

MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN AND HIS FOREIGN POLICY: Shifting Tendencies in his Quest for Legitimacy

FINAL DEGREE PROJECT



Mireia Fonseca Claparols / NIU 764279

Supervisor: Dr. Blanca Camps-Febrer

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ABSTRACT

The unexpected irruption of the young Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) into the highest levels of the Saudi political arena has been accompanied by his decision to distance his regime from the two traditional pillars of the Al-Saud rule: Wahhabism and royal family consensus. This has shaken the foundations of Saudi power dynamics, forcing MBS to find alternative sources of legitimacy. Departing from this idea, this research paper aims to assess to what extent Foreign Policy has been one of the tools used in his personal quest for legitimacy. Through the analysis of the main decisions taken since his rise to power, two divergent tendencies have been identified, shifting from an assertive approach and the promotion of a strong and decisive leadership, towards the prioritization of regional stability. The assassination of the Saudi dissident, Jamal Khashoggi, in 2018 has been established as the turning point for such shift, triggering changes in the Kingdom's historical alliances as well. The Western condemnation of the events opened the door for China to pursue a closer political partnership with the Gulf country, which is now in tension with the renewed Western interest to rekindle relations after the energy repercussions derived from the Ukrainian War and the increasing rivalry between the US and China.

Keywords: MBS, foreign policy, legitimacy, leadership style, assertiveness, regional stability

*Prestige lasts at best four generations in one lineage.
It comes into being and decays inevitably.*

Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah

INDEX

1.Introduction	4
1.1.Structure of the research	4
1.2.Methodology and limitations of the research.....	5
1.3.Acknowledgements	6
2.Brief Literature Review	7
2.1.Historical legitimacy sources of the Al-Saud.....	7
2.2.MBS and his rise to power	8
2.3.Foreign Policy under the rule of MBS	9
3.Theoretical approach: Foreign Policy Analysis	11
4.Study of MBS and his Foreign Policy	13
4.1.Profile of Mohammed bin Salman and his rise to power.....	13
4.1.1.Early years of Mohammed bin Salman	13
4.1.2.Unprecedented rise to power of the young prince.....	14
4.2. Factors affecting the articulation of MBS’ Foreign Policy.....	16
4.2.1.Domestic Factors: Wahhabism and Royal Family Consensus	16
4.2.1.International Factors: regional role and historical alliances.....	18
4.3.Assessment of the impact of MBS’ personality in his FPDM	19
4.3.1.Is the figure of MBS relevant in FPDM?	19
4.3.2.What type of ‘predominant leader’ is MBS?.....	21
4.4.Analysis of his main Foreign Policy decisions	23
4.4.1.New Saudi FP approach: assertive policy-making (2015-2020).....	23
4.4.2.Shifting tendencies: towards a more strategic approach? (2021-2023)	26
4.5. Key Takeaways from the analysis	28
5.Concluding Remarks.....	31
6.Annex	33
Annex I: Timeline of MBS’ Rise to Power	33
Annex II: Classification of leadership styles	34
Annex III: Table analyzing FP decisions (2015-2020)	35
Annex IV: Attendance list Future Investment Summit 2018	38
Annex V: Table analyzing FP decisions (2021-2023).....	39
Annex VI: Non-exhaustive list of official visits of MBS.....	41
7.Bibliography.....	42

INTRODUCTION

Until 2015, the name of Mohammed bin Salman, popularly known as MBS, was largely unknown in the West, and even within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, implied limited recognition. This began to change with the accession of his father, Salman bin Abdulaziz, to the Saudi throne, which was followed by the appointment of MBS as Defense Minister. From that moment on, the rise to power of the young prince would adopt an accelerated pace, unprecedented in the entire history of the Kingdom.

In 2017, he had already managed to become the youngest Crown Prince ever appointed, gathering a precedent of largely assertive foreign policy decisions that greatly diverged from the traditional Saudi approach. Such tendency reached its zenith in October of 2018, when reports began to come out in Turkish media claiming that the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi¹, had disappeared after visiting the Kingdom's consulate in Istanbul (Daily Sabah, 2018). The confirmation of the brutal assassination of Khashoggi inside the diplomatic building heightened the already growing interest in the figure of a man, that was considered to be, by then, the *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia.

His progressive distancing from the traditional pillars of the Al-Saud rule, Wahhabism and royal family consensus, throughout his rise to power have created the need to find alternative sources of legitimacy. Considering this, this project aims to assess to what extent his foreign policy has been shaped by this personal quest for legitimacy. Given the global agency of Saudi Arabia and potential repercussions of its actions due to its substantial control of the oil market and its role as a major regional power, the possible consequences derived from a change in the country's approach to foreign policy can greatly impact both regional and international dynamics.

1.1. Structure of the research

This paper is structured into four different sections. The first one includes a brief review of the available literature about Saudi Arabia, its foreign policy and the rise of Mohammed bin Salman. This is continued with the provision of the analytical framework used for the research of the project, based on Foreign Policy Analysis tenets. The third section consists of the analytical body, which is at its turn, separated into five different sub-sections that attempt to build on each other: (1) a profile

¹ Jamal Khashoggi was a Saudi journalist considered a dissident by the regime of MBS due to his critical statements of the Saudi government, and left the Kingdom in 2017 to live in the US. He was assassinated in 2018 inside the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul.

of the figure of MBS, (2) the domestic and international factors affecting the articulation of his foreign policy, (3) an assessment of the impact of MBS' personality into foreign policy decision-making, (4) an analysis of the main foreign policy decisions, and (5) the gathering of the main results derived from the analysis. Lastly, some final remarks regarding the results of the FDP and its further implications at the global level can be found on the fifth section.

1.2. Methodology and limitations of the research

This paper is based on the analysis of qualitative data extracted mainly from sources available in the internet. The use of secondary sources such as books, biographical accounts, and academic articles has been key to gather the necessary background information about MBS' early life, his rise to power, and the main policies pursued during his rule. This has been complemented with the analysis of diverse primary sources. Despite the limited knowledge of Arabic, which has restricted the use of non-translated original sources, the English versions of official statements, press releases, and official royal decrees published by the Saudi government, either directly through their official webpage or Saudi press channels, have been generally accessible.

