

Saudi Arabia's Shift to a Dovish Foreign Policy

**A most similar case study of Saudi Arabia's
regional foreign policy in the past two decades.**

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List of Abbreviations

FDI - Foreign Direct Investment

FM - Foreign Minister

FP- Foreign Policy

GCC - Gulf Cooperation Council

IMCTA - Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Alliance

IRGC - Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

ISIS - Islamic State Iraq and Syria (Daesh)

KSA - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

MB - Muslim Brotherhood

MBS- Mohammed bin-Salman

ME - Middle East

PM - Prime Minister

UAE - United Arab Emirates

US - United States of America

V2030 - Vision 2030

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Executive Summary

Following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, US and Saudi interests were no longer aligned, and the kingdom pursued a more hawkish foreign policy (FP) to secure its dominance in the region. This reached a turning point in 2018 with the murder of Jamal Kashoggi, beginning a transition towards a dovish FP in 2021 with the al-Ula Declaration. The aim of this paper is to answer why **has Saudi Arabian regional foreign policy become more dovish from 2021 to 2023 compared to a more hawkish approach from 2003 to 2018?** This paper employs a most similar systems case study design building upon constructivism. It compares Saudi FP actions from 2003-2018, including the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Operation Scorched Earth, the intervention in Bahrain, the Syrian civil war, Saudi efforts against ISIS, the Yemeni civil war, the Qatar Blockade, and Saudi-Iranian relations, with Saudi FP from 2021-May 2023 including the al-Ula Declaration, the Yemen Peace Process, and restoring relations with Syria and Iran. The three hypotheses to explain the change in Saudi FP are, first, the need to appease international investors for Vision 2030 (V2030) to replace oil as the al-Saud's basis of power and legitimacy. Second, the worsened national security situation as a result of hawkish FP. And, third, the aspirations of Mohammed bin-Salman (MBS) for the throne and the internal pressure against his hawkish FP choices.

In the first case study, FP actions were largely motivated by national security considerations in the KSA's struggle for regional hegemony against Iran and from 2015 onwards were further driven by the Crown Prince's aspiration for the throne. Following the murder of Jamal Kashoggi, the kingdom entered a three-year transition period evaluating the results of this FP. Instead of curbing Iranian influence, the opposite happened as its controlled militias were now in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, surrounding the KSA. Furthermore, the unsuccessful campaign in Yemen exposed the Saudi military as ineffective. The international image of the kingdom was further shattered by failed campaigns and aggressive actions against Qatar and Lebanon. The al-Saud family concluded that a change was needed to achieve its ultimate goal, the preservation of family rule. This shift first became evident with the al-Ula Declaration ending the Qatar Blockade and continued with peace processes with Yemen, Syria and Iran.

The paper found the three hypotheses influenced this change in FP to varying degrees. Given the centrality of V2030 in the al-Saud's long term survival and the prioritisation of spending oil revenues on V2030 rather than the military, Hypothesis one is the determining factor in the FP change. The second hypothesis takes priority over the third because the national security situation was the main reason that MBS came under pressure from internal forces in his succession bid. These findings add to the existing literature that Saudi FP is shaped by the intersubjectivity of its main actors and their security perceptions. They show that the past two years, Saudi FP has been shaped by this intersubjectivity on V2030, national security, and personal ambitions throughout this change from hawkish to dovish FP as well.

Introduction

After the United States (US) invaded Iraq in 2003 against the advice of the KSA, the kingdom's outlook on its FP moved away from the historically patient and pragmatic Riyadhpolitik. (Alhussein, 2019) The US were no longer seen as a reliable security guarantor and significantly altered the regional balance of the Middle East (ME) by removing Saddam Hussein from power. To take security matters into their own hands and balance an emboldened Iran, the al-Saud family pursued a more hawkish FP. (Al-Ghafli, 2016; Gause, 2017; Ma & Min, 2022) The world witnessed the KSA intervening militarily in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, as well as the Saudi-led Qatar Blockade and the forced resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister (PM). However, following the murder of journalist Jamal Kashoggi in 2018, Saudi FP began transitioning from its hawkish behaviour towards dovish policies, starting with the al-Ula Declaration in 2021 ending the Qatar Blockade. This further resulted in peace efforts in Yemen, with Syria, and Iran. This change was never openly formulated in an official strategy change nor has it been explained by King Salman.

The issue to be raised here is **why has Saudi Arabian regional foreign policy become more dovish from 2021 to 2023 compared to a more hawkish approach from 2003 to 2018?**

So far, the relevant literature for this topic has only observed a change in Saudi FP; there have been few academic attempts to discover its causes. Understanding one of the most powerful players' FP in the ME is key to understanding regional dynamics. Especially in such a conflict ridden region, the security implications of such a drastic change in the KSA's FP cannot be underestimated as the country is involved, to different degrees, in all of them. This paper will argue that three main factors influenced this change in FP to varying degrees. First, the need to appease international investors for V2030, replacing oil as the al-Saud's basis of power and legitimacy. Second, the worsened national security situation as a result of hawkish FP. And third, the personal aspirations of Mohammed bin-Salman (MBS) for the kingdom's throne and the pressure he came under for his hawkish FP choices. This will be tested in a most similar systems case study design analysed with content analysis, systemic analysis and comparative method of the two time periods outlined in the thesis statement. The findings of this paper will build upon previous work and add to the understanding that Saudi FP is shaped by the intersubjectivity of its main actors and their security perceptions.

Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to understand the processes of FP decision making in personalistic authoritarian forms of government in general and the KSA in particular. According to Mintz (2004) FP is a set of principles, strategies, and actions that guide a state's interactions with other states in the international system. Realism argues that states are primarily motivated by their own interests, and that FP is largely determined by the balance of power in the international system (Waltz, 2010). In the Constructivist

interpretation, FP is also shaped by social norms and identities (Zakaria, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996) and in democracies, through domestic factors influencing the executive, such as public opinion, bureaucratic decision-making processes and electoral politics and interest groups (Hudson, 2007). In autocracies, Geddes (1999) notes that FP is typically shaped by a smaller group of elites who are closely aligned with the ruling party or the head of state, and who generally have limited accountability to the broader population. Closely related to this are monarchies, where depending on the role of the monarchy in the country, the monarch can have more or less influence. In some monarchies, such as the KSA, the monarch has significant authority over shaping FP. In other cases, such as the United Kingdom, the monarch's role in FP is largely ceremonial, because the elected government takes the lead (El Berni, 2021). Furthermore, Goldstein & Pevehouse (2018) state in a more universal approach that a state's FP may be influenced by the political preferences of its leaders, the interests of its key industries, or the security threats it faces from rival states or non-state actors. Overall, Allison (1971) emphasised very early on the importance of individual leaders in shaping FP outcomes in all political systems.

In personalistic systems, like the one of the KSA, leaders often rely on informal networks and personal relationships for their FP which, according to Joffe (2004) operate outside of formal diplomatic channels, and decisions may be made quickly and without the input of established institutions. Furthermore, Geddes (1999) notes an increased focus on national security, regime survival, domestic stability and sovereignty. Tilly (2007) argues that these often are guided through an ideology or nationalism that further strengthens the goals mentioned by Geddes.

According to Eilts and Brown (2006) Saudi FP has one underlying aim: the survival of the KSA under the al-Saud dynasty. Therefore any FP actions are a direct extension of the royal family's interests. Alammash (2021) argues that the KSA's instruments have largely been based on its oil resources and the financial leverage and its position in Muslim World as the Custodian of the two holiest sites in Islam. As a result, the al-Saud family sees itself as the natural regional hegemon and leader of the Arab and the Muslim world as continuously pronounced by the family itself and lately through Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (2013). Which, according to Heibach (2021) the family aims to preserve as the domestic and regional status quo. In this sense Saudi FP has been described as "remarkably consistent" by Gause (2011, p. 169) and as marked by "patience and pragmatism" by Elits (2006, p. 219).

Chairil (2023) argues that the KSA adopted political institutionalisation in its pyramid of power, its main features being tribal and personal. The King is the sole decision maker for FP as he transcends the constitutional system and the prevailing laws according to El Berni (2021), but takes into account the position of the senior princes in the family and merges them in collective solidarity expressed through military and diplomatic cohesion. Therefore, Saudi FP is shaped by the intersubjectivity of its main actors and their security perceptions. Sometimes, opinions from people affiliated with the King and Crown Prince are consulted as well, these include professionals, religious

elites or bureaucrats. If these tribal leaders are invited to compromise they will become an ally, if they refuse they must be removed and fought, (Chairil, 2023). This became unusually clear in 2017, when then deputy Crown Prince MBS arrested then Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN) and replaced him in an unprecedented move as Koç (2019) explained.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on the constructivist approach set out by Gedes (1999), Goldstein & Pevehouse (2018), El Berni (2021), and Allison (2017) and the understanding of the monarchical form of government's impact on the shaping of FP. The case of Saudi Arabia, as stated above, is an appropriate case study to explore the behaviour of monarchical states, particularly those that are autocracies centred around a single outstanding leader, as the King or the Crown Prince in the KSA. The framework also considers various factors outside of the sole idea of the states' self-interest as laid out by Goldstein & Pevehouse (2018), and will explore the influence of rival states, key industries, as well as non-state actors on their FP.

To answer the driving question, this thesis will build on the studies on Saudi Arabia by Eilts & Brown (2006) and El Berni (2021) in order to elaborate an argument which joins together the aforementioned factors: the monarchy, the internal economic makeup of the KSA, the accrual of power by MBS, and external players of the regional and global sphere. By doing so, the paper will explain the driving motivation behind a more dovish FP which cannot be wholly justified by the premises of power politics or the less nuanced delineations of hard power. On this theoretical basis, the author will consider the relevance of international business interests, referred to as investors or investment, national security, and the personal monarchical ambitions of individuals in the al-Saud family, particularly, Crown Prince MBS.

