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The evolution of Saudi Arabia's soft power in the era of Mohammed bin Salman

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Abstract

This research has analyzed the changes and developments in the soft power of Saudi Arabia since the inauguration of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince. Due to its strategic position in the West Asian region and its special position in the Islamic world and the Arab world, Saudi Arabia is always considered one of the countries that have great importance in the above region. The location of the main sacred and respected places of Muslims in Mecca and Medina made this country the destination and host of millions of Muslim travelers every year, and apart from generating income for Riyadh, it increased the spiritual status of Saudi Arabia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia among Muslim communities. As long as this country assumes the role of leadership in the Islamic world. On the other hand, benefiting from huge oil resources, production, export and control of its global market has made Saudi Arabia, in addi-

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tion to earning high income, exert influence and pressure at the regional and international level in sensitive and critical situations. Also, after the so-called Arab revolutions in the last decade and the decline of the power of some countries in the region, Riyadh tried to increase its regional power and role.

But what was noticed in this research is why and how the soft power of Saudi Arabia changes in the new era of governance. The method of this research is explanatory and using Joseph Nye's concept of soft power and its method of data collection is also library and internet, and it tried to identify the main components of Saudi Arabia's interest in improving its soft power status in the region and the world by examining the available sources and evidence. pay attention to Although valuable researches have been written in relation to the soft power of Saudi Arabia or the competition in this field with neighboring countries, but in relation to the evolution of the soft power of this country in the period of generational transition and new governance, no similar or similar work has been published. Is. The political elites of this country are trying to develop their country's position in various political, military, cultural, tourism, sports, etc. dimensions until the specified time by setting the vision and development horizon of 2030, until it becomes the first power in the West Asian region and To become one of the world's first-class powers in many fields. For this reason, the young Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, with the agenda he presented, in addition to upgrading the hardware power of his country, is trying to achieve the goals and horizons of development by exerting influence and through soft power. Among the tools used in this field, we can mention the components of economy, foreign policy, cultural and media diplomacy, and tourism and sports. To the extent that many investments have been made in these areas.

In the first stage, this country is trying to diversify its economy by creating infrastructure, entertainment and tourism centers, launching production lines, attracting well-known sports figures and investing in this field, etc. Provide Saudi Arabia as a satisfactory destination and in this way get rid of dependence on oil income. On the other hand, despite signing contracts with leading figures in various fields, including sports, this country, with its effective communication in the field of foreign policy with countries and governmental and non-governmental actors in the region and the world, is trying to remove the negative view that was previously seen in the fields of human rights and freedoms. reduce civil and political interference and take steps towards justifying its image. All in all, in the new period of governance, the Saudi Kingdom is trying to become a leading country in many areas by changing from the current situation with the extensive changes and transformations that it brought about in the domestic

and foreign fields of its politics. Therefore, one of the best ways to reach such a horizon is the use of soft power in different aspects of foreign policy.

In line with the soft power of Saudi Arabia that was mentioned, there are also challenges and damages that are noteworthy. Although many efforts have been made during the reign of Mohammed bin Salman to improve the challenges and damages and some revisions have also occurred, Saudi Arabia still faces significant weaknesses in this area. The lack of social and political freedoms and the structural confrontation with protest views and actions in Saudi Arabia have caused many international organizations and human rights institutions to object to this. In this regard, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist in the Saudi consulate in Turkey, can be mentioned, which had formed many reactions. Therefore, the lack of civil liberties in Saudi Arabia is one of the most important challenges facing the government. Although in recent years, the Al Saud government has tried to rebuild its lost credibility in international forums by injecting money into various areas, including the film industry and social freedoms, the closed cultural and social space is still one of the main challenges in the country. The war in Yemen, the killing of civilians and the destruction of infrastructure by Saudi Arabia and the Saudi-Arabian coalition, and other regional adventures, including the boycott of Qatar in 2017, are another issue that has caused Saudi Arabia a lot of damage in the field of soft power. However, Mohammed bin Salman, understanding regional and international realities, has significantly adjusted his aggressive approach in order to achieve Saudi Arabia's 2030 development goals and also to gain greater legitimacy in the Arab and Islamic worlds. To the extent that this year and during the Gaza-Israel war that began on October 7, 2023, he did not participate in the US-UK coalition against the events in the Red Sea and the operations against the Houthi militias in Yemen. The third challenge facing Saudi Arabia is the issue of normalizing relations with Israel in line with the Abraham Accords. Riyadh's close relations with the United States, maintaining regional peace and stability, and connecting with all major regional and global players to achieve the goals of Vision 2030 are incentives for Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with Israel. However, as a country striving to play a leadership role in the Islamic and Arab worlds, it cannot easily implement normalization of relations. Because it will face a lot of criticism from its own society and the Arab and Islamic community, which will weaken Saudi Arabia's soft power. Regarding Vision 2030, although it was a bold plan by Mohammed bin Salman, it may challenge decades of political stability because this plan is aimed at gradually reducing subsidies and increasing employment and investment independent of the state, which will lead to

the formation of a new capitalist class that is less dependent on the state. The above issue strengthens the possibility of demand for political reforms; Especially if the economic transition has been more difficult than expected, and also the connection between the succession issue and political, social, and economic stability in Saudi Arabia is an important issue that may also affect national security and foreign policy.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, soft power, Mohammed bin Salman, foreign policy, sports.