as an anti-corruption effort initiated by Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (News, 2017). This also resulted in a diplomatic rift between Saudi Arabia and Canada when Canada raised concern over arrested female activists. Diplomatic relations and trade were cancelled between Saudi Arabia and Canada (Cecco, 2018). Saudi role in the Yemen conflict has been under scrutiny and condemnation by human rights groups (BBC, 2023). However the most damaging incident for Saudi image was the Khashoggi

assassination which occurred at the Saudi embassy in Istanbul (Jazeera, 2018). In the light of this recent history and the ongoing peace talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran mediated by China which can have the potential to settle the Yemen conflict, it can be concluded that the Vision 2030 creates a web of changes that interlink domestic politics, international politics, socio-religious changes, economic reforms etc.

The ongoing modernization and de-Wahhabization of Saudi Arabia offer us a chance to study how tradition and religion are being reconciled with efforts to modernize a state. Tradition and modernity are commonly conceptualized as being contrary to one another, with religion holding negligible role in a modern society (Sultan Tepe, 2008). However, this understanding of the two notions seems insufficient when analyzing Middle East's politics and policies. In the case of this thesis, we perceive Saudi Arabia to be a state in the process of modernization with a robust economy but continuing to hold on to its traditional values and identity. Saudi Arabia was a result of an agreement between religious clergy and ambitious statesmen. How Saudi Arabia manages its deep-rooted interrelation between religion and politics (state) as it modernizes, is an ongoing case study that can contribute to the existing discourse on the age-old debate of modernization, secularization, and religion. This thesis analyses and assesses Saudi Arabia's modernization and de-Wahhabization through its ongoing reforms. These reforms can be put under the umbrella of post-Islamism that encourages a practice of moderate and inclusive Islam (Sinani, 2022), instead of the political Islam Saudi Arabia had been following.

Purpose, aim, and research question

This thesis aims to study the Saudi modernization reforms which have lead to the Saudi state distancing itself from its Wahhabi identity and attaching itself with a nationalistic identity. These internal reforms have also shifted Saudi state behaviour in the international world. The study will attempt to contextualise Saudi modernization and de-wahhabisation vis-à-vis the bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. We will attempt to relate modernization, traditionalism, and religion not in polarity but as principles that in certain situations can operate in tandem and support each other. The thesis will attempt to expand on the following research questions:

- *How is the ongoing modernization and de-wahhabisation in Saudi Arabia progressing as part of the Vision 2030?*

- *How does Saudi Arabia's modernization and de-Wahhabisation which is a part of the Vision 2030 play out in Saudi-Pakistan relations?*

Disposition

Following the present introduction to the topic that gives the reader a starting point and background while also highlighting the research questions that have been framed as the base of this study, the thesis proceeds onto the literature review in Chapter 2. The literature review goes into relevant detail on the political, social, and religious background of Saudi Arabia. It also discusses the literature that has studied the changes taking place in Saudi Arabia over the last few years. Chapter 3 lays out the theoretical framework that focuses on modernization theory, foreign policy analyses (FPA) and transformational leadership. It also includes the methodology which helps structure the research. Chapter 4 discusses the findings and analyses of the research in alignment with the theoretical framework and the literature review of the thesis. The final chapter 5 will conclude the thesis.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

From tribes to a Saudi State

The creation of Saudi Arabia in the 20th century is distinct from the other states in its neighborhood. It was never under colonial rule and was instead created out of a local contest in the Arabian Peninsula. Before the creation of the Third Saudi State, which is the present-day Saudi Arabia, the Al-Saud family secured an alliance with Muhammad ibn abd al Wahhab and his religious movement in 1792 (Mabon, 2018). Many scholars at the time did not support Wahhab's interpretation of Islam (David Dean Commins, 2009). His doctrine stated that the Muslims of his time had gone away from the teachings of Islam and that their practices had pushed them outside the pale of Islam. This message was not received well by religious scholars from Mecca and other prominent Islamic learning centers of the time, and resulted in widespread refutations of his teachings (Traboulsi, 2002). They deemed Wahhab's religious interpretation and doctrine to be errant and questioned his qualifications to be able to comment on matters of Islam and its theology (Ibid).

Ibn Saud had formed strong tribal relations in the Arabian Peninsula through multiple marriages into various tribes allowing him to consolidate some form of political power (Mabon, 2018). However, these marriages and new familial links with the tribes did not ensure a sense of collective national identity. To turn the tribal support into a politically cohesive identity, Al-Saud decided to utilize the earlier alliance between his family and Muhammad ibn abd al Wahhab to provide religious legitimacy to the Al-Saud political rule (Ibid). Islam, specifically Wahhabism, became woven into the state fabric of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi national identity. Other factors also added weight to the Islamic legitimacy of the Al-Saud, especially within Muslim communities outside of Saudi Arabia, such as the presence of the two holiest sites of Islam, Makkah and Madina, within the borders of Saudi Arabia.

Wahhabism; the Saudi identity

Islam has not only been the central identity of the Saudi state but also the basis of all its state institutions. The Saudi state institutions exist within the religious and clergy sphere. The strongest overlap of the religious and the state instruments is in the legal sphere of Saudi Arabia. The courts in Saudi Arabia run on Islamic sharia with no recourse to state law. Until recently "religious police" had strong policing power in the state. Saudi public life has been centered on religion

whether it be media or education. The oil wealth had so far helped support and withhold these structures instead of revolutionizing them.

Saudi Arabia's state-sponsored Salafi Islam is referred to as Wahhabism, albeit not by the followers themselves as they claim there is no other true interpretation of Islam apart from the Islam they follow (Commins, 2015). Salafism basis its belief on the strict and rigid interpretation of Quran and Sunnah, the foundational sources of the Islamic way of life. The interpretation followed by Salafists is claimed to be the most authentic version of Islam by them as it is based on the earlier generations of Muslims who are referred to as "salaf al sahih" (Sinani, 2022).

Wahhabism morphed into a movement that deeply enshrined itself within the Saudi state and society. Wahhabism and the Saudi state grew in tandem, reinforcing the other to the point that Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia took an institutional form. Wahhabi scholars and officials were given the status of civil servants of Saudi Arabia further legitimizing their authority and power in the eyes of the Saudi citizens (Brown, 2021). As Saudi Arabia developed into the world's major oil producing and exporting country, the financial reward from that was used to spread the message of Wahhabi Islam across Saudi borders (Nabil Mouline, 2014). Saudi Arabia gained the status of the patron of Salafism around the globe erecting religious institutions devoted to the preaching of Wahhabism (Farquhar, 2016). The classical Wahhabist doctrine, that had been more prominent before the creation of the Third Saudi state, had to compromise some elements of its teachings under the rule of Abd al-Aziz. Before the formation of the modern Saudi Arabia, the Third Saudi state Wahhabist scholars were confident that their rulings on interaction with foreign countries, especially non-Muslim and non-Wahhabist countries, would be upheld by King Abd al-Azziz and that the true Islamic State of Saudi Arabia would not host such embassies or flags. However, under the rule of King Abd al-Aziz and the beginning of the new Saudi state it became evident that the King was working towards adopting the nation-state model and wanted his country to participate in international politics (Cole Michael Bunzel, 2018). King Abd al-Aziz did assure the Wahhabist clerics that there would be no objection to the Wahhabist doctrine, but he also did not implement the clerics' directives on expelling the Shia Muslims of Saudi Arabia's Al-Ahsa region, nor were there any barriers to non-Muslim foreign explorers entering Saudi Arabia to develop its oil reserves (Ibid). These incidents laid the foundation of the Saud and Wahhab relationship in context of Saudi Arabia; the Wahhabist clerics would overlook certain policies by the state that went against their

doctrine, but would enjoy the benefits of being the state religion of Saudi Arabia and providing the Al-Saud with religious legitimacy.