Central to this paper are the terms dovish and hawkish FP, this paper defines these terms as follows. Hawkish FP is a term used to describe an aggressive and confrontational approach to international relations. It is described as the willingness to use military force, economic sanctions and other forms of coercion to advance national interests, and a general scepticism towards diplomacy and negotiation. (Mearsheimer, 2001) On the other hand, "dovish FP implies a preference for non-military solutions to international problems, a willingness to compromise and make concessions, and a belief that diplomatic solutions are often preferable to the use of force" (Art & Jervis, 2014, p. 4). Additionally, the term regional hegemony is of importance, and refers to the dominant position of a state within a specific geographic region, where it has the ability to shape the political, economic, and security dynamics (Keohane, and Nye, 2021). Lastly, national security refers to government decisions and actions to protect the state, its citizens and territory from both direct external and internal threats to their safety. (Collins, 2015)

Central Argument

The research objective of this paper is to analyse the determining factors which led to a change in the KSA's regional FP from a hawkish approach between 2003-2018 to a dovish approach from 2021-May 2023. This paper argues that the main driving factor in the kingdom's changing FP is:

- Hypothesis One (H1): The motivation to attract investors for V2030.
- Hypothesis Two (H2): A worsened Saudi national security.
- Hypothesis Three (H3): The Crown Prince MBS' ambitions for King Salman's throne.

The **first hypothesis** explaining the change from a hawkish Saudi FP to a more dovish one is H1, the motivation to attract investors for V2030. In order to understand the importance of V2030 for the al-Saud family, it is essential to understand the Saudi social contract, no taxation - no representation (Kinninmont, 2017) and the importance of oil revenues for state survival (Elneel & AlMulhim, 2022). In 2014, the oil price fell from \$115 per barrel down to \$60 and continued its demise throughout 2015 where it ended the year below \$40 per barrel (Breul, 2016). This posed a problem to a state which was dependent on oil revenues for 90% of its income (Noura et al., 2015) and connected the volatility of government spending to the volatility of the oil price (Husain, 2018). This government spending is essential to maintain political quiescence by the population in return for cradle-to-grave social guarantees and to finance the KSA's aspirations for regional hegemony. (Grand & Wolff, 2020) Recent examples of this were the uprisings during the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 when the al-Saud family increased government handouts (Kinninmont, 2017) and the financial transfers of the kingdom in exchange for regional alliances (Ottaway, 2021). Both factors are essential for the survival of the al-Saud family and both are based on oil revenues. (Grand & Wolff, 2020)

Because of the volatility of the oil price and the predicted oil depletion in the coming decades, then deputy Crown Prince MBS consulted McKinsey for a solution. In 2015, the report "Saudi Arabia A productivity-led transformation" was published and served as a basis to MBS' V2030, which aims to transform the kingdom into a vibrant knowledge-driven economy and society. (Kosárová, 2020) In order to achieve the transformation away from oil, the kingdom is reliant on international investors for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) worth \$3 trillion by 2030. (Barbuscia & Azhar, 2021) This ties the long-term survival of the royal family to the willingness of international investors to invest large sums of money into V2030.

A major aspect driving FDI apart from business factors for international investors in the KSA is reputation, stability and geopolitical risks. (Aliedan, 2022) The reputational costs of being associated with the KSA's hawkish FP and its negative effects in the region is driving investors, in particular Western investors, away. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) FDI into the KSA decreased from \$8,8 bn in 2013 to \$1,4 bn in 2017. (UNCTAD,

2019, p. 214) The same applies to stability and geopolitical risks which have notably harmed the investment climate around the country. (Aliedan, 2022) To change the investment climate and the KSA's international reputation, the effects of a hawkish FP needed to be reversed and most importantly not worsened, leading to a more dovish FP. To test this hypothesis positively, the pressure to appease investment must be absent in the FP decision making of the first case study and the driving factor behind the FP decisions of the al-Saud family in the second case study.

The **second hypothesis** explaining the change from a hawkish Saudi FP to a more dovish one is a worsened Saudi national security. Whereas the main driver behind a more hawkish FP in 2003 was taking on more responsibility for national security, regional stability and stepping out of the US' security protection, this step has not yielded the results that were anticipated. A more hawkish FP has opened conflicts on multiple fronts in the ME and created more adversaries than allies surrounding the KSA geographically. This changed the al-Saud family's perceptions of the country's security. The direct attacks on the kingdom and its oil supplies were particularly shocking. The definition of national security used in this paper limits the notion of national security to the elements described in this hypothesis. Reversing this trend under the notion of H2, national security, led to a more dovish FP, which focused more on alliances, normalising of relations and diplomacy, while decreasing military engagements and sanctioning of other countries. To test this hypothesis positively, this paper must find an internal change of tactics within the KSA's FP decision makers as a response to an increased national security threat level.

The **third hypothesis** explaining the change from a hawkish Saudi FP to a more dovish one is the Crown Prince MBS' ambitions for King Salman's throne. From his first days as deputy Crown Prince and minister of defence MBS has used FP to strengthen and determine his position within the royal family and in the line of succession of his father, King Salman. (Gause, 2017) Once this hawkish FP did not yield the results as expected and criticism within the family grew, the prince changed the country's FP behaviour to avoid further weakening his position. To test this hypothesis positively, this paper must find a threat to MBS' succession coming from other family members over the Crown Prince's FP decisions.

Research Design

The methodology this paper will employ to answer the research question is a most similar systems case study design analysed with content analysis, systemic analysis and comparative method. This design allows the paper to compare Saudi FP changes in the last decade and determine the factors responsible for the change. The two cases chosen for this design are first, Saudi regional FP from the year 2003 to the year 2018 and, second, Saudi regional FP from the year 2021 until May 2023. (Figure 1.) The first time period is marked by the beginning of a more hawkish Saudi FP in 2003 as a response to the US invasion of Iraq the same year and the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the US. The end of the first case study is in late 2018 after the killing of Saudi journalist

Jamal Khashoggi and the cabinet reshuffle of the Saudi government two months later (Reuters, 2018).

The second time period is marked by the beginning of a more dovish FP with the al-Ula Declaration bringing an end to the diplomatic blockade of Qatar (Feierstein & Guzansky, 2023) and lasts until May 2023, the submission of this paper. The years in between the two case studies did not show any significant FP decision by the KSA and were largely marked by a low profile of the Crown Prince after the death of Jamal Khashoggi and the Covid-19 pandemic. The regional scope of this study is due to the KSA only feeling comfortable enough to show force in its immediate surroundings; outside the ME, the kingdom resorts to other FP tools. (González del Miño & Hernández Martínez, 2019) The data used for this analysis consists of the relevant academic literature, institute reports and public statements from the Saudi authorities.

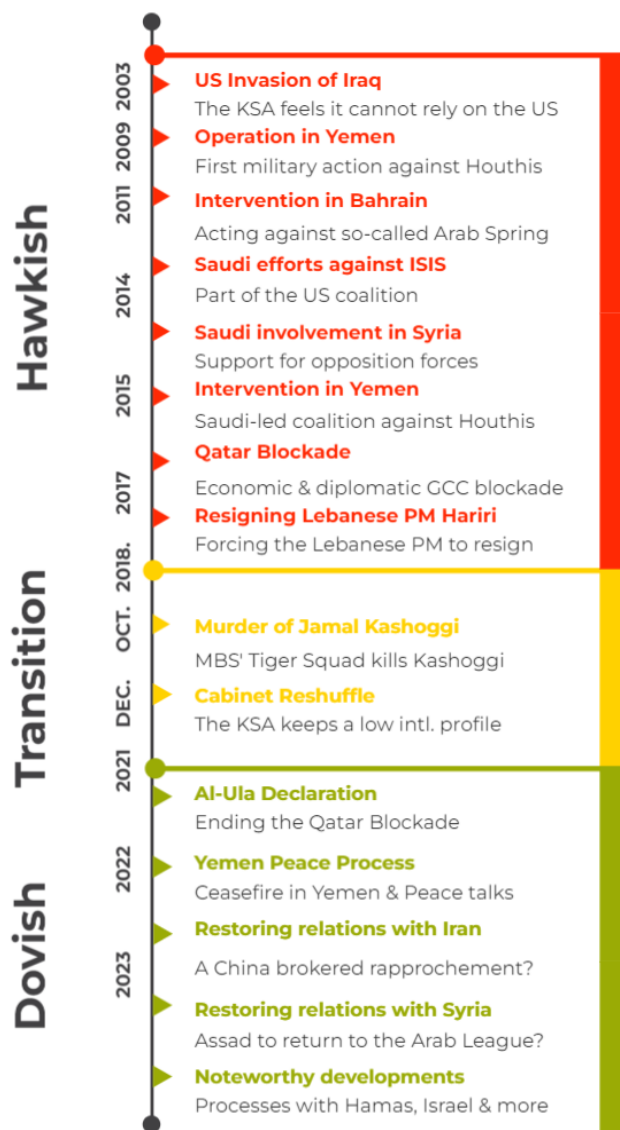


Figure 1. Source: Author (Annex A)

Analysis

The following section will be divided into two parts. In the first part, this paper will analyse the trend of increasingly hawkish Saudi FP from 2003 until 2018. In particular, this section will analyse the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Operation Scorched Earth in Yemen, Saudi intervention in Bahrain, Saudi efforts against ISIS, Saudi involvement in the Syrian civil war, intervention in the Yemeni civil war, the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis, resigning Lebanese PM Harisi and Saudi-Iranian relations. There were FP activities by the KSA that also fit into this newly hawkish FP but these will not be thoroughly analysed in individual sections. These include the 2013 coup in Egypt, the Civil War in Libya and instability in Iraq. In the second, this paper will analyse the turnaround of Saudi FP and the increasingly dovish Saudi FP from 2021 until May 2023. In particular, this section will analyse the 2021 al-Ula Declaration, the Yemen Peace Process, restoring relations with Syria, restoring relations with Iran and some additional noteworthy developments.

