

Nation Building in Saudi Arabia: From Rentierism to Territorial Nationalism

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Öz: Makale, Suudi Arabistan'da devam eden dinamik sosyopolitik dönüşümü ülkesel (territorial) milliyetçilik kavramı çerçevesinde ele almakta ve geleneksel, dini ve milliyetçi faktörler arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi incelemektedir. Hızlı genç nüfus artışı, rentier ekonomiyi dönüştürme zorunluluğu, hanedanlık içi yapısal dönüşüm, din kurumunun değişen rolü, kadın hakları konusu ve askerileşme sürecini içeren çeşitli unsurları Velihaht Prens Muhammed bin Selman'ın ülkesel milliyetçiliği geliştirme çabaları içinde geniş bir bağlamda değerlendiren makale, Suudi Arabistan'daki cari modernizasyon stratejilerinin, petrol gelirleri, petro-dolar birikimi, eğlence sektöründeki ilerlemeler ve ulus inşa çabalarının canlanması gibi önemli unsurlara bağlılıklarını ve sonuçlarını değerlendirmektedir. Suudi Arabistan içerisindeki gelişmeler kadar Suudi dış politikasını da şekillendiren uluslararası dinamikleri, jeopolitik gelişmeleri de analiz çerçevesine dahil eden makale, Suudi Arabistan'ın devam eden dönüşümünün çok yönlü doğasına dair içgörüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suudi Arabistan, Territorial Milliyetçilik, Rentier Devlet, Vehhabi İdeoloji, Modernizasyon Stratejileri

Abstract: The article investigates the dynamic sociopolitical transformation underway in Saudi Arabia, contextualizing it within the framework of territorial nationalism and examining the intricate interplay of historical, religious, and nationalist factors. The study explores various elements, including the burgeoning youth population, the reshaping of the rentier economy, internal structural changes within the ruling dynasty, the influence of Wahhabi-Salafi ideology, the evolving role of the religious institution, the women's rights issue, and the process of militarization. It sets these developments within the broader context of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's endeavors to foster territorial nationalism. The article assesses the implications of contemporary modernization strategies, elucidating their connection to key aspects such as oil revenues, petro-dollar accumulation, advancements in the entertainment sector, and the resurgence of nation-building initiatives. The analysis encompasses an exploration of external factors that mold Saudi Arabia's trajectory, encompassing dynamics in international relations, regional conflicts, and shifts in the geopolitical landscape, and offers insights into the multifaceted nature of Saudi Arabia's ongoing transformation.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Territorial Nationalism, Rentier State, Wahhabi Ideology, Modernization Strategies

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Introduction

Since its inception, factors such as Wahhabism, Islamic law, tribalism, rentierism, regional and global developments, natural resources, and the country's pivotal role in the Islamic world have collectively contributed to the formation of the Saudi identity. Nation-building initiatives in Saudi Arabia have historically diverged from those of other nations due to unique geographic, historical, and political circumstances. The foundational political structure took shape through the alliance of the Saudi and Abd al-Wahhab families in Riyadh, solidified by the transformation of Diriyah (Riyadh) into an economically endowed state (ArabNews, n.d.). On the other hand, although Saudi Arabia was never colonized, its complex alliance with Britain, marked by conflicting policies and financial support since its inception (Al Rasheed, 2010, pp. 2-3), significantly shaped its unique identity among Arab countries. Initially, Saudi Arabia's economic resources encompassed religious taxes, spoils, and foreign aid. The rentier state framework of Saudi Arabia gained added impetus with the inclusion of oil revenues in the budget since 1939. Nonetheless, the sustained reliance of the populace on conventional rentier economic practices has recently been challenged, given the country's present population of 40 million, a significant increase from 2.9 million in the early 19th century and 20 million in the early 2000s (Statista, 2023). The ongoing developments in Saudi Arabia and the concurrent nation-building initiatives predominantly emanate from this transformation in the country's socio-economic framework.

In its formative years, Saudi Arabia's identity was largely shaped by the Wahhabi faith. However, Wahhabi narrative evolved after the 1960s, assuming a pan-Islamist dimension, whose influence peaked in the 1980s, notably through foreign policy engagements, particularly in supporting mujahideen in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, the rise of radical movements like al-Qaeda posed significant challenges, prompting a search for a more "secular" identity within the Kingdom. This shift gained momentum during King Fahd's reign in the 2000s and continued to develop under King Abdullah (Dazi-Heni, 2019).

Prominent figures such as the founding King Abdulaziz ibn Saud, King Faisal ibn Abdulaziz, King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz, and more recently Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) have actively engaged in nation-building endeavors. The conclusion of the initial generation after Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, along with the necessity to revamp the rentier state economy and society, and to preserve Saudi Arabia's international standing, has motivated MBS to embark on nation-building endeavors, including the Vision 2030 initiative. This article aims to elucidate the ongoing nation-building process that accelerated during the MBS era in Saudi society.

The Concept of Nation and Nation-Building

In this study, the concept of nation refers to a large social group with political sovereignty over a certain piece of land or aspiring to achieve it, as outlined by Johnson (2006, p. 315). Often, the social group (elites or state) that seizes the exercise of sovereignty has the power to determine the borders and transform content of the nation in interaction with other states. Nation-building, on the other hand, encompasses the historical process through which a group of people communicate and transform into a nation-state. It involves various tools, including economic, cultural, political integration, and military and bureaucratic control, democratization, women's issue, leading to the creation of shared interests, national symbols, and the development of a common citizen identity (Mylonas, 2022, p. 183).

The elite often imposes a common national identity, crucial for building majorities and ensuring legitimacy in the modern state. The actors involved in nation-building can be either the elites of the community (Mylonas, 2022, p. 183) or external actors (Hippler, 2004, p. 3-7) with interests in the region. The process itself involves three key elements: a unifying and coercive ideology, social integration around a common national identity, and the presence of a functional state apparatus capable of translating ideas into social reality (Hippler, 2004, p. 7).