Contesting interpretations

For the adherents of Salafists, there is no other correct interpretation of Islam. However, this belief is not unique to the Salafists as almost every variant of Islam claims to be the right variant. The most critiqued core belief of Salafism is the characterization of what constitutes to be a Muslim. As per Salafist belief, any Muslim who visits graves with the intention of seeking blessings and prays for intercession by the prophets and saints has committed shirk and is deserving of excommunication (takfir) (Sinani, 2022). This Wahhabi belief has aggravated sectarianism and violence as entire communities belonging to various Islamic sects have been labelled as “disbelievers no better than the pagans of pre-Islamic Mecca” (Ibid). For Salafists, Muslims of other madhabs and sects bring innovation (bidaa) to the religion and are thus not true followers of Islam (Ibid). As per Salafism, its followers are required to show animosity to such Muslims and prevent them from preaching their version of Islam (Ibid). The “sahwa” which was a movement born out of a nexus between Salafism and Islamism was responsible for the Wahhabization of Saudi society. It took stronghold in Saudi educational institutes which helped it consolidate its influence over the new generation of Saudis (Ménoret, 2020). This generation grew up to be critical of anything un-Islamic in Saudi society as well as Saudi political sphere. Especially after Saudi Arabia hosting American troops against Iraq in 1990, the Sahwa called for an Islamic reform all the way up to the royal family. The Sahwa claimed that Saudi Arabia must align its foreign policy with Islamic ideals if it was to be a true Islamic state. Sahwa scholars went as far as to say that Saudi Arabia had no reason to exist if it did not implement Islamic ideals in matters of state (Mansoor Jassem Alshamsi, 2014).

While the Sahwa worked on bringing about political reform based on Islamic ideals, other groups formed that deemed it their responsibility to fight for the Islamic ideals even if it meant fighting against Muslim governments they considered as corrupt (Sinani, 2022). These groups also engaged in the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. One of those groups was Al Qaeda and in early 2000s al Qaeda took up armed struggle against Saudi Arabia (Thomas Hegghammer, 2011). The Salafi belief of excommunication of fellow Muslims for not following authentic Islam was the driving force behind the opposition faced by the Saudi state from Sahwa and al Qaeda (Nedza, 2015). By allying with the US, Saudi Arabia went against one of the foundational pillars of

Salafism, *al wala wal bara*, which commands Muslims to show allegiance to fellow Muslim brothers and show enmity towards disbelievers. This, in the eyes of *sahwa* and al Qaeda meant that Saudi Arabia had given allegiance to disbelievers and shown enmity to fellow Muslims (Bunzel, 2018). Following the Arab spring and the emergence of ISIS, it became increasingly necessary for Saudi state to distance itself from the Salafist beliefs of *takfir* (excommunication of Muslims) and how *takfir* was used to legitimize violence happening at the hands of violent Islamist groups who claimed to be the true beacons of Salafism. Militant organizations which were all proponents of the Salafi theology like the ISIS, al Qaeda, Ahrar al Sham fought not only non-Salafists but also each other (Ibid). This has resulted in distrust of the cause behind Salafism, which was to unite all Muslims under one interpretation of Islam.

For many Saudi citizens, it is during the 1960s and 1970s that the religious reigns within the country tightened and the current state institutions and practices really took root. These changes were a response to the rising religiosity, often manifesting in violent extremist ways, around Saudi Arabia. Notably the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Iranian revolution, etc. Saudi response to this was to place stringent religious control within its borders and fund foreign religious activities too (Abdullah al-Gharsan, 2020). It was the seizure of the grand mosque of Makkah that firmly strengthened the religious power over the public policy in Saudi Arabia (Ibid). As these re-modeled institutions and practices were a political response, they do not hold a historical or traditional relevance to the Saudi state. Therefore, trying to reverse these changes is an attempt to go back to a more authentic Saudi identity and culture (Brown, 2021).

Wahhabism has been a key influence in shaping the country's identity. At present the kingdom is moving towards constructing a national identity that is independent of its Wahhabi identity. The changes happening in Saudi Arabia are not just focused on curating its national identity but also within the Wahhabi ideology. Post-Salafism, the current period, is a reactionary movement to Islamist militancy that has seen an increase over the past decades (Christopher Pooya Razavian, 2018). The Saudi public sphere was under threat to the influence of the *Sahwa* movement, of which the defining feature was opposition to the Saudi monarchy. Post-Salafism and Post-Islamism are both movements in search of a reformed version of what it means to be Salafi or Islamist. In particular, re-invent Salafism and Islamism in exclusion from the links between these ideologies and Islamic militancy. The emergence of ISIS pushed forth the need for revisionism inside Salafi

beliefs and Salafi authority (Bunzel & Bunzel, 2016). ISIS claimed to be the true image of Salafism, a serious challenge to the similar claim held by Saudi religious authority (Ibid). Salafism, more accurately Wahhabism, had already been the subject of much scrutiny both domestically and internationally following the 9/11 attacks. Connections were drawn between the similarities of ISIS's ideological thought and the Saudi Salafi thought. This created an environment of pressure on Saudi clerics, especially, to publicly disassociate not only Saudi Arabia but also Salafism from ISIS. Many in Saudi Arabia agreed with scholars from around the Arab world that called for allowance of traditional Sunni Islam as alternative interpretation and revisionism of Salafism in the light of political and theological turmoil as a result of the Arab Spring and ISIS (Brown, 2021; Sinani, 2022). These factors set the foundations that initiated a series of changes within the Saudi Kingdom in both political and religious spheres of the Kingdom (Sinani, 2022).

[Saudi efforts to distance from extremist label](#)

Religious moderation became the new motto of the Saudi kingdom backed both by its political arm and the state's religious arm. In the years immediately after the 9/11 attacks, King Abdullah categorically cleared his country's stance when it came to terrorism and extremism. By being a signatory of the Amman Declaration 2004, and later as the host of the Mecca Declaration 2006, King Abdullah stood with those that considered takfir (declaration of excommunication), core principle of Salafism/ Wahhabism, as the driving forces behind violent terrorism and political chaos in the region (Sheline, 2019). Whereas earlier the Saudi minister of religious affairs, a descendent of the Wahhab family, Shaykh Salih Al al-Shaykh preached these core principles, was now seen condemning the same principles. In 2003, another hallmark event took place in Mecca, National Dialogue, a religious conference arranged by the government where not only Saudi Salafi scholars but also Saudi Sufi and Shia scholars were invited. Certain core principles of Salafism were once again questioned for being responsible for encouraging violent terrorism. Not only did the government create an inclusionary platform for non-Salafi scholars, it also non-aligned itself with one single brand of Islam by allowing public critique of Salafism/Wahhabism at the conference (Lacroix, 2005).

