

Islamic Soft Power in International Relations: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia’s Religious Diplomacy

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia has strategically employed Islamic soft power as a tool of religious diplomacy to expand its geopolitical influence and maintain leadership in the Muslim world. While Soft Power Theory (Nye, 1990) emphasizes attraction and persuasion, this study integrates Neo-Realism (Waltz, 1979) to analyze how Saudi Arabia utilizes religious influence to secure its national interests in an anarchic international system. Through Hajj and Umrah diplomacy, mosque funding, religious education, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Saudi Arabia extends its ideological reach and strengthens global alliances. Additionally, the study examines Saudi Arabia’s strategic competition with Iran and Turkey, highlighting the interplay between religious diplomacy and power politics. Using a qualitative research approach, this study employs content analysis of official policy documents, speeches, and media discourse, along with case studies, to assess the effectiveness and limitations of Saudi religious diplomacy in international relations.

Keywords: Islamic soft power, Saudi Arabia, religious diplomacy, Neo-Realism, Hajj diplomacy, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, qualitative analysis,

Introduction:

Saudi Arabia has historically played a crucial role in shaping international relations through religious diplomacy, leveraging its status as the custodian of Islam’s two holiest sites. As a state with significant religious influence, it has utilized Islamic soft power to extend its ideological, cultural, and political reach. Unlike traditional forms of power, which rely on military and economic coercion, soft power derives from attraction and persuasion. Joseph Nye (1990, p. 166) defines soft power as the ability to shape preferences through appeal and influence rather than force. In the case of Saudi Arabia, Islamic soft power is exercised through the promotion of Wahhabism, funding of religious institutions, Hajj and Umrah diplomacy, and leadership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Gallarotti, 2010, p. 32). This study explores how Saudi Arabia’s religious diplomacy operates within the broader context of international relations and examines its strategic role in maintaining influence in the Muslim world.

Religious diplomacy has been an essential tool for Saudi Arabia, allowing it to shape global narratives and maintain its leadership in the Muslim world. The Kingdom has invested heavily in the construction of mosques, Islamic centers, and educational institutions

worldwide. It funds religious scholars and preachers, ensuring the global dissemination of Wahhabi interpretations of Islam. This investment in religious infrastructure is not merely a cultural initiative but a deliberate effort to expand ideological influence and counter competing religious and political movements, particularly those backed by Iran and Turkey (Al-Rasheed, 2007, p. 112). Through financial support to Islamic organizations and charities, Saudi Arabia maintains close ties with various Muslim communities, reinforcing its role as the guardian of Sunni Islam and bolstering its position in global politics (Mandaville, 2007, p. 49).

Hajj and Umrah diplomacy further strengthen Saudi Arabia's religious influence. As the host of Islam's most significant pilgrimage sites, the Kingdom has control over the annual influx of millions of Muslims who travel to Mecca and Medina. This control allows Saudi Arabia to exercise diplomatic leverage over Muslim-majority states by regulating pilgrimage quotas and offering preferential treatment to allied nations. Hajj diplomacy is particularly evident in its engagement with politically sensitive regions, where access to pilgrimage has been used as a tool for fostering alliances or exerting pressure on adversarial states. For example, Saudi Arabia has, at times, restricted Iranian pilgrims' access to the Hajj following political disputes, highlighting the intersection of religious influence and geopolitical strategy (Commins, 2015, p. 203). This ability to regulate the pilgrimage grants Saudi Arabia a unique form of soft power that few states possess.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), headquartered in Jeddah, serves as another mechanism of Saudi religious diplomacy. The OIC, established in 1969, is the world's second-largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations, representing 57 member states. Saudi Arabia's dominance in the OIC enables it to set the agenda on key issues affecting the Muslim world, from Palestine to counterterrorism efforts. The Kingdom utilizes the OIC to project itself as the leader of the Muslim community while sidelining rival narratives, particularly those propagated by Iran, which promotes a Shi'a-centric vision of Islamic governance (Esposito, 2016, p. 187). Through its leadership in the OIC, Saudi Arabia has sought to reinforce its status as the defender of Sunni Islam and maintain control over Islamic discourse at the international level.

Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy also plays a role in its competition with regional powers such as Iran and Turkey. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is deeply rooted in sectarian and ideological differences, with Saudi Arabia championing Sunni Islam and Iran positioning itself as the leader of the Shi'a world. This rivalry has manifested in proxy conflicts across the Middle East, from Syria and Yemen to Iraq and Lebanon, where both states support opposing factions to expand their influence. Saudi Arabia's funding of Sunni religious institutions serves as a countermeasure to Iranian-backed Shi'a expansionism, reinforcing sectarian divides in regions where both countries vie for dominance (Nasr, 2006, p. 211). The competition with Turkey, on the other hand, is less sectarian but equally significant. Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has sought to revive its historical influence in the Muslim world by promoting a neo-Ottoman vision of Islamic leadership. Through its own religious institutions and humanitarian efforts, Turkey has challenged Saudi Arabia's monopoly on Islamic leadership, particularly in regions with Ottoman historical ties such as the Balkans and North Africa (Öztürk, 2021, p. 145).

Saudi Arabia's religious influence extends beyond the Middle East, reaching Muslim

communities in Africa, Asia, and even Europe. The Kingdom has funded religious schools (madrasas) and provided scholarships for students from Muslim-majority countries to study in Saudi universities, where they are immersed in Wahhabi teachings. Many graduates of these institutions return to their home countries and assume leadership roles in religious and political spheres, further extending Saudi ideological influence (Kepel, 2002, p. 94). Additionally, Saudi-backed charities, such as the Muslim World League, have played a crucial role in humanitarian aid and disaster relief efforts, reinforcing the Kingdom's image as a benefactor of the global Muslim community (Lacroix, 2019, p. 77). However, Saudi-funded religious institutions have also been criticized for fostering extremism, as some beneficiaries of Saudi religious funding have been linked to radical movements (Bronson, 2006, p. 228). This dual perception of Saudi religious diplomacy—as both a source of Islamic unity and a catalyst for ideological extremism—adds complexity to its role in international relations.

Despite its extensive use of Islamic soft power, Saudi Arabia faces challenges in maintaining its religious influence. The rise of alternative Islamic narratives, internal political changes, and shifting geopolitical dynamics have posed obstacles to its religious diplomacy. The Kingdom's recent push for social and economic reforms under Vision 2030, spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has raised questions about its long-term commitment to Wahhabi religious outreach. As Saudi Arabia modernizes and diversifies its economy, its ability to sustain religious diplomacy at previous levels may be affected (Gause, 2018, p. 129). Additionally, the increasing scrutiny of Saudi religious funding, particularly in Western countries, has led to tighter regulations on foreign-funded mosques and religious organizations (Haynes, 2021, p. 162). These factors indicate a potential shift in how Saudi Arabia balances its religious influence with evolving political and economic priorities.

Saudi Arabia's use of Islamic soft power remains a key element of its foreign policy, allowing it to maintain a leadership position in the Muslim world while advancing its geopolitical interests. Through religious diplomacy, the Kingdom has cultivated alliances, countered regional rivals, and projected its ideological influence on a global scale. The mechanisms of Saudi religious diplomacy, including Hajj and Umrah policies, mosque funding, religious education, and leadership in the OIC, demonstrate the strategic integration of religious influence into statecraft. However, the effectiveness of this approach is shaped by regional competition, global perceptions of Saudi religious outreach, and internal policy shifts. As international dynamics evolve, the role of Islamic soft power in Saudi foreign policy will continue to be a subject of significant academic and political interest.