In order to analyze the determining factors behind the foreign policy decisions taken by MBS, a table listing the main foreign policy decisions taken since his appointment as Defense Minister in 2015 has been created, with two different entries: the potential gains derived from that action and the potential losses, both at the external and internal level. The criteria used for the choice of the selected decisions has been the inclusion of tangible and specific decisions that have had a considerable impact at the regional or international level. This has allowed the observance of inclinations towards certain kind of decisions and shifting tendencies in such propensities, an observation that has led to the division of the fourth point into two different subsections. Some scenarios that could have been considered as relevant for the object of the paper, such as the role played by Saudi Arabia during the Abraham Accords², have not been included due to their indefinite and unofficial character

It is also important to on one hand, acknowledge the positioning of the author as a Western researcher with no field experience in the Middle East region, and on the other, keep in mind that this paper is centered on the analysis of foreign policy at the individual level. This decision has been made based on a perceived insufficiency in the previous research consulted, and the belief in the

² The Abraham Accords are a set of normalization agreements brokered by the US between Arab countries and Israel in 2020 and 2021.

relevance of the role played by Mohammed bin Salman. However, that is not to say that the other levels of analysis are not relevant to understand the reality studied, acknowledging that this paper should be complemented with further research tackling more in depth state and international level factors.

1.3. Acknowledgements

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BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

The appointment of MBS as Crown Prince in June of 2017, together with his following restructuring of the power base and ambitious reforms pursued, took many by surprise, defying the historically established order of royal succession according to agnatic seniority³ and the traditional pillars of the Al-Saud family rule (Hope & Scheck, 2020). Such a stark alteration of the conventional order in a conservative country like Saudi Arabia can undermine MBS's legitimacy as the future king (Al-Rasheed, 2020). This section aims to provide a brief overview of the available literature regarding the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its foreign policy, going all the way back to its foundation and ending with the foreign policy under the rule of MBS.

2.1. Historical legitimacy sources of the Al-Saud

The agreement reached between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab in 1744 set the grounds for a long-lasting dynastic alliance and power-sharing arrangement between the Al-Saud and the Al-Shaikh families (Kéchichian, 2019a). The historical relationship between the Saudi royal family and the Wahhabi tradition has been the object of study for many: after efforts towards conceptualizing the ideological tenets of this Sunni movement (Crawford, 2014; Davis, 2018; DeLong-Bas, 2008; Nahouza et al., 2018), special interest has been placed on the study of the religious legitimacy it has given to the political rule of the Al-Saud (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Commins, 2009; Nevo, 1998; Weston, 1987), and the role it has played in the building of a national Saudi identity (Ayoob & Kosebalaban, 2009; Nevo, 1998; Weston, 1987). The events that have taken place during these past years have brought several authors to write about the changing nature of this relationship (Alamer, 2022; Hassan, 2022; Hoffman, 2019; Lacroix & Holoch, 2011). Some have even gone as far as to use the term 'post-Wahhabi era' to refer to these new circumstances (Lacroix, 2005; Smith, 2022).

A second upholding pillar of the hegemonic rule of the Al-Saud has been the careful balance between the different factions within the royal family throughout these decades (Samore, 1979). While the intricacies of royal factionalism have remained rather murky for a long time (Hubbard, 2020), historical accounts of the family lineage help shed some light on it (Holden & Johns, 1982;

³ Agnatic seniority refers to a patrilineal principle of succession in which the monarch's younger brother has preference over the monarch's sons. Therefore, the monarch's offspring succeed only once the males of the elder generation have been exhausted.

Lees, 1980). The Sudairi line⁴ has been the family grouping that has received the greatest attention due to their substantial political influence throughout Saudi history, as well as the analysis of the various efforts of other groups at rearranging the balance of power within the family (Bray & Darlow, 2015; Dhanani, 1982; Raphaeli, 2003; Stenslie, 2011; Taheri, 2012). Even though several ‘coup’ attempts have been documented (Al-Rasheed, 2018; Bsheer, 2018, 2020; Teitelbaum, 2008), they have never gone “beyond conspirational gatherings and murmurs of revolution” (Taheri, 2012, p. 140).

The succession procedure, which plays a key role in royal dynamics, has evolved throughout the years: from the deliberation amongst family conclaves to decide the future monarch (Taheri, 2012), to Fahd’s change of system in 1992 vesting all the deciding power on the monarch alone (Henderson, 1994), to Abdullah’s creation of the Allegiance Council⁵ in 2006 (Henderson, 2009; IISS, 2000). Throughout all these different systems, extensive debates theorizing about how the next succession will look like have been recurrent (Henderson, 2009; Mouline, 2009; Stenslie, 2014, 2019).

2.2. MBS and his rise to power

The appointment of Salman bin Abdulaziz as the King of Saudi Arabia in 2015 set the path for his seventh son, Mohammed bin Salman, to climb up the royal ladder. Although some argue that the importance of royal politics in Saudi Arabia is overemphasized (Mohammadzadeh, 2019), the peculiarities of his rising process, which took many experts by surprise, have led to an unprecedented interest in the figure of MBS. While there is limited information available regarding his upbringing and early years, some publications have attempted to shed some light on the matter (Elliott House, 2019; Ortiz de Zárate, 2017), pointing out his relationship with his dad and his fully Saudi education (Hope & Scheck, 2020).

The existing accounts of MBS’ rise to power are more extensive, seeking to analyze the rapid ascendance of the young prince in such a short amount of time (Cochran, 2019; Hubbard, 2020; Mabon, 2018). For some time, the steps taken by MBS to modernize the country and open it to foreign investors and visitors were praised by several journalists and institutions in the West, labeling him as a ‘reformist’ (Davidson, 2021; Friedman, 2017; Ignatius, 2017, 2018). However, the

⁴ The Sudairi line is constituted by the sons of King Abdulaziz’s (considered the founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) favorite wife, Hassa al-Sudairi, and their descendants.

⁵ The Allegiance Council is a body in charge of determining the future successor to the throne of Saudi Arabia through the election of one of the candidates proposed by the King.

increasingly repressive and autocratic tone of his policies, such as the Ritz-Carlton roundup⁶ (Brisson, 2021; Gause, 2018), and the growing crackdown on dissidents and clerics (Pan & Siegel, 2020), not only progressively shifted Western opinion, but also attempted against the traditional pillars of legitimacy (Mabon, 2018; Mațoi & Constantin, 2019; Ulrichsen & Sheline, 2019; Younes, 2017). The several human rights abuses and the brutal murder of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in 2018 (Fogel, 2020; Rowley, 2020) marked a turning point in the international perception of MBS, swiftly shifting the balance on the debate between ‘reformer’ or ‘tyrant’ (Carey, 2018; Kéchichian, 2019b; Khouri, 2018).

2.3. Foreign Policy under the rule of MBS

The progression from a traditionally cautious approach towards a much more assertive stance in foreign policy since the arrival of MBS has drawn the attention of several experts (Al-Rasheed, 2020; Demmelhuber, 2019), some of whom have pointed out a prominent nationalistic tone in these new policies (Alhussein, 2019; Dazi-Héni, 2019).