Over the years, Saudi Arabia made efforts to curb the threat of extremism from within its society by controlling the religious sphere that the public engaged in. The state-controlled religious forums that had the capacity to issue "fatwas" (Islamic legal rulings on matters), monitored and shut down websites that provided religious discourse. By 2010, only the state-controlled Council of Senior

Scholars was authorized to issue fatwas (Aloudh, 2018). The government also created a space of mutual consideration for religious groups that were loyal in their support of the royal family, some Salafi groups and also some Sufi and Shia groups in the country that had never before been extended this liberty (Lacroix, 2011).

Highlighting national history and celebration

The most obvious changes come in the form of social freedoms that were granted over the past few years. These changes were outright “liberal” and “secular” to the more conservative Islamist opponents of the Saudi government. New art and educational programs were curated for the Saudi society that so far had been prohibited and discouraged under the Wahhabi teachings (Meijer, 2010). For Saudi Arabia, Post-Salafism signifies ongoing changes in Saudi policies especially those related to public life. This shift has been in the works since the 1990’s but only now the effects have become more visible. Earlier the state response to threat of Islamist militancy and opposition was to imprison significant persons connected to the causes, without much response in policy works or state affairs (Lacroix, 2011). A process of “saudization” or “de-wahaabization” was initiated which aimed to create a stronger national identity for Saudi Arabia that was based more on secular aspects of its history. The aim was to highlight the al-Saud in the historical narrative and separate their accomplishment in creating Saudi Arabia from the Wahhabi movement (Madawi Al-Rasheed, 2021). Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia started commemorating its National Day which was once not considered to be a “celebratory occasion” as per strict Wahhabi ideals. In 2022, Saudi Arabia announced the Founding Day which would commemorate first Saudi state established in 1727. Up till now the political narrative had established 1742 as the beginning of the present day Saudi Arabia when King Saud made the historic alliance with Sheikh Mohammed ibn Abdulwahhab (Alamer, 2022). The commemoration of the Saudi Founding Day, since 2022, now acknowledges the seventeen years before the alliance between King Saud and Sheikh Abdul Wahhab, which as per the Saudi Historical School are too significant to ignore. The announcement of the Foundation Day is viewed by many as a political move in regards to Saudi Arabia’s attempts to identity itself without the labels of al Wahhab. This new founding day is meant to signify that the first beginnings of the Saudi state preceded the alliance between al-Saud and al-Wahhab (Ibid). It is the current Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) who has become the face of Saudi Arabia’s “modernization” and “de-Wahhabization”, however, these changes have been simmering for over three decades (Blin, 2021). MBS in a televised interview

stated that he was under no obligation to follow just the teachings of al-Wahhab, implying that he was open to more pluralistic interpretations of Islam (Al Arabiya English, 2021).

Lifting of strict social controls

The most popular features of Saudi Arabia's modernization have been the changes in its public sphere such as women being allowed to drive, opening of cinemas, music concerts, sports and entertainment events with no strict gender segregation protocols. These changes signify that religious control over the Saudi public sphere and society is being curtailed and restricted (Mouline, 2018). For many, these steps clearly oppose Wahhabi norms and values that have till now prevailed in the Saudi way of life.

The interdependence between the Saudi state and the clerics is now being used as a leverage by the Saudi state to push the clerics and their religious approaches to evolve in order to meet the Saudi states "modernization" goals. The new vision for the Saudi state is to be perceived as "moderate" and "open" in order for it to integrate with non-Muslim nations successfully (Brown, 2021).

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

To study how these changes may potentially impact the bilateral-ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, it is important to analyze the links between the two countries based on their shared religious-social values. The creation of Pakistan set forth the commitment to nurture mutual and cooperative ties with all Muslim states. It is enshrined in the constitution of Pakistan that, 'the State shall endeavor to preserve and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic unity' (*Ministry of Foreign Affairs – MOFA*, 2018). Over the years, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have cultivated ties that vary from cultural, economic, and strategic areas (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2020). The most visible area of engagement is the vast number of Pakistanis that make pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia for Hajj and Umrah (Ali, 2017). This pilgrimage is a manifestation of a deeper connection that Muslims across the globe feel with Saudi Arabia as it houses the two holiest sites of Islam. Saudi Arabia has also propagated its version of Islam in Pakistan, especially since the 1980's. Saudi Arabia funded madrassahs, constructed mosques, and provided religious material to help support the preaching of Salaafi/Wahaabi Islam (Weinbaum & Khurram, 2014). This movement took place in the backdrop of intense political environment in the larger context of the cold war and the Soviet-Afghan war (Ibid). The Faisal Mosque in

Islamabad, considered a national landmark, was also built in honour of the late King Faisal of Saudi Arabia with Saudi funding (Ibid).

Barelvi and Deoband Islam in Pakistan

The two most visible and common branches of Islam are Sunni Islam and Shi'ite Islam, and within these two divides there are numerous ways people practice their own version of Islam (Svanberg & Westerlund, 1999). Islam varies from individuals to individuals in what it constitutes to mean as a set of beliefs and system and how those individuals interact with those beliefs and system (el-Zein, 1977). Pakistan is a Sunni majority country which is further divided into two significant branches, the Barelvi sunnis and the Deoband sunnis. These two branches were conceived as a type of reactionary movement to the British colonial power (Svanberg & Westerlund, 1999).

Many beliefs and practices within the Barelvi branch reflect the cultural and traditional elements of the sub-continent, while the Deoband branch, influenced by the teachings of the Saudi Ibn Wahhab, foresakes all cultural and traditional elements in efforts to practice a pure Islam (Svanberg & Westerlund, 1999). The Barelvi branch derives its name from its founder Ahmed Raza Barelvi, who founded this branch through his institution Dar Ul Ulum Manzar Islam in 1904 to oppose the Deoband movement (Ahmad, 2008). Raza's teachings combined the traditions of the subcontinent within the framework of Islam to reflect the pluralistic realities of the region. Religious and ethnic communities lived in a continuous borrowing and overlapping of each other's beliefs and traditions (Alvi, 1996). Barelvi Muslims commemorate special Islamic dates and events through traditional and folk customs (Ahmad, 2008), such as qawwalis and naats; a traditional genre of music that is written to honour qualities of God, the Prophets, Islam, and ethics and morality. They also place high regard on celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birth as per the Islamic date of 12th Rabiulawal which is another key characteristic of Barelvi Islam that puts it at odds with Deobands (Ibid). Barelvi also believe in intercession and blessings from the "awliya" (sufi saints) as mediation between them and God (Ibid). The burial places of such awliya are turned into shrines which are visited by the masses to seek blessings and pay respect.