Case Study One: 2003 until 2018

In this first time period, this paper analyses the motives and driving factors behind the KSA's hawkish FP decisions. A comprehensive understanding of them is necessary to test what factors were responsible for the kingdom to adapt its FP modus operandi. For H1 to apply, there should be no pressure for international investment amongst FP decision makers. For H2 to apply, the KSA's main motivation behind all FP decisions should be protecting national security interests and establishing regional stability under the KSA's leadership. And, for H3 to apply, the personal motivations of MBS to gain power through a hawkish FP needs to be present after he became deputy Crown Prince in 2015.

The Aftermath of 9/11 and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

In this section, this paper analyses the reasons for the KSA to adopt a more hawkish FP in the early 2000s. Before the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, Saudi FP had been "detached" (Russel, 2005, p.66) from internal security measures because it had a security guarantor which had been confirmed just ten years prior during the invasion of Kuwait and the US-led Operation Desert Shield stepping up in the Gulf countries' protections. Only after the public disagreement over the US decision to invade Iraq did the KSA question the US as guarantor for stability in the region (Lacey, 2010) and of its and its allies' defence (Bowen, 2008).

Another reason the KSA felt that the US had undermined the kingdom's strategic interests was that US policy in the region had bolstered Iran's position in the ME. Long term Saudi Foreign Minister Saud bin Faisal Al Saud described the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a gift handed to Iran on a "silver platter" (Ottaway, 2013, p. 122). Eliminating Iran's biggest threat in the West, after having eliminated the Taliban in the East, gave the country the opportunity for an unbalanced rise to a regional power. (Nuruzzaman,

2013) Additionally, US efforts for democratic elections in Palestine, resulting in a victory for Hamas, further strengthened Iran's position as the country capitalised on Hamas' international isolation and increased its influence in the organisation. (Bronson, 2011) Ultimately, the kingdom decided to pursue an independent and hawkish FP after the US did not respond to demands from King Abdullah to "cut off the head of the (Iranian) snake" (Jerome, 2010). Overall, the al-Saud family felt a lack of US commitment to maintain the strategic specific alliance relationship it had with Riyadh. (House, 2016) In 2013, FM bin Faisal officially announced this change to the world, following a 10-year preparation for the kingdom's more prominent role, when he named Iran the biggest threat in the ME during a speech on the KSA's FP. (Al Faisal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, 2013)

With King Salman's accession to the throne in 2015 and the rise of his son MBS, this hawkish Saudi FP has become even more pronounced through the Salman Doctrine. King Salman inherited the so-called Arab Spring and the rise of non-state actors in regional conflicts from his brother's reign. Increased regional complexity, according to the doctrine, requires the use of all possible resources to reactivate Saudi hegemony. (González del Miño & Hernández Martínez, 2019) This was embodied particularly by MBS who showed a greater willingness to "lead from the front" (Gause, 2017, p. 4). This shows that the kingdom's change in FP came as a response to the US no longer acting in accordance with the KSA's strategic interests in the region after 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

2009 Operation Scorched Earth in Yemen

On 11th of August 2009, the Yemeni government launched Operation Scorched Earth against the Houthis in the Saada governorate. The conflict is between the Shia Zaidi Houthi rebels protesting the dilution of Zaidi influence and identity in Yemen, and the central government representing the Shafi Sunni majority of the country wanting to prevent succession from Saada and the Houthis. (Boucek, 2010) Interestingly, the Zaidi interpretation of Shi'ism is regarded as a Sunni school of Shi'ism and Shafi interpretation of Sunnism as a Shi'i school of Sunnism. (Bonney, 2009) Additionally, the conflict was driven by grievances about economic underdevelopment and displeasure about the government cooperating with the US and the KSA. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2004, the KSA had supported the government's military efforts against the Houthis with intelligence, financial support, and shielded the Yemeni government's actions internationally. (Boucek, 2010) This support was very much in line with Saudi FP in the decades prior to 2003.

However, on November 3rd, Houthi forces attacked a Saudi border patrol killing two and wounding ten officers, which provoked the first Saudi military operation since the KSA's participation in Operation Desert Shield. (Boucek, 2010) The Saudi participation in Operation Scorched Earth mainly focused on driving Houthi forces away from the border with airstrikes and artillery. Throughout the operation Jordanian and Moroccan forces had joined the fighting. (Al-Amrani, 2009) Later, it became clear that the Saudi

military response was not just a reaction to the border fighting, but that it had been a planned operation which only needed a pretext. (Boucek, 2010) This planning and the intensified fighting against the Houthis was the first time that the shift in FP to a more hawkish behaviour translated into reality.

The reasons for the KSA to intervene were mainly connected to national security considerations. Yemen had become a sanctuary for Saudi militants joining Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula looking to attack their homeland and the al-Saud family needed a strong Yemeni government to control this flow of militants. The most notable attack, an assassination attempt on Deputy Minister of Interior Affairs MBN, had occurred just three months prior to Saudi military actions in Yemen. (Slackman, 2009) While the Yemeni government accused Iran of involvement this was never proven in these years. (Boucek, 2010) Additionally, the reality on the ground in 2009 did not present an opening fit for Iran's modus operandi. Therefore, the Saudi military engagement was mostly concerned with direct threats to national security and not the struggle for regional hegemony with Iran.

The 2011 Saudi-led Intervention in Bahrain

On March 14th 2011, a Saudi-led coalition began assisting the Bahraini government in suppressing anti-government protests. After an invitation by the Al-Khalifa ruling family, a first of its kind decision by the GCC, they authorised 1200 Saudi and 800 United Arab Emirates (UAE) troops to enter Bahrain in order to support its security forces. (Bronner & Slackman, 2011) The protests were part of the so-called Arab Spring and were driven by the Shia majority, supported by Iran, against the Al-Khalifa family's discrimination of the Shia majority in Bahrain. This decision of the KSA was at odds with the preferences of the Obama administration for dialogue and political participation of minorities. (Henderson, 2011)

The intervention by King Abdullah marked a surprising public show of military force from the KSA (Bronson, 2011) for the first time since the 2003 decision for a more independent and hawkish FP (González del Miño & Hernández Martínez, 2019), something the country had shied away from doing even in the 2009 Operation Scorched Earth in Yemen. Additionally, it marked a new low point in US-Saudi relations at that point, given that a day before, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates travelled to the region reiterating Obama's stance on political reforms. (Bronson, 2011) Internally, King Abdullah handed out an additional \$37 billion to boost the Saudi social contract and prevent popular unrest. (Alhussein, 2019, p. 6)

The reasons for the KSA to intervene in Bahrain were mainly driven by national security considerations. First, a potential success by Bahrain's Shia population would have set a precedent for uprisings in other Gulf monarchies and the KSA. Especially given that Bahrain is bordering the Eastern Province of the kingdom, home to most of the country's Shia population. (Henderson, 2011) Second, Bahrain was economically important to the KSA as a regional financial hub used to channel oil revenues and

because one of the time's world's largest oil refineries is located in the country, refining 83% Saudi oil. (Nuruzzaman, 2013) Third, with 70% of the population identifying as Shia and Iran's historical sovereignty claims over Bahrain, the country is another proxy in the Iran-Saudi struggle for regional hegemony. (Bronson, 2011) All three of these considerations are closely located in the al-Saud family's definition of national security. Suppressing the uprisings to dampen hopes of protests in the kingdom, to protect its oil revenues, and to assure that Iran does not gain control in bordering country were of vital importance and only protected by the kingdom itself, as its security guarantor — the US — was not willing to support the al-Saud family.

Finally, the intervention in Bahrain marked a shift within the KSA's view of national security. Just two years prior in Yemen, the main focus was still on extremist militants attacking the kingdom. After the death of Osama bin-Laden and with the emergence of the so-called Arab Spring, this focus shifted to preventing any form of popular uprisings that could threaten authoritarian governments in the region. This was done to avoid giving templates for domestic groups within the kingdom and to assure that the KSA could still rely on its authoritarian allies.

Saudi efforts against ISIS 2014

In response to the territorial gains in Iraq and Syria by the violent extremist organisation Islamic State Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the KSA joined the US-led coalition in an intensive campaign of airstrikes over Syria on September 22nd 2014. (Griffin, 2014) Saudi support to the coalition was estimated to be limited to monthly airstrikes, contributing minimally to the overall coalition efforts. (Greene & Elwazer, 2015) One year later, on December 15th 2015, MBS announced the founding of the Islamic Military Alliance based out of Riyadh, a coalition of 34 Sunni Muslim countries set to fight Muslim extremism. (Payne & Abdelaziz, 2015) In 2017, MBS hosted the inaugural meeting of the coalition, which has since been renamed Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Alliance (IMCTA). (Middle East Monitor, 2017) Today, the coalition has 42 members after Kenya joined in September 2022. (Arab News, 2022)

These two FP decisions by the KSA highlight another element of more hawkish Saudi behaviour. First, according to government sources, the KSA has flown “341 sorties against ISIS in Syria, the second largest number after the United States” (Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, 2019) as of March 2017. As of January 1, 2017, the US has flown 167,912 deployments from strongpoints (sorties) (U.S. Department of Defense, 2017) This rhetoric and increase in activity is in line with Saudi efforts to take on a leading role in the region's security infrastructure. Secondly, the creation of IMCTA was also a sign to the rest of the world that Arab Gulf states and the KSA in particular now assume greater responsibility in regional security. (Diabat, 2019)

The KSA's participation in the US-led coalition against ISIS was driven by national security and by its international image. First, the kingdom has long been the target of extremist Muslim groups who reject its custodianship of Islam, the monarchy and its

alliance with the US. (Matthiesen, 2015) While Al-Qaeda had primarily been behind attacks in the country, since 2014, attacks from ISIS increased. Overall, 60 major attacks have been recorded in the kingdom. (Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, 2019) Therefore, weakening ISIS in cooperation with the US is within the national security interest of the KSA. Secondly, a significant motivator for the kingdom to pursue this coalition was to calm Western criticism of the kingdom spreading Salafi jihadist ideology, particularly Wahhabism in the case of the KSA. (Ajami, 2015) Joining the coalition was a relatively easy and cheap way to address these criticisms.

