



DETERMINING THE RELATIONSHIP OF REGIONAL AND RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS: PERCEPTIONS FROM THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

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Abstract: Regional and religious factors in the Arabian Peninsula have long received scholarly research from several scholars. But the interaction of both regional dimensions and religion on the politics, social and economic fabric of Arabia has not received ample research. This research aims to examine the impact of regional power politics and religious rivalry on local political processes and foreign politics of Arabian Peninsula states. A critical analysis of historical, political and religious literature is then undertaken the purposes of understanding the roles of regional and religious factors for state governance, security issues and international policies within the region. It is assumed that regional competition and religious factor plays an important role in the political behaviors and affiliations of Arabian Peninsula states. The identified dynamics are expected to give an insight on how these have transpired over time and how they shape socio-political context. This study contributes to a gap in prior research by examining the relationship between regional structures of power and religious sectarianism while the latter is seen as independent in other works. The contributions of the study are expected to increase the awareness of the dynamics of regional and religious factors within the Middle East with focus on the impact of the KSA Vision 2030 and the emerging role of the kingdom in the region. These findings are expected to be useful to policy makers and academics studying the geopolitical and socio-religious changes in the Arabian Peninsula.

Key words: Region, Religion, Arabian Peninsula, Sectarianism, Geopolitics, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, Regional rivalries, politics, Authority, Global Relations.

Introduction:

The Arabian Peninsula occupies a key position in the context of the historical, cultural and religious exchange. This position of birthplace of Islam and regional political arena makes it one of the important nations of the Middle East both in the past as well as in the present. To fully comprehend the role, the region has played and continues to play in this part of the world and the world in general one has to have some awareness of the functions of regional and religious reconciliations or conflicts within the peninsula. Historically and geo-politically significant area, Arabian Peninsula has always been influenced by interactions of regional and religious politic. These dynamics have affected its political, economically, and culturally in one way or another. Religious convictions together with tribal loyalties and outside pressures have driven the emergence of a special social political structure within the region over centuries. Islam

especially Wahhabi culture in Saudi Arabia has been partly responsible for shaping the internal governance systems and foreign policy oriented goals of the peninsular states of the region in addition to shaping internal institutions of the peninsula states as well as dictating their behavior in regional and international sphere. It has been the strategic importance underpinned by petroleum wealth and geo-strategic location that has entrenched the role of the peninsula as a broker in world politics. The relations and the closeness wedged between the regional members of the Gulf Cooperation Council have also been defined by religion politics relation. For instance, the blockade of Qatar in 2017 has been political to explain shifts in power within the Gulf by nationalists and sectarianism to strengthen political authority. Moreover, the Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is seen as a tool of re-organization in the region's economic and cultural perspectives as the diversification of the Saudi economy has aimed at reshaping the Kingdom's identity in a globalized world. In the analysis of the political history of the region it becomes evident that religious factor has been a key a factor in the formation and rivalry of regional blocs in the case of the gulf. Sectarianism, especially the Sunni/Shiite split, has been identified as a component of Gulf state foreign policies. The split has defined the Saudis' interaction with Iran and other regional neighbors, which has defined the security structure of the region. The existence and use of religious authority as an extension of political leadership has been looked at extensively in the literature. The changes in the makeup and texture or the region's cities and towns and social relations that have accompanied its development have only reinforced the value of attending to the cultural and spatial dimensions of the interactions between regions and religions. For instance, neighborhood clustering and decision making in custom based traditional city of Saudi Arabia has been investigated which has explained the socio religious patterns of the community life. This research works has provided a different perception regarding the influence of religion on cities. Over the decades however, global factors and changes in geopolitics have served to enhance the roles of religion and region in the Arabian Peninsula. The events of 9/11 have led to an increased examination of the Saudi Arabian domestic and foreign policy in terms of its support of various religious creeds, ideas and practices, the shifts in Saudi Arabian policy seen since then have been viewed as adjustments resultant of the new regional international conjuncture, the dynamics of power relations and construction of the Saudi Arabian identity in the Persian Gulf region. The interaction of regional processes and religious beliefs in the region that is the Arabian Peninsula is rather intricate, so the subject matter that requires analysis is in many ways diverse. These forces have not only determined the history of the concerned region but are active in determining its current and future. Scholars are deficient in examining how regional and religious factors play out in the Arabian Peninsula more so in how they impact both domestic and foreign policies. Despite a certain amount of coverage of power struggles at the regional level and religious sectarianism in existing literature, there are cracks for a more extensive study that must look into how both dynamics affect governance, security and alliance systems. Further, the historical changes in geopolitics in regard to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030s policies for the region lacks sufficient analysis in relation to the influence and role of religious identity, or regional rivalry in the contemporary political and economic planning. In this article the relations between religion and regional politics in the Arabian Peninsula through history up to the present day are analyzed and primary developmental changes are highlighted.