The Deoband Islam in Pakistan was founded in 1867 as a movement against the British colonialists (Ahmad, 2008). The aim of the Deoband movement was to create a Muslim identity free from all cultural non-Islamic influences and the threat of colonialism of culture. This branch of Islam evolved to reflect the Wahhabi Islam followed in Saudi Arabia (Ibid). Like the Wahhabi Islam,

the Deoband Islam and the Ahl-e-Hadith Islam, which is a closer version to Wahhabi Islam than Deoband Islam, wanted to replicate the version of Islam in the sub-continent that was followed in the times of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (Svanberg & Westerlund, 1999). It was the Deoband movement that influenced Mawlana Mawdudi to create a socio-political party in 1941 to strengthen Muslims against the British Colonialists in India (Vali, 1994). The party, called the Jamaat-i-Islami, was based on Deoband Islamic ideals and is the most prominent religio-political party in Pakistan today (Ahmad, 2008). This party engages in da'waa (Islamic preaching) as well as social and political engagements. It has set up organized institutions all over Pakistan to educate Pakistani men and women on Islam as per Mawdudi's teachings and offer them employment opportunities within the Jamaat-i-Islami.

The reason that the Deoband school and the Ahl-e-Hadith school have found acceptance within Pakistan is that even though these variants of Islam claim that they are free from any cultural or traditional influences, it is the cultural codes, which are understood as 'extant stock of meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths, narratives, and the like' (Benford and Snow, 2000), within the Pakistani society that open up avenues of acceptance amongst the people towards the Deoband and Ahl-e-Hadith school. Their adherents do not view these belief systems in isolation from the culture they live in but rather see them as accommodating and accepting of certain cultural values and beliefs that already exist in the society (Ahmad, 2008). This is referred to as frame resonance in the social movement theory (Benford and Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1994) which posits that greater the frame resonance the more people accept the discourse as it seems to align with the values and norms that are already a part of their society and culture (Quintan Wiktorowicz, 2012, pp. 1–33). Belief in God, His last Prophet, sanctity of the word of Quran, modesty, enjoining the good and forbidding the evil are all part of the environment Pakistanis grow up in.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ongoing Saudi modernization offers us a case study to critically analyze and add to the existing modernization theory. Like other theories formulated during the period of decolonization, the modernization theory is highly influenced by western experiences and standards. The modernization theory by Whitman Rostow offers set standards which measure the modernization level of a state and suggestions to achieve further industrial modernization in accordance with the modernization level a state is at. However, these standards fail to take into account the relativity of modernization and how non-western states might have differing understandings and standards for modernization. Fangjun's addition to the modernization theory helps to bridge the lack of relativity by implying that modernity and traditionalism are not polar concepts but rather can supplement each other and coexist. This helped broaden the concept of modernization to include not just western ideals of modernization but also non-western ones. The current ongoing modernization in Saudi Arabia is highly economic in nature and works towards centralization of power towards the al-Saud instead of any form of democratization that is an important principle in most defining standards of modernization. In the context of Saudi Arabia and centralization of power, at the inception of Saudi Arabia this was necessary to balance the tribal forms of power. The centralization of power helped transform a tribal system to a "modern" statehood.

In this thesis we will also attempt to look at the Vision 2030 and the ensuing reforms and policies aimed at Saudi modernization and de-wahhabisation through foreign policy analysis (FPA).

Every state's foreign policy is curated according to the state's own perception of the international system. As per Frankel (1963), a state's actions, reactions, and inactions make up its foreign policy. There is a substantial overlap between foreign policy and public policy. A way to differentiate between the two is by identifying the junction of international politics and domestic public policy as foreign policy has to take into account the international context (Rosenau, 1980). However, a clear distinction between public policy and foreign policy is becoming increasingly difficult to determine. It is more accurate to view the two as mutually reinforcing. As foreign policy furthers a state's interests, it has also come to include matters such as domestic economy, health, energy, human capital etc. which come under the umbrella of non-traditional security (Buzan et al., 1998). Foreign policy has become increasingly multi-sectorial which focuses on all aspects such as

promotion of cultural diversity, protection of human rights, environmental conservation to name a few. Foreign policy analysis (FPA) takes into account the interaction between different actors and the environment they operate in such as the international context, distribution of power between states, and other transnational stakeholders. The state's domestic dynamics and decision-making processes also impact the FPA (Organski, 1967). Foreign policy and subsequently its analysis consists of multiple variables ranging from social structures to a leader's personality, institutional architecture and the bureaucratic politics behind them, and also media portrayal domestically and internationally. There is no singular theoretical model or methodological approach to FPA. However, the accuracy of the FPA can be judged based on how integrative the analysis was, whether the individuals, groups, and institutions which drive the success of foreign policy outcomes were sufficiently included (Ibid). A generalizable theory cannot holistically explain the unique features and complexity of the real world (Sil & Katzenstein, 2023). FPA needs to take into account various subnational factors which include but are not limited to personality of government leaders, social groups, bureaucracy etc. The inclusion of these factors in FPA is necessary as they provide vital information about the state's behavior which is conditioned by political/cultural values, economic development, and leader's perception or worldview. The approach towards FPA is ever evolving and varies across times and contexts. The breakdown of the Soviet Union in the 90's brought to light the impact agents/leaders can play in the international system. A change in the structure of the international system can be better understood by studying the leaders of the time. Morgenthau (2005) points out that the strength of the key persons in terms of strategic intelligence and charisma are important variables in state behavior. In recent years, individual level of analysis has become an important part in FPA (Peterson & Miller, 2024). Expanding on Kissinger's emphasis on personalities being responsible for making a difference in history, many consider it reductive to ignore the place on individuals in FP (Byman & Pollack, 2001). All those capable of making state level decisions, such as heads of state and government leaders, generals, parliamentarians, advisers, and ministers must be included in the FPA (Smith 2004). The kind of impact an individual can have on foreign policy or state behavior can vary in different circumstances. Certain factors that can affect the individuals influence on the foreign policy can include institutional or political capacity to influence FP based on the centralization of authority in the state. Unique personal traits of the individual that determine the willingness of the individual to exert influence can also play a role in the individuals influence on FP. Unforeseen

political opportunities can also arise from crisis situations like natural disasters, terrorist attacks, cross-border skirmishes etc. that create space for decision makers or state leaders to showcase personal strength and commitment. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it is futile to comment on Saudi Arabia's changing dynamics without considering the face of these changes, Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), the current Crown Prince. The strong centralization of power in Saudi Arabia, especially under the de facto rule of MBS allows us to better understand these changes through the transformational leadership theory. Burns (1978) describes transformational leadership theory as "the distinction between transactional leaders, who attempt to satisfy the current needs of followers by focusing attention on exchanges, and transformational leaders, who attempt to raise the needs of followers and promote dramatic changes of individuals, groups, and organizations" (Yammarino et al., 1993). Transformational leaders influence followers and ultimately an organization as a whole to bring about change in the overall behaviors, attitudes, values, and norms (Marenee et al., 2017). These leaders exhibit charisma, inspirational leadership, intellectual stimulation, and are considerate of the needs of their followers (Dubinsky et al., 1995). A transformational leader makes an accurate assessment of the followers and creates appropriate pathways for them to increase their participation in order to efficiently fulfill the leader's vision (Savovic, 2017; Woods, 2019). MBS was crowned Crown Prince by his father, King Salman, despite there being a number of older princes who were far more experienced. However, it was the grit MBS had showcased in the years leading up to King Abdullah's death that compelled the subsequent King Salman to ascend MBS next in line to the throne. Hubbard points out that unlike other princes MBS had barely spent time abroad, neither for studying nor vacationing, and this gave him a unique leverage over others in terms of being deeply aware of his Saudi society (Hubbard, 2021). Soon into power, MBS launched an ambitious Vision 2030 in order to socially and politically integrate Saudi Arabia with the rest of the global world and subsequently turn the Middle East into the next Europe, as he is recorded to have stated himself (Kane & Ben Gasseem, 2018). MBS particularly resonates with Saudi Arabia's young population, estimated to be about sixty-three percent (63%) under the age of 30 (Arab News, 2016). They see in him a leader who is unlike the previous rulers, especially in terms of how his Vision 2030 and the changes happening under his leadership have transformed their lives in Saudi Arabia. In a very short span of his rule his policies and the actions taken have created unprecedented employment opportunities and brought openness to the Saudi social life. His leadership has become a point of interest for those

