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# The Soft Power of Saudi Arabia

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# **The Soft Power of Saudi Arabia**

## ***International Studies***

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### ***Introduction***

When people are asked the question, What is the source of Saudi Arabia's power? Who would cite factors other than oil? This equation of Saudi power exclusively with its oil wealth is mistaken. Historically, a principal and the most consistent source of Saudi power at the domestic, regional and global levels has not been revenues from oil, but the cultural power that inheres in a Kingdom that is both the capitol of the Muslim and Arab worlds. This soft power accounts for as much, if not more, of Saudi influence than even oil itself. To a large extent, this power explains why Saudi Arabia has remained stout in the face of the shock waves of the Arab Spring. This soft power also accounts for much of the leverage that the Kingdom holds in its region and the world at large. Ultimately, of course, Saudi Arabian power is grounded in both the hard power of its oil wealth and the soft power of its cultural importance. And so the Kingdom is endowed with extensive smart or cosmopolitan power (i.e., the synthesis of soft and hard power). Events in the Middle East and North Africa have confronted Saudi Arabia with some of its greatest challenges as a nation due to the strong ties with the countries in the region and the Saudi's special eminence among the people of those countries. The political landscape has been transformed by popular movements calling for freedom, social justice and economic opportunities. The serious economic and political turbulence that confronts the region does not promise to ameliorate anytime soon due to the relentless resistance of the old regimes and the fledgling nature of the new political orders that continue to establish themselves. Saudi Arabia, given its special place among these nations, is at the crux of this regional transformation. In the greater sphere of global relations, Saudi Arabia faces a critical and uncertain future with the limitations of an oil economy, the US disengaging from Iraq, and the controversy over a nuclear Iran. On a domestic

front Saudi Arabia too has to continue to modernize and prosper in the face of a myriad of political, economic and social challenges. Never has the need for a resolute continuation of the use of its hard and soft power been more pronounced in order for Saudi Arabia to effectively confront its domestic and international challenges. But while much has been said about its hard power, far too little attention has been paid to the role of Saudi soft power. This article is an attempt to analytically balance the power ledger. The article assesses the modern day international, regional and domestic challenges facing Saudi Arabia and analyzes how the nation's soft power can be employed to effectively deal with those challenges. Section one identifies the general theoretical foundations of soft power. Sections two takes inventory of Saudi Arabia's principal sources of international and domestic soft power. Section three analyzes the potential of this soft power as a means of confronting the Kingdom's most pressing challenges and problems. Section four offers brief concluding remarks.

### ***I. What is Soft Power***

Joseph Nye developed the concept of soft power in 1990. Since then the concept has received much academic attention, but it is also one of the few concepts in academic political science that has garnered broad attention in the media and even among politicians.<sup>1</sup> Theoretically, soft power represents a Constructivist/Neoliberal vision of influence that is in contradistinction to the Realist vision of power. Realists have historically seen influence as a direct function of material resources: how large an army does a nation have?; how wealthy is a nation?; how well endowed is a nation in terms of territory, natural resources, and people?; and how technologically advanced is the nation? In this vision, the sources of influence are tangible assets with which nations can *extract* compliance on the part of other nations. This is referred to as *hard power*. While hard power can manifest itself in intangible ways (threats, alliance commitments, swaggering), the intangible avenues are always founded on some tangible pool of resources that can be activated in order to extract compliance (e.g., threats and swaggering are only effective if they are backed up by muscle). This hard vision of power accords well with the Realist obsession with the pervasive impact of anarchy (i.e., nations have no absolute authority that exists above them) on the behavior of nation-states. Since there are no absolute guarantors of a nation's security, only physical assets can be relied on to meet a threat. While allies and international organizations may be abundant, there is no guarantee they will come to a nation's aid when crises occur. Similarly, one may have generated much goodwill among other nations,

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<sup>1</sup> The literature has become extensive. For good bibliographic sources and explanations of the concept, see Gallarotti (2010a, 2010b, and 2011).

but even so there is no guarantee that this goodwill could be turned into physical support in times of dire need. The vision draws heavily on a Hobbesian state of nature.<sup>2</sup>

Soft power occupies the other end of the spectrum in terms of the foundations of national influence. Rather than coercing compliance through physical assets, soft power constitutes the *cultivation* of compliance through the creation of goodwill in the international community. The goodwill is essentially cultivated by building a positive image. The positive image endears nations with soft power to other nations in the international system, such that latter will be amicable toward the goals and interests of the soft power nations. To give a simple analogy, one can obtain goals and protect interests by being a bully (rely exclusively on hard power-i.e., muscle); but they can also do so by comporting themselves in ways that create respect, and thus others will be amenable to their goals and interests. In fact, over-reliance on hard power (*the hard power curse*) has a tendency to generate deleterious consequences (*hard disempowerment*) for nations, and this often results in counter-productive outcomes (e.g., coercion generates resentment, which in turn could produce retaliatory uses of force). The use of soft power generally produces fewer such negative externalities.<sup>3</sup> At some minimum manifestation, soft power will make other nations less inimical to the interests and objectives of soft power nations. At some more extreme manifestation, the respect and goodwill garnered by soft power nations may actually make other nations pursue the interests and goals of the soft power nations. The most extreme manifestation in this case is when a soft power nation becomes a role model, and other nations seek to adopt the role-model-nation's policies (foreign and/or domestic).

The relationship between the two kinds of power is hardly simple and unproblematic. As noted, the difference is not founded purely on tangibility (as many scholars suggest). Hard power can be manifest in intangible or symbolic ways (threats, swaggering). Conversely, soft power can be realized through the use of tangible means (providing food aid to starving nations). Furthermore, soft and hard power unfold in ways that are not mutually exclusive, but often do so through interaction effects. For example, generating goodwill and respect may earn a soft power nation more military bases. Conversely, military support against potential enemies will garner much goodwill and respect on the part of the client nation. In this respect, both types of power can complement one another. But hard and soft power can also work at odds. For example, overly coercive policies can generate extreme enmity and vituperation on the part of target nations, thus completely compromising any sort of positive image of the perpetrator nations. Conversely, overreliance on goodwill may cause a nation to neglect the building of an adequate defense capability (i.e., this would be a moral hazard effect on the part of overly soft policies—*soft disempowerment*). Ultimately, in order for nations to achieve some optimal level of

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<sup>2</sup> Mearsheimer (2001) best articulates the Realist view of the effects of anarchy in the international system.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, soft power does not carry the guarantees that hard power does: one cannot guarantee that a friendly nation will come to one's aid in time of war.

influence, they would have to rely on some combination of hard and soft power. This has been referred to as *smart* or *cosmopolitan* power (Gallarotti 2010b).

There are fundamentally two main sources of soft power: (1) domestic policies and actions and (2) international policies and actions (see Table 1). In terms of international actions and policies, nations must show respect for multilateralism. This constitutes a commitment to addressing regional and global issues in a cooperative way based on norms of equality and fair play: where actions and policies are considered within the framework of existing laws, principles and norms. In the case of more powerful regional or global players, international soft power is often garnered through enlightened leadership: i.e., unilateral initiatives that foster collective regional goals. In this sense, the regional leader would function as a paternalistic provider in the theory of collective action. This is tantamount to a case of benevolent hegemony where the leading power disproportionately bears the costs of public goods for the region (Olsen 1965, Snidal 1985, and Kindleberger 1986). It is at this international level that the Constructivist and Neoliberal foundations of soft power are most apparent. Constructivists underscore the influence that can be generated by a commitment to norms and principles, while Neoliberals emphasize the advantages of multilateralism over unilateralism as a source of influence.