At the international level, much has been written about the relationship between the US and the Kingdom, from the historical alliance between Ibn Saud and FDR in 1945 (McFarland, 2020) to the impact of the 9/11 attacks (Bronson, 2006; Subhan, 2003), and the relations between the two countries during this past decade (Riedel, 2018), as well as the affinity between MBS and the Trump administration (Hope & Scheck, 2020; Hubbard, 2020; Mabon, 2018). Further attention has been recently drawn towards shifting alliances and the rapprochement of Saudi Arabia and China, sparking the debate about what will this new situation entail for US-Saudi relations and the broader international dynamics (Al-Rasheed, 2022; Chen & Han, 2019; Guzansky & Orion, 2017).

At the regional level, the historically problematic relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been the focus of many experts within the field of IR. Historical analysis of the relations between the two countries (Keynoush, 2016; Syahmanssuri, 2020) and studies of the divide between Shia and Sunni in the Middle East (Al-Qarawee et al., 2017) help to better understand the foundations of the conflict, which some have categorized as the Islamic ‘Cold War’ (Hiro, 2020; Levallois & Therme, 2016). Since the arrival of King Salman and MBS to power, their threat perception of Iran has been greatly studied (Abbasi & Qazi, 2019; Hartmann, 2016).

⁶ The Ritz-Carlton roundup consisted of a series of mass arrests of a large number of high-ranking officials, businessmen, and members of the royal family under the pretext of an anti-corruption campaign.

Two of the most striking events of MBS' foreign policy have been the Yemen War and the Qatar blockade, which are believed to have been, to a greater or lesser extent, due to this threat narrative (Van der Heiden & Krijger, 2018). However, while many analyses of both the Yemen War (Ghoble, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2015; Kendall, 2017; Salisbury, 2015) and the Qatar blockade (Albasoos et al., 2021; Berni, 2021; Ulrichsen, 2018) attribute significant part of the explanation to the dynamics between the two Gulf rivals, a much lesser explored factor has been the quest for status and regional dominance of this new regime (Darwich, 2018; Zweiri et al., 2021).

THEORETICAL APPROACH: FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

Given that the object of this research project will be based on the assessment of the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia since the appointment of MBS as Crown Prince, the theoretical approach used will be Foreign Policy Analysis. For this purpose, the extensive offer of handbooks tackling the topic provides useful overviews on the matter (Alden & Aran, 2017; Beach & Pedersen, 2020; Hill, 2016; Hudson & Day, 2020; Mello & Ostermann, 2023; Neack, 2018; S. Smith et al., 2016).

Since its inception during the 1950s as a subfield of International Relations, three different paradigmatic books (Rosenau, 1999; Snyder et al., 1954; Sprout & Sprout, 1958) led to the development of this area. The contributions of Snyder and the Sprouts, together with the posterior literature that derived from their publications, are key to understand Foreign Policy Analysis at the individual level (Gold, 1978). On the one hand, the former introduced the idea that the decision-making process should be a central interest, rather than merely focusing on the outputs of foreign policy (Kuperman & Ozkececi-Taner, 2006), defying the historical assumption of the 'black box'. On the other hand, the latter added the notion of the *psycho-milieu*, which refers to the need to take into consideration the psychological and social context of the individuals involved in decision-making (Criekemans, 2021).

Drawing from this *psycho-milieu* concept, latter works further theorized about the effect of individual characteristics of decision-makers, such as beliefs, attitudes and experiences (Brecher, 1972; Hermann & Kegley, 1995; Hudson, 2005). More narrow issues such as leaders' personal characteristics (Hermann, 1980; Post, 1991; Singer & Hudson, 1992; D. G. Winter et al., 1991), leadership styles (George, 1969; Walker, 1977), motivations of leaders (Barber, 2020; Etheredge, 1978; D. C. Winter, 1973), or potential consequences of misperceptions in foreign policy (Cottam, 1977; Jervis, 2017) have also been tackled. For the purpose of this paper, the conditions proposed by Valerie Hudson in order to determine the relevance of a leader in foreign policy (Hudson & Day, 2020) and the leadership styles classification created by Margaret Hermann (Hermann et al., 2001) will prove highly relevant contributions for the assessment of the role of MBS' personality on foreign policy decision-making.

The above-mentioned body of academics question the assumptions made by authors that abide by the rational model of decision-making, sharing the premise that foreign policy decision-makers and their environment can have influence in the agent-structure debate (Wendt, 1987). They argue that a

“compelling explanation of foreign policy cannot treat the deciders exogenously” (S. Smith et al., 2016, p. 23). Therefore, given that the aim of this research will be to make an individual level analysis of MBS’ foreign policy, this approach will provide the necessary tools to do so.

4.1. Profile of Mohammed bin Salman and his rise to power

4.1.1. Early years of Mohammed bin Salman

In order to study the influence of MBS' quest for legitimacy on his foreign policy, providing some background regarding his psychological, political, and social context will help shed some light on the rather secretive prince and the factors affecting his decision-making. Most of the available information comes from family members and close associates that refuse to speak on the record, given his compulsivity to manage his image and general reticence to speak for attribution.

Seventh son of Salman ibn Abdulaziz, current king of Saudi Arabia, and the eldest with his third spouse, Fahda bint Falah Al Hithlain, Mohammed bin Salman was born on August 31, 1985 (Al Jazeera, 2017). While details about his early life are scarce, it is known that he has lived his entirely life in the country, receiving a fully Saudi education and eventually getting a law degree from King Saud University (House of Saud, 2021). This stands in stark contrast with the experience of his older siblings, most of whom went abroad for schooling and are considered, by many, to have become "cosmopolitan and Western in their sensibilities" (Hope & Scheck, 2020, p. 19).

While the relationship between King Salman and the offspring from his first marriage has been portrayed as cold and imperious, such rigidity during the children's upbringing seemed to decrease over the years. Several stories regarding MBS' misbehaving reputation as a child have come up, such as the account of a past English tutor⁷ of his mischievous and rebellious attitude (BBC, 2018), or a scene starred by MBS dressed in a military outfit defying the police at a local supermarket, which highlighted the special soft spot Salman had developed for him, who handled the matter as quietly as possible (Hope & Scheck, 2020).

In 2001, when MBS was 16, Fahd, the oldest son of Salman, died suddenly from a heart attack at age 46. One year later, Ahmed, another one of Salman's first marriage sons, died from the same causes at 44. "The sudden, untimely deaths of two sons threw Salman into deep mourning. While his older children were off pursuing careers and taking care of their own families, MBS stuck close to his father in his time of pain, deepening the bond between them" (Hubbard, 2020, p. 22). From that moment on, the young Mohammed began to make the practice of shadowing his father, the governor of Riyadh back then, a usual habit. During this time, MBS acquired essential knowledge

⁷ Rachid Sekkai was a man hired as a private English tutor to some of Salman's third marriage sons, including MBS.

of the dynamics of the Kingdom, learning about royal factions and their quarrels, tribal disputes and power plays, the activities of the most prominent businessmen, or the position that each cleric held; something that would prove helpful in the upcoming years (Elliott House, 2019).