looking to analyze, assess, and map the trajectory of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. The particular brand of leadership MBS has showcased over the past few years clearly indicate that Saudi Arabia is distancing itself from the behavior and policies of the past not just domestically but also internationally. MBS, in his Vision 2030, has welded an economic necessity response with solidifying his own power and resulting in the longer term, the al Saud power.

Methodology

To analyze the ongoing modernization and de-Wahhabization process of Saudi Arabia and its implications on Pakistan-Saudi relations, this analytical and descriptive research employs the qualitative method. Secondary sources consisting mainly of relevant academic papers, reports, books, and interviews/statements of key personnel are used to describe the ongoing changes within Saudi Arabia and how these changes affect bilateral relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The content is chosen based on the search of phrases such as “Saudi Reform”, “Saudi Arabia’s Modernization”, “Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia”, “Pakistan-Saudi Relations” in the keywords, titles, and abstracts of articles published in relevant journals. News coverage by both Saudi and Pakistani news channels as well as global media will also be analyzed. So far, the literature and media coverage surrounding Saudi Arabia suggests that Saudi state and society are changing at a fast pace that can be observed and documented continuously. As this is an ongoing process, it is of crucial importance that the qualitative content used are time-relevant and not outdated. Regarding the Pakistan-Saudi relations, the history of their bilateral relations and literature focused on predictions of the Pakistan-Saudi relations will be reviewed to form a well-rounded analysis linking the modernization and de-Wahhabization of Saudi Arabia with Pakistan-Saudi bilateral relations.

The discussion and findings of the study will focus on key changes observed in Saudi Arabia that are considered to impact how Saudi Arabia engages with Pakistan going forward. This section will also be supplemented with discussion on any patterns linking societal level changes in Saudi Arabia with its state level behavior.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Saudi Arabia for long has adopted policies of media censorship which have in turn also created an environment of self-understood censorship. It is difficult to attain first-hand accounts from officials, academics, political analysts or reporters for fear of persecution. Freedom of expression

across all forms of communication is heavily restricted, with many internet communication applications blocked. Some of the materials, especially critical papers and news articles from certain news agencies, I had tried to access were blocked within Saudi Arabia. These factors especially limited the secondary resources I could access. Some of the observations, particularly regarding the social sphere and lives, come from my own time spent in Saudi Arabia. However, I have used the framework of this study to filter my observations to the scope of study and reduce any personal bias. This thesis, due to its type and scope of study, does not risk any ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

We believe the practice today in a few countries, among them Saudi Arabia, it's not the practice of Islam. It's the practice of the people who have hijacked Islam after '79. And also it's not the practice of the social life in Saudi Arabia even before '79. And even it's not aligned with the idea of Saudi Arabia that it's a country following the religion of Islam from the first Saudi Arabia. You see the idea that the first Saudi Arabia tried to tackle. For Islam it's totally different from what the extremists are trying to promote today. (Time Magazine 2018)

Vision 2030

The Saudi Vision 2030 launched by MBS is a detailed plan that aims to modernize and reform Saudi Arabia to better meet the modern domestic, regional and global challenges. It sets out drastic social and economic reforms needed to secure the Saudi economy from its over reliance on oil profits and solidify the al-Saud rule. MBS, in the Vision 2030's foreword highlights (i) Saudi Arabia's religious identity as the sacred land for over a billion Muslims worldwide (ii) labels Saudi Arabia as an attractive investment opportunity (iii) refers to Saudi Arabia's strategic location connecting three continents Asia, Africa, and Europe (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). As per the Vision 2030, the goals set in it do not point towards an overhaul of political processes or a change in its absolute monarchy. Instead, the change Vision 2030 sets out is economic, cultural, societal, and individual in nature. It pushes for privatization and diversification in economy by encouraging sectors other than the oil industry.

Through many of the projects under the Vision 2030, the Kingdom aims to rebrand its national identity and cultivate cultural values and attachment especially within its own citizens. A few of these projects include AlUla, Qiddiya, the Umluj Red Sea Project and also art galleries, museums and film productions. Such projects not only offer opportunities for Saudization of the labour force, which is the core element of Vision 2030, but also target the improvement of Saudi Arabia's image beyond its borders. They are being marketed as ultimate tourist spots providing rich historical and cultural value. As per the statement of MBS, "We are trying to evolve using the potential of the Saudi people, the culture of Saudi Arabia, our history. We want to bring something new to the world. Many of our projects are unique. They are Saudi. For example, Neom, created by our country, this project is developing solutions that no one has provided before" (Wood, 2022). Neom is a city planned in the Tabuk region of Saudi Arabia which will run entirely on clean energy with

zero emissions. This city will also offer highly unique technological opportunities such as human-machine fusion, artificial intelligence and robotics.

MBS chairs the Public Investment Fund (PIF) which is tasked with the achievement of Vision 2030 through redesign and transformation of the Saudi economy. It prioritizes investments in Saudi companies and offers lucrative subsidies to stimulate Saudi start-ups. Another less often discussed project under the Vision 2030 is the creation of a military industries company, the Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI). SAMI is also financed through the PIF. It is tasked with increasing local spending on military equipment to fifty-percent (50%). MBS states in the Vision 2030 that the Kingdom only spends two-percent (2%) of its military spending locally while being the world's third biggest military spender (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Most importantly, the Vision 2030 calls out to the youth and the people as the real wealth of the nation (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The Vision 2030 primarily focuses on engaging the Saudi youth and providing them opportunities that will allow them to be a part of the global community. Until recently, the Saudi youth had felt that their concerns were not addressed by the government and little to no attention was given to how they envisioned their lives and society. MBS over the last few years, through the Vision 2030, provided the young Saudis new employment opportunities across various fields, some of which were not open to the Saudi society before. These include but are not limited to the entertainment sector, social media content creation, and the tourism industry especially in the case of women's employment. He has demonstrated his unique understanding of his people's capabilities and how to harness them to transform the country entirely. By appealing to the younger generation, which accounts for the larger percentage of Saudi population, MBS has achieved significant popularity domestically.