Literature Review:

Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy has been widely studied in the context of Islamic soft power, foreign policy, and international relations. Scholars have examined the Kingdom's role in promoting Wahhabism, funding religious institutions, leveraging Hajj diplomacy, and using the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) as a strategic tool. This literature review synthesizes key academic perspectives on Saudi Arabia's religious influence, highlighting theoretical contributions, historical developments, and contemporary debates regarding its effectiveness and limitations. The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye (1990, p. 166), provides a foundational framework for understanding Saudi Arabia's use of religious diplomacy. Nye defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather

than coercion, derived from culture, political values, and foreign policy. Scholars such as Gallarotti (2010, p. 29) argue that Saudi Arabia's religious soft power stems from its control over Islam's holiest sites, its role as a patron of Islamic scholarship, and its funding of religious institutions worldwide. However, others, including Haynes (2021, p. 145), caution that religious soft power is inherently fragile, as it depends on maintaining ideological credibility and navigating regional rivalries.

Saudi Arabia's promotion of Wahhabism has been a central theme in discussions of its religious soft power. Kepel (2002, p. 94) highlights the global impact of Saudi-funded religious institutions, particularly in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. These efforts, often channeled through organizations such as the Muslim World League and the International Islamic Relief Organization, have contributed to the spread of conservative Sunni Islam and shaped religious discourse in numerous countries. However, critics such as Lacroix (2019, p. 77) and Bronson (2006, p. 228) argue that Saudi religious funding has, at times, fueled extremism, leading to international scrutiny and calls for greater transparency. Another key aspect of Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy is its role in Hajj and Umrah diplomacy. Commins (2015, p. 203) examines how the Kingdom uses its control over the pilgrimage to strengthen diplomatic relations with Muslim-majority states. By allocating pilgrimage quotas and providing preferential treatment to allied nations, Saudi Arabia reinforces its position as the leader of the Muslim world. Conversely, Nasr (2006, p. 211) explores instances where Saudi Arabia has restricted Iranian pilgrims' access to the Hajj, particularly during periods of heightened political tensions, illustrating how pilgrimage policies can serve as a tool of geopolitical influence.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) serves as an institutional mechanism for Saudi religious diplomacy. The OIC, headquartered in Jeddah, represents 57 Muslim-majority states and provides Saudi Arabia with a platform to shape international Islamic discourse. Esposito (2016, p. 187) notes that Saudi leadership in the OIC allows it to set the agenda on key issues, such as counterterrorism, Palestine, and Islamic unity. However, Mandaville (2007, p. 49) and Gause (2018, p. 129) highlight challenges to Saudi dominance within the OIC, particularly as rival states like Turkey and Iran seek to assert alternative Islamic leadership models. Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy is also shaped by its competition with Iran and Turkey. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry, rooted in sectarian and geopolitical tensions, has significant implications for Islamic soft power. Nasr (2006, p. 211) explains that Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in Sunni religious institutions as a countermeasure against Iranian-backed Shi'a expansionism. Similarly, Öztürk (2021, p. 145) discusses Turkey's neo-Ottoman vision, which seeks to challenge Saudi religious authority through humanitarian aid, mosque-building, and Islamic education initiatives. This competition has intensified in regions such as the Balkans, Africa, and Central Asia, where both states seek to extend their religious and cultural influence.

While Saudi Arabia's religious soft power has been instrumental in expanding its global influence, scholars debate its long-term sustainability. Gause (2018, p. 129) argues that Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's modernization initiative, presents a potential shift in its religious diplomacy strategy. As Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman pursues economic diversification and social reforms, questions arise regarding the future role of Wahhabism in Saudi foreign policy. Haynes (2021, p. 162) suggests that Saudi religious diplomacy may

become less ideological and more pragmatic, focusing on economic partnerships rather than religious outreach. Critics also highlight the limitations and unintended consequences of Saudi religious diplomacy. Lacroix (2019, p. 77) and Kepel (2002, p. 94) argue that Saudi-backed religious institutions have, in some cases, contributed to radicalization, leading to increased scrutiny from Western governments. Additionally, Bronson (2006, p. 228) notes that Saudi Arabia's religious influence has been challenged by the rise of alternative Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which advocate different visions of Islamic governance.