The reasons for the KSA to lead its own military coalition against ISIS were driven by concerns about its international image and the personal aspirations of MBS. With the intervention in Yemen starting just a few months prior to the announcement of the IMCTA, the struggle for regional hegemony with Iran was reaching its peak. Given the exclusion of the three Shia countries from the Muslim world, Iran, Iraq and Syria, from the coalition, IMCTA was a clear sign towards Iran of whom the majority of Muslim countries follow. (Diabat, 2019) (Al-Ghafli, 2016)¹ Furthermore, the KSA's concern about its international image. Similarly to the motivation for joining the US coalition in its fight against ISIS, the kingdom felt the need for a broader and bigger statement that would unify the (Sunni) Muslim world behind the al-Sauds as a bulwark against radical extremist Islam. Additionally, as described above, ISIS had singled out the KSA as an enemy and a threat to Islam, seeking to capture Islam's two holiest sites from the al-Saud custodianship. (Saab, 2015) This became increasingly worrying as ISIS tried to undermine Saudi prestige in the Islamic world and the ME in particular; the IMCTA sought to maintain Saudi leadership. (Akpomera, 2016) Ultimately it was MBS, a young and aspiring Saudi prince who used hawkish FP to cement his claims for the Saudi throne, who pushed for this alliance.

Saudi Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

Since the uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring in Syria, the KSA has been one of the main supporters of the Syrian opposition to President Bashar al-Assad. (Ellison, 2016) The main beneficiaries have been nationalist moderate islamists under the banner of the Free Syrian Army opposition forces and the Islamic Front, a group fighting against the Assad government as well as ISIS. (Uludag, 2015) The Saudis have supplied weapons, money and training to opposition forces. Since 2013, the kingdom has been the leading force amongst GCC countries, and was the highest supplier of financial aid to the Syrian opposition. (Ellison, 2016; Mazzetti & Apuzzo, 2016) The kingdom has also been involved in peace efforts for the conflict, however, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel

¹ This message was intensified with the North Thunder military exercise hosted by the KSA in 2016, displaying the military capabilities of 19 countries from the alliance. (Al-Sughair, 2016) This itself shows the three-tier nature of this coalition and its potential strength. With a set of core countries, the military alliance, committing long term military capabilities; a second set of member states, the coalition, committing short term military capabilities; and a third group, the entente, committing symbolically and joint consultations regarding terrorism and security issues. (Diabat, 2019)

al-Jubeir always insisted that Assad had to leave and that there could be no peace with him. (Reuters, 2016)

The KSA's involvement in the Syrian Civil War is in line with its more hawkish FP in the last two decades. While previously the kingdom focused on solely influencing the ME through its vast financial resources, the Syrian Civil War marked a change where now the kingdom provided actual weaponry and invested significant resources in acquiring and even shipping weapons, as well as actual training on the ground. However, similarly to the fight against ISIS, the KSA aligned its efforts with the US while stepping up its participation compared to pre-2003 times.

Saudi Arabia's involvement in Syria was driven by national security considerations on a domestic and regional level. The reasons to intervene in the Syrian Civil War were very similar to the reasons to intervene against ISIS. However, while ISIS posed an immediate threat to the kingdom as described above, the long term prospects of al-Qaeda or the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) rising in a vacuum left by a weakened Assad were unacceptable to the al-Saud family. (Wehrey, 2014) The reasons as to why Sunni radical violent extremist groups were of a concern to the KSA were explained above. The MB is seen as a threat by the KSA as they supported Saddam Hussein in 1991, led to the emergence of the Islamic Awakening movement, the main Islamist opposition in the kingdom, benefitted from the so-called Arab Spring and gained popular support in Tunisia and Egypt. (Grabowski, 2016) As a result, a Saudi backed Sunni authoritarian government in Damascus would solve Saudi security problems.

Syria was one of the first battle fields where Iran and the KSA met through proxies. (Ellison, 2016) The Islamic Republic supported the Assad government with Russia creating a land connection from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, an axis that threatened Saudi hegemonic aspirations. (Wehrey, 2014) The dynamics at play here are the same as in previously described FP encounters between the KSA and Iran. Furthermore, the KSA has also used the war in Syria to reassert its primacy in the GCC against Qatari aspirations and support of the MB.

The Saudi-led Intervention in Yemen 2015

On March 26th 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of nine countries launched an intervention into the Yemeni Civil War upon the invitation of President Hadi after he was ousted by the Houthi rebels. Starting in 2014, Iran significantly increased its aid to the Houthis in the form of weapons and training by the Quds forces. (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021) This shifted the power balance in favour of the Houthis and enabled them to overthrow the Yemeni government in 2014. As of March 2015, Houthi forces were close to taking control of all of Yemen and President Hadi asked the UNSC (BBC, 2015) and the Arab League to intervene (CBC, 2015). The KSA's Operation Decisive Storm included airstrikes, a naval blockade of Houthi controlled territories and the deployment of ground forces. Since 2015, the coalition has been supported with intelligence and logistical aid by the Obama Administration and saw an intensification

during the Trump Administration. In 2021, the Biden Administration ceased support. (Borger, 2021) After four weeks of intense fighting, Operation Decisive Storm was declared a success and replaced by Operation Restoring Hope, which is still in place today. (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, D.C, 2015)

This FP decision by the KSA marked the high point of its hawkish FP in the last two decades. (Matthiesen, 2015) Unlike in the years before, this deployment of military personnel marked an escalation compared to the relatively low profile interventions of 2009 in Yemen and 2011 in Bahrain. Additionally, this marked the first time that the KSA led an intervention of this size, having only been part of coalitions in 2013 in Syria and 2014 against ISIS. For the intervention, the KSA committed 150,000 military personnel and led a coalition of the willing, a step unprecedented in the country's modern history. (Reuters, 2015) Also, the involvement of MBS in FP decision making increased the kingdom's aggressiveness. (Gause, 2017)

Two main factors drove the KSA to intervene in Yemen, national security considerations and the young deputy Crown Prince MBS. Unlike the 2009 Yemen military operation, this time Iran played an actual role building up a proxy on the KSA's border. (Heibach, 2021) As Houthi forces came closer to the Saudi border and, given its increased military capacities, became a viable military threat, Saudi national security came under increasing pressure. Territorial integrity and economic development in the border region was perceived to be directly threatened by the Houthi forces. (Salim, 2022) Furthermore, the fact that this time Iran had in fact provided training and weapons to the Houthis elevated this domestic conflict to the regional level. With Iran-backed forces directly at the Saudi border a line in the struggle for regional hegemony was crossed. Additionally, Yemen was the easiest of the contested battleground between the KSA and Iran for the Saudis to signal to Tehran and the world that the KSA would put a stop to Iran's expansion in the ME. In Lebanon, Iraq or Syria the costs of an intervention would have been much higher and much riskier. (Sunik, 2018)

Secondly, it was MBS himself who drove the intervention three months after being appointed minister of defence. Since he joined his father's cabinet, MBS used hawkish FP to advance his own position within the al-Saud line of succession. (Heibach, 2021) (Annex B) The government and state media outlets made sure to depict MBS as the "architect" (Al-Wael, 2015) of the campaign and only one week after he declared Operation Decisive Storm to be a success he joined the succession ladder as deputy Crown Prince (Alhussein, 2019). This was the first of many occasions in the next three years where MBS would use FP to make the world and everyone at home understand who was running the KSA from now on.

The The Qatar Blockade 2017

On June 5th 2017 the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis began when, under the leadership of the KSA, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and began

the Qatar Blockade. Later on, Jordan, the Maldives, Mauritania, Senegal, Djibouti, and the Comoros joined the Saudi-led blockade. It included blocking Qatari access to the coalition's airspace, banning all imports and exports and imposing diplomatic isolation. Additionally, an intensive campaign of cyber attacks targeted the Qatari royal family. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) Three weeks after the beginning of the blockade and one day after MBS was elevated to Crown Prince (Ottaway, 2021), the KSA issued a list of 13 demands for Qatar to comply with for the blockade to end. These demands included reducing relations with Iran, removing Turkish troops from Qatari territory, ending contacts with the MB, closing the broadcaster al-Jazeera and submitting to monthly external compliance checks. (Wintour, 2017)

This decision further aligned with the kingdom's hawkish FP and with its intensification under MBS. The plan to neutralise Qatar had been prepared for months and was preceded with a carefully crafted public relations strategy undermining Qatari leadership and FP. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) Three weeks prior to the blockade, the Qatar News Agency website was hacked and filled with fake statements by the emir of Qatar praising Iran's role in the region and its status as an Islamic power. It was later revealed that the UAE was behind this incident (Nakashima, 2017), employing a Russian cyber mercenary group. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) Acting against a member of the GCC and considering a military invasion of the country (Hope & Scheck, 2021) showcased an emboldened Crown Prince.

Saudi action against Qatar was driven mostly by national security considerations and MBS' personal ambitions. First, Qatari behaviour since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring often directly opposed Saudi interests. The countries were disagreeing on every conflict area in the ME such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, MB organisations, and particularly the Qatari-Turkish relationship with Hamas. (Akyar & Sakka, 2021) The GCC always represented the ultimate expression of Saudi regional hegemony (González del Miño & Hernández Martínez, 2019), however, Qatar always presented a disruptive pole in the organisation and started developing an active FP (Dazi-Héni, 2019). After attempts to bring in Qatar with the 2014 Riyadh Agreement failed to achieve tangible results as the country still outshined its bigger neighbours a breaking point was reached. Second, after US President Trump's visit to Riyadh, his first presidential trip, full of flattering photo opportunities and the signing of large weapons deals with the kingdom, MBS felt emboldened to act against Qatar and force it back in line with Saudi hegemony. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) These actions are in line with him using FP to advance on the succession ladder for the throne and for his *modus operandi*.