The Historical Context:

The region, referred as Arabian Peninsula has historical significance and holds significant religious, cultural and political importance from the Islamic period. Its historical importance may be traced back to time when it used to act as a hub that facilitated movement of goods and people in the Asia, Africa, Europe continental divide. The tribal system was the primary mold of social and political organization with allegiance to family or clan passionate in ruling the society. The new religion of Islam in the 7th century was initiated by Prophet Mohammed in Mecca greatly influenced the region. It also made the two domains synthesize and bring all the Arabian tribes under one religious believe and hence the fast expansion of the Islamic empire. After the decline of the caliphate governments local governments appear shaping the political and sociocultural of the Peninsula. In the 18th century the Saudi people joined the Wahhabi movement as part of their history. In this case power partnership of political aspiration and an austere brand of Islam provided both, the ideological and political basis of modern Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile tribal federation under the leadership of Al Saud family resulted in the unification of different territories to form the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. The capitalist development of the oil industry at the beginning of the twentieth century marked the beginning of

the unprecedented rates of the economic and, consequently, the social transformation. Saudi Arabia and its neighbors changed from a nomadic to global economy greatly impacting the world economy especially in oil business. This led to great modernization, urbanization and growth of state institutions but also bred geopolitical complexities due to possessing the world's vital resource; oil. There was also the decolonization in the twentieth century, the spreading of nationalism that today gives birth to modern nation states. Formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 highlighted further endeavors towards promoting the collective security and economic cooperation of the Gulf state in the unstable region with instances of both Iran Iraq war and the Gulf War as prime factors. Sectarian split between Sunnis and Shias has tended to underpin the relation and political strategies of the states of the Gulf region. Analyzing the history trajectory of the Arabian Peninsula one can find the relations between religion, tribalism, and resource endowment. These elements however proved important in comprehending the current political, social and religious profile of this country together with its place in the modern Middle East. The Arabian Peninsula's history is deeply intertwined with the emergence of Islam. Bernard Lewis traces its historical significance, noting how the spread of Islam unified disparate tribal communities into a coherent socio-political and religious entity. This unification underpinned the region's role as a cultural and intellectual leader in the Islamic world, influencing governance, law, and societal values across the Middle East and beyond. The tribal systems that existed before Islam provided the framework for the region's political structures. Hourani highlights how Islamic governance evolved from tribal alliances into more centralized systems, reflecting a synthesis of religious and regional traditions. Over the centuries, this dynamic shaped the Peninsula's identity and its interactions with neighboring regions.