With respect to domestic sources of soft power, the two most important factors contributing to a nation's soft power are its culture and political system. Many of the specific factors cited as creating soft power at the domestic political level center around politically liberal principles. But non-democratic regimes can also generate outcomes that suggest popular support for political outcomes, and hence acquire soft power. At the basis of political soft power at the domestic level is an absence of political discontent within the system of government and its policies. So just as there can be illiberal democracies (Zakaria 2003), so too can liberal non-democracies that generate politically stable environments, which in turn can generate soft power. This could be stated in a reformulation of Huntington's concept of the political gap. Stable governing systems that create soft power minimize the gap between what governments produce and what the people demand. Hence to the extent that this gap is absent in a political system, soft power can be created irrespective of the nominal form of government (Huntington 1968).<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the political outcomes, the soft power created by culture derives from special characteristics in a society that other people find appealing or venerate. Culturally, there is much that can generate respect and endearment. Organic or cohesive qualities among people of a culture generate great respect and appeal among foreign societies. Similarly, a life perceived as manifesting a high quality is equally attractive. Furthermore, lifestyle itself is subject to critical scrutiny. Some lifestyles generate especially broad approval, whether merely respect or copied. Other qualities such as tolerance and opportunity are subsumed within the greater categories of

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Machiavelli's *Prince* is a testament to the possibilities of liberal non-democracies creating legitimate political outcomes. For Machiavelli, autocrats could only survive if they honored principles of civil governance. On this point, see Gallarotti (2010b, pps. 107-125).

quality of life and lifestyle. These qualities account for the greater appreciation of particular lifestyles. It is for these reasons that the U.S. is often identified as a cultural hegemon, especially among the youth of the world. In terms of the influence of an American lifestyle, the U.S. is the greatest net exporter of culture in the world (Barnet and Cavanagh 1996). Finally, a nation may be endowed with very special significance as a cultural entrepot. In the case of the U.S., it is an entrepot of modern popular culture, globalization, and capitalism. Rome is a cultural entrepot as the center of the Western Christian and ancient Roman worlds. Alexandria (Egypt) and Antakya (Turkey) are cultural entrepots as the centers of the Eastern Christian and ancient Byzantine worlds. The Makkah Province in Saudi Arabia is a cultural entrepot as the center of the Muslim and Arab worlds. Many more nations possess qualities of cultural significance, even if they are not cultural entrepots. While they may generate less cultural soft power, they nonetheless attain significant influence due to their special cultural qualities.<sup>5</sup>

It is tempting to look at attempts to garner soft power as actions based on decisionmaking rules that deviate from self-interest. This is wrong because while soft power does require the investment of resources to produce a strong and positive image, it also generates greater influence in the world polity. And it is most rational to make investments that will generate significant returns in terms of power. In this respect, soft power in general (but not always) is similar to cooperative moves in strategic games like Stag Hunt or Prisoner's Dilemma. For the best individual outcomes (in terms of where the games end up), you must also attain desirable collective outcomes. And hence these games require individual decisions about optimal moves to be undertaken in the context of what is also good for the group: i.e., employing social utility functions.

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Filali (2012) suggests a more detailed division for the sources of domestic soft power than culture and political system. He emphasizes the distinctions among the specific characteristics of culture: civilization, ideology, economic practices, and other human factors. So too the political system will involve a greater distinction among a larger variety of factors (e.g. political geography, institutions, leadership styles, ideologies). Such distinctions are more useful as explanatory factors since American culture for example may represent the overall culture of the US, while modern culture in other countries such as Russia, India and China refers to a mélange of distinctive cultures.

Table 1. Sources of Soft Power

International	Domestic
Willingness to contribute to multilateral solutions to international problems	<b>Culture</b>  --Social Cohesion  --Quality of Life  --Opportunity  --Tolerance  --Lifestyle  --Cultural Significance
Respect for international laws, norms, regimes and institutions	
Fundamental reliance on cooperation and a reluctance to solve problems unilaterally	
Respect international treaties and alliance commitments	
	<b>Political Institutions</b>  Institutions and political outcomes function in a way that are perceived as legitimate and desirable

## ***II. Saudi Soft Power***

### ***International Sources***

Saudi Arabia emerged as a natural candidate for a regional as well as an international leadership role in the postwar period. Regionally, although the population density is very low, Saudi Arabia is the largest nation in terms of its vast territory (80% of the Arabian Peninsula) and it has the longest shoreline in the region. In terms of ancient geography, combined with the flow of water from Zamzam Wells, that was instrumental in the founding of the City of Makkah, the city laid at the crossroads of major caravan routes from Yemen (Arabia Felix) up to the Mediterranean markets. This is in addition to common borders with seven Arab countries having different civilizations and distinct cultures, among which are spots of political unrest to the North and the

South. The Kingdom is the top producer of oil not only in the Arabian Peninsula but in the entire Middle East. Saudi Arabia's long distinguished history complements these economic and geographic sources of natural leadership. There are distinctive features of the modern cultures of Arab countries that vary from one region to the other depending on indigenous customs and heritages. However, there are cultural elements common among them that emanate from a shared Arab heritage, and Saudi Arabia is the leading entrepôt for this ancient Arab culture. Historically, with respect to religion, the Kaaba is believed to be the first house of worship to be built on Earth. Muslims believe that the Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael later rebuilt the Kaaba. In the pre-Islamic era, starting as a monotheistic place of worship, the Kaaba was eventually converted to a destination of pilgrimage for the deities of Arabia's pagan tribes from all over the Arabian Peninsula. Some hundreds of idols representing many different tribes were placed in the Kaaba making its environs an inviolable sanctuary and Makkah became a center of pilgrimage. The pilgrimage traffic added considerably to the wealth of the merchants of Makkah, which also benefited from its position astride the caravan routes. In the Old Testament chapter Psalm 84:3-6 there is a mention of a pilgrimage at the Valley of Baca, which refers to Makkah.<sup>6</sup> The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (60 BCE and 30 BCE) writes about the isolated region of Arabia in *Bibliotheca historica* describing a holy shrine (Oldfather 1968):

"And a temple has been set-up there, which is very holy and exceedingly revered by all Arabians."

Due to the prominence of the Kaaba among early Arabs, seven of the most venerated early Arab poems were hung on or in the Kaaba, in an era wherein poetry played a major role as a source of soft power in ancient Middle Eastern society. Poets used to recite their works in market places and other locations, gathering large audiences, and spreading their poems among literates and illiterates alike. In many cases the power of poetry exceeded that of the sword. It could ignite wars out of simple conflicts, while being capable of rapidly quenching long lasting wars. The sanctity of the Kaaba as a monotheistic place of worship was restored and preserved by Muslims who removed all idols from within and outside, and finally rid pilgrimages from all pagan rituals. Thus, they assigned to the pilgrimage the traditions of Abraham and Ishmael as taught by Mohammed. At the Kaaba, being the Islam's holiest place, early generation of Muslims built "The Sacred Mosque" (Al-Masjid al-Haram) around it and the whole city became a sacred place. Muslims around the world turn toward Kaaba while performing any prayer<sup>7</sup>. In this respect, Saudi Arabia has been venerated by over 1.23 billion Muslims worldwide as the very religious capitol of Islam: the land that witnessed the dawn of Islam from the birth of Muhammad, the call for Islam, the persecution of Muhammad's early followers in Makkah, and the refuge provided these followers in Medina.

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<sup>6</sup> Qur'an Surah 3:96 refers to Makkah as Baca.

<sup>7</sup> Praying five times a day towards the Kaaba is one of the five pillars of Islam.



Saudi Arabia is revered throughout the Muslim world as the "Land of the Two Holy Shrines", referring to the two holiest places in Islam: Al-Masjid al-Haram in Makkah and Al-Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina<sup>8</sup>. The house of Abdul-Muttalib enjoyed a form of nobility in pre-Islamic Makkah, bestowed upon them by their hereditary duty to act as stewards and caretakers of the pilgrims coming to Makkah to worship at the sacred shrine. Such honor is claimed by the Saudi Arabian King who formally acquires the title of "Khadem al-Haramin" (the caretaker of the two Holy Shrines).<sup>9</sup> Through the most holy sites for Muslims in the holy cities of Makkah and Medina, Saudi Arabia has become the destination of over two millions of pilgrims during the annual hajj (pilgrimage) season, and many more visitors year around.<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia is also the host to a plethora of Islamic religious organizations and a prolific donor to Muslim charities and causes all over the world.