Resigning Lebanese PM Hariri

On November 4th, 2017 Lebanese PM Saad Hariri appeared on television for a surprise address where he announced that he had failed to curb Iranian influence in Lebanon and was therefore stepping down as PM. (Deutsche Welle, 2017) It quickly became clear that this did not happen voluntarily, but that financial and physical pressure of MBS' men were the reason for his resignation as the United Nations High Commissioner for

Human Rights announced in 2019. (Middle East Monitor, 2019) It ultimately took a public invitation from French President Macron — who had met with MBS in Riyadh shortly after Hariri had been detained and where MBS told him the Lebanese PM was there voluntarily (Hope & Scheck, 2021) — to Hariri and his family to fly to Paris for the Saudis letting him go. (Solomon & Chassany, 2017) Hariri returned to Lebanon and revoked his resignation. (Balkiz & Qiblawi, 2017)

This FP decision by the KSA marked a new escalation in its hawkish FP. While the pressure on Hariri did not involve military means, kidnapping a foreign country's head of government and forcing them to resign was the boldest move up to date. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) Additionally, a day after Hariri travelled to the KSA and was held there against his will, Saudi minister of Gulf Affairs, Thamer al-Sabhan, responded to the reactions from Lebanon that aggressions from the country would be treated as declarations of war. (Al Arabiya, 2017)

The Saudi motivations to force Hariri to resign were national security considerations and personal motives from MBS. A day before the incident, Hariri met with senior adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Akbar Velayati (Qatar News Agency, 2017) in an effort to stabilise Lebanon over its complicated power sharing government accommodating Sunnis, Shia and Christians. This marked an escalation for the Saudis as they expected Hariri, a Saudi citizen and long term friend of the royal family, to curb Iran's influence in Lebanon. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) For the al-Saud family Hariri's actions became a liability in the struggle with Iran for regional hegemony.

Secondly, MBS had personal problems with Hariri which date back decades to Hariri's father, a former Lebanese PM, becoming a successful business man in the KSA based on good relations with the al-Saud family eventually earning him Saudi citizenship. When the 2015 dip in the oil price put pressure on the Saudi government, it was MBS who cut projects to Hariri's company in the kingdom who, as a response, laid off tens of thousands of migrant workers, leaving many stranded in the kingdom with no income. (Khan, 2016) This turned into a high profile embarrassment for the Saudi government and MBS in particular who was trying to sell himself as an economic visionary. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) Additionally, MBS did not like Hariri's deep financial and personal ties to the sons of the previous King Abdullah, some of his harshest domestic rivals. (Hope & Scheck, 2021)

Saudi Relations with Iran

As described at the beginning of this case study, the KSA was very concerned with the US invading Iraq in 2003 because it would allow the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to refocus its efforts on regional dominance. This Arab-Persian rivalry dates back to the year 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the year of the Siege of Mecca. Both events cut deep into both countries' memories and significantly changed their FP. A scared al-Saud family, worried about maintaining

family survival, was pushed back into the arms of the ulama² and with this back to more Wahhabist interpretation of policy making. (House, 2013) And the newly founded Islamic Republic formulated a FP that essentially opposed al-Saud's claim to leadership of the Muslim world when Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that the Islamic world must turn towards Iran's leadership. (Parsi, 2007) This threat to Saudi leadership translated into a struggle for regional hegemony between the two countries, echoed by sectarian divides. (Wehrey et al., 2009) Despite this struggle for regional hegemony, the early 2000s were largely shaped by the 2001 Security Accords signed by both countries (Al-Maena, 2001) placing constructive communication at the forefront of their relations.

This came to an end in 2008 when the US, the security guarantor and buffer between the two countries in Iraq, announced its withdrawal within the next three years. King Abdullah reacted to this by intensifying his rhetoric against Tehran and started developing a shared Arab strategy against Iran. (Hadzikadunic, 2019) In a much less constrained environment the struggle for regional hegemony transferred into proxy conflicts as outlined above with the examples of Yemen 2009, Bahrain 2011, the Syrian Civil War, the coalition against ISIS and the intervention in Yemen 2015. But actions against each other were not only constrained to proxies, as shown in the 2015 WikiLeaks where secret documents from the Saudi government were published, one of which highlighted increased efforts in 2010 to stir up domestic unrest in Iran. (Bin Faisal Al Saud, 2010)

The direct confrontation intensified when the KSA executed a critic of the government and Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. (BBC, 2016) On the same day Iranian protestors stormed and destroyed the Saudi embassy in Iran. (Hubbard, 2016) On the next day, the kingdom and its allies announced the breaking of diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic. The timing of the execution came shortly before the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action which lifted sanctions on Iran, increasing its economic power, a perceived threat for the KSA. (Chairil, 2023) Soon after cutting diplomatic ties with Iran, Saudi FM Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir published a piece in the New York Times that the KSA would not “allow Iran to undermine our security or the security of our allies” and that the kingdom would “push back” against any attempts by Iran to do so (Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, 2016). Crown Prince MBS himself further escalated the rhetoric against Iran when he called Ayatollah Khamenei a “new Hitler” (Reuters, 2017) and said that the kingdom would not allow appeasement policies. This rhetoric was then followed by Saudi FP actions against Qatar and Lebanon.

Case Study Two: 2021 until May 2023

In this second time period, this paper analyses the motives and driving factors behind the KSA's change to dovish FP decisions. After understanding the drivers for hawkish

² The Senior Council of Ulama is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's highest religious body and advises the king on religious matters based on a wahhabi interpretation of Islam. (House, 2016)

FP, we must outline the reasons for the KSA to apply a different modus operandi. For H1 to apply, there should be pressure for international investment amongst FP decision makers. For H2 to apply, there should be a changed perception of Saudi FP decision makers of the national security situation of the country, leading to a changed modus operandi. For H3 to apply, the ambitions of MBS to become king need to be threatened by the outcome of his previous FP decisions.

Inter years 2018-2021

The purpose of the following section is to highlight the internal assessment of Saudi FP of the past 15 years and how they have impacted Saudi strategic interests. Starting in March of 2018, MBS reached his personal high point during his three week visit to the US, meeting with President Trump in the White House. After this meeting MBS went on to tour the country, meeting some of the most influential US Americans eager to conduct business with the visionary Prince. (Arango, 2018) However, there was one dissident voice spoiling MBS's trip, Jamal Kashoggi. The Khashoggi family had long been influential in the KSA and enjoyed a close relationship with the al-Saud family, but starting with the rise of MBS criticism against him rose from Kashoggi. His commentaries were perceived as enough of a threat to the kingdom that Kashoggi was murdered on October 2, 2018 by MBS' secret security Tiger Squad in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, audio-recorded by Turkish security services. (Ottaway, 2021) The people involved in the operation were trialled by Saudi courts, however, knowledge of the operation by MBS was categorically denied. (Lamb & Rashwan, 2020) A UN report and CIA assessments concluded that MBS at least had knowledge of the operation if not ordered it himself. (Callamard, 2019; Central Intelligence Agency, 2021)

The international reaction to this was mixed. Western countries condemned the murder publicly and suspended weapons sales to the kingdom. Russia and China did not condemn and affirmed their trust in the Saudi judicial system; the Arab world was ambiguous. However, it was clear that MBS's personal image had turned from a pan-Arab reformer to another bloody dictator. (Kéchichian, 2019) Even Turki bin Faisal al-Saud, a supporter of the Crown Prince, said this would forever leave MBS with a stigma. (Ottaway, 2021) And this stigma had an immediate effect on international investment in the kingdom. Three weeks later leading bankers and investors withdrew their participation in the Future Investment Initiative and so did government officials and leaders from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. (Dubroff, 2018) Even MBS himself said about V2030 "No one will invest for years" (Kerr et al., 2018). One year after the murder, he took full responsibility while continuing to deny any personal involvement. (bin Salman, 2019)

The Khashoggi murder received significantly more attention than any of the KSA's FP actions in the 15 years prior. Immediately after, the kingdom was largely occupied with damage control and the December 2018 reshuffled government — seeing veteran government figures elevated to key cabinet positions — (Reuters, 2018) was keen to maintain a low profile abroad. Liberalising domestic policies was the immediate

response, particularly liberalising women's rights. (Eum, 2019) But that could only help so much and "it won't change what happened in Turkey", as a private text from Richard Branson, one of the biggest international investors into V2030, showed (Hope & Scheck, 2021, p. 309).

During these inter-years it became clear that never before had the KSA been involved in so many conflicts at the same time with its forces spread all over the region. (Berenguer, 2016) It was time for an assessment of the past 15 years which would ultimately lead to a recalibration of Saudi FP. (Hokayem & Raine, 2023; Kéchichian, 2019; Heibach, 2021) Particularly MBS started thinking about restoring his place in the global power structure in anticipation of the annual G20 meeting, planned in Riyadh for 2020. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this process as the KSA maintained a low FP profile compared to other Gulf countries such as the UAE and Qatar who continued their FP agendas. (Fakhro, 2022)

Starting with the intervention in Yemen. While the 2009 Operation Scorched Earth did achieve its goals of securing the border, it laid the foundation for the 2015 intervention which proved to be a political and military disaster by 2019. (Direction du Renseignement Militaire, 2018) While the KSA took the lead in the coalition, it was the UAE who committed most ground troops and achieved most success by building up and financing Yemeni factions defending UAE interests close to its border. The KSA on the other hand, focused its efforts on airstrikes and had to fight off Houthi incursions into Saudi territory. By 2019, the Houthis were still holding the north of Yemen. To make matters worse for the KSA, by June 2020 the Houthis had attacked targets within the kingdom with 313 ballistic missiles and 357 drones. (Arab News, 2020) The most prominent incident, which created immense pressure on MBS, was the Abqaiq–Khurais attack where drones hit oil production facilities, effectively cutting Saudi oil production in half for weeks, driving up global oil prices. (Guzansky, 2020)

With a stalemate settled, in 2020 three trends crystallised as results of Saudi FP. (Ottaway, 2021) First, Saudi airstrikes were responsible for significant civilian casualties and humanitarian suffering. By 2020, Yemen had been declared the worst humanitarian crisis in the world by the UN (United Nations, 2023) and 112,000 deaths were reported through airstrikes, 10% of which were civilians (ACLED, 2020). This led to the intervention receiving an overwhelmingly negative international reaction. Second, the KSA and its allies were parting ways in Yemen. Jordan and Morocco both pulled out of the coalition in 2019, partly as a response to the killing of Kashoggi and MBS aggressive behaviour towards Arab countries afterwards. (Young, 2019) The same year, Sudanese President al-Bashir, the biggest contributor of ground troops, was overthrown and the troops withdrawn as a result. (Ottaway, 2021) However, the worst hit for the KSA came when the UAE withdrew from the coalition as the most effective military power in the conflict. This was embarrassing for the KSA in two ways. It showed that \$370bn spent in five years on the military (CIA World Factbook, 2023) was not enough and that the UAE had a stronger military while spending significantly fewer resources.