Islam and Political Authority: A literature Review

The connection between Islam and political power is the most researched topic in the various genres of scholar's work, due to its significance as a provider of governance, individual and political legitimacy in Muslim societies. Primary and secondary sources of history pay a great deal of attention to the interconnection of religion and political leadership for the past and present. Therefore, Hourani (2013) underlines that since beginning Islamic have always linked religion with political authority where the Prophet Muhammad was both a religious and a political figure. Commins (2005) expounds on how the Islamic legalism is the key means of legitimizing politics especially and particularly within the early caliphate Islamic empire. Similarly, Mandaville (2020) explains that all the past models of Islamic governing encounter religious trust by following the legal framework of the Islamic rule from the Rashidun Caliphate to the Ottoman Empirical one. Lacroix (2011) analyses the contemporary forms of Islamic authority, with the focus on Saudi Arabia in which the deferral of the Al Saud family together with Wahhabi ulama became institutionalized religion. Al-Rasheed (2010) adds that religious sanctity has been instrumental to the Saudi state in articulating sovereignty and containing internal and external tensions. Other authors such as Ehteshami (2018) and Gause III (Hashemi and Postel (2017) provide an example of the sectarian politicization of Islam as a lens through which sectarian divisions affect regional power relations and the political actors' authority. Wehrey (2013) applies this phenomenon to the Gulf region and the interconnection of sectarian affiliation with states and foreign policies. Lacroix (2011) and Cook (2007) observe the conflict between state-centralized priesthood and non-state global Islamist actors who question state-supremacy instead suggesting forms of political Islam that transforms conventional governance systems. With personalities like the Muslim Brotherhood analyzed by Mandaville (2020), it is apparent how new forms of governance are being defined within emergent Muslim contexts. Peterson (2014) and Fischer-Campbell (2021) also look into the culture aspects of Islamic authority whereby historical tales and religious traditions sanction the present governing systems. Bardaji (2016) and Marsden and Henig (2019), both look into the politics of Islam and its role in the formation of policies regarding alliance and conflict. Deeb and Winegar (2012) systematically review anthropological approaches with a view on how Islam is engaged with powers and order in Muslim-majority settings. At the Arabian region these issues have remained close in that religion and politics have remained correlated. Mandaville discusses political Islam this idea how Islam organizes itself as a political power in the contemporary countries such as Saudi Arabia. In this case, Islam acts as a resource for authorization and structural model of policy. For example, the Saudi Arabian monarchy grounds its legitimacy in part on being the wards of Islam's two most prestigious locations; Mecca and

Medina. Ahmed also points out that on one hand, Islam was a factor that promoted stability, on the other conflict. Koch, Valiyev, and Zaini (2018) investigate the symbolic significance of mosques as memorials to authority and state or legitimized power constructs through architecture. Last of all, Ulrichsen (2021) and Rabi and Mueller (2018) show how states like Saudi Arabia attempt to respond to globalization while maintaining the Islamic nature of political authority in governance. It is on the grounds of legal and social systems influenced by Islamic legislation that controversies arising from divergence of opinion of how to modernize and reform have emerged. Such debates relate to other social conflicts of the region resolved between the poles of traditional values and the requirements of a post-modern civilization.

Sectarianism and Geopolitics:

Sectarianism has become one of the most pertinent topics that define both, internal politics, and external relations on the Arabian Peninsula. In their article Hashemi and Postel claim that sectarian identities are mobilized by rulers to help them stay in power. This trend is most observable in the Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, their competition is not limited to sectarianism per se, but as Region power. There is a literature on the part played by sectarianism in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the light of its Wahhabi cult, integral to the state. The connection between the Saudi state and its religious mainstream remains reciprocal to maintain the continuity of a political/religious discourse favorable for Saudi Arabia. The authors have also noted the upward surge of these processes after 9/11 as the Saudi Arabia became more involved in regional conflicts to combat Shia influence mainly Iran. Sectarian tensions by the GCC countries have also threatened to destabilize the region but the GCC has been actively involved in trying to quell them only for its efforts to be affected by internal squabbles. The sectarian discourse was used to justify Qatari blockade in 2017 to change political alliances in the region.

There's no doubt that Wehrey's approach to sectarian politics in the Gulf details the impact of the Iraq War and the Arab uprisings in polarizing societies and cementing the place of sectarianism at the heart of politics in the region. Religious political were therefore so concretized and deepened by the development of transnational networks and globalization of religion. Through these networks, these groups have been supported and maybe even furthered due to sectarian motives in the recruitment and organization of supporters. At the same time, the action of interreligious organizations, including KAICIID, has been mentioned in the attempt to reduce sectarianism by following dialogs and cooperation. In Saudi Arabia the dynamics of the urbanization especially in Najdi area have captured the sectarianism impacts on social and spatial arrangements. Alnaim and Noaime (2024) noted that sectarian affiliations to certain areas in the urban context has resulted in neighborhood clustering affecting decision making regarding physical city form. This shows how there are sectarians in politics and religion and that their culture possesses seepage in society. The sectarian geopolitical systems have been used in defining the security paradigms per the region. The Gulf Crisis has driven changes in perceptions of sovereignty and security and requires further incorporation of social actors into politics, addressing sectarian tensions. The reviews as to the relations between religion and politics paint the picture as to why it is difficult to develop stability within the area. The literature review on sectarianism and geographical politics is also still ongoing, and scholars stress a historical perspective and social-political conditions. These are not just doctrinal but these are products of political, economic, social battles for power and resources, and defense mechanisms. It is this fact that the Arabian Peninsula will continue to be at the heart of these rivalries because of the richness in oil and its strategic location.