In all these respects, one can say that Saudi Arabia is the center of four important worlds: the Middle East, the Arab world, the Muslim world, and global world of energy. Consequently the Saudi's emerged as natural leaders of important regional and international communities. Considering the political and economic importance of these four networks, the fact that Saudi Arabia is the lynchpin to all four makes Saudi Arabia one of the most important and influential nations in the world. No doubt this core position in these networks has endowed Saudi Arabia with hard power (i.e., power over material resources), but the Saudis have been especially astute at balancing this hard power with initiatives to raise and maintain its standing and image among its networks of nations. The foreign policies of Saudi Arabia in the later-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and more recently are a testament to this quest to balance its material resources with a vigorous quest for soft power in its most important networks of international relations, i.e., ultimately a quest for cosmopolitan or smart power (Gallarotti 2010b). The postwar period saw Saudi Arabia making a strong commitment to multilateralism in these communities by building robust networks of cooperation in both the region and the world at large. At the global level it joined the U.N. in 1945, shortly after the organization's founding. It has emerged as an important member of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and more recently the World Trade Organization. Regionally, it was a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Arab League, Muslim World League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. It has also expressed strong support for the formation of an Arab Customs Union by 2015 and Arab Common Market by 2020. In the

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Masjid al-Nabawi is a mosque built on the remnants of the living quarters of the Prophet Mohammed, where he and the first caliphates were buried.

<sup>9</sup> The house of Abdul-Muttalib, the grandfather of Mohammed, belongs to the Banu Hashim lineage of the tribe of Quraysh.

<sup>10</sup> Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, which a Muslim has to perform once in a life time, if he/she can afford it. It takes place on specific dates based on the Arabic Hijri calendar. Muslims from all around the world go to Makkah to perform Ummra (a petit form of Hajj) at any time with the peak being the Month of Ramadan (the month of fasting).

words of the Saudi Foreign Ministry itself, Saudi foreign policy is strongly grounded in a major soft-power framework that is oriented around the following principles and goals:

“good-neighbor policy, non interference in the internal affairs of other countries, strengthen relations with the Gulf States and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, strengthen relations with Arab and Islamic countries for the benefit of common interests of these countries, as well as advocate their issues, adopt nonalignment policy, establish cooperation relations with friendly countries, and play effective role in the international and regional organizations” (*The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia* 2005).

This policy has been pursued in four multilateral networks: the Gulf states, the Arab community, the Muslim community, and the international community at large. The Gulf Circle, or Arabian Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates), represents the principal network within which Saudi foreign policy has been marshaled in the postwar period. It is a fact that relations among these multilateral networks have been anything but harmonious. Indeed there are great cultural, religious, and political differences that have been a source of controversy in these networks from ancient times to the modern day. Common visions of unified fronts and homogeneity in the Arab and Muslim worlds manifest an ignorance of the diversity within these networks, differences that have caused tension and even conflict throughout their histories. But within this panoply of strained relations run communitarian strands that bring these networks into mutually beneficial relations. Based upon cultural, religious, geographic, historical, and even blood connections; Saudi Arabia has most closely worked within this network in attending to both its specific and milieu goals. This network functioned well informally until 1981, with formal status being proclaimed in the form of a regional union called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC has made vigorous attempts at cooperating on issues that have both important domestic and trans-border implications for all of its members. While international unions among less developed nations and even unions among developed nations have historically issued rhetoric about a need for concerted cooperation in order for each member nation to achieve its full potential, the GCC has achieved such a level of cooperation to a far greater extent than most other regional blocs or unions. The substantive manifestations of coordination span the field of important issues, from a security entente to cultural exchange.

The GCC has recently taken major steps in consolidating a union by creating a common market in 2008 (that eliminated all barriers to trade in goods and services) and a monetary council intended to deliver a common currency. Most recently in 2012 the six members announced that the GCC would be moving toward a more formal security and economic confederation. The special success of the GCC no doubt emanates largely from the connections noted above, but it is all the more reinforced by Saudi leadership and the special connection in energy. The Saudis have been the principal foundation of economic and military support for the

union.<sup>11</sup> For example, 70% of Bahrain's state oil and gas revenues come from the Saudi's Abu Shafah oil field. This enlightened leadership has generated considerable soft power for Saudi Arabia in the region. And with respect to the energy connection, as members of OPEC, the economic fates of the six nations are tied together in a far more crucial way, a way that separates them from most regional blocs. Maintaining a cartel places them in a position of vulnerability interdependence, whereby any unilateral initiatives that would upset collective targets and objectives have the potential to undermine the economic fates of both the individual nations undertaking the actions and the fates of the other cartel members. In this case, the group as a whole faces a prodigious need to reign in unilateral policy orientations because of the inherent prisoner's dilemma of defection which afflicts cartels (in any given play of the game, each nation in a cartel faces individual incentives to refrain from cooperating on production quotas, no matter what other nations do). In the longer run, such dilemmas can be solved by iterated play. But even under iterated play, there needs to be a leader that keeps the cartel functioning in the face of defection (what the Saudi's have historically done—see below) or very close connections between the members that would allow them to collectively solve the problem. The latter is a far more difficult a solution, but the GCC can be said to have demonstrated that kind of cooperative capacity (*The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia* 2005, Gause 2002, Moran 1981, and Knickmeyer and Delmar-Morgan 2012).

Unlike other regions that feature asymmetrical power relations among its members, the Saudi's have resisted taking too strong a hand in guiding the many multilateral initiatives of the members of this circle. It is difficult to see even attempts at proclaiming some special authority based on its cultural and economic power. Indeed the Saudis have maintained a much softer type of leadership that is based on collective goals and enlightened intervention, i.e., hegemonic aid and support with some strings attached. Within the Arab and Muslim communities, whose major organizational manifestation are the Arab League, the Muslim World League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; Saudi Arabia has reinforced its multilateral relations. Within the circle of the independent Arab states, the Saudi's have taken a central role in pursuing the objectives of prosperity, security and solidarity. Its leadership has taken the form of principal mediator in Arab disputes as well as the principal source of international aid to Arab states. Moreover, it has taken a leading role in pursuing goals of common interests among the states, especially in addressing a stable and fair solution to the Palestinian question. More recently the Saudi's have coordinated and pushed for an especially engaged role in the political problems in Yemen, Libya and Syria in order to encourage political transitions that would not disrupt the structure of Arab League membership and chemistry (Gause 2002 and *The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia* 2005).

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<sup>11</sup> In this respect, the hard power of oil money has allowed it to build up significant good will as a store of soft power. Roughly 90% of Saudi export earnings and 75% of the government revenues come from oil exports (Jones 2010, p. 6).

An especially glaring recent example of the use of Saudi soft power in the Muslim and Arab communities to push Saudi foreign policy goals came at the Fourth Extraordinary Session of the Islamic Summit in mid-August of 2012. The principal goals of Saudi's King Abdullah were to isolate the Assad regime and to try to limit the external shocks from the sectarian divide over Syria in the greater Muslim community. The functions and venues of the Summit that hosted leaders of 40 nations from Asia, Africa and the Middle East were vivid manifestations of the religious and cultural prominence of Saudi Arabia. The summit was held in Mecca and leaders were escorted through the holiest sites in Islam, both in Mecca and Medina. King Abdullah also held a suhoor for guests after the opening meeting, and Crowned Prince Salman encouraged the guests to partake in the pageantry of Saudi cultural, reminding them how former President George W. Bush danced with a sword in Saudi folk style. While the summit did not necessarily move Iran into a more docile position on Syria, the summit did make a strong impression on the group as a whole. In fact, the Saudis were able to lay the groundwork for expelling Syria from the OIC (Dickinson 2012).