Nation-building and state-building are closely related but distinct concepts (Hippler, 2004, p. 9). Nation-building aims to foster a shared sense of national identity and unity among citizens, emphasizing culture, history, values, and aspirations. It results in the creation of social cohesion and a collective national identity. Conversely, state-building focuses on establishing robust and efficient institutions that can deliver essential services, maintain law and order, and promote social justice. It centers on the development of infrastructure, governance, and legitimacy within the state. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are complementary and interdependent. A strong state can support nation-building by ensuring education, prosperity, and security for its people. Simultaneously, a cohesive nation can aid state-building by engaging in democratic processes, contributing taxes, and adhering to the law. While both concepts are intertwined, this article primarily focuses on nation-building.

According to Weber (1964, p. 382), the legitimacy of a political regime is rooted in the populace's belief in the rightful authority to govern, forming the foundation for their willingness to obey authority. This acknowledgment signifies a form of consent. Indeed, governments are increasingly reliant on consent, as described by Deutsch and Foltzscs (1966, p. xi). On the other hand, Walt defines the concept of a "nation" as any cohesive group with "independence" recognized within the framework of the

international order facilitated by the United Nations. A nation serves as a popular base for an effective governing body within the global order, lending it legitimacy (Friedrich, 1966, p. 31). While tradition, religion, and other commonalities play vital roles in nation-building, they may not fully capture the benefits of “independence” within the international order. Mylonas (2022, p. 189) further contends that the geopolitical landscape in which a state develops determines the extent of linguistic commonality and national cohesion, albeit partially. Hence, the legitimacy of a modern nation is built on two fundamental principles: internal broad popular support and consent and recognition from the international community, particularly the UN since 1944. Saudi Arabia’s nation-building process is guided by these two core principles: a) ensuring permanent support and consent from the populace domestically, and b) securing approval and acceptance from components of the international system, especially the UN. In essence, the nation-building process is intricately intertwined with both domestic developments and foreign policy, closely linked to international relations.

The modern nation-state utilizes various tools to protect its citizens, such as the monopoly of violence, law enforcement capabilities, and the distribution of economic value, enabling comprehensive control over all aspects of life. This authority also enables the modern state to shape the identity of its citizens, with the national identity it defines often superseding other affiliations such as tribal or civilizational identities. This linkage binds citizens to the nation-state, establishing ties that are challenging to sever or disregard. However, the allegiance of citizens to the modern nation-state is not absolute and eternal, but contingent upon the state’s ability to fulfill their fundamental material and intellectual needs, securing their consent and maintaining legitimacy. Furthermore, global and regional developments influence the processes of nation-building, as evident in recent nation-building endeavors in Saudi Arabia.

According to Huntington (2004, p. 13), the post-Cold War era has precipitated an identity crisis worldwide, propelled by factors such as the global economy’s rise, advancements in communication and transportation, increased immigration, and the global expansion of democracy, alongside the decline of the Cold War and Soviet communism as a viable economic and political system. Alhussein (2020, p. 5) also asserts that Saudi Arabia grapples with a crisis of national identity, as the absence of a cohesive social identity has led individuals to associate themselves with sectarian, regional, and tribal identities. Consequently, nation-states that fail to address the essential public needs of their citizens risk losing their legitimacy and monopoly on the use of violence, eventually facing state failure and potential fragmentation. Therefore, states, including Saudi Arabia, consistently engage in domestic and foreign nation-building activities to ensure their survival and avoid the perils of failure.

Nation-Building and Territorial Nationalism

Nationalism, which played a critical role in the development of modern European nation-states (Hutchinson, 2000, p. 651) and was based on the idea that every nation with a common culture and blood ties should have its own state (Kedourie (1996, pp. 56-87), is one of the main factors in the establishment of states such as Italy and Germany and the disintegration of traditional empires. While certain scholars contend that nationalism manifests spontaneously due to particular circumstances, others posit that it arises as a deliberate project. For example, Smith (2009, pp. 23-61) underscores the significance of organic ethno-symbolism in shaping national identity. Conversely, Kedourie (pp. 56-87) posits an emphasis on elite-driven construction of national identity. Anderson (2006) and Hobsbawm (2012), to a certain extent, align their arguments with Kedourie's perspective, introducing the notions of imagined communities and invented traditions, respectively. Specifically, Hobsbawm accentuates the pivotal role of elites in formulating nationalist ideologies, particularly highlighting their influence on the creation of invented traditions. The notion of a deliberate project aligns with MBC's recent endeavors to cultivate a Saudi national identity tailored to the nuances of Saudi territories.

As Hitman (2018, p. 1) points out, when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gained independence in 1932, the Saudi dynasty succeeded in establishing a [proto]-nationalism in which all those who accepted the Wahhabi creed enjoyed the rights of citizenship. However, even today, it is not possible for Saudi Arabia to speak of a secular nation in the Western sense and therefore of a nation-state understanding. A typical modern nation has its own unique language yet Arabic is widely used in the 21 Arab countries as well as many non-Arab ones. Therefore, although Arabic is one of the pillars of Saudi nation-building, it cannot be claimed that the Saudi people are a separate people because of the Arabic language. As Hitman (2018, pp. 83-84) points out, the peoples and states that claim to belong to the Arab ethnicity in terms of their thousands of years of history are not limited to Saudi Arabia. The universal religion of Islam shapes the lives of approximately 2 billion Muslims beyond Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi understanding of Islam, which is thought to be unique to Saudi Arabia, also uses a universal discourse and goes beyond being an element that defines the Saudi nation. Moreover, there have been important developments regarding the elimination of extremist elements in the Wahhabi discourse, which is frequently mentioned together with Al Qaeda, the September 11 events, and ISIS. A significant part of the recent nation-building activities in Saudi Arabia consists of these efforts. As a result, as seen in many other countries, the definition of a nation in which one or more elements of language, ethnicity, reli-

gion, or sect predominate (Smith, 1995, p. 57) has become almost impossible for Saudi Arabia under the current conditions. In this case, when defining a nation for Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to use another definition of nationalism, such as civic nationalism or territorial nationalism.

Traditionally, Middle Eastern monarchies have viewed nationalist ideologies as threats to their regimes, a stance also evident during Iran's Shah era (Snyder, 2015, p. 1039). Yet, Saudi Arabia now seeks to cultivate a distinct national identity centered on the Saudi ethos. This initiative aims to assert its interests apart from the broader Arab world and adapt its domestic politics to current contexts. The nation-building initiatives orchestrated by MBS in Saudi Arabia echo the westernization and modernization endeavors pursued in Iran during the Shah era. Nevertheless, specific factors, notably Shiite opposition initially in Iran, impeded the effectiveness of these nation-building efforts. The ultimate success or failure of Saudi Arabia's initiative remains subject to future determinations. This article explores this evolving Saudi perspective.