These experiences within the Kingdom considerably marked MBS' perception of reality. Nonetheless, he was also part of a new generation, one raised in the 21st century. And which contrary to the previous generations, had no recollection of the Bedouin past of the Kingdom, having grown up in air-conditioned luxurious palaces and a generally indulgent lifestyle (ARTE, 2019). Added to this, as did most Saudis of his generation, he grew up playing videogames, watching Hollywood movies and American cartoons. When asked in the past recent years about his political career, he has expressed his desire from a young age "to be a new kind of ruler, one who disrupted the old order like the giants of Silicon Valley, instead of one who followed the traditional ways" (Hubbard, 2020, p. 27).

This contrast between an immersive and deeply Saudi environment, especially compared to the experiences of his older siblings, and his admiration for technology and the Western business model of Silicon Valley, would shape to a great extent how he wielded power. While the choice made by Salman to pick MBS as his successor from all his children has never been publicly justified, the narrative that is commonly defended by experts and those close to the royal family is that the drastically different background of MBS in respect with his older brothers allowed him to nurture a closer and more intricate relationship with his father, who has been considered a Saudi traditionalist (Kerr & Allam, 2015).

4.1.2. Unprecedented rise to power of the young prince

The prospects of Salman bin Abdulaziz becoming the new king of Saudi Arabia seemed remote for a long time, being the 25th of the 36 sons that the founder of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had. He held the post of governor of the Province of Riyadh for almost five decades, witnessing the metropolitan transformation of the city, but his influence was not comparable to that of those holding powerful ministries. However, the future of Saudi Arabia took a turn when two of Salman's brothers, who were next in line to the throne, died from cancer and a heart disease. In 2011, he was appointed Defense Minister when the first brother, Prince Sultan, died (BBC, 2011), and in 2012, he became Crown Prince after the death of Prince Nayef (Al Jazeera, 2012). Suddenly and against all odds, MBS' became the son of the next heir to the Saudi throne, a forecast that was materialized in 2015 when King Abdullah died (Black, 2015).

Having begun to work for his father as a special advisor in 2009 when Salman was serving as governor of Riyadh (Duclos, 2018), the ascension of the latter catapulted the rise to power of MBS. When his father was named Defense Minister in 2011, MBS moved with him maintaining his role as special advisor. Later in 2015, when Salman ascended to the throne, he appointed his experienced younger brother, Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, as Crown Prince, and his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef⁸, who was then the head of the Interior Ministry and maintained excellent relations with the US, deputy Crown Prince. At the same time, MBS was named Minister of Defense and was put in charge of the Royal Court⁹, two positions that allowed him to have important control of the military and direct supervision over access to his father (Hope & Scheck, 2020). At this moment, the prince's machinations to begin centralizing power under his figure were ignited. The first step towards such goal was a royal decree that replaced several government bodies with "two supreme councils, one for economic development and the other for security. MBS took charge of the first, giving him vast powers over the Kingdom's economy" (Hubbard, 2020, p. 41).

In April of that same year, Salman replaced Crown Prince Muqrin with MBN, and named MBS the new deputy Crown Prince, which left him second in line for the throne (Tisdall, 2015). MBS was also appointed head of the council overseeing Saudi Aramco, after the Economic Council had approved a restructuring of the company that included separating it from the oil ministry (Reuters Staff, 2015). During that year, he unveiled his flagship 'Vision 2030'. The main aim of this strategic plan was to reduce the Kingdom's reliance on oil revenues by diversifying its economy through a wide range of investments and neoliberal reforms across multiple sectors (Gov.sa, 2021). Two years later, in June of 2017, MBN was requested to attend the king's palace, where he was retained for the night and forced to abdicate in favor of MBS, who became Crown Prince and head of the Council of Political and Security Affairs (Elliott House, 2019). After such an unprecedented accumulation of power¹⁰, MBS continued to secure this centralization through the appointment of confidants and men of trust in the most powerful governmental posts.

Throughout these years, he has been considered as the *de facto* ruler of the Saudi Kingdom due to health constraints of his father, a position that was made official to a great extent when King Salman published a royal decree announcing that "his Royal Highness, Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Crown Prince, shall be the Prime Minister; as an exception to the provision

⁸ Mohammed bin Nayef is commonly referred as MBN

⁹ The Royal Court is the Chief Executive Office of the King, acts as the link between the King and the governmental institutions

¹⁰ See [Annex I](#) for a graphic timeline of his rise to power

of Article (56) of the Basic Law of Governance” (Saudi Press Agency, 2022), which establishes that such role is reserved to the King. During all this time, he has also led a ruthless campaign against critics and dissidents, which has brought numerous accusations of violations of human rights (Fogel, 2020; Gause, 2018; Pan & Siegel, 2020).

4.2. Factors affecting the articulation of MBS’ Foreign Policy

This section will seek to contextualize the domestic and internal factors that affect the articulation of Mohammed bin Salman’s foreign policy, as well as a brief assessment of the reaction that MBS has had towards them. As for the domestic factors, an account of the historical importance of Wahhabism and royal family consensus in Saudi Arabia will be provided. As for the international factors, a brief overview of the historical alliances of the Kingdom will be presented.

4.2.1. Domestic Factors: Wahhabism and Royal Family Consensus

Before 1744, the Saud family ruled over a small settlement called Diriyah, and had “neither noble tribal descent, religious legitimacy, or wealth” (Sluglett, 2003). It was not until Muhammad ibn Saud, the chief of the family, gave refuge to a man called Abd al-Wahhab, that things began to change. Abd al-Wahhab had been expelled from a nearby village for preaching a version of Islam that would come to be known as Wahhabism. This doctrine advocated for the return to the earliest teachings of the Islamic faith and emphasized a strict adherence to the Quran and the Hadith¹¹ (Ayoob & Kosebalaban, 2009). His arrival led to the establishment of a historical alliance, in which the Saudi tribe committed to the Wahhabi principles, and in return, al-Wahhab agreed to provide religious legitimization to the struggle of the Al-Saud (Al-Rasheed, 2010). This arrangement between the two families still endures to this day, and it has greatly shaped the functioning of the country and the rule of the Al-Saud.

Since his rise to power, MBS has signaled a will to distance his leadership from this relationship with the Wahhabi religious establishment, which many consider intrinsically linked to the existence of the country. The first actions towards this goal began to take in place in 2016, when the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice¹² was stripped of its historically

¹¹ The Hadith is a compilation of words and actions that the prophet Muhammad transmitted through chains of narrators

¹² Saudi government religious authority tasked with monitoring social behavior and enforcing the observance of Islamic moral law, including proper dress and gender segregation. Known in the West as the ‘Islamic religious police’.

established arresting powers, with an official decree stating that “subsequent actions from pursuit of suspect, capture, interrogation and detainment will be left to the relevant official authorities” (Al Arabiya English, 2016). That same year, a restructuring of the country’s top religious body, the Council of Senior Scholars, took place, and new members included were described as “moderate Wahhabi clerics” (Reuters Staff, 2016).