Relations in the Arab circle have, in turn, been reinforced by Saudi leadership in the circle of Muslim states. This circle has always been an especially important collective venue for Saudi foreign policy, especially in its organizational forms--The Muslim World League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Since Islamic doctrine is regarded as the foundation of Saudi foreign policy, like domestic policy, the Islamic alliance forms a crucial conduit through which Saudi Arabia manages and marshals its multilateral soft and hard power. These two organizations are especially important venues for marshaling Saudi soft power as the religious capitol of the Islamic world. As with the GCC, the cooperation within the Muslim group essentially seeks to enhance the security and prosperity of each member through the collective efforts of the entire community. And as with the Arab circle, Saudi leadership and aid are among the most important factors in maintaining the solidarity of the group and prosperity of each member. Saudi Arabia receives requests from Islamic countries not only in times of humanitarian disaster, but also for development needs such as building an airport in Senegal or roads in Yemen. Al-Yahya and Fustier (2011) cite the maintenance of its role as leader of the Muslim world as the key foreign policy priority of Saudi Arabia. Responding to any call for assistance is but a fulfillment of a long array of obligations by the Kingdom to the Islamic World. The promotion of pan-Islamism has been central to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and to making the best out of its religious soft power. Broadly understood as an ideology based on the solidarity of the *umma*, or the Muslim community at large, pan-Islamism contains a normative imperative to help other Muslims in time of crisis and to work toward a sort of unity between Muslims that does not conflict with the new world fabric. In contrast to a secular nationalist political ideology, the political and social order fostered by Saudi Arabia is derived from a religious precept with religious identity, not culture or ethnicity, at its core. Rubin (2010) notes that the use of political ideology has been an instrument of alliance building (through power of persuasion), as well as a way to bolster domestic legitimacy. However, apolitical ideologies are more effective in reaching beyond the conscience of the public to reinforce consensus. In light of the appreciation of the extraordinary impact of the Saudi Arabian cultural propagation in other countries, Woollacott, (2002) rejects the claim that the resulting position of authority relies on either Saudi Arabia's current alliance with the U.S. or on its extensive oil reserves.

The multiple channels of solidarity among the three overlapping communities allow the Saudi's much more influence and flexibility in guiding the course of foreign relations among its allied nations. The frequency and diversity of the institutional interactions give the Saudi's extensive agenda power, which ultimately translates into greater influence over domestic and foreign policies of the member states within each of the three circles (Gause 2002 and Rubin 2010a).<sup>12</sup>

Within the greater international circle, the Saudi's are more intent on taking opportunities within the world system for domestic security and prosperity, then forming more intimate alliances like the ones in the previous three circles. But even here, while the fate of the outer circle is not as important as the developments within the Kingdom's three inner circles of allies, still there are networks of cooperation that are crucial to the welfare of the Kingdom, and it is within these networks that Saudi Arabia continues to work to preserve the viability of its multilateral relations. The most important of these is the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Historically, the Saudi's have been the principal reason for the success of the cartel through their role as swing producer.<sup>13</sup> Like any other cartel, OPEC has been plagued by the ever-present threat of dissolution as a result of defection, as each member faces a common prisoner's dilemma incentive to cheat. The Saudis have historically maintained collective quotas in the face of cheating by cutting their own production below levels that would maximize their revenues. Hence, they have sacrificed extensive economic benefits in order to keep the cartel alive. While the Saudi's have also used more punitive measures in maintaining discipline in the cartel, such as diplomatic confrontations and occasional resort to overproductions that would drive prices down significantly, still the Saudi's have shown an ongoing willingness to accept the burden of cheating by sacrificing their own revenues. But the leadership of OPEC has also been crucial to navigating another important sphere in the Kingdom's foreign relations: its relations with the West. In this respect, enlightened leadership placed the Saudi's between two conflicting objectives: to maintain the viability of the cartel while keeping the price of oil at levels that would not alienate Western consumer nations. Saudi Arabia can be said to have dealt fairly perspicaciously in this precarious position between a rock and hard place. As Gause (2012, p. 204) notes, the Saudi's have deftly followed a soft path of "quite consensus building and deal making." Moreover, while it has shown the willingness to sacrifice revenues in order to boast the revenues of other OPEC nations, it has indulged in another kind of benevolent leadership on the other front by boosting production beyond OPEC targets when Western nations have been especially victimized by high oil prices, even though it has been far from an OPEC dove in its

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<sup>12</sup> A growing literature attests to the widespread and growing influence of religion on international relations via interfaith conferences, symposia and initiation of formal and informal dialogues. Saudi Arabia's religious position makes it essentially a religious hegemon in terms of soft power. On the influence of religion on international relations, see Fox and Sandler (2004) and Haynes (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Saudi Arabia's swing producer role emanates from its prolific oil production (world's largest exporter of crude) and abundant reserves (1/4 of the world's reserves), but also the speed with which it can produce oil: it can produce an additional 2 million barrels overnight (Gause 2002).

support for a high price of crude oil. This power over oil makes Saudi Arabia one of the key lynchpins in the global economy, as swings in the global economy since the 1970s have been strongly influenced by the price of oil (Moran 1981, Amuzegar 2001, Faucon and Said 201, Gause and Jones 2012, and Rifkin 2011).

Both the Kingdom's special role in the global economy and the geo-politics of the Middle East has brought it into a critical relation with the US. While there has been much to disrupt this relation, still the relation is strongly set in soft bilateralism. The interests of the two nations have accorded on many fronts, often due to the willingness of the Saudis to accommodate American foreign policy goals. The Kingdom has consistently interceded in OPEC arrangements to prevent ruinous energy prices for the West, accommodated American security interests in allowing American air bases and military passage for its operations, served effectively as a balancer in the Middle East, offered its services to quell regional friction in peace initiatives pushed by the US, and taken a strong stand against terrorism (Gause 2002).

### *Domestic Sources*

Just as Saudi Arabia has long faced daunting international challenges that have tested its soft and hard power endowments, its domestic conditions have been no less difficult. The Saudi Arabian Peninsula has been historically beset by sectarian, geographic, political, socio-economic, and even tribal divisions. These divisions were often exacerbated by outside forces in order to undermine the strength of the ruling regime: Nasser in the 1950s and 60s, Iran in the 1980s, and Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and 90s. Indeed, the pre-Saudi society was anything but homogeneous, and its veil of Islamic devotion masked a fundamentally fractured society. Even the birth of the Kingdom was a struggle to unite independent regions that had been at odds for centuries. The ruling regime has had to draw on all of its hard and soft power resources to make this fractured system function as a stable and prosperous state. As with international soft power, a great deal of the domestic soft power enjoyed by the Saudi ruling regime emanates from its hard power, more specifically oil wealth. The ruling family has historically used this oil wealth to solidify the role of the government institutions, reach out to the sparse pockets of the population, quell the volatility of the southern borders, and invest in domestic political, economic and social stability. This hard "distributive" capacity has been responsible for bringing the factions that potentially challenged the legitimacy of the state into a stable co-existence. The fact that the Saudi's are far richer than most of the regimes in the region and the fact that their economy is doing relatively better than other regional economies, suggests that this distributive power is relatively more potent than in other nations. We saw microcosmic manifestations of the relative superiority of Saudi hard capacity in the wake of the Arab Spring, during the time which King Abdullah ratcheted up transfers to a variety of groups far more than was done in nations faced with revolutionary movements. In March of 2012 the King instituted a large bailout to Saudi citizens and institutions. Distributions were also increased to selected religious institutions. He even convinced businesses to give larger bonuses to their employees. The Saudi's experienced little fallout from the Arab Spring (isolated demonstrations in Shiite areas, some petitions for reform, and some activity in the media), which reflected a political equilibrium that

created significant immunity to the revolutionary virus. The regime used little physical force to counter demands for reform. In this respect it has historically been the case that the Saudi's classic hard power resources, physical intervention through the use of police and national guard, have played a smaller part in consolidating the state. And this is a reflection of not only the effectiveness of the distributive strategy, but also of the inherent stability of the regime that emanates from a greater domestic soft power (Gause 2002, Lippman 2012, and Gause and Jones 2012).

The two principal sources of the Kingdom's domestic soft power emanate from the ruling family itself and the nation's religious prominence. Interestingly, many of the soft power sources that derive from politically liberal principals are apparent in Saudi Arabia as well. The absolutist structure of governance obfuscates a system that possesses many of the characteristics of liberal political cultures. The ruling regime actually functions according to broad norms of majoritarian public interest and consensus among the ruling elite. Hence in terms of outcomes, governance is pluralistic because the various ruling family members need to be on board on important issues, and society is in general not subjected to extensive gaps between public interests and regime outcomes. In this sense, the regime functions somewhat like European principalities in the Middle Ages, which were often titular monarchies but functioned as civic republics. In Europe, this was the result of the survival and resilience of Roman institutions in guiding the political practices of ruling families throughout this period in European history (Lindsay 1962). While Saudis do not have the political agency that citizens in liberal democracies have, they enjoy a great many of the freedoms that the latter citizens enjoy. So in terms of political outcomes, the Saudi regime is closer to democratic liberalism than regimes of oriental despots. Indeed, the ruling family has shown a very long tradition of sensitivity to popular moods, given their willingness to depose kings that were seen as unfit, as well as a willingness to deny successors that proved to be widely unacceptable in the public eye.