Existing literature underscores the strategic importance of Islamic soft power in Saudi foreign policy, while also recognizing its challenges and evolving nature. Scholars agree that Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy has historically been a key driver of its international influence, but the effectiveness of this approach in the face of regional competition, global scrutiny, and internal reforms remains a subject of ongoing debate. This study builds upon these discussions by analyzing the contemporary landscape of Saudi religious diplomacy, assessing its effectiveness in securing political alliances, countering rival narratives, and maintaining ideological influence in the 21st century.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on a case study approach, analyzing Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy through the lens of Neo-Realism and Soft Power Theory. Neo-Realism, as developed by Kenneth Waltz (1979, p. 88), asserts that states operate in an anarchic international system, prioritizing their security and influence. While traditionally focused on hard power, Mearsheimer (2001, p. 30) acknowledges that states also employ non-military means to assert dominance. Joseph Nye's (1990, p. 166) Soft Power Theory complements this by highlighting the role of culture, values, and diplomacy in shaping global influence. Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy, exercised through institutions like the Muslim World League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, is examined using secondary sources such as academic books, journal articles, and policy documents. This research critically assesses how Saudi religious soft power functions within a Neo-Realist framework, exploring its role in securing alliances, countering regional rivals, and maintaining ideological influence.

Findings:

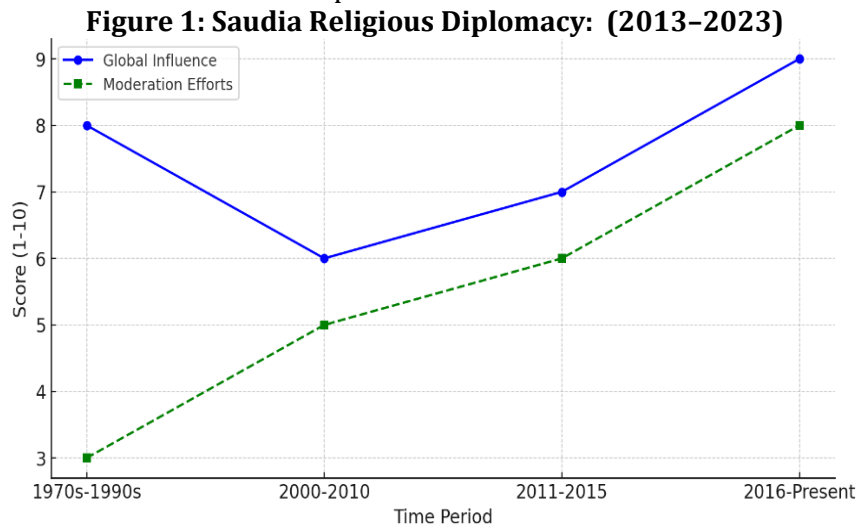
The findings of this study reveal that Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy serves as a strategic tool within a Neo-Realist framework, reinforcing its geopolitical influence while simultaneously projecting Islamic soft power. By leveraging its status as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, the Kingdom consolidates leadership over the Muslim world, particularly through institutions like the Muslim World League (MWL), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center. The research highlights how Saudi Arabia utilizes Hajj and Umrah diplomacy to strengthen diplomatic ties, offering preferential pilgrimage quotas to allied nations while restricting access for political adversaries, such as Iran during periods of heightened tensions (Commins, 2015, p. 203). Furthermore, the Kingdom's global religious funding, which has historically advanced Wahhabi doctrine, continues to shape Islamic discourse, though recent reforms under Vision

2030 suggest a shift toward a more pragmatic, less ideological approach (Gause, 2018, p. 129). However, findings also indicate growing challenges to Saudi religious hegemony, particularly from Turkey's neo-Ottoman outreach and Iran's Shi'a influence (Öztürk, 2021, p. 145; Nasr, 2006, p. 211). Additionally, Western scrutiny of Saudi-funded institutions due to alleged links with extremism has pressured the Kingdom to recalibrate its religious soft power strategies. These findings underscore the dual nature of Saudi religious diplomacy—both as a source of influence and a subject of contention—highlighting its evolving role in global politics.