Later in 2017, a royal statement announced the adoption of “the application of the provisions of the Traffic Law and its Executive Regulations - including the issuance of driving licenses - to both males and females” (Saudi Press Agency, 2017), ending the longstanding legal ban on women to drive¹³. A month later, during the Future Investment Summit¹⁴, he stated that Saudi Arabia was “returning to what [it was] before - a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world” (MEE Staff, 2017). By the end of that year, the 35-year-old ban on cinema and movie theaters was also lifted (Paul, 2017).

Further instances in which MBS has made statements tackling the topic can be found. In an interview in 2018, he talked about the Grand Mosque Seizure of 1979¹⁵, a moment that he depicted as the turning point of the country’s modernization efforts and which marked the beginning of a “conservative backlash in the Kingdom” (Goldberg, 2018). Later in 2021, MBS ordered a codification of Saudi laws, which ended the power of individual Wahhabi judges to implement their own interpretation of Sharia. And on a national television speech during that year’s Ramadan, he stated that “there are no fixed schools of thought and there is no infallible person, religious *fatwas*, should be based on the time, place and mindset in which they are issued, not regarded as immutable” (Ottaway, 2021). This kind of language would have been perceived as unconceivable for a Saudi royal before the arrival of MBS. His attempt to reform a religious establishment that has constituted an underlying legitimacy source for the Al-Saud family during over two hundred years is unprecedented, and may prove risky, especially taking into account that he has “no official standing as a religious scholar” (Ottaway, 2021).

¹³ Despite this change, advocates of the right for women to drive in Saudi Arabia such as Loujain al-Hathloul, continued to face repression and several incarcerations.

¹⁴ The Future Investment Summit, informally known as Davos in the Desert, is an annual conference held in Riyadh that gathers influential business leaders, politicians and academics from around the world to discuss global issues since 2017.

¹⁵ In 1979, a group of Islamic militants seized the holiest Islamic site calling for the overthrow of the House of Saud as a reaction against what they perceived as the degeneration of social and religious values. These events successfully halted all modernization efforts and Saudi Arabia remained on an ultra-conservative path for the decades to come, highlighting the importance of religious legitimacy for the Al-Saud.

Added to this, the Crown Prince has also defied the traditionally established practice of royal family consensus, which has helped maintain stability throughout the long rule of the Al-Saud. The inherent nature of his centralization of power, including the deposition of MBN as crown prince, already challenges such practice, disregarding the traditional division of governmental ministries and security bodies amongst the different royal family branches. Moreover, in November of 2017, nearly 400 of the most powerful Saudi royals and businessmen were detained in the Ritz-Carlton hotel. They were retained and stripped of their fortunes, with many having denounced afterwards coercion, beatings, and torture (Chulov, 2020), under the premise of an anticorruption campaign. However, the fact that “other well-known offenders remained free, including some of King Salman’s closest nephews” (Hubbard, 2020, p. 19), made the motives behind the roundup resemble more a crackdown on potential opposition than on corruption.

Considering the above-mentioned, it can be concluded that MBS has distanced his regime from these two traditional sources of legitimacy of the Al-Saud rule. This departure has created a need to seek alternatives that help him justify his rise to power and future right to the throne of Saudi Arabia.

4.2.1. International Factors: regional role and historical alliances

A further layer on the articulation of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy is its alliances in the regional and international arena, which include geopolitical considerations, regional security concerns and economic ties.

In 1945, the American president FDR met with the Saudi king, Ibn Saud, on an American cruiser in the Suez Canal. This historical meeting marked the first official contact between the two countries, and created the basis of a long US-Saudi alliance, mainly based on America’s security guarantees in return for access to affordable Saudi oil (McFarland, 2020). Such relationship has had a huge impact on the foreign policy approach of the Kingdom throughout the years, with Riyadh being perceived as the leader of a “pro-Western camp of Arab state” (Byman, 2017, p. 30) and a major ally in combatting terrorism.

Nonetheless, from 2000 onwards, Saudi Arabia increased exponentially its trade relations with China, and as of 2009, the Asian country had already become the world’s second-largest consumer of oil, surpassing the US as the biggest Saudi oil buyer (The Economist, 2010). Since then, this relationship continued to be fostered and numerous bilateral investment agreements in the oil industry and its infrastructure were made. As of today, China is considered to be one of Saudi

Arabia's most important trading partners and a major buyer of its oil, with its bilateral trade accounting for \$48.7 billion in 2021 (OEC, 2021). As the following analysis sections will portray, their political partnership has also been enhanced during the last years.

Lastly, at the regional level, Saudi Arabia has played a significant role in the Middle East region. Being home to the holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, it has been considered a referent in the Muslim world. The Kingdom was also a major promoter of the establishment of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and continues to hold extensive influence on the oil market. However, its position as the hegemonic power in the Middle East has been repeatedly contested by Iran throughout history. The relationship between the Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and the Shia-majority Iran has been characterized by tension and conflict (Mabon, 2013), greatly shaping the region and manifesting their religious differences and rivalry for power and regional influence in the form of proxy wars, as seen in the war in Syria and Yemen, amongst others.

4.3. Assessment of the impact of MBS' personality in his FPDM

4.3.1. Is the figure of MBS relevant in FPDM?

As it has been pointed out by some Foreign Policy Analysis scholars, the right question when seeking to analyze decision-making at the individual level is not whether leaders matter, but *when*, and *which* leaders do. While there is not a universal answer to this, Valerie Hudson's contribution provides a useful list of conditions that need to be considered when assessing the role of leaders in foreign policy: (1) the type of regime, (2) the interest of the leader in foreign policy, (3) crisis situations, (4) information available, (5) the degree of experience in foreign policy, and (6) the leadership style (Hudson & Day, 2020).

The first condition she proposes is the type of regime in which the leader acts, given that this will determine how much control the person has over policy decision-making. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the country is established as an absolute monarchy, which entails that the constraints that MBS' might face regarding foreign policy decision-making, are far less than those of many other leaders, such as democratic decision-making systems or checks and balance mechanisms. A second area that must be taken into account is the leader's interest in foreign policy. The interest shown by MBS since the beginning of his rise to power towards foreign affairs has been remarkably high,

which means that his level of decision-making delegation will be much lower than that of a leader that is not specially concerned with this field.

The two next scopes are related to specific contexts in which the leader can play an even greater role: crisis situations, in which leaders will be involved disregarding their level of interest, and uncertain situations, in which the lack of information or its ambiguity may lead advisors to call upon the judgment of the leader. Taking into account that these are dependent on situation specificities they cannot be generally applied to the figure of MBS.