[MBS and the Saudi Identity](#)

The domestic legitimacy of MBS rests mainly on the shoulders of the Saudi youth that has felt empowered since the opening up of Saudi social sphere under the Crown Prince's leadership. Through his Vision 2030 he has fostered a national identity that young Saudis are aligning themselves to, which is distinct from the strictly Islamic identity the Saudis had before this. MBS aims to give the Saudi youth a work and leisure environment that is more suited to today's globalized world. The consumption of real-time sharing via social media applications, i.e. Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, has given an unprecedented window into the lives of others across

the world. This naturally creates a sense of comparison and often dissatisfaction if one's status-quo seems less privileged or fair than the others'. To quell these sentiments of being less-than among the Saudi youth, MBS has placed emphasis on the visibly social aspects of everyday life. This has meant easing up gender segregation in the public and work, disbanding the religious police (Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice), allowing women to drive, opening up entertainment avenues such as cinemas, concert venues, tourist sites, sports events, fashion/award shows, art galleries and museums. To promote and encourage all citizens, which include those who are less willing to let go of conservative norms that were the reality of everyday Saudi life before these reforms took place, to be accepting of the redesigned Saudi identity, tools such as cultural centers (examples include Ithra and Etidal), exhibitions, festivals, promotional social media content are being used.

The re-invented Saudi identity is further supported by encouraging secular tourism which is a drastic shift from the Two Holy cities of Makkah and Madinah being the sole reason for travel and pilgrimage for Muslims around the world for much of Saudi Arabia's past. Saudi modernization offers inviting reasons for even non-Muslims foreigners to travel to the Kingdom and visit tourist sites. Some of these tourist sites are historical and heritage sites which are being highlighted to help form a cohesive identity based on Saudi culture and tradition.

By encouraging a traditional Saudi identity through modernization reforms, the state prevents more conservative pockets of its society feeling alienated. An identity based on religion was crucial at the time of Saudi Arabia's birth as there was no other unifying identity that had the power to shape the many warring tribes into a Saudi state. With the Saudi state gaining power over the decades, mainly due to oil profits, it can now help shift the Saudi identity from a purely religious one (de-Wahhabization) to a more cultural one using modernization. Another way to analyze the shift in Saudi identity is to relate it to the shift in power from religious clerics to political state figures within Saudi Arabia.

In the more public and civic domain, the reforms are aimed at modernizing Saudi society and public space. The most visible effects seem to be the labor force trends in Saudi Arabia recently which has brought changes in the way individuals behave in public spaces now. Saudis are now increasingly taking up employment opportunities that earlier they had minimal participation in such as taxi drivers, shopkeepers, receptionists. Most importantly females have become more

visible in public spaces as they become an active contribution to labor force. Vision 2030 sets out strong goals in terms of female empowerment to allow them to become contributing members of the economy. Allowing women the space in Saudi economy and society that earlier was in many ways kept from them has also strengthened the popularity and acceptance of the modernization reforms and resultingly MBS's vision for the country. While the uplifting of driving restriction for women receives much attention, another drastic move within the Saudi law was the easing of the Guardianship Law which requires a male relative's permission for a woman to carry out a certain action (for example; travel, enrollment in a school or employment contract) (Amnesty International, 2022). Certain aspects of the Guardianship Law, however, still remain codified and in practice.

Moving towards Moderate Islam; De-Wahhabization

The role of Islam in Saudi society and familial life is given prominence in the Vision 2030, however, moving forward Vision 2030 encourages "moderate" Islamic values. This is seen by many as contrary to the Wahhabi branch of Islam that was until recently an integral part of Saudi identity. However, what constitutes as moderate Islam within Saudi Arabia is still to be defined. In a move to help garner religious support for the state sanctioned social reforms that seemed at odds with the strict religious codes of conduct, King Salman announced on state media the appointment of "modern thinking" clerics (Ulema) to the Council of Senior Scholars (Reuters, 2016). The government also broadened the Council to include scholars that align with other branches of Sunni Islam whereas before, it was traditionally always comprised of staunch conservative Wahhabi Ulemas that follow the Hanbali school (Ibid).

The de-Wahhabization was also initiated in the Saudi educational curriculums, notably by replacing "Islamic Awareness" programs with "Intellectual Sensitivity" programs. This program teaches students to prioritize good citizenship values and encourages openness to other cultures and people. The hours devoted to the Islamic and Quran Sciences were reduced as per the new Saudi syllabus (Saudi Gazette, 2022).

Tightened Political Space

It is difficult to assess whether the Saudi modernization and de-Wahhabization will significantly impact the Saudi power and political structures. There has been no meaningful expansion in the space provided for constructive or critical debate and opinions regarding any political changes

within Saudi Arabia. While, MBS modernizes the Saudi social and economic life, any hint of dissent against him or his policies is brutally repressed. Under his leadership, the reform and modernization in Saudi Arabia has taken the shape of an authoritarian liberalization model. Questioning or critiquing the “modernization” reforms such as reopening of the cinemas, mixed-gender concerts, film shows etc. have landed senior religious clerics (Ulemas) in prison (Human Rights Watch, 2017). The Saudi religious establishment has had to mold their views and opinions to stay in the Crown Prince’s good books, whereas previously they were free to not only encourage hardline stances but also impose them. Also to be noted is that, it’s not just conservative clerics being prosecuted but also “moderate” ones just for the crime of disagreeing with the ruler. Along with the clerics being arrested, peaceful activists, writers, academics, and press personnel also make the list (Ibid). These are widely believed to be politically motivated arrests under the guise of tackling extremism, preventing social unrest, or treason against the ruler and state (Ibid).

Anti-Corruption Measures

The goals outlined in Vision 2030 and the reforms initiated to achieve those do not include any significant political overhauls and the changes within Saudi Arabia are expected to remain at a purely economic, social, and societal level. Within these domains, appropriate changes needed in government procedures and institutions have been undertaken. There has been an increasing pattern of accountability and anti-corruption checks and balances within government processes and services to increase efficiency in achievement of the Vision 2030 goals. One of the first moves by the Crown Prince that took his nation and the world by surprise was the arrest and detainment of a number of princes and high-level Saudis at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh in 2017. They were held there until agreements could be reached for them to pay back portions of their wealth which they had gained through corruption back to the state. Such arrests continue to be made as part of MBS’s anti-corruption campaign (Al Jazeera, 2021). The Nazaha, which is the Oversight and Anti-Corruption Authority, was established in 2011 with the objectives to fight financial and administrative corruption. It is directly headed by the King and helps in the implementation of the National Strategy which defines corruption as “every act that threatens the public interest as well as any abuse of the civil service in order to earn an individual advantage” (Al Tamimi & Co, 2014). Nazaha’s website and automated text-messages to the general public invite concerned citizens to report suspicions of financial and administrative corruption in order to protect and preserve public funds (Nazaha, 2022).