Discussion:

Saudi Religious Diplomacy: Evolution and Strategic Shifts:

Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy has historically been a pillar of its soft power, leveraging its role as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites to influence the Muslim world. Traditionally, Saudi religious diplomacy was shaped by Wahhabi doctrine, exported through financial support for religious institutions, scholarships for Islamic education, and funding of mosques and religious centers globally (Lacroix, 2019). This ideological approach helped Saudi Arabia establish itself as the preeminent leader of Sunni Islam, countering regional rivals such as Iran and later Turkey. However, this form of religious outreach also attracted global scrutiny, particularly in the post-9/11 era, as concerns over Saudi-backed religious institutions fostering extremism led to calls for greater transparency (Commins, 2015). Over time, international pressure, along with internal reformist tendencies, encouraged Saudi Arabia to redefine its religious diplomacy in alignment with broader geopolitical and economic goals. Figure 1, illustrates the evolution of Saudi religious diplomacy by comparing global influence and moderation efforts over different periods.



Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has moved from ideological propagation to a state-controlled, strategic model of religious diplomacy. This shift includes curbing the influence of conservative clerics, placing religious institutions under direct government supervision, and repurposing organizations like the Muslim World League (MWL) to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue (Gause, 2018). Furthermore, Saudi leadership has sought to

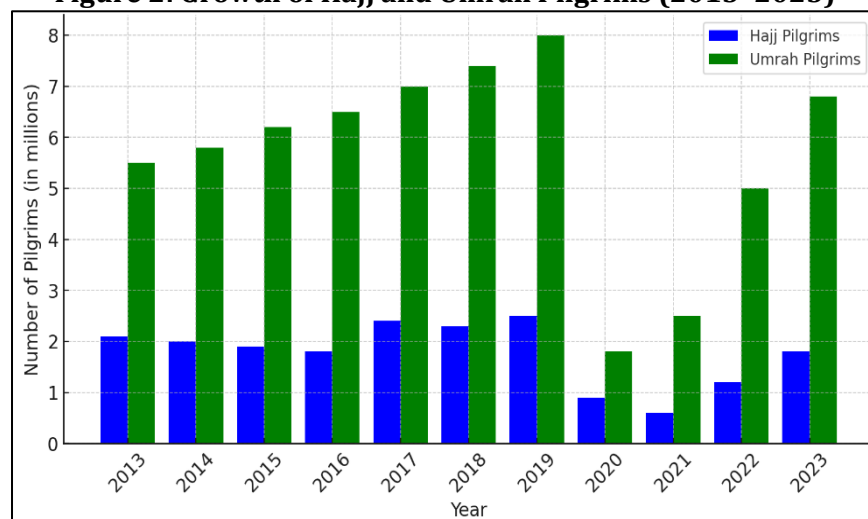
depoliticize religious institutions, ensuring they serve as instruments of diplomatic engagement rather than ideological expansion. This strategic repositioning reflects Riyadh's desire to maintain its religious leadership while avoiding the pitfalls of past policies. In essence, the Kingdom is transitioning from exporting doctrine to using religion as a tool for broader diplomatic and economic influence, particularly in response to regional challenges posed by Turkey's neo-Ottoman policies and Iran's ideological outreach (Öztürk, 2021).

Religious Soft Power and Vision 2030: A New Direction

Vision 2030 marks a significant transformation in Saudi Arabia's approach to religious soft power, integrating economic and diplomatic priorities into its religious diplomacy strategy. The initiative aims to modernize the Kingdom's global religious image, shifting from an ideological exporter of Islam to a leader of moderate Islam. Central to this effort is the restructuring of the MWL, which now prioritizes interfaith dialogue and counterterrorism efforts, distancing itself from its previous role as a promoter of Wahhabi doctrine (Esposito, 2016). Additionally, the Saudi government has tightened control over the domestic religious establishment, marginalizing ultraconservative clerics while promoting a state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam that aligns with the country's broader modernization agenda (Kepel, 2002). This recalibration serves multiple purposes: enhancing Saudi Arabia's international image, reducing global criticism, and positioning the Kingdom as a moderate Islamic leader in contrast to Iran and Turkey.