The fifth condition has to do with the degree of diplomatic training of the leader, which in the case of MBS is very minimal, having acted only in the capacity of special advisor to his father before he was appointed Minister of Defense in 2015, year in which he already launched the war on Yemen. According to Margaret Hermann, “leaders with prior training have learned to subordinate their personal characteristics to the diplomatic requirements of the situation at hand. While untrained leaders, are likely to rely more on their personal worldviews in any foreign policy response” (Hudson & Day, 2020, p.41). Lastly, another important dimension is the style of leadership: whether the leader prefers to provide a hands-on leadership or tends to delegate the processing of intelligence and decision tasks. The current Saudi Crown Prince would fall into the first category, a style that entails a much more prominent role of that person’s personality on decision-making, as it will be further developed in the next subsection.

Overall, it has been established that the political system in which MBS is leading is an absolute monarchy, that he has displayed significant interest in foreign policy throughout these years, that he does not have considerable diplomatic training in the field, and that he can be considered to tilt towards a hands-on leadership approach. The practical effects of this are that his leadership is under a much lesser level of constraint than that of leaders living in other political contexts, such as democratic countries, that he is prone towards a low level of decision-making delegation due to his lack of experience and style of leadership, and that he will tend to highly rely on his personal worldviews in foreign policy responses. It can thus be established that MBS fulfills the necessary conditions to have the potential power to shape how the state is going to respond to a foreign policy problem, something that Hermann conceptualizes as the figure of a ‘predominant leader’ (Hermann et al., 2001)

4.3.2. What type of ‘predominant leader’ is MBS?

Further developing on the last condition proposed by Hudson, Hermann’s classification of eight leadership styles provides useful insights on MBS’ foreign policymaking process and which kind of actions he is likely to encourage. In order to determine into which category each leader falls, the author proposes an assessment of the person’s sensitivity to its political context based on three areas: (1) their reaction to political constraints, (2) their openness to information, and (3) their motivation for action (Hermann et al., 2001).

Regarding the first question, as it has been seen in the previous sections, MBS has exhibited a tendency of challenging political constraints. The unprecedented accumulation of power he has managed to achieve has only been possible through the defiance of historically established balancing mechanisms, such as the division of predominant ministries between the different factions of the royal family or the undermining of several consultative councils. “To facilitate maintaining influence over events, leaders [that present insensitivity towards their political environment] work to bring policymaking under their control” (Hermann et al., 2001, p. 91), something that has been clearly reflected in his centralization of power and extensive campaign against dissidents and political opposition (Fogel, 2020). Furthermore, studies indicate that these kinds of predominant leaders tend to take direct and assertive action to solve what they perceive as a problem (Hermann et al., 2001), which has been seen with the decision to launch Operation Decisive Storm or the Qatar Blockade.

As to the second question, the predisposition of MBS to incoming information is harder to determine due to the available resources. However, there are accounts of several instances in which the Crown Prince has overlooked information that provided evidence that did not support his point of view or positions taken. In the case of the war in Yemen, it has been reported that the leader was warned about the dangers of his actions and the unlikelihood of the operation being finished in a matter of weeks. Both heads of the main security services besides the military, MBN¹⁶ and Prince Mutib bin Abdullah¹⁷, amongst other senior royal members, uselessly expressed their apprehension towards the decision (Hubbard, 2020). The same attitude was maintained by MBS when experts warned him that the value given to the Aramco IPO¹⁸, over \$2 trillion, was overestimated (Momani, 2019). A pattern that was repeated when the indicators and timeframes provided by the consulting

¹⁶ MBN held the post of Minister of Interior at the time.

¹⁷ Prince Mutib bin Abdullah held the post of Head of the Saudi National Guard at the time.

¹⁸ The Aramco IPO refers to the Initial Public Offering (process by which a private company issues shares of stock to the public for the first time) of Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil and natural gas company.

firm McKinsey, which the Crown Prince had hired to help him plan and develop his economic vision for the country, did not fit or align with his needs (Hope & Scheck, 2020). According to Hermann, these kind of leaders “are intent on finding that information that supports their definition of the situation or position and overlooking any evidence that may be disconfirmatory” (Hermann et al., 2001, p. 92).

Lastly, the third question has to do with the motivation that drives leaders to assume a position in politics. The author provides two main groups: those that are motivated by an internal focus (a particular problem or cause, an ideology or a specific set of interests) and those that are motivated by the desire to build relationships and get a certain kind of feedback from people in their environment (such as acceptance or support). In the case of MBS, the numerous instances in which he has stated the urgent need of the country for change and modernization (Goldberg, 2018), together with the early signs of his interest to hold a position of power (Hubbard, 2020) would suggest a classification in the first category. This group is considered less sensitive to the political context, prioritizing mobilization and effectiveness towards the accomplishment of their goals instead of fostering consensus or building networks.

All of these answers provide the necessary information to place the figure of MBS within the different leadership typologies created by Hermann. While the two first questions determine what she calls the ‘leadership style’, the third one accounts for the ‘orientation’ of the leader, which is a subgroup of the former.

Taking into account the propensity of the Crown Prince to challenge political constraints, which has been demonstrated through actions such as the events at the Ritz Hotel or the thorough campaign against dissent, and his tendency to dismiss information that does not align with his position, it can be concluded that he fits into the ‘Crusader’ leadership style¹⁹. This group of leaders are very proactive in the pursuit of their goals, and “by being convinced that available information supports their position, they can often create a very persuasive rationale for what they are doing that gives their actions credibility and legitimacy. Thus, in the decision-making process, such leaders' positions are likely to prevail as they take charge and work to control what happens” (Hermann et al., 2001, p. 96).

Furthermore, when the leader’s motivation is added to the responsiveness to constraints and openness to information, another layer can be added to the previous leadership style. Given that MBS has been considered to fall into the Crusader leadership style, and that it was previously

¹⁹ See [Annex II](#) for a more detailed explanation of the eight leadership styles

established that his motivation was problem-driven, the term used by Hermann to designate his orientation type is ‘Expansionistic’²⁰. The effects of this orientation include a likely focus on expanding his power and influence, as well as the upholding of the belief that his position should prevail, considering all those that attempt to defy him “the equivalent of traitors” (Hermann et al., 2001, p. 98). Amongst many more examples of attacks directed at dissidents, leaks of parts of the tape that recorded the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi include a quote of one of the members of the hit squad: “Traitor! You will be brought to account” (H. L. Smith, 2018).

4.4. Analysis of his main Foreign Policy decisions

The previous section has established that MBS can be considered a ‘predominant leader’, categorized under the ‘Crusader’ leadership style with an ‘Expansionistic’ orientation, which entails propensity towards direct and assertive action. This new section will be devoted to the analysis of the main foreign policy decisions taken since his rise to power in order to determine which have been the motivating factors behind them. For this purpose, the potential gains and losses derived from that decision will be assessed²¹.