According to Al-Rasheed (2020), Saudi Arabia's understanding of nationalism has changed over time. This nationalism, which was initially religion-oriented, adopted an international pan-Islamist identity with the influence of the Cold War in the 1960s. During the MBS era, Saudi Arabia built a narrow Saudi nationalism supported by discourses such as "Saudi Arabia belongs to the Saudis" or "Saudi Arabia is great", which did not coincide with the liberal-looking global economic discourse it developed in order to protect its reputation in the oil markets and the accumulation of petrodollars in the West, to get rid of the difficulties brought by Salafi-Wahhabi beliefs, and to adapt to the conditions that emerged after September 11, 2001. This seemingly contradictory situation is perceived by the Saudi regime as a sustainable and manageable situation.

Yael Tamir (2019, p. 425) delineates ethnic nationalism from civic nationalism, noting that Civic (Western) nationalism flourishes in societies boasting a strong, confident bourgeoisie capable of fostering a nation with a civic ethos. "Eastern nationalism," by contrast, is observed in states lacking a robust middle class. Civic nationalism embodies a political ideology that emphasizes shared values, principles, and institutions binding citizens together, championing the significance of human rights, individual freedoms, and democracy. However, such civic nationalism does not serve as an expedient tool for nation-building in Saudi Arabia, which considers adaptation to contemporary conditions achievable without democracy. Stewart (2020, pp. 5-6) suggests that the measure of successful nation-building differs for democratic and autocratic regimes. The former seeks to promote emancipation

and collaboration within an inclusive political community, while the latter strives to ensure tranquility and stability within the polity. Additionally, as posited by Hippler (2004, p. 13), although nation-building can enhance democratic potential by mobilizing the masses, it does not necessarily guarantee genuine democracy. Rather, it can concentrate power in the hands of elites acting on behalf of the nation, potentially leading to more oppressive practices under the guise of national interest compared to feudal or traditional political powers. Numerous assertions have surfaced underscoring Saudi Arabia's perceived independence from the need for democracy in its recent transformation. Consequently, the only viable means for Saudi Arabia to legitimize state-citizen relations within an institutional framework remains *territorial nationalism*. Acknowledging this reality, the contemporary Saudi elite endeavors to steer the trajectory of Saudi nationalism.

Territorial nationalism refers to a form of nationalism based on the belief that all inhabitants of a given region should share a common national identity, regardless of ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, etc. differences. Territorial nationalism in a sovereign state manifests itself as the belief that all inhabitants of a country owe loyalty to the country of their birth. The memory of a defined piece of land and the people who live on it has sacred qualities. Territorial nationalists idealize citizenship. The criterion of territorial nationalism is the creation of a mass folk culture based on the common values and traditions of the people with the aim of building a mass of loyal citizens. In Moaddel's words (2014, p. 13) “[i]n the modality of territorial nationalism, political sovereignty belongs to the people who inhabit a given territory. Connections to this territory, rather than religious affiliations or ethnicity, define membership in the political community. The nation is the source of legitimacy, religious and political functions are differentiated, and individual identity is territorial nationalistic, like being an Algerian, Egyptian, Iranian, or Turkish.”

Certainly, the distinction between the concepts of Arab nationalism (*qawmiyye*) as an ideology aimed at fostering unity and a collective Arab identity in the Arab world and “*wataniyye*” (Çetinsaya, 2005),¹ underscores the significant influence of territorial nationalism in the region. Despite the longstanding tension between the ideologies of *qawmiyya* and *wataniyya* since the 20th century, influenced by various factors such as resource distribution, political dynamics, and historical heritage, these two concepts have coexisted, often mutually reinforcing each other in certain

1 Although Hitman (2018, p. 81) used the concept of *kawmiyya* in the context of Saudi Arabia to indicate that Wahhabism has evolved over time into a concept that defines those who belong to the modern Saudi national collective group and excludes non-Wahhabis, the concept of *kawmiyya* is used in the literature as a concept that mainly defines Pan-Arabism.

contexts. While Saudi Arabia underscores territorial nationalism, it has articulated discourses that encompass both *qawmiyya*, serving to maintain its influence across the Arab world, and *wataniyya*, emphasizing the nation's interests.

Saudi Arabia's historical evolution of territorial nationalism finds its roots in the early formation of the Wahhabi faith. The initial characterization of non-Wahhabi entities as infidels with justifiable harm laid the groundwork for a proto-territorial nationalism, asserting conquered territories as "liberated." International recognition of these borders followed the kingdom's establishment in 1932. To navigate global and regional shifts, Saudi Arabia strategically employs Salafism and Wahhabism to advance foreign policy interests and address allied expectations. Recent developments, driven by economic diversification and international positioning concerns, underscore the nation's prioritization of territorial nationalism.

In the Eurocentric Westphalian system, nationalism is an ideology associated with the nation-state, based on the principle of sovereignty, and has become a fundamental norm within the global state system, particularly following the decolonization processes in the Third World. Arabism, previously characterized by an ethnic connotation, transitioned into a national bond through the lens of nationalism, giving rise to Arab nationalism, which subsequently evolved and waned as a product of this historical progression (Tibi, 1990, pp. 1-26). Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, wherein Egypt lost its prominent role in Arab nationalism and politics, pan-Arabism declined in influence and was supplanted by Saudi Arabia, which was bolstered by its oil revenues (Barnett, 1995). The void left by the waning influence of Arabism was gradually filled by Islamist ideologies, including Salafi-Wahhabi, the Muslim Brotherhood, and subsequently Shiite variants. Notable events such as the 1973 oil crisis, 1979 incursions at Masjid al-Haram (Grand Mosque) staged by the Juhaiman group which necessitated intervention from France to suppress and, allegedly, prompting Saudi Arabia to adopt more stringent religious practices (BBC, 2019), the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the subsequent Iran-Iraq War, unauthorized protest held by Iranian pilgrims in 1987 (Crace, 2015), the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 'Arab Spring' uprisings in 2010 have cemented Saudi Arabia's position as the preeminent, if not the sole, enduring "significant" country within the Arab world. This scenario has provided a material foundation for the regional (Arab world) aspect of the pursuit of territorial nationalism, further fortified by MBS's de facto assumption of power.