Saudi Arabia and Vision 2030

Thus Saudi Arabia which is the largest state in the Arabian Peninsula and holding tremendous social, religious, and political power in the region is of paramount importance. Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia is a broad, durable plan presented by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in 2016, directing to expand economy of the kingdom, decrease its dependency on oil, and place Saudi Arabia as a worldwide technological and financial center. The strategy represents an important change from the country's traditional dependence on oil profits to a more expanded, maintainable economic configuration that involves industries such as tourism, entertainment, technology, and structure improvement. This brave initiative pursues not merely to change the national economy but also to increase the position of Saudi Arabia in global geopolitics. The important aim of Vision 2030 is to expand the economy by the enlargement of non-oil zones, especially

renewable energy, tourism, and technology. For instance, the kingdom has spent in increasing the NEOM city, a revolutionary megacity planned to be a hub for modernization and commerce, trusting deeply on sustainable technologies and artificial intelligence. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is operational on encouraging tourism, particularly spiritual tourism, by increasing the size of the two holy cities of Medina and Mecca to accommodate millions of people yearly, also upholding new tourist destinations like the Red Sea Project, a luxury resort designed at fascinating worldwide tourists.

The economic alteration under Vision 2030 is also intensely secured to societal improvements. The government has operated to rise the participation of women in the workforce, announce additional liberal strategies in entertaining, and inspire more cultural interchange. The progression of women to drive has been noted, their employment and education opportunity. In addition to other activities, the Kingdom has gained unrestricted access to its entertainment zone, sports events, cinema screenings and concerts, which were previously prohibited. These changes ambition to update Saudi culture while preserving a stability with its traditional social and religious beliefs. Furthermore, Vision 2030 objects to build up geopolitical influence of Saudi Arabia and create it as a significant player in global and regional politics. This is completed by investments in overseas strategy and local corporations, especially with neighboring states and main overall powers like the United States, China, and Russia. These corporations are part of efforts of the kingdom to influence its place as a leader in the Middle East and an Islamic governance's supporter, while also navigating difficult geopolitical dynamic forces in the region, especially with its rival Iran and shifting relationships with Western powers. However, the implementation of Vision 2030 looks different trials. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia must discourse the youth's unemployment problem, as the state has huge young people that will need chances for employment in the developing financial setting. Despite of these problems, Vision 2030 remains a base of future policy of Saudi Arabia, imitating both its aims and the kingdom's desire to be a leading worldwide player.

Religious Dissent and Reform:

The process of religious dissent and reform has produced influences on the religious, political and social structure of the Arabian Peninsula. The relations between the normative and innovative tendencies which arise from time to time as the competition between the traditional religious leaders and the reformists who appeal to fresh offers of Islam have always been tense. The religious reformative movement which may be cited here is the Wahabi movement in Saudi Arabia in the 18th Century where the Wahabi reformists endeavored to restore the pure practices of Islam which they believed was free from a number of innovations especially those practices prevalent among different sects in the region. These reformist ideologies have also been influenced by the general political trends of the countries societies in the twentieth and twenty- first century which have translated into demands for reforms and an augmentation of people's liberties. It has always been the case that religious dissention was brought by political social and economic transformation in order to get religious reform to want political reforms, women rights among other things. But these reform endeavors have been thwarted by fundamentalist religious and governments that regard them as dangerous to the prevailing order. Nevertheless, religious dissidence remains a critical theme in the formation of the region's religious cultural imperatives, particularly the controversies pertaining to the place for religion in politics and public life.