Beyond this ascension of civic republican outcomes, the Al Saud family itself enjoys a personal legitimacy among the Saudi public that gives it significant soft power. The present line is the only ruling family that the nation has known. Moreover, they are venerated as a heroic legacy of the founder of the Kingdom, King Abdul-Aziz, who overcame great obstacles in joining independent regions that had been in an adversarial relationship for centuries. The initial triumph has carried much political currency for his heirs, which have been seen as carrying on the great union. In fact, much of the perception of the family is embedded in a belief that they are the ones that are the key force in maintaining the delicate union among a fractured society. Furthermore, unlike a variety of autocrats in the Middle East and beyond, who have been seen as Western puppets or not of the people, the Al Saud are home grown people. Moreover, the Al Saud enjoy a greater religious legitimacy relative to other ruling families in the Middle East. The rise of the family, as a ruling elite, was facilitated by an alliance with Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, a reformer whose salafy (orthodox) teachings of Islam have been adopted by the majority of Muslims and religious leaders in the Arabian Peninsula. The reforms bring to mind the actions of the early Muslims who cleansed the Kaaba and the pilgrimage from all pagan

artifacts. What became known as Wahhabism is but a grass root movement to maintain the purity of religious practices from infringements by alien contemplations and extraneous dogmas. These special characteristics give the Al Saud a robust political legitimacy. The strength of this legitimacy is historically evident in movements for domestic reform (whether from the right or the left). Such movements have principally taken the form of quests for regime change rather than regime transformation, i.e., demands for change from within the ruling structure, rather than demands to change the ruling structure itself (Riedel 2011 and Lippman 2012, pps. 9-17).

The Al Saud have undertaken initiatives in order to close political gaps between themselves and the various competing political groups in Saudi Arabia, thus garnering support from both sides of the political spectrum. In this respect, the ruling family has perspicaciously tried to walk the political tightrope between conservative and reformist groups so as to maximize its collective soft power over all of Saudi society. While the family has traditionally courted the favor of conservative groups much more than reformists, still it would be erroneous to think that the family does not care about satisfying liberal elements in Saudi society, and that such a courtship has not produced important political results. After all, attending to the needs of a modern society is itself self-enforcing. This is a lesson a number of fallen regimes learned in the Arab Spring.<sup>14</sup> In fact, it has historically been the ruling family that has been the one to introduce modernizing elements into Saudi society and politics, often over the consternation of conservative groups. Indeed, it is a sign of the compelling force of modernity that liberal reforms would come in a system where conservative elements still dominate politics. Presently King Abdullah has shown a keen sensitivity to making changes so as to make Saudi Arabia fit better into the modern community of nations. He has made more such reforms in a short period than any other ruler in Saudi history. His creation of a National Dialogue, his human rights commissions, his fight against corruption, and his educational, legal, political, and social reforms have gone beyond the nominal institutions of political agency embodied in such things as the Consultative Council (*majlis shura*) system (i.e., political venues through which people can marshal a political voice to Saudi leaders) and have demonstrated a commitment to modernization in a more liberal direction. Moreover, there is much generational momentum in compounding this movement, as many of the King's grandsons are themselves products of modernity, and a number of their spouses have taken up social causes. Lippman (2012, p. 36) cites an extensive study on reform in the Kingdom undertaken by a group of experts on Saudi Arabia, and highlights their finding that Saudi Arabia is indeed moving toward a "liberalized autocracy" (Lippman 2012, pps. 23-36, 189; Riedel 2011, and Gause and Jones 2012).

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<sup>14</sup> There have been a number of popular provocations on political issues reminiscent of the Arab Spring process (i.e., networking and communication through modern media) that have gotten the attention of, and in some cases even responses from, the ruling family. In addition, political uprisings in Tahrir Square, Benghazi, and Dara were extensively televised on Al Jazeera (Lippman 2012, p. 35, and Riedel 2011, ).



With respect to religious prominence, consistent with its international soft power, being the capitol of Islam bestows on Saudi Arabia its greatest source of domestic soft power. The history of the Arabian Peninsula (especially at the earlier days of the emergence of Islam), the spread of Islam throughout the Peninsula and the surrounding regions, and the coming to the fore of Islam as a major world religion provides Saudi Arabia a replenishing source of domestic soft power. Perspicacious use of such soft power was even a key factor in governing the early Kingdom. For instance, Medina became the seat of the first government under control of Muslims. It ruled over a diverse population with differences in ethnic and tribal ancestry comprising various religious and belief systems including Muslims, pagans, Jews, and a small minority of Christians. The legitimacy of that government was not gained by the hegemony of a group over the others, but rather by a sense of camaraderie nurtured by a mix of political, economic and religious soft power strategies capable of bringing together factions of a society torn by internal conflicts and wars among the dominant tribes. Following a major peace accord, known as the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah with Quraysh (the Makkah tribe which was vehemently pursuing the eradication of Muslims), Muslim emissaries and ambassadors of good will were sent to tribal leaders and rulers in neighboring countries from Roman Cesar to the Persian Emperor to the leader of the Egyptian Coptic church. A number of early Muslims who took refuge with the Christian king of Abyssinia (Aksum) maintained and enhanced the diplomatic relationship with the Aksumite Empire (Ethiopia). Although some of the emissaries were killed or treated with hostility, the outcome of this soft power initiative helped in establishing a widely spread network of trading routes, a range of distinct allies, and it quelled hostilities against the followers of the new religion. It was not long before Makkah came under control of the Medina government with, again, resort to soft power initiatives of negotiation and reconciliation. Ultimately the Arabian Peninsula was unified under a central government responsible for the welfare and the defense of semi-independent political units. This model was pursued by King Abdul Aziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, through the use of smart power, wherein hard power was not applied unless absolutely necessary.

While Saudi Arabian society is fractured in disparate ways, there is a fundamental unifying force in Islam that cuts through all of the divisions. This “green cloak of Islam” has generated preponderant domestic political capital for the ruling regime (Lippman 2012, p. 13). A large proportion of Muslim scholars and followers of Islamic orthodoxy regard the Saudi religious leaders as the most authentic source of Islamic jurisprudence and religious doctrine. Frequently, this religious power has been intentionally marshaled to obtain specific goals, while at other times the desired outcomes have emanated from a less contrived and more spontaneous realization of this religious power. Domestically, this integration or synthesis of religion and political authority has been a most powerful political weapon for the regime. The integration of politics and Islamic law has lent great legitimacy to the ruling regime, as the objectives of the ruling regime have become perceived as synonymous with Islamic doctrine. In essence, the regime has come to be seen by many as conterminous with Islamic law itself, thus sanctifying state interests and objectives. Moreover, the union between politics and religion in Saudi Arabia is greater in the Kingdom relative to other nations where important religious leaders function independently of the state. In Saudi Arabia, religious authorities are employees of the state, hence there is a far greater connection between state and religion. The legitimacy of governance created by this synthesis of religion and authority has garnered much soft power over conservative and liberal power networks in Saudi society and politics. And among these networks, while many political outcomes themselves would seem deficient from a vantage point

of Western liberal democracy, the support for such outcomes averts the perception of a political gap in Saudi society (Lippman 2012 and Gause 2012).

In addition, much Saudi soft power is carried on the chariots of modern communications technology. The Kingdom has invested in a myriad of media sources, from television to newspapers. These chariots are principally active in Arab nations (thus enhancing the image of the Kingdom among Arabs and Muslims), but Saudi investment has also reached global media sources such as Fox News and Twitter. Indeed the Kingdom spends generously on commercials and advertisements in order to bolster its legitimacy as a role-model state. With the advent of satellite communications and the launching of Arabsat and Nilesat, there is no limit on the ability of Saudi Arabia to reach out to any spot on the globe and relay messages of interest, or broadcast informative pieces through multilingual TV, radio channels, websites, and social networks. Saudi privately-financed broadcasting companies operate satellite radio stations such as MBC FM (Gulf music), Panorama FM (contemporary Arabic hit music), ART Zikr (Quran recital and religious speeches), and ART Music. Al Arabiya, a Saudi-owned television channel, is rated among the top pan-Arab stations by Middle Eastern audiences. The channel is engaged in an aggressive soft campaign of public diplomacy, as it is part of concerted efforts to dominate the world of cable and satellite television media in the Arab world. Those satellite stations also reach Arab communities around the world and are carried by Dish network and Direct TV in the USA (Hammond 2007 and Pintak, 2006).