Nation-Building Activities in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's contemporary nation-building endeavors are intricately linked to the country's 21st-century socio-economic development. The resolution of the royal succession matter, arising from the aging of the post-founding King Abdulaziz generation, necessitated a comprehensive review of the regime-people relationship. Under the leadership of MBS, policies such as the transformation of the rentier economy, liberalization in religious and social domains, and initiatives like Vision 2030 have been pursued. Simultaneously, the strategic promotion of territorial nationalism is reinforced through endeavors to rediscover historical icons.

From Rentierism to Territorial Nationalism

The social contract based on rentierism requires a trade-off between political participation and economic security: the state provides material comfort and patronage to various groups, expecting loyalty from them in return (Obi, 2004, p. 111). This system, which is based on revenues from natural resources such as oil, encourages authoritarian regimes and hinders democratic developments. This reduces the autonomy of society (Morse, 1999, p. 14) by limiting the development of the industrial bourgeoisie and the working class (Obi, 2004, p. 115).

Saudi Arabia is a typical rentier state that relies heavily on oil revenues to finance public spending and the well-being of its citizens. Especially since the 1970s, the rise in oil prices has increased the ability of the state to shape society. The rentier state in Saudi Arabia led to a decline in opposition movements in the 1970s. The Saudi economic system, including the merchant class, has come under the domination of the state (Hertog, 2012), with government-controlled projects and limited private sector participation. However, due to the risk of declining oil revenues caused by the depletion of oil resources and fluctuations in oil prices, as well as the inadequacy of the current production structure in the face of rapidly increasing population and welfare demands, doubts about the sustainability of the rentier economy have recently started to deepen. As a matter of fact, the ratio of oil production to GDP in Saudi Arabia, which was 54% in 2008, decreased to 20% in 2016 and was 23% in 2021 (WorldBank, 2023). This leads to the decline of the welfare state and the questioning of the legitimacy of the ruling elite. Modernizing Saudi Arabia's rentier economy is, therefore, pivotal for nation-building, requiring a shift from traditional loyalty fostered by rentierism to ideological allegiance. This transition demands a redefined citizen-state relationship anchored in a territorial nationalist framework focused on Saudi Arabia. Funded by accumulated petrodollars, these nation-building efforts aim to strengthen citizens' loyalty to the state.

Saudi Arabia's reliance on natural resources, particularly oil, has historically fueled its economy but also rendered it susceptible to global oil price fluctuations. This dependence, coupled with structural challenges such as rising domestic consumption, a burgeoning young population, voluntary unemployment, and inefficient wealth utilization, questions the sustainability of the monarchy's welfare model. Recognizing the need for economic diversification in a post-oil era, the discourse of nationalism in Saudi Arabia underscores modernization efforts. This discourse serves the dual purpose of securing the ruling elites' regime by renegotiating the existing rentier social contract and legitimizing the restructuring of relations between the people and the ruling elite. This process, as Davidson (2013, pp. 49-90) points out, is part of a pre-emptive and controlled reform process.

In response to challenges like declining oil prices, budget deficits, demographic pressures, and environmental concerns (Hameed, 2020), Saudi Arabia has initiated economic diversification strategies through Vision 2030. This comprehensive plan includes reforms in tourism, renewable energy, manufacturing, education, and job creation, exemplified by the NEOM project, a city focusing on technology, innovation, and culture with a \$500 billion budget (Baumann, 2019, p. 12). The reforms aim to involve the public in production, promote "Moderate Islam" (BBCNews, 2017), curb radicalism, and enhance women's rights. However, the success of these changes is uncertain, considering the significant societal and political shifts required, potentially impacting the existing rentier social contract and the legitimacy of the Saudi Dynasty. Achieving lasting stability necessitates a transformation (Ulrichsen, 2015, pp. 85-109) in "Saudi First" discourse (Alhoussein, 2019), emphasizing territorial nationalism and addressing crucial aspects such as the economy, religious interpretations, women's rights, and foreign policy in the post-oil era.

The realization of this project seems hindered by Wahhabism's ideas on the women's question, including the notion of asceticism, which suggests contentment with less. Saudi Arabia has faced a global reputation for its restrictive treatment of women, with past restrictions on travel, driving, business ownership, and public employment without male permission. Recent reforms, however, have led to positive steps in improving women's social freedom (Bager, 2023). Increased participation in production and consumption processes, particularly among women and youth, is expected to fuel democratic demands, necessitating an ideology that aligns with contemporary requirements to channel these demands for the benefit of the state and society (Gause III, 2018, p. 38). In the case of Saudi Arabia, territorial nationalism, under the charismatic leadership of MBS, serves as this guiding ideology. The populace, instilled with nationalist sentiments, is shedding the inertia of rentier

state practices, making it easier to mobilize them for employment and fostering greater ownership of their country through work, earnings, and taxes. However, the challenge arises from the possibility that an empowered citizenry engaged in taxation and employment may demand greater accountability and challenge authoritarian structures with democratic aspirations, prompting Saudi Arabia to reinforce its authoritarian grip through a corporatist approach (Hertog, 2004).

Rentierism in Saudi Arabia is not merely a static or internal phenomenon but a dynamic and international one (Baumann, 2019, p. 1). The historical and global influences shaping the rentier state include factors such as colonialism, geopolitics, globalization, and technological change. Counter-revolutionary policies adopted by Saudi Arabia to safeguard the monarchy from Arab nationalist and leftist ideologies were not solely focused on domestic politics but had wider implications. Particularly in the context of the global fight against communism, the United States viewed Saudi Arabia as a natural ally. Despite the nationalization of the Saudi oil giant Aramco in the 1970s, recent initiatives under MBS have partially opened up the kingdom to international partnerships. Key institutions such as the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA), established in the 1960s, were developed with the guidance of US consultants, exemplifying the significant role played by Western consultants in the nation-building process. Aramco, the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, John Philby, the World Bank, and the Ford Foundation are just some of these consultants (Baumann, 2019, p. 11). Additionally, Saudi Arabia's oil wealth has been instrumental in supporting social welfare in Western countries (Baumann, 2019, p. 7), enabling the United States to cover trade and budget deficits while maintaining the global reserve currency status of the dollar through petrodollar recycling (Baumann, 2019, p. 8). Although Saudi Arabia plans to make radical changes in state-society relations through the reduction of public employment, increasing indirect taxes, and privatizing basic public services with the Vision 2030 project, these changes are still carried out by Western consultants and maintain patrimonial relations (Baumann, 2019, p. 11).

