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The Transformation of Saudi Arabia's Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Saudi Arabia wields a significant influence in the international arena. As the wealthiest Middle Eastern state and the birthplace of Islam, it holds a prominent position in the Middle East and the Muslim world. Internationally, Saudi Arabia is a major contributor to organizations such as the Global Fund and the World Health Organization, in addition to being the largest oil exporter. However, its soft power and public diplomacy remain underexplored. This lack arises from two reasons. First, the Saudi government has historically prioritized traditional diplomacy. Second, Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy is often framed as a form of "sharp power," primarily used to whitewash its image. This article aims to address this gap by highlighting the evolution of Saudi public diplomacy, providing context and guidance for further exploration of the Saudi case.


Saudi Arabia's public diplomacy can be divided into two periods — before and after 2016 — and three dimensions: regional, Islamic, and international. Before 2016, Saudi Arabia showed

limited interest in communicating with foreign publics. The Middle East, however, is where the Saudi public diplomacy has been most active, using its media outlets to communicate with other Arabs. Within the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia relied on its advantage as the host of the holiest sites in Islam and its connection with the Muslim publics was often done through the religious sector with the aim of spreading Islam. In the West, the country was often depicted as an extremely conservative, repressive or wealthy state.

Saudi Arabia began practicing public diplomacy through media outlets out of necessity to convey its own narrative to neighboring Arab publics in response to regional threats. In 1978, it initiated its media empire by launching the pan-Arab newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, shortly after acquiring a majority interest in Aramco. The oil revenues enabled the Saudi government to build different media outlets to protect its security interests. However, Saudi Arabia built its media presence at a slow pace despite having significant financial resources. In 1991, the first TV channel from the Middle East Broadcasting Group (MBC) was launched, becoming the most popular in the Arab world to this day. In 2003, Al-Arabiya was launched to rival the Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera. However, according to Waleed Al-Ibrahim, the CEO of MBC, King Abdullah, the late Saudi king, initially wanted the TV channel to be a pan-Arab outlet funded by various Arab states, aiming to act as a counterbalance to Al-Jazeera rather than a Saudi mouthpiece. The pan-Arab approach by the Saudi government illustrates its preference for traditional diplomacy, with public diplomacy mainly used to facilitate cooperation with Arab states. The Saudi public diplomacy is also linked to security concerns. MBC was launched soon after the Gulf War and Al-Arabiya in the aftermath of 9/11 and just days before the invasion of Iraq.

In the Muslim world, the Saudi public diplomacy was mainly driven by Islamic values. The conservative segment of Saudi society was predominantly involved in advocating for and implementing initiatives to connect with the Muslim publics. Because Islam, like other faiths, encourages concealed alms-giving, promoting the state's initiatives was not a priority for those who conducted them. The stated goals for the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs used to emphasize serving Islam and Muslims. These goals include but are not limited to printing the Quran, sponsoring Islamic centers, publishing and translating materials that serve Islam, supporting Muslims, and utilizing media to showcase the Kingdom's role. Public diplomacy and support for the Saudi foreign policy were not central. As a result, many Muslims who benefit from such projects would not know who is behind them. It is not a communication failure if we understand that the religious sector's main focus was to serve Islam, and the state preferred formal diplomacy and cooperation with Muslim countries through organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Muslim World League.

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Internationally, Saudi Arabia's preference for traditional diplomacy is evident in the way it communicates its oil policies. Despite the overwhelmingly negative coverage  of the Saudi oil policy in Western media, the government seldom explains its decisions to the foreign publics. It prefers to work directly with other governments, primarily through OPEC. When a Saudi official is seen in the media addressing the foreign publics, it is usually an attempt to contain a crisis. The Russia-Ukraine war is the latest example. Western media portrayed

Saudi Arabia as a supporter of the Russian aggression due to its reduction in oil production. Therefore, Saudi officials began conducting interviews to explain that the decision was non-political and aimed at stabilizing the market rather than increasing prices.

The announcement of Vision 2030, which seeks to diversify the Saudi economy, marks a transformative point in the country's public diplomacy. Saudi Arabia established the Public Diplomacy Agency within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2019, the country allowed foreign tourists for the first time. It has moved to become a regional entertainment hub by hosting a plethora of sports, entertainment and cultural events. Towards Muslims, the country began reviving Islamic and historical sites to enrich the experience of Muslim pilgrims and present the Saudi culture. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs adjusted its aims to include enhancing the Saudi image as a main goal. Internationally, Saudi Arabia attracted foreign publics through its sports sector. It purchased the British football club Newcastle United and has hosted multiple events. In addition, the Public Investment Fund boosted the Saudi Pro League by attracting big-name players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar Jr. The country is also set to host the FIFA World Cup 2034.

Saudi Arabia has undergone a radical change that includes its public diplomacy approach. As the country opens its borders to the world, public diplomacy serves its economic and security interests. In his latest interview, the Saudi Crown Prince said that he does not worry about the term "sportswashing." For him, the government's aim is to boost the economy, not to whitewash the country's human rights record. However, for us, it is vital to consider the historical and current contexts to understand the Saudi public diplomacy.