The support for opposition forces in Syria has also not materialised the way the KSA envisioned. In 2020, President al-Assad celebrated his 20 years in power and controlled the largest part of Syrian territory thanks to the help of Russia and Iran after the US withdrawal in 2019. (Mogelson, 2020) The Qatar blockade only pushed the country closer to Iran and Turkey diplomatically and militarily, creating an axis that was not there before and was only created because of the blockade. (Akyar & Sakka, 2021) Additionally, some GCC countries started showing support for Qatar, most notably Jordan. The forced resignation of Lebanese PM Hariri backfired spectacularly as upon his return Hariri remained PM until 2020 and received outpouring support from all factions, including Hezbollah. (Ottaway, 2021) Only the intervention in Bahrain and the IMCTA coalition against ISIS were not complete FP failures. The royal family of Bahrain was kept in power and moved closer to the al-Saud family as a consequence. (Bronson, 2011) The IMCTA managed to increase the number of countries in the Muslim world following the lead of the KSA as regional hegemon over Iran (Al-Ghafli, 2016), however, the coalition does not engage in more activities than information sharing. Overall, this track record led to a change in Saudi FP starting at the beginning of 2021.

The 2021 al-Ula Declaration - The Turning Point

On January 5th 2021, the leaders of the GCC came together for the first time since the beginning of the Qatar Blockade to end the diplomatic dispute by signing the al-Ula Declaration. (Khalid, 2021) This declaration marked the first time that the KSA officially chose a dovish approach to FP over its hawkish behaviour in the two decades prior after the three transitional years. It is particularly impressive because it officially rolled back hawkish policies on one of the conflicts in the region the KSA had marked as essential to its regional hegemony. Additionally, in April 2023, the KSA led mediation efforts between Bahrain and Qatar to restore diplomatic relations, as Bahrain was one of the last countries to follow normalisations in 2021. (Narayanan, 2023)

There are three main reasons why the KSA decided to end the Qatar Blockade. First, it failed to achieve any of its objectives and even backfired as it drove Qatar closer to Iran and Turkey (Hope & Scheck, 2021), significantly harming Saudi interests as Gulf and Sunni hegemon (Ma & Min, 2022). None of the 13 posed demands were fulfilled by Qatar. Second, President Trump, whose election had originally emboldened MBS to pursue the blockade, lost the election against President Biden who vowed to have a much tougher stance on the KSA and MBS in particular. In order to signal good will to the incoming President, MBS saw reconciliation with Qatar as a gift to Biden. (Kerr et al., 2020) Additionally, MBS portrayed himself as the driving force of reconciliation, thus drawing a line in the sand with the hawkish FP of the past four years. (Ma & Min, 2022) Thirdly, the Qatar Blockade significantly harmed the investment climate into the KSA as its erratic and unpredictable behaviour posed questions about the kingdom's reliability. (Dubroff, 2018) Investment from Qatar into the kingdom decreased from two billion US Dollars in 2016 to zero in 2021 (Economist Intelligence, 2022), a matter that

became particularly pressing once Western investors avoided the KSA after the Khashoggi murder (al-Tamimi, 2017) and increased geopolitical risks as a byproduct of Saudi FP (Aliedan, 2022).

Yemen Peace Process

After the United Nations called for a ceasefire in Yemen due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the KSA declared a unilateral ceasefire but continued its airstrikes in the country. (BBC, 2020) Yemen has been experiencing the longest truce due to a United Nations brokered ceasefire since April 2022. This culminated in March 2023 in a 900 men prisoner exchange between the Houthi forces and the forces backed by the KSA. Despite being an active party to the conflict, the KSA has been recognised as a mediator trying to bring a diplomatic solution to the Yemeni Civil War. (United Nations Security Council, 2023)

Deescalating the bloodiest involvement of the kingdom and declaring unilateral ceasefires intensified the turn towards a more dovish FP. There were three reasons for this change. First, as explained above, the Saudi-led intervention caused the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today and the civilians killed by Saudi airstrikes took a serious toll on the international image of the KSA. (Salim, 2022) Second, despite Yemen being the easiest of all battlegrounds for the kingdom to signal to Tehran not to expand further, the Saudi military failed. (Bozorgmehri & Ghasemi, 2021) Instead, fighting the almost non-existent presence of Iran in Yemen turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy as Iran increased its support to the Houthis after the KSA's intervention. Yemen became an opportunity for Iran as it was never a threat to begin with which yielded great returns on modest investment from the IRGC and its asymmetric warfare, draining Saudi resources. (Juneau, 2016: 662) Lastly, the military campaign in Yemen became too expensive for the KSA as it had to increase its military spending to the third largest in the world and with this taking away valuable resources from V2030. (Ma & Min, 2022)

Restoring Relations with Iran

Since April 2021 Iraq has led 5 rounds of mediation efforts between Iran and the KSA. (Younis, 2021) On March 10th 2023, the countries announced that in a deal brokered by China they had agreed on resuming diplomatic relations within the next two months and an affirmation of the respect for the sovereignty of states and the non-interference in internal affairs. (Abdallah & Hafezi, 2023) One month later, on April 6th, the FMs of the KSA and Iran met in Beijing marking the highest level meetings between the countries since 2016. (Pourahmadi et al., 2023) Only a few days later, on April 17th, Iran officially invited King Salman to the country in return for the Saudis inviting Iranian President Raisi; the resumption of diplomatic relations is set for May 9th. (Middle East Monitor, 2023) It is too early to tell whether these diplomatic efforts will translate into a meaningful de-escalation in the countries' proxy wars throughout the region. There are voices that hail this agreement as the entry into a new era of peace in

the ME (Bianco & Barnes-Dacey, 2023) and there are others who doubt whether either side, but Iran in particular, has an interest in reducing its asymmetric efforts for regional hegemony (Wimmen, 2023).

The rapprochement with Iran fits the KSA's new FP approach that "stems from keenness to favour political resolutions and dialogue in the region" as described by Saudi FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan. (Hamad, 2023) There are two reasons why the KSA entered diplomatic negotiations with Iran, economic development and national security. First, the influence of China played an important role in the negotiations after the Saudis reached out to Chinese President Xi during his visit to the kingdom in December 2022. (Figueroa, 2023) During this visit, the two countries signed extensive economic agreements and agreed upon billions in investments, cementing China's status as the country's largest trading partner and investor. (Tuvia, 2023) Moreover, both partners are synthesising V2030 with China's Belt-Road Initiative (BRI). (Xinhua, 2022)

One year prior, China signed the 25-Year Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Iran also becoming its main investor and economic lifeline. (Figueroa, 2023) This fits into Xi's long held beliefs that economic development solves all problems, however, for China, protecting its investments was the main driving factor here and promising investments is its main leverage³ to balance the two countries. (Foley, 2018) Additionally, the KSA requires a calm atmosphere in the region to implement V2030 and as a result the reduction of tensions with Iran became a priority. (Bozorgmehri & Ghasemi, 2021; Ulrichsen, 2023; Farouk, 2023) Second, as explained in the Yemen peace process, the KSA had to acknowledge that it could not win its struggle against Iran without committing significantly more resources to its military that would come at a further reputational cost not only in Yemen but throughout the entire region. (Bozorgmehri & Ghasemi, 2021) The realisation that Iran could hurt the KSA more than the KSA could hurt Iran by spending less money led to the Saudi push for negotiations.

Restoring Relations with Syria

Since May 2021, the KSA and the Assad government in Syria have been in negotiations about re-establishing relations with each other after they were broken off in 2013. (Ayton, 2021) Since the devastating February 2023 earthquake, relations between the countries were further warming over disaster relief efforts by the GCC and lifting Syria's suspension from the Arab league. (Faucon et al., 2023) After the rapprochement of Iran and the KSA, the ongoing talks to re-establish relations intensified in April 2023 when the FMs of both countries visited the respective state leaders. (Narayanan, 2023) Similarly to the Covid-19 pandemic during the Yemen Peace Process, the earthquake earlier this year allowed for a humanitarian cover of Saudi retreat. And just as with the

³ After the breakdown of Libya in 2011, 35,000 Chinese workers were stranded in the country and billions of dollars in investments wasted, a repetition of this is to be avoided at all costs to protect Chinese investments. But also to secure Chinese energy supplies which it imports from both countries and which already suffered once from their struggle for regional hegemony in 2019 following the Abqaiq-Khuras attack which cost China an additional \$ 97 billion per day over the price hikes following the event. (Tuvia, 2023)

Iran rapprochement, these developments are very recent and there has been nothing but lip service so far vowing for improved relations. Important to take into account here are US sanctions against the Assad government which Riyadh needs to respect or receive approval for to avoid another rift with Washington.