The tumultuous period catalyzed by the Arab Spring has significantly disrupted the regional order, challenged the dominance of authoritarian regimes and paved the way for democratic transitions across the region. Democracy, in this context, entails a commitment to periodic accountability and the continuous endorsement of the populace's consent. However, the Saudi monarchy have vehemently opposed the notion of democracy, striving to uphold the authoritarian character of prevailing regime. To counteract the influence of the Arab Spring movements, the Saudi regime initially reinforced conventional rentier state practices. Nonetheless, the sustainability of these practices became increasingly precarious due to the looming threat of resource

scarcity. Despite attempts to renew and expand resources, it became apparent that the distribution of oil revenues alone could no longer suffice as a means of securing legitimacy, owing to factors such as the growing appeal of democratic ideals and the rapid rise of the young and educated population. Consequently, recent nation-building endeavors in Saudi Arabia and the recalibration of Arab nationalism in accordance with the kingdom's political and social imperatives represent endeavors aimed at surmounting this critical juncture.

The practical manifestation of this nationalist rhetoric predominantly involves the classification of any critique of the Saudi regime and MBS beyond the regulated boundaries of domestic politics as a threat to national security (securitization), thus morphing into an authoritarian coercive instrument. This narrative of nationalism is intricately interwoven with MBS's charismatic persona and reform initiatives. By forging a connection between MBS and the founding king Abdulaziz, particularly through diverse social media and propaganda mechanisms, MBS is portrayed as the architect of a new Saudi Arabia, where the monarchy's authority is reinstated under shifting circumstances, characterized by a novel economic blueprint and contemporary advancements in the post-oil era. This notably highlights one of the foremost indicators of the territorial nationalist paradigm that is being cultivated under the dynamic stewardship of MBS (London, 2022).

In the Saudi Arabian labor market, foreign workers currently constitute a significant majority, while citizens often prioritize higher salaries and shorter working hours, leading to a prevalent preference for employment in the public sector. Conversely, foreign workers occupy roles in labor-intensive and lower-paid positions within the private sector. With foreign workers constituting 37% of the workforce in Saudi Arabia (GLMM, 2023), this dynamic presents challenges for local citizens, including issues such as unemployment, capital outflow, dependency on foreign labor in various sectors, and social imbalances. Consequently, the 'localization' and 'Saudiization' program has been initiated (Salih, 2010, p. 169), aiming to address voluntary unemployment and pave the way for a new social contract in the post-oil era through the cultivation of a shared sense of responsibility (Barua, 2017).

The launch of the Vision 2030 initiative in Saudi Arabia is expected to bring about substantial changes in the relationship between the state and society, leading to a transformation of the traditional social contract. The projected shift in the economic model will prompt a reconfiguration of the dynamics between the state and the citizen, leading to a departure from the conventional patronage model and paving the way for comprehensive political and social reforms (Kinninmont, 2017, pp. 26-36). Under the Vision 2030 project, the emphasis on nationalism aims to

address the concerns, interests, and future aspirations of the country's predominantly young population, 60% of whom are under the age of 30 (BBCNews, 2017), while also ensuring the continuity of the current regime. This renewed focus on "secular" nationalist discourse seeks to establish a foundation and justification for the economic measures undertaken amid existing structural pressures. However, in this new social contract, the principal focus lies not on the society but on the state, specifically the regime itself (Alhoussein, 2019).

Saudi Arabia's endeavors to transition from a rentier state have gained momentum under MBS, with an increase in the private sector's share in the economy, a more cautious distribution of oil revenues by the government, and diversification of private enterprises, leading to significant Saudi investments overseas. However, despite these developments, public service subsidies and state employment remain high, and the patronage networks of the princes persist. Political organization remains constrained, and societal reliance on the state persists. Consequently, it is more apt to characterize the recent nationalist discourse emerging in Saudi Arabia not as "civic democratic" nationalism but as territorial nationalism. Within this context, the transformation of the rentier economy stands as the heart of Saudi Arabia's recent state-building endeavors, albeit posing one of its most challenging aspects.

Wahhabism and the Place of Religion in Nation-Building

The Peace Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 granted each nation-state the right to determine its own religion (Gesley, 2017), signifying the shift of nationalism from its initial religious origins to a more secular character during the 19th and 20th centuries. Likewise, ongoing nation-building efforts in Saudi Arabia have led to a diminishing role of religious institutions and clergy. However, it is evident, particularly in instances like Türkiye and Egypt, that a wholly secular interpretation of nationalism in Islamic countries, akin to that in the West, is not widely embraced by the populace. Furthermore, considering the global resurgence of religious influence, as highlighted by Huntington (2004, p. 15), it is expected that the emphasis on religion will influence the emerging nationalistic narrative in Saudi Arabia, given its unique circumstances.

The cultural and religious significance of Mecca and Medina has not only shaped Saudi Arabia's identity but has also solidified the Saudi royal family's position as the custodians of these revered sites. Religion serves as a pivotal factor in uniting diverse social factions within the expansive geography of the country. To bridge the divides inherent in such a diverse landscape, the Saudi state has historically relied on the tenets of the Wahhabi creed. However, recent developments suggest a growing

recognition that the Wahhabi doctrine alone may not suffice in fostering national unity within Saudi society or integrating the kingdom into the global community (Hammond, 2021), (Henderson, 2022).