Vision 2030 and the Saudi Foreign Policy

While the Vision 2030 is dominantly socio-economic in nature, and has had no significant impact on Saudi politics domestically, it has in ways triggered certain foreign policy decisions by Saudi Arabia which signify a change in the Saudi approach to its foreign affairs. Saudi foreign policy has always focused on cooperation and avoiding confrontation. Saudi Arabia was created because of an alliance with the West, whereas other Arab states and many around the world at that time for the matter became an independent state through the process of decolonization from the West (Rundell, 2021). This alliance with the West, particularly with the US, has cushioned Saudi Arabia through some serious troubles in the region over the years. Saudi Arabia has also depended on its economic and religious soft power, which is its oil producing and exporting capability and being the land of the Two Holiest Sites of Islam. Iran is considered as Saudi Arabia's greatest threat, and to contain this, Saudi foreign policies have focused on building better relations with the US, China, Russia, UAE, and even Israel much recently (Ibid). Though the Saudi establishment stays adamant on the Palestine cause as a condition for the normalization between Saudi and Israel relations (Riyadh (AFP), 2024).

Since the initiation of Vision 2030, Saudi foreign policy objective has focused on supporting this vision. The success of the Vision 2030 depends on how effectively Saudi foreign policy creates mutual pathways between itself and other states. Under King Salman and the de-facto rule of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the Saudi foreign policy adopted an aggressive approach to achieve its objectives which has come to be referred as the "Salman doctrine" unofficially (Nuruzzaman, 2019). These aggressive moves are best exhibited in the Saudi military actions against Shia militia groups in the region to counter Iran and the ongoing fight against the ISIS (Ibid). Not just on the military front, but on the diplomatic front as well, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated a harder stance. The prime example of this being the Saudi-Canada diplomatic dispute in 2018, in which the Canadian ambassador was expelled by Riyadh and Saudi students recalled back home from Canada as a response to tweets by Canada's foreign affairs citing concern over jailed Saudi peaceful activists (Kestler-D'Amours, 2018). The four years Gulf blockade of Qatar led by Saudi Arabia is also an example of the Salman doctrine. The blockade finally ended at the Al-Ula Declaration which is a collective reconciliation framework designed by MBS for the GCC countries and Egypt (Alrashed, 2021).

Saudi-Sino Relations

There has been a noticeable shift towards China which experts believe is an opportunity to cater to the economic needs and ambitions of the Saudi Vision 2030. China is now the largest market for Saudi oil export and its increasing presence in the MENA region makes China a key player in the region (Lons et al., 2019). China's mediating role between Saudi Arabia and Iran also testifies to the Chinese influence globally and the Middle East specifically (Narayanan, 2023). Saudi foreign policy, since the initiation of Vision 2030, aims to lessen any confrontation and security or economic instability. Accepting the Chinese mediation between itself and Iran gives Saudi Arabia a much stable regional environment to advance its Vision 2030 goals. The war in Yemen has cost Saudi Arabia not just money but also its international image, as the worsening situation in Yemen came to be known as one of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world (Robinson, 2023). The Saudi-Iran reconciliation also offers Saudi Arabia the opportunity to de-escalate its aggressive proxy in Yemen as the reconciliations stipulates both Saudi Arabia and Iran to curtail their role in the conflict (Wimmen et al., 2023). The growing relationship between Saudi Arabia and China has manifest in Saudi Arabia being granted the "dialogue partner" status in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which is expected to evolve into a full membership (Reuters, 2023).

Saudi-Pakistan Relations; evolution and moving forward

The orientation towards the east also opens up for analyses the recent trends in Saudi-Pakistan relationship. The pattern of relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan over the past has been that of economic assistance to Pakistan in exchange for defense and security assurances for Saudi Arabia. However, as part of Saudi modernization and fostering a stronger relationship with international monetary agencies, Saudi Arabia has cut off cash aid to Pakistan and is instead offering economic opportunities. In the light of MBS's "Saudi-first" governance, the Saudi finance minister stated at the World Economic Forum in 2021 that, "We used to give direct grants and deposits without strings attached and we are changing that. We are working with multilateral institutions; emphasis will now be placed on economic reforms in friendly countries. We are taxing our people; we are expecting also others to do the same, to do their efforts. We want to help but we want you also to do your part" (El Dahan & Saba, 2023). There has been no significant effort from the Pakistani side to show economic or governance improvements, and the need for constant financial bailouts especially in the context of IMF loans has led Saudi Arabia to shift its attitude towards Pakistan.

For most of Saudi-Pak bilateral relations, Iran has been a critical focal point. Pakistan has had to navigate balancing the two states as both states hold deep ties with Pakistan and specially its population. Saudi Arabia is the heart of the Muslim world and is revered deeply by Pakistan's majority Muslim Sunni population. Saudi Arabia is also home to the greatest number of Pakistani diasporas. Similarly, Iran is held in great reverence by the Shia Muslims. Pakistan's Muslim population is prominently Sunni but the Shia population also numbers significantly. Iran also happens to share a border with Pakistan alongside its most sensitive province of Balochistan. These factors have contributed to the dynamics of the trilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran. The Saudi-Iran deal brokered by China has introduced new layers to this relationship. Especially, because this deal is also supposed to help solve the Yemen conflict for which Pakistan had refused military support to Saudi Arabia for its offensive (BBC News, 2015). The Pakistani parliament had called for neutrality instead of sending in more troops due to the worsening humanitarian situation in Yemen (Ibid). China not only managed to de-escalate tensions between the long-standing rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also embedded in the deal, provided Saudi Arabia with solutions to the protracted Yemen conflict (Farouk, 2023). Pakistan has welcomed this development in the Saudi-Iran relations, terming it as a move in the right direction towards regional peace (Khan, 2023). With a major chunk of Pakistan's economy benefitting from remittances from the large diaspora community in Saudi Arabia, and also Iran being a key trading partner; Pakistan can take advantage of this rapprochement by improving commerce and trade with the two countries. In 2024, both Saudi and Iranian top government officials visited Pakistan within weeks of each other. The official agendas for both their visits were bilateral trade deals with Pakistan, meeting civilian government officials as well as the top brass of the military establishment (Shamim, 2024; Imran, 2024). Saudi Arabia confirmed the talks and finalization of defense related projects with Pakistan. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia both reaffirmed that serious steps were being taken to expedite the Crown Prince MBS's five-billion-dollar (\$5 bn) investment package which also lead the way for more Saudi investors in Pakistan (Imran, 2024).

However, Pakistan will need to diplomatically maneuver Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, and even the US in the larger picture so as to not shake the fragile balance.

Pakistan could create a sustainable and mutually beneficial partnership between itself and Saudi Arabia by offering attractive investment opportunities and providing specialist talent especially in

the field of IT, tourism and hospitality, and finance. These fields are highlighted in the Vision 2030 as key areas for Saudi Arabia's diversification plans (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). In line with these changes, the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development has planned proposals for special quotas in mega Saudi projects like NEOM (Arab News Pakistan, 2024). Saudi Arabia has also stated plans to establish a "state-of-the-art skill university" in Pakistan to facilitate the growth of skilled labor force from Pakistan (Ibid).

The Saudi Vision 2030 and Pakistan's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) offer both countries a shared aim that they can work together on. The Vision 2030 shares many similarities with the SDG in terms of what it aims to achieve (United Nations, 2018). Saudi Arabia has not only made progress in advancing these goals domestically, but also assists developing and low-income countries in their efforts towards SDG's (Ibid). Pakistan can create collaborative trade projects with Saudi Arabia in food, energy, and housing sectors that help alleviate poverty that afflicts much of its masses. Creating better vocational and educational programs for Pakistani youth could give them a chance for better employment within Saudi Arabia which greatly helps Pakistan's unemployment crisis but also benefits Saudi Arabia which is looking for skilled labour.