Reinviting Syria to the Arab league and stopping the support for oppositional forces is a further step away from the kingdom's hawkish FP of the past two decades. There are two reasons for the KSA to seek re-establishing relations with Syria. First, the realisation that the maximum pressure efforts from the GCC and the Arab League have failed as Assad is still in power. (FAIR, 2023) And, second, the al-Saud family hopes to bring Syria away from Iran closer to the KSA with promises of investments for the reconstruction of the country. (Ayton, 2021) This is in line with the observations from above that the KSA could not outspend IRGC's militias throughout the ME.

Noteworthy Developments

There are a couple of developments from the last two years that deserve mentioning but were either too recent or too minor to receive special dedication as part of this case study. One of these developments is the KSA's warming up its relations to Hamas after years of animosity over its close relations to Iran. In April 2023, President Abbas visited the kingdom and held talks with MBS. (Narayanan, 2023) Another one of these developments were the Abraham Accords, which did not fall into this case study because they did not directly involve the KSA and took place in late 2020 (Rehman, 2020), shortly before the timeline included. However, they do fall into the transition years when the al-Saud family was still debating a regional FP change and were testing the waters for regional diplomacy by greenlighting the UAE and Bahrain normalising relations with Israel. (Trigano, 2021) Despite MBS wanting to reap the economic benefits for V2030 by normalising ties with Israel (Ma & Min, 2022), the royal family decided to wait until late 2020 over uncertainties about who the next US President would be and King Salman's commitment to the Palestinian cause. (Hope & Scheck, 2021) Furthermore, the KSA is returning to Riyadhpolitik as a 2022 decision by the Saudi Public Investment Fund to establish six funds channelling \$24 billion towards Egypt, Oman, Iraq, Jordan, Sudan and Bahrain shows. (Bianco, 2023)

Findings

After carefully examining the case studies, there are a number of factors supporting all three hypotheses.

The factors supporting H1, the motivation to attract investors for V2030, are, first, Saudi efforts to appease investors by improving its international image, second, Saudi efforts to stabilise and improve the region's investment climate and, third, the stress the KSA's hawkish FP put on the implementation of V2030. Since the transition years, there have been increased efforts by the KSA — like restoring relations with Qatar and driving peace efforts in Yemen — to build a new image among international investors

(Czornik, 2020) after hawkish FP choices had poisoned the investment climate in the kingdom (Aliedan, 2022) which was reflected in a sharp decline of FDI (Annex C) until 2021 when FDI peaked (Shi, 2023). Particularly, the KSA increased efforts to stabilise the region for investments from China's BRI into V2030 (Chen, 2021) by restoring relations with Iran. Especially the KSA was suffering from the destructive consequences of its struggle with Iran (Bozorgmehri & Ghasemi, 2021) and spent billions on its military and not on V2030 (Ma & Min, 2022), which came under increasing financial pressure⁴ (Hope & Scheck, 2021).

The factors supporting H2, a worsened Saudi national security, are, first, an increase in direct security threats to Saudi territory, second, increased Iranian influence in the ME, and third, the realisation that the KSA is not able to outperform Iran militarily. Direct security threats to the kingdom increased particularly due to its interventions against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015 which led to Iran getting involved. As a result, attacks on the Saudi border and drone attacks deep into Saudi territory increased. Iran's influence in the ME increased despite or because of Saudi interventions in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Qatar (Hope & Scheck, 2021), all while spending far fewer resources (Hadzikadunic, 2019). Iran had clearly outperformed the KSA's military through its asymmetrical warfare with the IRGC's network of militias. (ul-Ain Shabbir et al., 2023). The KSA's hawkish FP proved detrimental to its national security interests. (Bozorgmehri & Ghasemi, 2021)

The factors supporting H3, the Crown Prince MBS' ambitions for King Salman's throne, are, first, the personal connections of MBS to Saudi FP failures, second, internal and external criticisms and pressure for him to be isolated from the country's FP and, third, MBS' efforts to portray himself as a mediator and statesman negotiating peace. As outlined above, since MBS became Minister of Defence he portrayed himself at the front of hawkish Saudi FP in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, against ISIS, and Qatar to cement his position in the accession to the throne. During his waves of arrests in the royal family he also rid himself of the influence of religious clerics who previously were a buffer between the al-Saud family and negative consequences from decisions; that buffer was now gone. (Alhusein, 2019) Once it became clear that these were FP failures the prince's qualifications for the throne were questioned (Kéchichian, 2019), particularly by the former Crown Prince MBN whom MBS's father removed from his position in an unprecedented move (Ottaway, 2021) and MBS later arrested (Hope & Scheck, 2021) This pressure from within the family increased with the Abqaiq–Khurais attack over fears of national security (Bozorgmehri & Ghasemi, 2021). External pressure was applied through Turkish President Erdogan who tried to pressure King Salman to take away some of his son's FP powers with the recordings of the Kashoggi murder. (Hope & Scheck, 2021)

⁴ On top of the scared away international investors came pressure from the initial public offering of Saudi Aramco which was supposed to bring in a large share of the funds needed for V2030 but only brought in \$25,6 billion instead of the anticipated hundreds of billions. (Hope & Scheck, 2021: 327)

Finally, as explained above, all three hypotheses are closely interlinked. The need for V2030 to succeed (H1) in order to cement al-Saud leadership and survival is Saudi national security (H2) given the country's institutional set up. Consequently, MBS has connected his personal success so closely to V2030 (H1) that its success becomes vital for his position within the royal family (H3). At the same time, a stable national security situation (H2) in the kingdom and the region is vital for international investors in V2030 (H1) and for the Crown Prince's FP track record in his accession to the throne (H3). And, accordingly, MBS' central position in the kingdom during the most hawkish FP years, the transition period, the dovish time and as a result the country's national security and V2030, highlight his personal role in both other hypotheses.

However, given the centrality of V2030 in the al-Saud's long term survival and the prioritisation of spending oil revenues on V2030 rather than expanding the kingdom's military to meet its goals in Yemen, Syria and the overall struggle against Iran, H1, the motivation to attract investors for V2030, is the determining factor in the KSA's change from a hawkish FP to a more dovish FP. The second hypothesis, a worsened Saudi national security, takes priority over H3, MBS' ambitions for the Saudi throne. The national security situation was the main reason that MBS came under pressure from internal forces that questioned him as future king, which was also a reason for him to change his personal FP outlook. Both H1 and H2 were very influential in the Crown Princes' personal considerations about the kingdom's FP, which led him to tone down its hawkishness.

Discussion

These findings are in line with previous research on the KSA's FP decision making outlined in the literature review. Saudi FP is shaped by the intersubjectivity of its main actors and their security perceptions, and it has been shaped by this intersubjectivity throughout this change from hawkish to dovish FP as well. The intersubjective perception of external changes have led to internal reevaluations in the decision making body of the KSA. This caused a change in the Saudi FP approach to achieve its overarching goal, the preservation of the al-Saud rule as hegemon in the Muslim and Arab world. The key factors in the change of Saudi FP were V2030 and a worsened national security situation as described in hypotheses one and two.

Given the similar institutional set up and objectives of the remaining Gulf monarchies, the findings of this paper are expected to be applicable to their FP as well, an area for further studies. Furthermore, this change in Saudi FP was very recent and is expected to continue. Future research is necessary to show whether these findings hold up and how changing geopolitics, external changes, will affect internal decision making processes. However, one of the main limitations of this area of research is the intransparent nature of authoritarian governments. The research often relies on insider information that is difficult to obtain and can leave important aspects out.

These findings have implications for the entire region, its security infrastructure and how international actors can best interact with the KSA. The race to transform its economy has changed the priorities of the government when achieving its overall goal of maintaining al-Saud rule. So far, this is leading to a deescalation of tension between the KSA and Iran in its proxy conflicts through the ME. China is currently setting an example of how to engage and influence the kingdom since this change. A business based approach balancing Saudi interests with Iran has put China at the centre of negotiations in the ME, welcomed by the KSA.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to answer **why has Saudi Arabian regional foreign policy become more dovish from 2021 to 2023 compared to a more hawkish approach from 2003 to 2018?** After US and Saudi interests were no longer aligned in 2003, the kingdom set out a more hawkish FP to assert its dominance in the region. Results of this were Operation Scorched Earth in Yemen, Saudi intervention in Bahrain, Saudi involvement in the Syrian civil war, Saudi efforts against ISIS, intervention in the Yemeni civil war, the Qatar Diplomatic Crisis, and the deterioration of Saudi-Iranian relations. These FP actions were largely motivated by national security considerations in the KSA's struggle for regional hegemony against Iran and from 2015 onwards, further driven by MBS' aspiration for the throne. Following the murder of Jamal Kashoggi, the kingdom entered a three year transition period evaluating the results of this FP. It became obvious that the kingdom's track record had not been good. Instead of curbing Iranian influence the opposite happened as its controlled militias were now in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, surrounding the KSA. Furthermore, the unsuccessful campaign in Yemen exposed the Saudi military as ineffective. The international image of the kingdom was shattered as a result of failed campaigns and aggressive actions against Qatar and Lebanon. The al-Saud family came to the conclusion that a change was needed to achieve its ultimate goal, the preservation of family rule. This shift first became evident with the al-Ula Declaration ending the Qatar Blockade and continued with peace processes with Yemen, Syria and Iran.

After employing a most similar systems case study design analysed with content analysis, systemic analysis and comparative method building upon the constructivist approach, the paper found the three main factors which influenced this change in FP to varying degrees. First, the need to appease international investors for V2030 (H1) to replace oil as the al-Saud's basis of power and legitimacy. Second, the worsened national security situation as a result of hawkish FP. And third, the personal aspirations of Mohammed bin-Salman (MBS) for the kingdom's throne and the pressure he came under for his hawkish FP choices. Given the centrality of V2030 in the al-Saud's long term survival and the prioritisation of spending oil revenues on V2030 rather than expanding the kingdom's military to meet its goals in Yemen, Syria and the overall struggle against Iran, H1 is the determining factor in the KSA's change from a hawkish FP to a more dovish FP. The second hypothesis takes priority over H3, MBS' ambitions for the Saudi throne, because the national security situation was the main reason that

MBS came under pressure from internal forces. These findings add to the existing literature that Saudi FP is shaped by the intersubjectivity of its main actors and their security perceptions. Because they show that this time, Saudi FP has been shaped by this intersubjectivity on V2030, national security and personal ambitions throughout this change from hawkish to dovish FP as well.