The implementation of modern projects that aim to involve all segments of society, such as Vision 2030, within Saudi Arabia's foundational intellectual background of Wahhabi-Salafi thought and tribal tradition, is not possible. This is contingent on uniting all citizens on a common ground, which necessitates establishing a broad conceptual identity within the Saudi Arabian society that encompasses horizontal and vertical dimensions without regard for class, belief, sect, or religion. Such a comprehensive societal identity leaves no room for any ideology other than a sense of Saudi patriotism, or a form of territorial nationalism centered on Saudi Arabia. The backdrop of recent innovations in the religious sphere, such as the promotion of a moderate Islam, also stems from this kind of nationalist understanding, particularly those attempted under the leadership of MBS.

The fabric of Saudi Arabian society was historically woven around the tenets of the Wahhabi faith, marginalizing sub-groups such as Shiism and Sufism, and exerting control over dissident groups through the manipulation of oil revenues. The recent discourse on "Moderate Islam" has given rise to policies aimed at grounding the legitimacy and nationalism of the modern state, fostering stronger and enduring bonds between the state and its citizens. The concept gained prominence in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, initially serving as a response to global efforts against extremism. Over time, "moderate Islam" has evolved into a comprehensive strategy for religious reformation and has become intertwined with the historical narrative of the state. Figures such as Khalid al Faisal have begun to argue that the kingdom on the path of moderation is "represented by those who adhere to their religion, those who are proud to be Arabs, and those who cling to their Saudi identity (Areef, 2018).

The adoption of the Charter of Makkah by Saudi Arabia in 2019 (Faddis, 2019) and the increased emphasis on the country's pre-Islamic historical sites and Nejd-based Saudi culture (Shaikh, 2023) are significant manifestations of this concept's application in the realm of international relations. These historical landmarks are not only sources of national pride but also key components in the kingdom's efforts to boost tourism, an essential resource in its transition away from the rentier economy model (Al-Rasheed, 2020). The promotion of "Moderate Islam" reflects the nation's quest to address regional and domestic political, economic, and social challenges under the framework of the new discourse of Saudi nationalism. Moreover, the emergence of "Moderate Islam" post-9/11 aims to restructure the established religious institutions in the country under the leadership of MBS, curbing their influence on

society and politics (Alhussein, 2020, pp. 4-5), and transforming Islam into a tool for nation-building and legitimacy.

During the evolution of the rentier state, the significant role assigned to the religious institution and clergy in the process of integrating large segments of society into economic production and consumption must deviate substantially from the practices of the rentier state. Traditionally, religious teachings advocating contentment with limited resources (asceticism) have played a crucial role in helping people endure hardships during the establishment phase and cope with reduced opportunities during periods of declining oil prices. In the past, the clergy held considerable powers to intervene in social functioning on behalf of both religion and the state. However, currently, with society transitioning into one that adopts production and consumption and is closely linked to the state, it appears unfeasible for the religious institution to retain its former position and function. Moreover, with the growing influence of social media, the demands of the youth, and the pressures concerning women's rights and human rights, it is evident that the clergy may encounter marginalization in society in the forthcoming period. Nonetheless, despite the narrowing scope of its activities, the religious institution will continue to serve as a crucial social cohesive force in Saudi Arabia, as in all societies, particularly within the context of endeavors to construct territorial Saudi nationalism.

MBS often invokes the founder, King Abdulaziz bin Saud, in his pursuit of reforms for Saudi Arabia, while sidestepping the role of religion and the dynasty in the kingdom's future (Alrebh, 2022), (Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019). This strategy aims to position MBS as the spearhead of the reform movement. Revitalized nation-building endeavors under MBS's leadership emphasize patriotic fervor, touting new economic initiatives, technological advancements, and the central role of the crown prince. Rather than extolling the devout Saudi citizen who spreads Islam and supports Muslim causes worldwide, the emphasis is placed on the Saudi citizen dedicated to the economic advancement of the nation. This new citizen is instrumental in identifying the regime's perceived 'traitors', 'violators', and 'subversives' at the local, regional, and international levels. The contemporary portrait of the citizen is not one subservient to the clergy and rewarded by the state for compliance but rather an innovative young entrepreneur and advocate of the regime, eagerly participating in the acquisition of newly issued shares of the oil company Aramco (Al-Rasheed, 2020). At the heart of these initiatives, the crown prince is portrayed as a charismatic leader.

In 2022, the Saudi government declared that the Saudi state was established in February 1727, preceding the notable alliance between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 1745. This significant historical milestone,

while opposed by religious authorities due to potential parallels with Christian traditions, serves to reinforce Saudi identity and nationalism in contrast to other identity elements (Kinninmont, 2017). This development highlights Mohammed bin Saud's role as a local leader and unifier of the Arabian Peninsula and emphasizes the diminishing historical influence of the Wahhabi religious establishment (Henderson, 2022). As a result, the ulama are constrained to the realm of religious services, necessitating a less prominent role in social and economic affairs in accordance with the state's new regulations, emphasizing obedience to the ruling authority, and providing Islamic support for its contentious initiatives. However, this does not entail the removal of Wahhabism from its central position; instead, it signifies an attempt to restore the ulama to the more restricted social influence they held before the 1980s (Hammond, 2021).

One of the important developments that is expected to cause a radical change in the functionality of the religious institution is the efforts to develop the entertainment industry. Saudi Arabia has committed to investing \$64 billion in the entertainment industry by 2030 (BBC, 2018). For this purpose, the "General Entertainment Authority" and the "General Cultural Authority" were established in 2016. By promoting arts events, hosting international events, and meeting the demands of young people, it aims to reinforce the commitment of young people to their leader MBS and the future of the regime in a new understanding of Saudi nationalism (Cioffoletti, 2019).

For Saudi Arabia, a pivotal external factor reshaping the role of the religious institution was the waning need for the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology in combating communism, particularly following the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, as groups previously focused on countering communism redirected their attention to Western countries, the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology became a liability for Saudi Arabia. The September 11, 2001 attacks exacerbated this challenge, magnifying Saudi Arabia's predicament. The JASTA law (Congress, 2016), passed by the US Congress, yet to be enforced due to Saudi Arabia's objections, revealed the extent of the country's international isolation stemming from the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology.