4.4.1. New Saudi FP approach: assertive policy-making (2015-2020)

Only three months after his appointment as Defense Minister, in March of 2015, MBS launched a Saudi-led coalition of nine countries²² code-named Operation Decisive Storm as a response to the Houthis²³ takeover, which ended with the ousting of President Mansur Hadi²⁴. This coup was commonly perceived as a threat for Saudi Arabia, as it gave the considered hostile rebel group control over greater territory bordering the Kingdom and access to military stockpiles (Hubbard, 2020). Additionally, the links between the group and Iran increasingly became apparent (Landry, 2015), which further amplified this threat perception. Despite this general Saudi contempt towards

²⁰ See [Annex II](#)

²¹ See [Annex III](#) and [Annex V](#) to find the entire table listing the potential gains and losses deriving from the main foreign policy decisions taken by MBS, which has been used as the basis to conduct the analysis.

²² Operation Decisive Storm was a coalition of Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco and Pakistan.

²³ The Houthis are an Islamist political and armed organization, predominately Zaidi Shia, with a complex and tense historical relationship with Sunni Muslims. They have been widely considered to have ties with Iran.

²⁴ The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 led to the ousting of the Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. After that, Saudi Arabia had played a key role in the installment of Mansur Hadi as the new president.

the Houthis, the decision to launch Operation Decisive Storm displayed a rupture with the traditional cautious Saudi approach to foreign policy, in favor of a much more assertive one. Moreover, contrary to traditionally pre-established practices of relying on American intel and feedback before taking foreign policy decisions of this caliber, the Obama administration only found out at the last minute about MBS' intentions (Hubbard, 2020).

On one hand, when the potential consequences that could have derived from taking this action are assessed, it can be seen that the Kingdom's position as a key regional player could have been strengthened if the operation was successful. Saudi southern borders and routes through the Bab el-Mandeb strait²⁵ would have been secured (Aguilera, 2020), as well as the containment of Iranian influence in the region. His reputation, both domestically and internationally, would have been potentially consolidated, enhancing his image as a strong and decisive leader. On the other, the potential backlash that the failure of the mission could spark was considerable. If Operation Decisive Storm was unsuccessful and the Saudi intervention prolonged in time, regional instability would be significantly increased, opening the door for a new channel to exploit the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh. Furthermore, economic costs derived from the armed conflict and international condemnation over likely humanitarian violations were other factors to take into account. Lastly, the failure of the first foreign policy decision launched by MBS could have clear repercussions on his leadership credibility.

Still struggling to secure military gains in Yemen, in January of 2016, the Saudi foreign minister announced that Iran's diplomatic mission had been given 48 hours to leave the country. This decision came after a succession of escalating tensions between the two regional powers, largely sparked by the execution of the Saudi Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr²⁶, which then triggered mass attacks on the Saudi Embassy of Tehran (Al Jazeera Staff, 2016). The Kingdom pursued the killing of the prominent Shia cleric after warnings from Iran, being aware of the sensitivities and tensions that could arise due to the Sunni-Shia sectarian fault line. Such action portrayed once more the hardening position of Saudi Arabia towards its regional foe. The decision could have potentially helped Saudi Arabia position itself as a strong and decisive regional leader in the power struggle with Iran and win popularity amongst those domestic groups and countries that shared a similar

²⁵ The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a chokepoint bordering Yemen and Djibouti that connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. Its location implies high geostrategic relevance for the traffic of crude oil.

²⁶ Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr was a Shia cleric and vocal critic of the Saudi Arabian government who was executed on charges of terrorism and incitement to violence. News of the killing triggered international condemnation and widespread protests.

stance on Iran. However, it also had the potential to escalate regional tensions, bringing increased instability and security threats if Iran chose to retaliate through proxy groups.

A year later, on the morning of the 5th of June of 2017, Saudi Arabia, together with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt²⁷, issued statements severing diplomatic relations with Qatar followed by the blockade of land, air and sea traffic routes, under the accusation of destabilizing the region with its support for Islamist groups²⁸ (Albasoos et al., 2021). The Saudi-led decision to isolate the neighboring GCC country implied again an attempt to assert regional dominance and contain Qatari influence, which had been undertaking an increasingly independent foreign policy for some years and developing closer relations with Iran. Nonetheless, it brought once more the possibility to strain regional relations and increase instability, especially in the GCC and OPEC (which Qatar eventually left in December of 2018) (Brookings, 2019). Furthermore, the image of MBS as a young modernizer could be damaged and shifted towards an excessive propensity towards belligerence, possibly facing opposition both domestically and internationally.

Five months after the launch of the Qatar blockade, at the same time as the mass detentions in the Ritz Carlton hotel were taking place, the Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri²⁹, abruptly appeared on Saudi television next to a Lebanese flag reading from a piece of paper. He read a statement accusing Hezbollah and Iran of threatening the region, and announced his resignation. Such declarations shocked the entire Lebanese country, as Hariri had not used this kind of rhetoric in public before, which led the President to reject his resignation (Al Jazeera, 2017a), as reports claiming that he was held in Riyadh against his will due to his failure to counter Hezbollah began to spread (Ignatius, 2017). In 2019, a UN Human Rights Council report stated that he had been detained in a private residence of the Ritz-Carlton and subjected to “psychological torture and treatment which may amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading” (Human Rights Council, 2019, p. 51).

This show of force was in line with the previously shown tendency towards bold and aggressive action, and even though it could have had the potential to increase the Kingdom’s leverage on Lebanon’s politics and strengthen its regional position by reducing Iranian influence, the potential

²⁷ Later Yemen, Jordan, the Maldives, Senegal, Mauritania, the Comoros, Djibouti, and the Tobruk-based government in Libya joined the Saudi-led blockade.

²⁸ On May 23rd, remarks attributed to Qatar's emir on the Qatar News Agency website praising Iran and Islamist groups were made public and aired on several UAE and Saudi-owned networks. These were one of the instigators of the crisis, although they were later proven to have been fabricated by hackers.

²⁹ After over two years of deadlock in the election of a Lebanese leader, Michel Aoun took the President charge and appointed Saad Hariri as Prime Minister. Aoun is a Maronite Christian considered a domestic Hezbollah ally, as his party tends to avoid speaking out against the Shiite group’s activities outside of Lebanon.

possibilities of a blowback were very high. Amongst them, regional and international backlash for violating domestic sovereignty and potentially damaged relations with Western countries that viewed Hariri as a key ally in the efforts to stabilize Lebanon.

