



Article Type: Research paper

Analysis of the Neopatrimonialism role in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia

Mohammadreza Mohammadi¹, *Kayhan Barzegar², Nafiseh al-Sadat Qaderi³

1. Ph.D student of International Relations, Faculty of Law, Political Science and Theology, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Unit, Tehran, Iran
2. Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Law, Theology and Political Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Unit, Tehran, Iran
3. Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Law, Theology and Political Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Unit, Tehran, Iran

Article Info.

Received: 30/08/2023

Accepted: 31/12/2023

Available Online: 05/03/2024



Copyright © The Authors

Publisher: Iranian Association of Geopolitics

Abstract

Foreign policy serves as the guiding compass for countries within the intricate international arena and stands as one of the most critical functions of political systems. The involvement of multiple actors, escalating societal divisions, diverse perceptions of friendly, rival, and adversarial entities, structural ambiguities in international politics, historical legacies, political cultures, internal governance structures-all contribute to the intricacy of formulating and implementing a country's foreign policy. Consequently, achieving successful foreign policy implementation necessitates building consensus among a broad spectrum of domestic actors and elites, all within the context of an inherently ambiguous global environment.

One of the most critical subjects in the study of countries' foreign policy is the

■ ■
Kayhan Barzegar, Ph.D.

Address: Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Law, Theology and Political Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Unit, Tehran, Iran

E-mail: kbarzegar@hotmail.com

How to Site:

Mohammadi, Mohammadreza and Barzegar, Kayhan and Qadri, Nafiseh al-Sadat. (2024). Analysis of the Neopatrimonialism role in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, 5(4), 25-28.

structure, influencing variables, and decision-making processes. Economic development, as well as the political culture of the actors, which is mostly rooted in their history, affects the way and influence on foreign policy. Hereditary rule or patrimonialism is a term coined by the German sociologist Max Weber. Patrimony comes from the Latin word “pater,” meaning father, and it refers to inherited property or assets passed down from fathers or ancestors.

On the other hand, an issue that has received less attention in Iran is the position and internal structures shaping foreign policy decision-making processes in Saudi Arabia. In this regard, the current research states that foreign policy decisions in the countries of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, with Saudi Arabia at the head, revolve around three concentrated circles.

The first circle exclusively includes the head of state, main members of the royal families, close relatives, and political elites. This group encompasses senior positions such as the foreign minister and advisors to the head of state. Neopatrimonialism plays a direct role in shaping the foreign policy decision-making body of the Cooperation Council, particularly concerning the Persian Gulf.

The second group comprises other members of the executive branch, specifically the Council of Ministers. It involves bureaucrats responsible for policy design and implementation. Standard decisions typically follow hierarchical principles, while during crises, the inner circle or the head of government takes charge.

Influences from outside government institutions on foreign policy design are limited. Businessmen and owners of commercial interests, who wield significant influence in foreign policy in some countries, have restricted access to decision-makers. Other institutions of society have limited influence on the design of foreign policy. However, the role of domestic politics over foreign policy in the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council cannot be generally ignored. In the upcoming article, the focus is on unit-level variables, particularly decision-makers' comprehension of the internal and external environment. In essence, various internal factors of the system (independent variables) influence decision-makers' understanding - namely, human factors - shaping foreign policy as a dependent variable. This view effectively helps to explain the formation of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The present study believes that the lack of recognition of the political-historical culture of Saudi Arabia has become one of the major challenges

for the foreign policy apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Iran when dealing with the regional and international approaches of this country.

The central question of this article is about finding the roots of the formation of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and the main internal factors influencing it. Previous studies on this topic have often not focused on the decision-making processes within this country. Examining the internal structure of one of the important governments in the region, namely Saudi Arabia, provides a more realistic picture of the country's foreign policy approaches. In this study, to enhance precision and narrow down the research focus, only the structure of power transfer in this country will be discussed in the context of neo-patrimonialism, and the impact of the succession processes on Saudi policy-making will be investigated.

Accordingly, with the assumption that the adoption of different approaches in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is based on the element of the king as the main core of power from the beginning of its formation, it answers the question: What is neopatrimonialism and its impact on the foreign policy of this country? The findings of the research indicate that the reason for adopting different approaches in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is related to the power structure in this country, the concepts of identity, succession structure, and political culture, which have been based on the element of the king as the primary core of power since its inception. The behavior of the government in the foreign sphere has always been a function of the status and conditions of the king's power in the political system, succession processes in this country, and its subordinate systems. The research also shows that while the foreign policymakers of the previous generation of Saudi Arabia considered caution, conservatism, and patience important in foreign policy, the transfer of power in the form of neo-patrimonialism to the new generation of Saudi political elites has led to new and aggressive policies.

Saudi Arabia feels insecure and lacks stability in all internal influencing components. At least until King Salman came to power in 2015, Riyadh had always adopted a conservative foreign policy. However, the increase in threats from Riyadh's point of view prompted Saudi Arabia's foreign policy to abandon conservatism and embrace a more assertive approach in regional affairs. The seizure of power by Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince, further intensified the

country's foreign policy aggressiveness. Saudi Arabia's involvement in the war in Yemen, interference in the Syrian crisis, and closer ties with China are all indicative of shifts in Saudi foreign policy positions. . Of course, at the same time as the last days of 2021 passed, it seemed that Mohammed bin Salman had a serious will to reverse the trend of hostile and aggressive policies of Saudi Arabia and instead, take a conciliatory process based on several regional initiatives. This issue also serves as an example of a central individual in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, which is affected by the structure of neo-patrimonialism in this country. In fact, with a little precision, it can be seen that Alvin Toffler's theory of power displacement and the three characteristics of power—money, and knowledge—can be appropriately matched with the change of the Ahadi regime in Saudi Arabia.

In this way, Muhammad bin Salman emerged as the first theoretician of the Yemen war, a key figure during the Qatar crisis, and the central tension creator in the Riyadh-Tehran political conflicts. He is also considered one of the most significant supporters of addressing the Syria and Iraq crises, even before assuming the Ahadi governorship.

On the other hand, if we examine Muhammad bin Salman's economic plans using financial tools, we observe that Saudi Arabia's Economic Development Document 2030 holds a prominent place among his political measures. As power transitions from traditional monarchs to the young generation symbolized by Mohammed bin Salman, pragmatism within Saudi Arabia has broadened and become more inclusive over the past one or two years. Within this framework, Saudi Arabia's new foreign policy aims to strike a balance and diversify sources of political and economic support.

It is very important to develop a relationship with China, a country that has been a pioneer in prioritizing economic development in the developing world. Over the past five decades, China has successfully lifted its people out of poverty and hunger, positioning itself on the brink of becoming the world's largest economy. Strengthening relations with China, which both imports oil and provides capital and technology, can indeed play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of this region.

Key words: Analysis, Neopatrimonialism, Foreign Policy, Saudi Arabia.