The Arabian Peninsula has become seen a religious dissent and anti-reformist movement especially in Saudi Arabia. In the book titled 'Islamist Movements of Egypt, Jordan, and Libya: Adoption of Islamic Features by National Sociopolitical Structures,' Lacroix looks at how the movements have made a stand against the monarchy pushing for higher levels of Islamic practice in management of affairs. The problem with such movements is that they primarily address, and are in many cases foreseeable manifestations of societal discontent over corruption and inequality, and therefore perfectly illustrate the nuanced interaction between the religious and political authority. Using his observations of KAICIID and other related organizations Gusha described moves toward a dialogue between the religions. Although these measures chiefly pursue the globalization of peace and friendly relations globally, it equally demonstrates the regions' efforts to mend internal frailties of sectarianism and present a more hospitable image on the world arena.

The Role of External Powers:

The Arabian Peninsula being at the crossroads of great powers has been always a subject of interest. Thus the outside forces have played an important part in the evolution of the relations in the Arabian Peninsula as well as the political power within the states. In the past, these outside forces determined when a war began, factions to form and changes in political systems within the peninsula hence dynamism in the social, economic, and geopolitical map of the region. The discovery of oil at the middle of the twentieth century brought the region to focus as major world powers including United States and United Kingdom. These powers wanted a certainty to the rich energy resources the region possesses; this led to political and military confrontation. In their turn the United States is the main power shaping the Gulf, concluding strategic military bilateral agreements with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on securing the flow of oil and countering possible threats from such unfriendly states as Iraq or Iran. designation arrived with the Gulf War of 1990-1991, creating headily presence for the USA in the region, the U.S military further entrenched its position as an influential power, establishing itself as a major signifier of the security architecture in the Peninsula. Lewis observes that political boundaries and systems in the region have been defined by colonial as well as post-colonial interferences. In the later part of the global actorness, the United States and other world powers have involved themselves in the sustenance of regimes and bearing policies. Similar to the United States, the United Kingdom was also a colonial power in the region till mid Twentieth Century in the Gulf states and particularly in Yemen. European and especially British imperialism influenced the polity in these regions in that British mediated conflicts and exercised its influence in issues of political and regional architecture. British decoupling from its Gulf protectorates in the 1970s left a leadership void which was soon to be replaced by regional leaderships and then, and more dominantly by the U.S, and other global hegemonies. After the cold war, Iran has come into the center stage as a powerful contender to the U.S. and its allies in the Gulf region. Additional disastrous area where Iran has expressively pursued its power is in the Middle East; it has reinforced various political and militant groups comprising the Shia militia in Iraq, and the Hezbollah in Lebanon. This has resulted in the formation of complicated cooperation and competition within the region; besides compromising the sectarian conflict between Sunni dominated country like Saudi Arabia and Shia dominated Iran. In current years, China has also improved its power in the Gulf concluded financial enterprises, primarily come together on energy imports and organization development. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China has directed to provide the essential funds in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf countries, with emergent relations in trade and technology. This external interaction always emerges as a factor that interferes with the internal processes in the region, intensifies animosity and increases conflicts. This paper elucidates how regional actors and International affiliates coexist in the Arabian Peninsula to highlight the politics at regional and international levels.

Conclusion:

Therefore, this paper also indicates that both the regional and religious factors present in the Arabian Peninsula have greatly shaped the domestic and international politics today. Reviewing the literature of Middle East power politics, it can be discerned that regional power competition and religious sectarianism intertwines with the decision making processes of the state in the range of governance, security, and foreign policy. The results imply that these dynamics have developed dynamically and still remain influential in the current socio-political structure of the Arabian Peninsula. For this reason, there is a presumption that all these transformations and potential instabilities at global and regional levels determine Saudi Arabia's positioning with specificity of Vision 2030 in mind. The study established that regional rivalry and religious affiliations are some of the defining aspects of the region widely addressed in the literature, their interconnection requires broader concern in clarifying the dynamics of the political organizations in the area. The contribution of the study is envisaged to refine knowledge on these dynamics of the strategies and their implications in the geopolitics of the region. Such an analysis is expected to serve self-reflective and heuristic purposes that may assist policymakers and scholars more effectively to tackle the Navigate dynamics and offers sharper tools for contemplating the future of the Arabian Peninsula in the context of the regional power configuration.

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