Consequently, the prominent role of the religious institution during Saudi Arabia's inception phase remains significant. With the suppression of the Brotherhood in the 1930s, the ulema and religious establishment found a limited but notable place in Saudi politics. Their resurgence during the Cold War aimed to counter communism and withstand the repercussions of the Iranian revolution. More recently, attempts have been made to curtail the influence of the ulema once again, leading to growing discontent among radical Salafists, certain members of the dynasty, and ordinary

citizens invested in the status quo (TheEconomist, 2022). Another critical factor is the pivotal role of bureaucracy in the process of national transformation, from the state's initial establishment to its ongoing evolution (Mylonas, 2022, p. 189). The bureaucratic apparatus serves as the backbone for facilitating this transformative journey in Saudi Arabia.

Global And Regional Dynamicsand Saudi Territorial Nationalism

Saudi Arabia, a significant middle power, exerts substantial influence in global oil markets, shapes the foreign policies of developed nations through its robust defense industry sector, distributes oil revenues to both domestic and international beneficiaries, and effectively shields its internal affairs from regional upheavals such as the Arab Spring (Mitreski, 2021, p. 298).

According to Mylonas, states facing high-threat environments tend to prioritize nation-building efforts to foster internal unity. The external threat of territorial loss, particularly through the fifth column, incentivizes ruling elites to pursue strategies promoting linguistic and national cohesion. The extent to which this occurs is contingent upon prevailing global dynamics and international circumstances. In this context, Saudi Arabia's recent pursuit of nationalist policies is a response to international trends. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia possesses the capacity to impact regional and global developments, a potential that is already manifesting (Hoffman, 2023).

In the post-Cold War era, the emergence of autocratic powers like Russia and China, characterized by successful economies and social structures, has underscored the viability of autocratic and anti-democratic approaches. Consequently, the emphasis on moderate Islam and territorial nationalism is better understood as an endeavor to comprehensively address the internal, regional, and economic challenges faced by the state.

Factors such as the limitations of US protection in meeting Saudi Arabia's security needs, evidenced by incidents such as drone attacks on oil facilities, the Iran-US JPOA agreements, and the JASTA law, have prompted the Saudi elite to consolidate the internal social structure. The Saudi-led assaults in Yemen serve to position MBS as a heroic figure through sudden success, while also countering the expanding Iranian influence in the region. These threat perceptions necessitate the unification and consolidation of the Saudi populace under a territorial nationalist ideology.

In the context of the Arab world, where leaders like Nasser and Saddam have failed to solidify their influence, Saudi Arabia has uniquely positioned itself as a pivotal regional

player. Its strategic alliance with the Western world, combined with its custodianship of sacred sites, notably during the 1973 oil crisis and subsequent distribution of oil revenues to Arab nations, has contributed to its heightened significance. The challenges arising from the aftermath of the Iraq invasion in 2003 and the Arab Spring further propelled Saudi Arabia to the forefront, assuming the role of an ambassador of Arab identity and bolstering territorial Arab nationalism under the leadership of MBS. Its significant role in the custodianship of the country's holy sites and influence over Salafi currents has solidified its dominant position in the Arab world.

Recent efforts in Saudi Arabia have been focused on consolidating domestic politics, spearheaded by the 'Saudi First' principle (Alhussein, 2019), (Blumberg, 2020), while simultaneously shaping the region to align with its own foreign policy interests and threat perceptions. The military intervention in Yemen, launched by Saudi Arabia under MBS's leadership in 2015, was instrumental in reinforcing MBS's authority and reinforcing the nationalist Saudi identity in opposition to perceived threats, notably Iran (Kinninmont, 2017, p. 24). The 'Decisive Storm' operation against the Houthis in Yemen aimed to elevate MBS's standing during his ascent to the crown prince (Alhussein, 2019), prompting strong reactions and criticism from external parties. Notably, the Saudi government fiercely rebuffed criticism and engaged in diplomatic disputes with certain Western nations, sparking concerns over potential economic repercussions and prompting efforts to mitigate tensions through diplomatic channels (Alhussein, 2019).

The collective aspirations articulated by the masses during the Arab Spring, advocating for a cohesive "Arab world," persist to this day. The surge in democratic demands has compelled both internal and external status quo forces, perceiving the shift in the Arab world as a threat, to collaborate. Recognizing the need for an intellectual foundation to bridge the legitimacy gap, Saudi Arabia embraced the concept of a "revised new Arab nationalism" aligned with its own interests. Alhussein notes that the state introduced the Criminal Code for Crimes and Financing of Terrorism to criminalize the Muslim Brotherhood and to exert greater regulation and control over the media. Subsequently, the leadership has been implementing these directives, fostering a perception of hypernationalism within the nation (Alhussein, 2020, p. 5).

During the early phases of the Arab Spring, the popular movements garnered support from US President Barack Obama, which was grasped with apprehension by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This further heightened their anxieties about regime security, already stirred by the democratic aspirations of the Arab Spring and the burgeoning appeal of political Islam, including movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, in the processes of democratic transition. This sense of 'abandonment'

(Quilliam, 2020, p. 97) has contributed to the perception of a power vacuum, leading Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to pursue assertive foreign policies in the Middle East (Ragab, 2017, p. 38). Meanwhile, Türkiye's increasing influence in the region has elicited concern among Gulf countries, owing to its historical legacy and the democratic and Muslim structure (Ibish & Cook, 2017).

The resurgence of Arabism and Islamism ideologies in the wake of the Arab Spring has once again gained significance across the region, posing dual challenges for the survival of the Saudi regime (Alhoussein, 2020, p. 4). Consequently, the newly constructed Saudi nationalist identity, fostered under MBS's modernist vision for transformation, can be seen as an 'intellectual balancing' strategy to navigate the identity crisis in Saudi Arabia amid internal and external pressures. Nonetheless, Arabism and Islam will continue to remain integral pillars of the Saudi nation (Alhoussein, 2020, p. 5). Indeed, the Saudi government has reengaged clerics like Aid al-Qarni to counteract the influence of the Sahwa movement.