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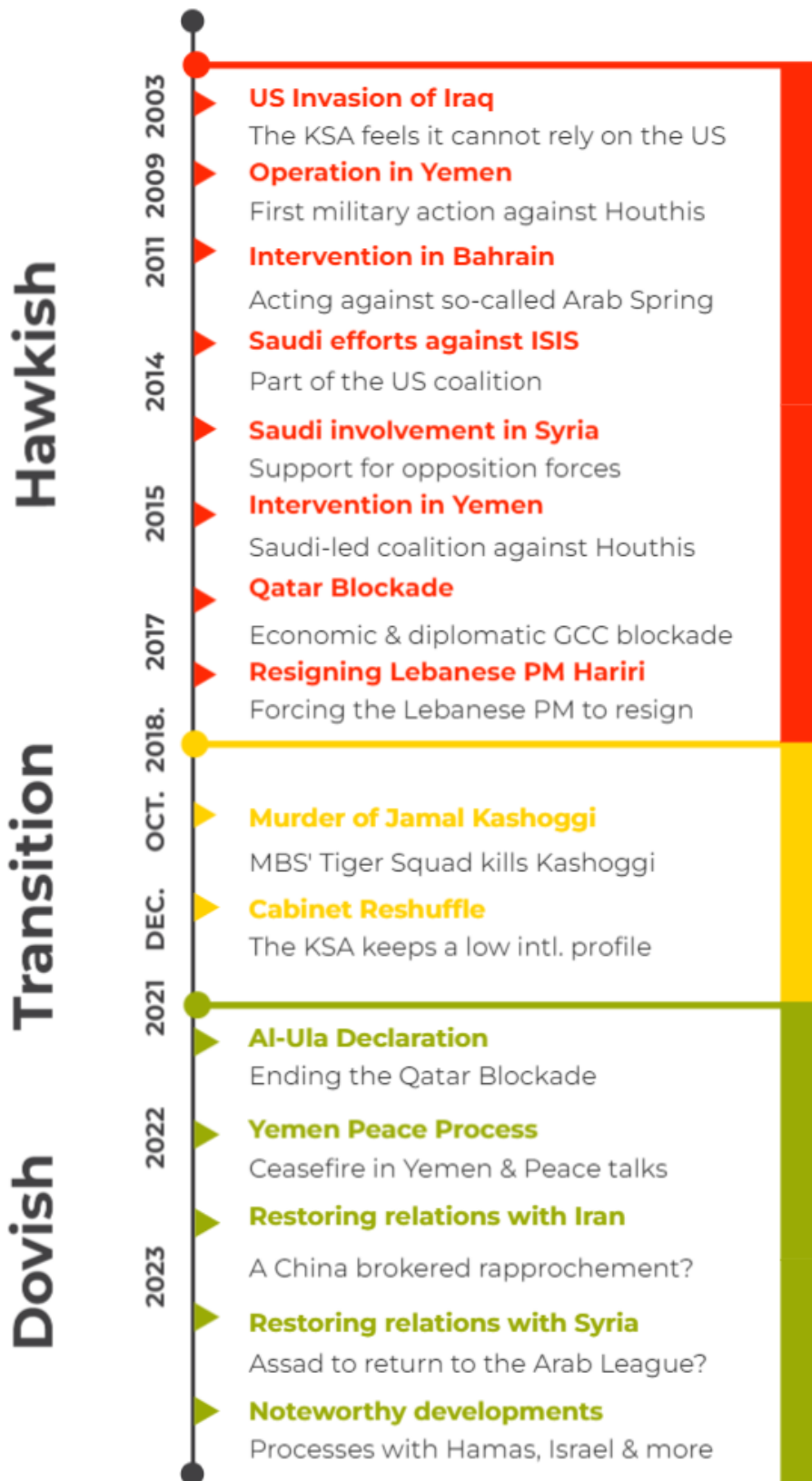
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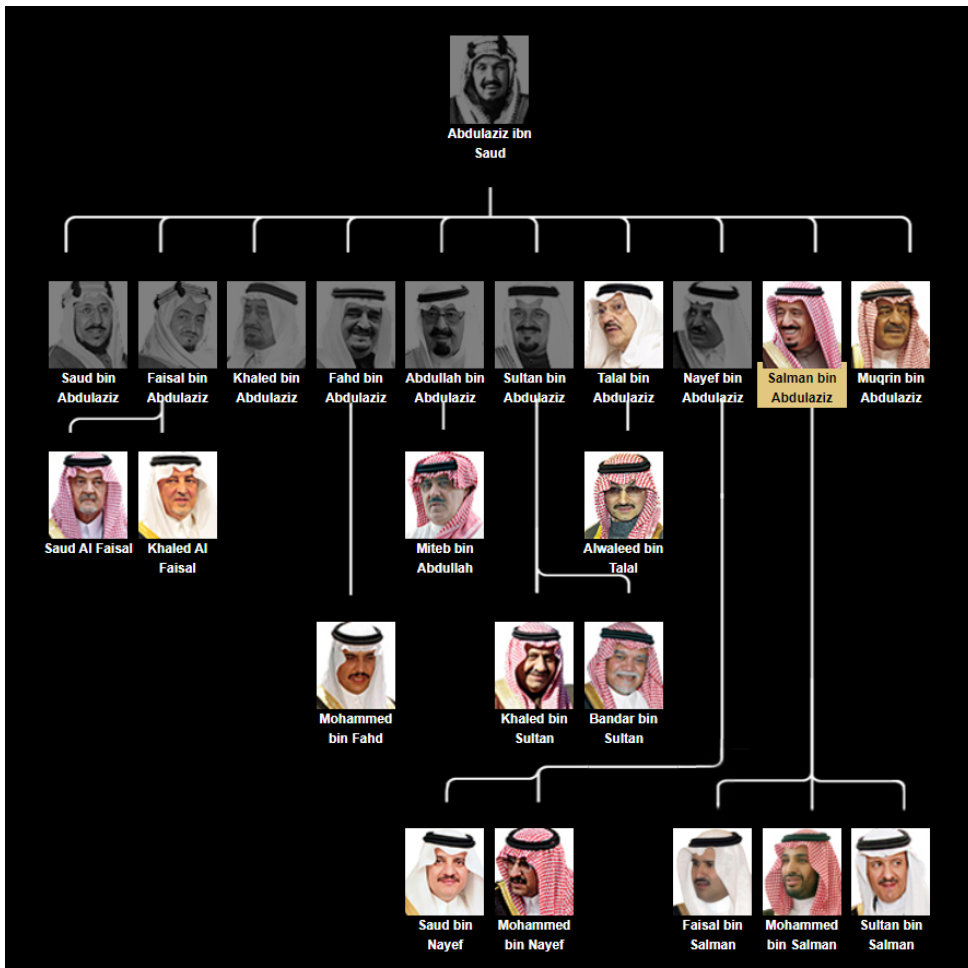
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Appendix

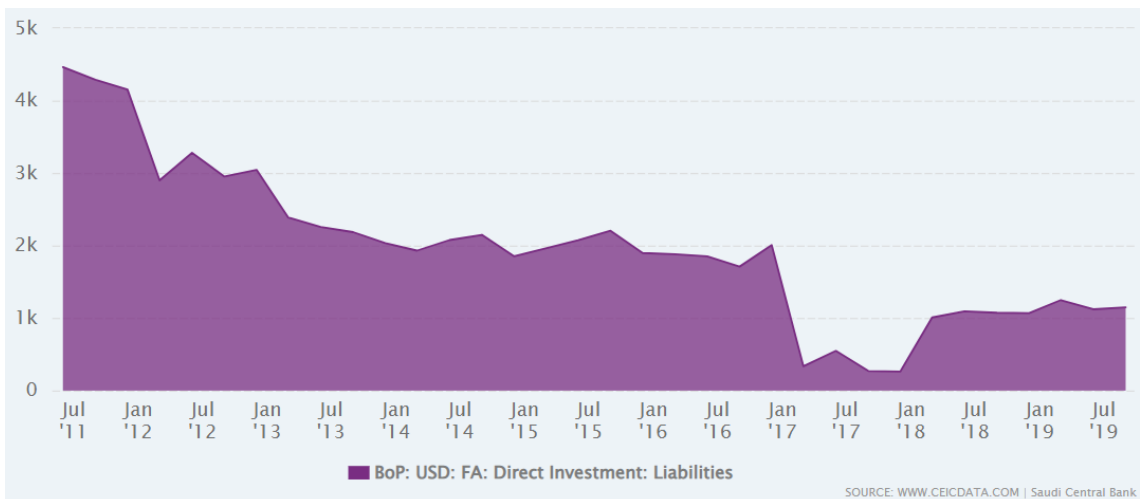
Annex A: Case Study Timeline



Annex B: Al-Saud Family Tree (House of Saud, 2021)



Annex C: FDI into Saudi Arabia from 2011-2019 (CEIC, 2022)



Statement of Authorship

I hereby confirm and certify that this master thesis is my own work. All ideas and language of others are acknowledged in the text. All references and verbatim extracts are properly quoted and all other sources of information are specifically and clearly designated. I confirm that the digital copy of the master thesis that I submitted on May 2nd 2023 is identical to the printed version I submitted to the Examination Office on May 3rd 2023.

DATE: 30.04.2023, Berlin

NAME: Joshua Dario Hasenstab

SIGNATURE:  The signature is handwritten in blue ink. It consists of a stylized, circular monogram on the left, followed by the name 'Hasenstab' written in a cursive script.