Sports is another growing attraction in Saudi Arabia, with its international level football teams and various Olympic participations. Saudi football talent can benefit Pakistan's developing football scene and Pakistan's cricket experience can offer its expertise to boost cricket in Saudi Arabia. Working on this front, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Pakistan Football Federation (PFF) and the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) (Ibrahim, 2023). Such collaborations help deepen people-to-people ties, which traditionally for Saudis existed mainly in the context of pilgrims and labor force from Pakistan.

Both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan agree that bilateral ties between them need to broaden beyond the traditional areas of cooperation. With an increasing private sector in Saudi Arabia through its modernization efforts, the entrepreneurial and business community on both sides can increase engagement. To further the pathways for collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, a framework known as the Saudi-Pakistan Supreme Coordination Council (SPSCC) was set up in 2019 (Arab News Pakistan, 2022). It is based on three pillars which are the political and security pillar; economic pillar; and social and cultural pillar. These are the domains under which collaborative deals will be appropriately fast-tracked and institutionalized.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is not just centered or formed on defense and economic ties but also on intangible linkages such as religion and identity. Saudi Arabia is sacred to the Pakistani people who are majority Sunni Muslims, as it is the land of the two Holy Cities of Makkah and Madinah. Muslims around the globe not just in Pakistan harbor a religious attachment to the Saudi land and are hosted by the Saudis when millions go for Holy pilgrimages around the year. Saudi Arabia is well aware of its unique influence over Muslim nations and often utilizes this position as a soft-power tool. In the case of Pakistan, this deep attachment and reverence towards the symbolism of what Saudi Arabia stands for is reflected in the building and naming of the Shah Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, which has come to be an identifying landmark for Pakistan. Faisalabad and the Faisal Base in Karachi also point towards this connection. It is to be noted, that the name Faisal is highlighted in all three of these instances and could also be interpreted that it was the Late King Faisal specifically who nurtured this relationship. Saudi Arabia has also arranged numerous visits by the Imams of the Two Holy Mosques to Pakistan where they led prayers at prominent mosques and met with key religious personnel (Saudi Gazette, 2024). Saudi Arabia has also given Pakistan humanitarian assistance and charity during its natural disasters, climate crisis, and through various charity organizations set up for different causes (Radwan, 2022). The Saudi religious influence is also noted in the political parties of Pakistan, like the Jamaat-e-Islam (Waterman, 2014).

One of the other ways Saudi Arabia has used its influence is in the widespread cross-border preaching of Wahhabism (Mandaville, 2022). In Pakistan's religious sphere, Saudi funded madrassahs (religious schools/seminaries) were set up which follow and teach the Wahhabi form of Salafism. These madrassahs are not just limited to one geographical area but are spread throughout Pakistan and have varying institutions aimed at varying classes of society. Their history is rooted in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the resulting Mujahideen fighters backed by the US and Saudi Arabia and taught and trained in Pakistan (Husain Haqqani, 2010). These Saudi backed madrassahs have made significant contribution to the diverse religious landscape of the country. For much of the period of active Wahhabi preaching across international borders by Saudi Arabia, it has been strongly linked to extremist and terrorist ideologies and in the case of Pakistan rising violent sectarianism. Following the initiation of Saudi modernization and de-Wahhabization, Saudi Arabia is said to have stopped funding of religious schools and mosques outside its borders (R. Sheline, 2017). As per MBS, Saudi Arabia at the time did not know how to

deal with the threat of Islamic Revolution which had overturned Iran's monarchy and so Saudi Arabia adopted a strict ideology (Ibid). To uphold and promote the Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is no longer looking to export its religious ideology especially one that its leadership is publicly distancing itself from. However, the deeply entrenched radicalism and extremism in some of Pakistan's Islamic groups is not projected to change as quick as the change happening in Saudi Arabia.

The rapidly changing Saudi image in the international arena is targeted towards the West and western foreigners it is looking to attract through its modernization. Many conservative factions within Saudi Arabia and similar factions in Pakistan have criticized such "liberal" changes happening in the Holy Land. Not just in the context of these two countries, but globally as well in religious circles, MBS's modernization is being equated with appeasement to the West. It still remains to be seen how Saudi Arabia evolves its long-held policies with Pakistan in regards to promotion of religious education such as special scholarships for Islamic Studies, promotion of Arabic and religious sciences, special events and contests held for Quran recitation and memorization.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Saudi Arabia, under the implementation of Vision 2030, is changing at a faster pace than it ever has under previous rulers. MBS continues to be the face of this change and a true leader for the Saudi youth, as his vision puts them at the front of this new Saudi Arabia. As for now, the Vision 2030 is encouraging modernization and changes in the economic and social sense domestically. This modernization and de-Wahhabization allows the younger and more liberal segments of Saudis to enjoy a relatively open lifestyle with economic and social opportunities that did not exist just over five years ago at the price of political freedoms. In terms of political space, MBS's rule deals with dissent and critique through harsh repression. Unlike previous rulers who did not question the religious establishment of Saudi Arabia, MBS has sought to control them as well, imprisoning scholars who did not give their approval for his plans.

This thesis also looks into the impact of the Saudi modernization and de-Wahhabization on Saudi relations with Pakistan. The Saudi modernization and de-Wahhabization reforms also impact its foreign relations and policy. The bilateral relations between the two countries have mostly been highlighted in terms of economic and defence cooperation. Over the past decade, a pattern of Saudi financial assistance to Pakistan has become more prominent. A pattern that now is expected to change with new policies underway between Saudi Arabia and international financial institutions to assist countries like Pakistan. This change in Saudi funding to Pakistan is not just expected to affect the economic conditions of Pakistan but also a large and deep-rooted web of Saudi funded madrassahs (religious seminaries) which in-turn will affect Pakistan's religiosity that had for long been heavily influenced by Saudi Arabia (Afzal, 2019). Changing Saudi geostrategy especially in regards to Iran may alter the role Pakistan has held for Saudi Arabia over the past. The bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan may now move from an assistance-based relationship which depended on security assurance from Pakistan in regards to regional insecurities for Saudi Arabia in exchange for financial assistance to a more opportunistic and conditional one.

In line with the Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is aiming to change its geopolitical relationships into geoeconomic relationships which will not only improve the Saudi image internationally but also boost trade and investment opportunities to cushion the Saudi economy as it transitions from a majorly oil-based economy to a diverse economy. As mentioned above, the Saudi economy is

opening itself to fields such as IT, tourism and financial services sectors. These are the sectors that Pakistan needs to engage its youth in, who would then benefit from high-value and high-paying job opportunities in Saudi Arabia. The already existing Pakistani labor force in Saudi Arabia is mostly employed in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Changing this employment pattern to increased numbers of skilled Pakistani professionals will not only benefit Pakistan in terms of flow of intellect, skills, innovation and remittances but also help form a more equal people-to-people relationship between Saudis and Pakistanis.

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