The ongoing process of normalization with Israel in the Arab world, initiated by Bahrain and the UAE and steered by the USA, signifies a fresh interest-driven identity shaping within the dynamics of regional politics (Knell, 2023). This shift, influencing the Arab identity, is likely to impact Saudi Arabia. The repercussions of the regional geopolitical transformation, following the Arab Spring, have intensified Saudi Arabia's concerns for regime security, prompting the emergence of a new Saudi identity and the development of territorial nationalism. In this evolving context, the positioning of Israel has shifted from being the 'other' to a strategic business partner, while the Palestinian issue has been deprioritized. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's stance appears to be isolating itself from traditional Arab nationalism and Islamist ideologies.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, one of the notable elements of the Gulf's nationalist narrative is the growing prominence of 'militarization.' Particularly in Saudi Arabia, an escalating trend of militarization intertwined with social and political shifts has become apparent. Ardemagni (2020) characterizes this phenomenon as 'militarized nationalism,' describing it as a system of military values, symbols, collective experiences, role models, and memories, promoted to foster a sense of national belonging and cohesion. Notably, the military intervention in Yemen by Saudi Arabia and the UAE against the common enemy Iran represents a significant milestone in the nation-building process, fueling nationalist sentiments within domestic politics through foreign military involvement. Moreover, this militarized nationalism is reflected in Saudi Arabia as a consolidation of power in the hands of MBS, bringing the military structure to the forefront during the reform process.

On the other hand, I would like to state that the primary impediment to establishing robust armies in the Gulf countries, despite substantial expenditures, is the absence of a coherent military doctrine. Articulating national security objectives necessitates a clear definition of national identity, namely, through nationalist ideology. Thus, while militarization reinforces the phenomenon of nationalism, the development of formidable armies in today's territorial nation-states is contingent upon robust territorial nationalism and patriotism. Despite its limitations, Arab nationalism has historically mobilized Arab armies and populations against Israel, sustaining its relevance over the years. Conversely, the defeat of Arab armies has equated to the collapse of Arab nationalism. Moreover, military doctrines are fundamentally rooted in the principles of nationalist ideologies. Consequently, the resurgence of territorial nationalism in Saudi Arabia, which formerly perceived Islamist and nationalist ideologies as threats to regime security, is poised to foster a robust doctrine and ideological fortification within the military. From a military standpoint, the resurgence of territorial nationalism may lead to both the fortification of armies and the transformation of the region's traditional monarchical structures into dominant authoritarian states under strong autocratic rule.

Conclusion

The drive to foster territorial nationalism in Saudi Arabia, a long-standing endeavor, has surged during the MBS era. Notably, the emphasis on 'moderate Islam' warrants internal and external support. Furthermore, the intensified focus on 'militarization' and its corollary, 'patriotic consciousness,' alongside the restructuring of historical narratives for a cohesive national identity, underline the cultural elements. Initiatives promoting national solidarity, such as museums and commemorative events, and the integration of youth into the global entertainment milieu play vital roles. Simultaneously, perpetuating the discourse of Iranian expansionism internally and externally, and implementing 'localization' policies to substitute foreign labor with local workforce, represent key elements in the revival of territorial nationalism.

It is imperative to consider that domestic socio-political shifts, such as the promotion of moderate Islam and dynastic power dynamics in Saudi Arabia, will invariably impact foreign policy and international relations. Saudi Arabia seeks to navigate the preservation of Wahhabi ideology and the clerical establishment, striving to establish a relatively secular nationalist framework rooted in moderate Islam and avert potential religion-state conflicts. Nonetheless, significant contentions are anticipated in this endeavor.

An ideology emphasizing Saudi Arabia's "Arabness" is poised to impact societies identifying as Arab in various ways. The essential intellectual and material resources required to propagate such a discourse throughout the Arab world, positioning Saudi Arabia as its central hub, are readily available. With control over a significant share of Arab media and a sizable cohort of Western-educated Saudi nationals equipped with advanced cognitive and practical skills, alongside annual oil revenues in the hundreds of billions, and cumulative petrodollars amounting to trillions, Saudi Arabia possesses the means to realize this vision. Notably, the nation's minimal social tensions, apart from the Shiite-Sunni divide in the eastern regions, allow it to utilize its oil wealth to implement modernization policies effectively and smoothly. The paramount criterion here is the enhancement of citizen welfare and the maintenance of social stability through these endeavors.

However, internal challenges and external pressures that may run counter to Saudi Arabia's genuine interests pose the most significant obstacles to the successful progression of this initiative. Initiatives aimed at altering long-standing behavioral patterns of the regime, which have become entrenched as cultural norms, and reducing its reliance on Islam could instigate a backlash from the royal family or religious leaders, thereby weakening the regime's legitimacy. Moreover, like other forms of nationalism, MBS's populist territorial nationalism in Saudi Arabia has garnered both advocates and detractors, potentially leading to the exclusion of opposing factions. Efforts to promote Saudi Arabia as the cultural hub of the Arab world may trigger competition with Egypt, while an empowered Saudi Arabian hegemony, bolstered by territorial Arab nationalism, risks unsettling and estranging other Gulf states. Navigating the complexities of harmonizing the Saudi national identity, Gulf identity, and Arab identity, as well as managing the adaptation to broader global identities like Muslim, Western ally, and independent sovereign Saudi nation, presents significant challenges. It is crucial that nationalist discourse and nation-building efforts align with economic development and welfare improvements to yield success. Failure to do so may provoke resistance from segments accustomed to rentier state practices, thereby impeding the assimilation of modern state practices. Additionally, potential objections from entrenched factions adhering strictly to the Wahhabi creed pose a significant risk to the administration's transformative ambitions in the foreseeable future.

The successful integration of Arabist and Islamist ideologies within the framework of territorial Saudi nationalism is poised to redefine Saudi Arabia's relations with Arab and Islamic nations, elevating them to a new level. However, the excessive exaltation of Saudi land and its people through territorial nationalist rhetoric may potentially estrange other Arab and Muslim populations, necessitating a delicate

balance in Saudi Arabia's approach. Moreover, given the longstanding alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States and the substantial American influence in the country across economic, political, military, and bureaucratic domains, the development of a new identity, ideology, or citizen that contradicts the demands of Western allies, particularly in the region, is implausible. The historical presence of US experts in shaping Saudi Arabia's bureaucratic structure during the 20th century further underscores this reality. Consequently, the new discourse of Arab nationalism is unlikely to pose an existential threat to Israel at the regional level and will not jeopardize the regional interests of Western nations.

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