In sum, Saudi Arabia has amassed a significant amount of soft power, a fact little appreciated by the global public. It has access to many potential sources of such power both nationally and internationally with which to address its problems and attain its most important national objectives. The role of this soft power has heretofore been largely neglected or undervalued in relation to Saudi hard power. But while the Kingdom still has vigorous sources of hard power, its soft power will play a far greater role than most people perceive in promoting the national interest. In the remainder of this article, we will consider just how important these soft power sources will be for attending to Saudi Arabia's major problems and objectives both internationally and domestically.

### ***III. The Potential of Saudi Soft Power in Dealing with the Kingdom's Major Challenges***

#### ***International Problems and Objectives***

Saudi Arabia's most important international problems and objectives lie in security, peace and stability in the Middle East; as well as peace, stability, and favorable relations within their other geo-strategic circles of interest (among Muslim nations, Arab nations, with the US, and with the rest of the world). Saudi Arabia requires a good deal of soft power at the international level for its security, especially given the fact that it has historically kept its armed forces limited in favor of a strong National Guard. Additionally, oil revenues suffered a long period of decline following the 1970s (having once more climbed to those heights again in real prices only in recent years). Given that this oil money has historically been the greatest source of Saudi hard power (i.e., its strategic transfers both domestically and internationally have purchased a great deal of security both in the form of domestic and international support), the secular decline in real revenues has been of critical significance to the endowment of Saudi hard resources. In conjunction with these limitations in hard power, the Kingdom has found itself between a number of conflicting forces. And its security has to a large extent been influenced by the state of relations within these conflicting environments: between the West and the "rest" (i.e., Muslim world), between the U.S. and anti-American regimes in the Middle East and Muslim world, between hawks and doves within OPEC, between the producer and consumer nations in the oil market, in the middle of an international sectarian divide, between Israel and nations hostile to Israel, and between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements in the democratic uprisings of the Arab Spring. It is no wonder Saudi foreign policy has often bifurcated between a "big brother" style and a hands-off posture to preserve its role as an honest broker in mediating conflicts. Saudi fence walking has proved skillful and effective, but much of the success in staying on the fence has owed to a balance pole constructed out of soft power. Using hard power in these relations has been difficult because doing so has forced the Saudi's to choose a side. And when that has occurred, significant alienation arose on the opposing side. The Saudis have always been able to restore amicable relations with the parties they alienated. But this restoration has often required significant soft power precisely because Saudi hard power has been far too limited to invest in all of these dyadic scenarios in ways that maintained stability and preserved Saudi interests. The Saudi's are rich and materially powerful, but not enough to impose hard control over all of these conflicting environments. Moreover, aside from promoting side-taking, hard power has a tendency to ignite conflict because it constitutes the transfers of resources that can be used to marshal threat or force (i.e., such transfers tilt the material balance of power between competing nations and groups). Saudi Arabia's ability to effectively navigate the middle ground and keep both sides on various issues mollified stands as one of the Kingdom's most effective soft power resources. And in effectively using its soft power in this middle ground, it has for the most part been successful at keeping the peace in the Middle East (through soft balancing as well as hard balancing), keeping peace among Arab states, keeping peace among Muslim states, and being a platform for better relations with the West and the US. This is an especially crucial time to court US favor and support, as US policy toward the Middle East is in

flux. Indeed, the Saudi's could presently use their soft power to mold a more consistent policy that is closer to Saudi interests (Jones 2010 and Gause and Jones 2012).

Within the sectarian divide, the Kingdom's religious prominence as capitol of Islam has provided a focal point for accommodations and peaceful co-existence among conflicting groups and nations. This divide has been increasingly fueled by the Syrian conflict, which has intensified the sectarian rift. In its most immediate international sphere of interest, the GCC, the hard power of transfers have been overlaid with the soft power of a benevolent and sacred leader of both the Arab and Muslim cause.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly it is within this more intimate circle of Saudi geo-strategic operations that the strength of Saudi soft power is perhaps most visible. While the Saudi's have issued a good deal of material (hard) support to this Arab circle of nations, it is far short of the amount required to support the economies of these nations and assure their security. Much of the loyalty and cooperation that these nations demonstrate toward Saudi Arabia comes from the endearment and legitimacy it generates through its special cultural and religious position, as well as from its enlightened foreign policy in the region. We see a similar dynamic in the second (greater) circle of Saudi geo-strategic interest: the greater Muslim community. Saudi soft power has also manifested itself on both sides of the West/US/ Israel/OPEC versus the rest (Muslim nations) dyads of relations. While the "rest" tend to be tied to Saudi Arabia religiously and/or culturally, and hence are much influenced by Saudi soft power, still the Saudi's have cultivated enough good will among the West, Americans, oil consumers, as well as defenders of Israel to lay claim to a fairly desirable image on both sides of the battlefield, and thus making the Saudis one of the few nations that can influentially walk the tight-rope between these geo-strategic rivalries. Given the importance of all these sets of relations, and the Saudi's soft influence over their course, one could claim that the Saudi's are among the most important nations of the world with respect to global security (Dickinson 2012).

In contests that pitted the Saudi's squarely against a menacing opponent, hard power was no doubt a factor, but ultimately it was soft power that often proved the decisive weapon. Nasser's attempt to overthrow the Al Saud family in the 1950s and 60s, for example, was marshaled through a soft war that Egypt could not win: trying to undermine Saudi Arabia's religious influence through a countervailing invocation of pan-Arab nationalism. This initiative failed because the religious affinities to Saudi Arabia were too strong. The Al Saud counter-initiative to proclaim Islam as the foundation of regional governance proved stronger than Nasser's nationalist invocation. This led to the formation of the Islamic Conference Organization, which would go on to serve as an important venue for Saudi soft balancing. Furthermore, even on the pan-Arab contest, Saudi Arabia had a greater claim to the role of an Arab entrepot. Similarly, Saddam Hussein's attempts to target Saudi Arabia as a territorial prize

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<sup>15</sup> As noted, soft and hard power are often interlinked. Saudi Arabia has been the largest donor in the world since 1973 as measured by ODA/GNP. In addition, the nation has consistently issued the greatest proportion of Arab aid—70% in the decade 1995-2004. This aid has, within the various recipient circles, garnered significant soft power for the Kingdom (Villanger 2007).

founded. While it faced a strong deterrence effect from the US security umbrella, still the soft power of Saudi culture made that objective quite unsustainable, as popular reaction to such an invasion in the Arab and Muslim worlds would have significantly compromised Iraq's relations with those nations. In terms of the regional balance of power, the Saudi's reacted to both the rise of a menacing Iraq and a more confrontational Iran in the 1980s by soft balancing through the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This institution, like many others founded on Saudi initiative, was also consecrated in the legitimacy and appeal of Saudi leadership based on an identification of the Kingdom's special position in the Muslim and Arab worlds (Gause 2002 and *The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia* 2005).<sup>16</sup>

Iran has for some time made use of religious symbols to undermine Saudi legitimacy as the spokesperson for global Islam: it has targeted what Iran considered to be a disaffected Shia minority in the Kingdom in hopes of fomenting revolution or uprisings. In fact, the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be said to have taken the form of a cold proxy war within the sectarian politics of Muslim nations throughout the world. But here, even with the sectarian divide, Saudi cultural power has kept even Shias supercharged by external provocation relatively subdued and compliant. Furthermore, the Saudi's have skillfully reached out to different religious groups in other nations in order to shield themselves from the potential instability fomented by strong sectarian upheavals in foreign countries. Courting majority Sunni populations, or Shia minorities, or even the Muslim Brotherhood in foreign nations, all fall under an initiative of soft balancing in ideological struggles that have important security implications. In this respect, Saudi Arabia has done much to solve one of its most important problems: fallout from sectarianism in its geo-strategic circles of interest (Gause and Jones 2012).