One of the most notable shifts under Vision 2030 is the use of religious tourism as a tool of diplomacy. The government has heavily invested in Hajj and Umrah infrastructure, expanding the capacity of Mecca and Medina to accommodate millions of pilgrims annually (Gause, 2018). A bar chart in figure 2 below, visualizes the number of Hajj and Umrah pilgrims from 2013 to 2023, thus demonstrates the fluctuating number of Hajj and Umrah pilgrims over the past decade, highlighting the impact of COVID-19 restrictions (2020–2021) and the subsequent recovery under Vision 2030. This reflects Saudi Arabia's efforts to strengthen religious diplomacy through tourism and economic integration.

Figure 2: Growth of Hajj and Umrah Pilgrims (2013–2023)



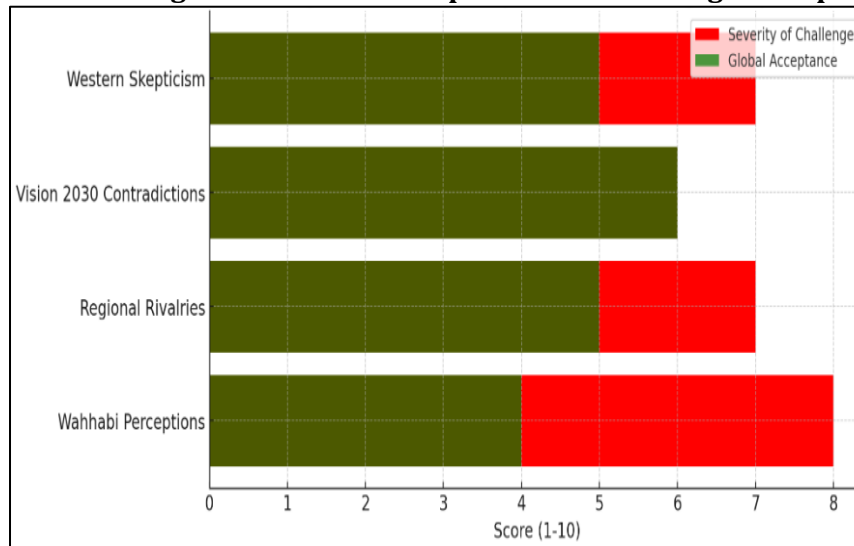
Moreover, by controlling access to these sites, Saudi Arabia can strengthen its diplomatic ties with Muslim-majority nations, offering pilgrimage quotas and preferential treatment to allies while restricting access to adversaries. Additionally, the promotion of religious tourism aligns with economic goals, as the Kingdom seeks to diversify its economy away from oil dependency. Saudi Arabia's transformation of religious soft power thus represents a strategic shift, allowing the Kingdom to maintain its leadership in the Muslim world while aligning religious diplomacy with economic and geopolitical ambitions.

Challenges and Global Perceptions of Saudi Religious Diplomacy:

Despite its efforts to modernize religious diplomacy, Saudi Arabia faces significant challenges and criticisms. One of the primary geopolitical challenges is the growing influence of rival Islamic powers, particularly Turkey and Iran. Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has positioned itself as a defender of Sunni interests, particularly in the Balkans and the Middle East, using religious institutions and cultural diplomacy to challenge Saudi religious influence (Öztürk, 2021). Meanwhile, Iran continues to project its Shi'a ideology, contesting Saudi leadership in the Muslim world, particularly in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen (Nasr, 2006). These competing narratives force Saudi Arabia to constantly adapt its religious diplomacy, ensuring that it remains relevant in the global Islamic sphere.