Saudi soft power has also been, and will continue to be, of importance in addressing two other important international problems/objectives that bear on regional peace and political stability: stable political transformation in the wake of the Arab Spring and the regional balance of terror. Weapons of mass destruction will continue to be sources of potential instability in the Middle East. Israel has already built a significant arsenal, and Iran has been seen as a nation intent on developing nuclear weapons. Interestingly Saudi Arabia has reacted with greater alarm to the latter than the former. But Saudi soft power deriving from religion and Saudi leadership among its regional allies will continue to be effective forces against proliferation. From a purely religious standpoint, there has been much emphasis on the incompatibility between Islamic doctrine and the possession of weapons of great destructive power. Many clerics and non-clerics alike have underscored that the very pacifist ideological foundation of Islam itself (the word deriving from the Arabic "Salam," which means peace, purity, submission and obedience to God). Even the religious leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, came out strongly with a *fatwa* against nuclear weapons as *haram* (forbidden) under Islamic teachings. Iranian leaders have been

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<sup>16</sup> At times, the use of soft power for the purpose of shifting the balance of power in the region would take a more direct unilateral form, such as in the first Gulf War when King Fahd secured *fatwas* from important clerics that supported the use of Saudi territory as a springboard for the US war against Iraq (Gause 2002).

repeating this mantra continuously as a means of deflecting accusations that Iran is intent on building nuclear weapons. Such widespread beliefs could function as a strong impediment against building an arsenal of such weapons, especially a large arsenal. The Saudi's have embraced this philosophy, as their interests fall mainly in the area of developing nuclear power as an alternative energy source. And even though the Saudi's are concerned about Iranian possession of a bomb, still Iran has not announced that it would definitively arm itself. This preference for nuclear energy over arms, and the Saudi's consternation over proliferation both send an important message to its regional and non-regional associate states: that the commendable path is one which develops technology for peaceful purposes rather than for war ("Ahmadinejad..." 2012).

With respect to stable political transition among Arab Spring nations and potential prospects for political upheavals elsewhere, Saudi Arabian soft power promises to wield extensive influence. As much as the political upheavals in the Arab Spring were characterized by popular movements for democratization, they also exhibited strong elements of Islamic populism. After all, it was presidents and soldiers that fell in the Arab Spring, but no Arab monarchs. These latter nations did enjoy greater hard power (i.e., greater oil wealth with which to buy greater support), but some of them also had abundant political soft power (i.e., tended to have systems of governance that were more closely in sync with Islamic law and ideology, and dynastic lines that enjoyed a good deal of legitimacy as ruling families). So too did Saudi Arabia avoid the turmoil, partly because of its oil wealth, but also because of the political legitimacy generated by the Al Saud and their veneration of Islamic governance. Hence, the need for Islamic populism was undercut by the fact that these nations already conformed to the canons of such a political ideology. Given the rise of this Islamic populism, politics in these nations are destined to promote a congruence with Islamic religion and ideology for some time. With this greater Islamic political reification, Saudi Arabia's soft religious power should be all the greater within this constellation of nations. And this power will be augmented all the more by the fact that Saudi Arabia is the world's major Arab cultural entrepot (Yom 2012 and Hudson 1977).

### ***Domestic Problems and Objectives***

Internal political and social stability, and economy prosperity represent the Kingdom's principal domestic objectives. As noted, Saudi Arabia has enjoyed much hard power in their oil wealth. Yet while it has remained relatively wealthy relative to other nations in the region, it has hit on harder times in the 1980s and after, until the oil price boom of the last decade. And now the price of oil has hit a downward spiral at the writing of this paper. While some bravely quote the price at which the Saudi's can sustain an effective distributive state (often cited as over 100 dollars a barrel), one which can maintain stability, it is clear that the economy has struggled after the 1970s. Those, like Yom (2012), who predicate political stability in Middle Eastern monarchies based on oil revenues and careful manipulation of this oil wealth by clever monarchs, fail to explain the sustained political stability in the Kingdom when oil revenues were down (1980s and 90s) and when there was dissension in the royal family (and hence a crisis of

leadership) as in the 1960s between King Saud and Prince Faisal.<sup>17</sup> In such cases, even with difficulties of succession and oil wealth looming, the soft power based in religion and dynastic veneration of Saudi leadership promises to remain a compelling barrier to political instability in Saudi Arabia. While King Abdullah undertook selected transfers in the wake of the Arab Spring, they far from removed the lion's share of conditions in the Kingdom (e.g., unemployment and reformist movements) that led to upheavals in other nations. Indeed, the transfers helped, but an extremely valuable currency for the Al Saud was composed of strong perceptions of legitimacy based in soft political and religious power. In fact, King Abdullah and leading clerics concomitantly undertook a soft initiative in the media to underscore the link between the ruling family and the protectorate of a Muslim state, thus reifying the idea that political allegiance was tantamount to religious devotion. The same soft buffers that shielded the Saudi state from the shock waves of an Arab Spring, will also continue to work as a hedge against upheavals even when Saudi hard power declines. One especially crucial buffer, which will not only contribute to domestic stability, but also influence in its main geo-strategic circles of interest, promises to be its political congruence with the Muslim Brotherhood. The ties between the Saudis and the Brotherhood go well back, and were especially strong when Saudi Arabia supported and sheltered Brotherhood members in the 1950s when the organization went underground. The Brotherhood today has emerged as the single most important political organization in the Muslim world, controlling either a majority of the legislatures or comprising important opposition groups in the governments of a number of Muslim nations. There is natural conservative political commonality between the two: the desire for Islamic society, the belief that governance and law should be based on the Koran, and a Sunni religious base. But they also share some moderate qualities that would appeal to the reformers and moderate Muslims. The Brotherhood is important for enhancing the Saudi image in other nations, and in doing so brings in that many more animated supporters of the Kingdom (Jones 2010, Hudson 1977, Rubin 2010b, and Yom 2012).

Another potential challenge to political stability in the Kingdom is the transfer of power. This problem of succession inherently requires a political buttress of soft power to maintain stability in the face of a transition of authority, especially so if there develops controversies among the ruling family. King Abdullah has taken positive steps in this direction with the creation of the Allegiance Institution (AI), which contains the most important family members

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the oil boom of the 1970s itself created numerous problems that led to a crisis of the state both from Shiites and Sunnis. The former were upset that they were too often left off the distribution list of oil wealth, while the latter reacted to the grand projects and consumption as a corruption of traditional Islamic society (with the Sunni rebel occupation of the Grand Mosque in Makkah in 1979 serving as the most extreme manifestation of their vituperation). The ruling family did use hard power methods to send a message about subversive activities (through police action), but perhaps even more important was the soft campaign engineered in response to the rising social discontent. King Faud initiated a grand campaign to reinforce the legitimacy of the ruling family by underscoring the religious foundations of political authority. The initiative resoundingly reified the vision of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic state and society. Not only was there a rhetorical initiative that more vigorously associated the ruling regime with the practice and laws of Islam, but there was also robust public investment in creating Muslim institutions (Jones 2010, pps. 218-222).

and ultimately has authority over successors, and a process by which succession can take place in an orderly fashion. King Abdullah has drawn on religious soft power to sanctify the process by grounding it in Islamic law (i.e., linking it to the Koran and the tradition of the “Venerable Prophet”), and thus making it more acceptable to family members and conservative political groups. But on the more reformist side, the process enjoys the soft power of a checks-and – balance system among the power centers in the ruling family. The King can still name a successor, but the successor has to be approved by the AI. The AI process promises to garner soft power from differing ends of the political spectrum, and hence has the potential to help deliver a stable transition of power (Lippman 2012, pps 31,32 and Gause 2002).

Social stability will depend on the ability of the Saudi leaders to provide an environment that promotes harmonious co-existence among diverse groups in a society with many cleavages. This will mean a political and economic space that minimize gaps between broad-based popular desires and political-economic outcomes. Sectarianism presents itself as the most threatening cleavage. The fact that the modern Saudi state has successfully navigated its way throughout its history without major religious rifts is testament to the vigorous application of both hard and soft power. Oil money has provided the tools to maintain a great deal of harmony, but as noted above, the most important currency in maintaining a stable regime in the face of a fractious social structure proved to be the organizing powers of the general appeal to Islam, identity politics based on Arab culture, and the veneration of a ruling family. Specifically with respect to the Shia minority in the Kingdom, Saudi leaders have always tried to step gingerly around issues that might stir discontent within its ranks. While this trend of accommodation and sensitivity has characterized a historic style, more recently King Abdullah has raised the ante on creating religious bridges among the major sects in the Saudi Islamic community. Since 2003 the ruling family has taken vigorous steps toward quelling sectarian confrontation by pushing the idea of religious tolerance. It invited Shia representatives to the Saudi National Dialogue meetings and pushed to have Sunni clerics visit Shia communities. In 2008 the King sponsored religious tolerance conferences in Madrid and Makkah, and even invited the controversial and outspoken Iranian Shia political leader Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to Makkah. These political/religious initiatives have shown increasing manifestations in the greater Saudi society as we see a growing trend in media and movies that demonstrates religious reconciliation, with artistic portrayals of intra-Islamic unity becoming a more common theme (Sunni-Shia Strife, 2012, p. 67; Jones 2008; and Gause and Jones 2012).

This ability to quell sectarian controversies in Saudi society is a necessary condition for dealing with one of the Kingdom’s other major problems: that of terrorism. In that the two problems are inextricably linked, then the same arsenal of soft power that quells sectarian strife, also becomes the key weapon against terrorism. The resilience of the regime to terrorist activity has been apparent in the war against al-Qaeda from 2003 to 2006. While the Saudi population sympathized with the idea of embracing a traditional vision of a Muslim state, they were abhorred by terrorist targets and the means used. This vituperation was reinforced by the soft campaign which the rulers waged against the organization. In a vigorous media initiative, the Saudi government was able to undermine the terrorist cause by linking their acts to religious and cultural taboos. The ruling family underscored the basic principles of Islam, which detest violence, and they promoted a vision of the rebellion as a challenge to a ruling family that upheld Muslim law and governance, thus linking the targeting of the ruling family as a war against



Islam itself. While much hard power (police action) was used in rooting out suspected terrorists, the ultimate victory of the regime was won on the softer battleground of ideas. No such an insurgency could persist without a favorable host society. And the greater legitimacy of the regime, founded on religious and political principles, created a somewhat toxic refuge for such terrorist activities. A compelling manifestation of the regime's victory in the soft war was evident in the fact that of the 26 proclaimed terrorists on the most wanted list, 20 were apprehended within 18 months of the first bombings, and the other 6 fled the country. Saudi Colonel Alshehri's (2010) elaborate study of the optimal means of fighting terrorism in the Kingdom resoundingly underscores the critical role of soft power as a sustainable solution to the problem. The effectiveness of soft war against terrorism in the Kingdom has led Alshehri to proclaim the Saudi case as a role model for nations fighting domestic insurgencies (Alshehri 2010; Lippman 2012, pps. 186-189; and Hegghammer 2010).

Social stability in Saudi Arabia will also be strongly dependent on the ability of the regime to provide prosperity and economic opportunities to the society at large, a lesson not lost on the regimes that fell in the wake of the Arab Spring. While political agency was a driving force of the Spring, the ignition mechanism and persistent factor sustaining the Spring was the state of the economies in those nations. The Saudi economy is generally in a better state than those of the nations engulfed by the Arab Spring. But like many oil economies, the Saudi's have been facing the many challenges common to resource economies. The ruling regime is continuing an initiative that has sought economic diversification, especially with respect to developing a knowledge economy. So far the results have been promising. The data over the past decade have shown a robust movement toward a more diversified industrial economy largely led by the knowledge sector. The soft power of the ruling regime will be instrumental in having the Saudi population buy into the necessary conditions for such an economic transformation (economic industrialization and the creation of a technology society), because it will be challenging to integrate them into a conservative religious lifestyle. In the modern era the Al Saud have been very successful in engineering such an interface between economic modernity and a traditional society (Gallarotti and Al-Filali forthcoming).

The Saudi leaders will have to muster all of the soft power they can in the face of the present and future economic trends, especially given the potential decline of their most important hard power resource: oil revenues. No doubt the Saudi leaders of this and future generations will spend hundreds of billions of dollars in hopes of creating a more complex-industrial economy, and this will take time. But outside of the economic glory days of the prosperous distributive state in the 1970s, the Saudi economy has always faced difficult conditions in differing degrees. In fact, economic difficulties have long plagued the entire Arab Spring region. Some nations, such as Saudi Arabia and the other Arab monarchies of the Gulf, were able to weather the storms, largely from the use of hard power deriving from oil revenues, but a good deal of soft power was also expended in riding out the most difficult times. The soft power of Saudi Arabia has been the one consistent and powerful counter-weight to social instability in difficult political and economic times: the ruling family has a centuries-long history of successfully navigating through crises of the state, so much so that Riedel (2011, p. 166) calls them "the come-back kids." While the Kingdom has much in common with nations that were transformed by the Arab Spring, it is also endowed with far more soft power than the regimes that fell in the face the popular movements. This soft power promises to be the Al Saud's principal asset in a future of

uncertainty regarding the state of oil revenues and regional political turmoil (Riedel 2011, Gause and Jones 2012, Lippman 2012, Jones 2010, and “Saudi Economy” 2012).

Indeed, the Kingdom is faced with many domestic challenges. This article does not propose to be dismissive or cavalier about the political, social and cultural tensions, and sentiments for reform, that confront the ruling regime. As with many nations, Saudi Arabia confronts strong elements of revisionism that are pervasive throughout its various social strata. The ruling regime must continue to use all of its sources of power in its arsenal: its smart or cosmopolitan power (i.e., its hard oil wealth and soft power) to address the demands that arise from such elements in search of sustainable solutions. Reforms will especially require robust applications of both hard and soft power. On the soft power side, Saudi history has shown that indeed the ruling family is quite capable of modernizing a society with strongly conservative ideology. Their legitimacy has proved crucial in introducing progressive elements in Saudi society throughout the modern period. These same sources of power, along with hard power of oil wealth, will be required to further consolidate and expand the reforms that much of Saudi society demands.

#### ***IV. Conclusions***

Saudi Arabia stands as an enigma in the global public eye. Blinded by the high price of oil, the last several generations of foreign observers have seen the Kingdom as a global behemoth that has relied almost exclusively on hard power resources emanating from its resource wealth to achieve its vital goals. Indeed oil wealth has comprised one of the Kingdom’s two principal pillars of smart or cosmopolitan power. But the vision of a nation with a singular source of power has never materialized in reality, even at the height of its oil earnings in the 1970s. The true glory days of oil were relatively brief, and the Saudi military was never a prodigious force. Hence the nation’s hard power was too often exaggerated. And yet, even in times when hard power was limited, the Kingdom was able to navigate difficult waters domestically, regionally, and globally to preserve a strong and stable state and society. Beset by menacing outside forces, caught in between opposing factions in international disputes, and also beset domestically by a fractured society, the Kingdom ultimately found ways to persevere. While oil wealth has been identified as the preponderant source of this resilience, much of this perseverance owes to a set of assets many observers undervalued or even failed to perceive altogether: Saudi Arabia’s soft power. Ironically, in this liberal age, many would see a monarchy that takes refuge in a vision of a traditional society as the anti-thesis of soft power. Oddly enough, what has been widely perceived as a weakness has ended up in fact becoming one of the regime’s greatest strengths. Indeed, oil wealth gave Saudi Arabia one of its most prodigious weapons in confronting its many international and domestic challenges, but it has been its soft power that has quietly and modestly formed the undercurrents that have guided Saudi Arabia through the treacherous waters in the modern period. With respect to the political transformation in the region, Saudi Arabia’s stability throughout the Arab Spring generates one of the most important implications of this paper. Why were some nations spared the shock waves of the Spring while other were not? In the Saudi case, oil wealth was a factor, but its domestic soft power was even more important.

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