Additionally, international scrutiny regarding past Saudi religious funding has led to calls for greater transparency in the Kingdom's religious diplomacy efforts, particularly from Western nations and human rights organizations (Commins, 2015). Figure 3 below, highlights the challenges and global perceptions of Saudi religious diplomacy and too identifies the pattern to refine its religious diplomacy strategies to address these challenges and improve global perceptions.

Figure 3: Challenges and Global Perceptions of Saudi Religious Diplomacy



Domestically, the transformation of Saudi religious diplomacy under Vision 2030 has encountered resistance from conservative elements within the Kingdom. The government's decision to curtail the role of the religious police, limit clerical influence, and promote cultural

reforms has sparked opposition from traditionalist factions who see these changes as a departure from Saudi Arabia's religious identity (Lacroix, 2019). Additionally, the modernization of religious messaging poses a challenge in balancing reform with religious legitimacy, as the Kingdom must maintain its leadership role in the Muslim world without alienating its domestic religious base. These internal and external pressures create a delicate balancing act for Saudi policymakers, requiring a carefully managed transition that ensures religious diplomacy remains an effective tool of soft power while adapting to changing global and domestic realities.

The Future of Saudi Religious Diplomacy

The future of Saudi religious diplomacy will likely involve greater integration of economic, technological, and cultural strategies to reinforce its religious leadership. The Kingdom is expected to expand its use of interfaith initiatives, humanitarian aid, and educational diplomacy to maintain influence in the Muslim world. One key area of evolution is the digitalization of religious diplomacy, as Saudi Arabia seeks to project its religious messaging through digital platforms, countering rival narratives from Turkey, Iran, and non-state actors (Kepel, 2002). Additionally, the Kingdom is likely to expand its partnerships with Western nations in counterterrorism efforts, leveraging its religious institutions to promote moderation and stability in conflict-prone regions. By aligning its religious diplomacy with global governance frameworks, Saudi Arabia can maintain international legitimacy while continuing to exercise influence over Islamic affairs.

Another crucial factor shaping Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy is its economic diversification strategy. As the Kingdom reduces its dependence on oil revenues, religious tourism will play a more central role in economic policy, reinforcing Saudi Arabia's status as the spiritual center of Islam while simultaneously generating revenue (Gause, 2018). However, the success of this strategy depends on navigating geopolitical rivalries, maintaining internal religious cohesion, and ensuring that Vision 2030 reforms do not undermine Saudi Arabia's traditional religious legitimacy. Ultimately, Saudi religious diplomacy will continue to evolve as a strategic instrument of statecraft, balancing modernization with religious leadership to maintain its preeminent role in global Islamic affairs.

Conclusion:

Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy has evolved significantly, transitioning from an ideology-driven approach to a strategic tool of statecraft under the framework of neo-realism. Historically, the kingdom's religious influence was rooted in its export of Wahhabism, financial aid to Islamic institutions, and control over the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage industry. However, global scrutiny, security concerns, and regional competition necessitated a shift toward a moderated, state-controlled religious diplomacy. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has sought to balance its Islamic legitimacy with economic and geopolitical pragmatism, emphasizing religious tourism, controlled funding, and interfaith engagement. Despite these shifts, challenges remain. Lingered associations with Wahhabism, regional power struggles with Iran and Turkey, and skepticism from Western nations continue to shape global perceptions. The contradictions within Vision 2030—between modernization and religious

conservatism—further complicate Saudi Arabia's diplomatic trajectory. While its religious diplomacy has gained greater strategic coherence, the long-term success of these policies depends on Saudi Arabia's ability to maintain religious credibility while adapting to international expectations. Looking ahead, Saudi Arabia's religious diplomacy must integrate technological outreach, institutional reforms, and economic diversification to sustain its influence. By leveraging digital engagement, expanding interfaith initiatives, and refining its religious policies, the kingdom can position itself as a moderate, influential leader in the Islamic world while navigating the complexities of international relations.

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