The final blow, however, arrived in October of 2018, when the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, was assassinated in the Saudi consulate of Istanbul. After having fled the country in 2017 due to the increasing pressure derived from his public criticism of the government, the labeled 'dissident' entered the diplomatic building to obtain the required documents for his upcoming marriage, but never made it back. Shortly after, articles claiming that he had been killed were published, and leaked tapes proved that a brutal assassination had taken place (Fogel, 2020). Further investigations concluded that the murder had been premeditated, and CIA and UN reports stated that the murder had been ordered by MBS (Barnes & Sanger, 2021; Human Rights Council, 2019). While the only potential gain of taking such a consequential action was to silence dissent and send a clear message of no tolerance to opposition, the potential repercussions were numerous. From international outrage to diplomatic isolation, legal repercussions and substantial damage to the reputation of the Crown Prince, who had once been seen as a modernizer figure promoting change in the Kingdom.

All of the decisions analyzed up to this point portray a clear tendency towards assertiveness in the regional sphere. When the potential gains and losses derived from taking these actions are assessed, it can be observed that risk aversion seemed to greatly decrease when potential reputational gains as a strong leader and regional dominance were at stake. All these decisions align with the 'Crusader' leadership style, and portray the harsher anti-Iranian stance taken by MBS during this period. This can be clearly seen with the War in Yemen, the Saad Hariri incident or the Qatar Blockade. These events received, to some extent, international condemnation, but the murder of Khashoggi crystallized the ruthlessness of the MBS regime, marking for many countries, a wake-up call that made the previous contentious decisions hard to ignore.

4.4.2. Shifting tendencies: towards a more strategic approach? (2021-2023)

With some analysts calling the murder the worst diplomatic crisis of Saudi Arabia since the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Albergotti et al., 2019; Ataman, 2019), the public appearances of MBS were largely reduced, and the attendance at that year's Future Investment Summit, the annual business conference launched in the context of the Saudi Vision 2030, which took place that same month,

witnessed the cancelation of numerous Western foreign officials and businessmen³⁰. While during the months prior to the Khashoggi scandal the Crown Prince had launched a massive publicity tour in the West to promote his figure as a modernizer, visiting the US and Europe and meeting with several officials and celebrities (Brimelow, 2018), after October of 2018 he significantly curtailed his travel and refrained from publicly speaking in non-Saudi media channels. Instead, that year he mainly limited his official visits to the regional sphere, and in 2019, he shifted his focus towards Asia. It was not until 2022 that he would eventually venture back to Europe³¹.

Accordingly, the country's foreign policy approach seemed to progressively adopt a much lower profile from that moment on, and in January of 2021, the first sign of a shifting tendency in this regard took place³². After almost four years of the Qatari blockade, MBS invited the five leaders of the member states of the GCC³³ to a meeting in the Saudi city of Al-Ula. There, they signed the Crown Prince's reconciliation project proposal, known as the Al-Ula declaration, which called for the end of "the measures announced on 10 Ramadan A.H. 1438 (5 June 2017), including those associated with or connected to land, air and sea transport" (Secretariat of the United Nations, 2021). This measure, contrary to all those taken since 2015, had the potential to improve regional stability, strengthen Gulf cooperation, and begin to rebuild the image of Mohammed bin Salman. Despite some concerns regarding the long-term viability of the agreement, given that most of the core differences had not been addressed³⁴, it seems to have been sustained over time.

Two years afterwards, in March of 2023, a Joint Trilateral Statement by Saudi Arabia, Iran and China was made public, in which Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to "resume diplomatic relations between them and re-open their embassies and missions within a period not exceeding two months" (Saudi Press Agency, 2023). This move, which came as a surprise to the international community, appeared to signal again a willingness by MBS to begin de-escalating tensions in the region, especially taking into account the potential impact this deal could have on the several ongoing proxy conflicts between the two regional powers. However, almost as significant as the agreement itself was the fact that it was brokered by China, which potentially signaled a shift from the

³⁰ See [Annex IV](#) for the full list. While some international executives still attended the summit, many Western CEOs decided to drop-out from the attendance list. As for politicians, the only attending PM was the Pakistani Imran Khan, whereas all expected European officials and the US Treasury Secretary decided not to fly to Riyadh.

³¹ See [Annex VI](#) for a table listing the official visits of MBS from 2017 to 2022 (2020 is omitted because of Covid-19).

³² See [Annex V](#) for the table listing the potential losses and gains for the FP decisions taken from 2021 to 2023.

³³ The members of the GCC are Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia.

³⁴ When the Qatar blockade was announced, a 13-point ultimatum was given to Qatar, including the closure of Al-Jazeera, a scaling back in cooperation with Iran, and ending contact with groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, amongst others. At the time of the Al-Ula Declaration, barely any of these points had been tackled.

traditional alliance with the United States towards closer ties with the Asian giant. These actions were in line with the narrative promoted since the official visit of Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in December of 2022³⁵, in which a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was signed, stating their will to “find means to develop their relation beyond trade” (Radwan, 2022).

While hopes for positive repercussions of this rapprochement on the different proxy conflicts in which the two regional rivals were involved were abundant, very few expected them to happen in a matter of weeks. Nevertheless, in April, a delegation from Saudi Arabia traveled to Sana’a, Yemen’s capital, for talks with the Houthis, and presented a draft peace agreement³⁶ (Wintour, 2023). This decision conformed with the mentioned turn towards a decrease in the level of assertiveness, favoring regional reconciliation, mending the costs of previous decisions and repositioning the figure of MBS as a stabilizing figure.

Even though the long-term continuity of all these advancements towards regional harmony is still to be corroborated, for the moment, it can be stated that a shift in the tendency of the previous foreign policy decisions can be observed. An apparent increase of MBS’ openness to information seems to have taken place in the few past years, especially after the Khashoggi episode. “People who have met with him over the years say he now listens a bit more and talks a bit less”, possibly moving towards the ‘Strategic’ and ‘Incremental’ leadership style, according to Hermann’s classification³⁷ (Hermann et al., 2001). This change would entail higher attention to the feasibility of decisions taken with the goal of minimizing risks, in detriment of assertiveness and direct action to compulsively achieve his goals. As it is seen after analyzing the decisions taken after 2018, the list of potential losses is much shorter than the potential gains, contrary to what is observed in all the decisions taken from 2015 to 2018³⁸.

4.5. Key Takeaways from the analysis

Coming to the end of the analysis of the figure of Mohammed bin Salman and the impact of his quest for legitimacy on the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, this section will seek to compile the main results extracted from the previous analytical parts.

³⁵ See [Annex VI](#)

³⁶ The proposal included a six-month long ceasefire as a first phase, following a period of negotiations of three months in which the conditions for a transitional phase of two years would be established. The ultimate aim would thus be a final solution negotiated between all parties during these last two years.

³⁷ See [Annex II](#)

³⁸ Compare [Annex III](#) and [Annex V](#).

Through his sudden rise to power, going from being an anonymous character even inside the country to being appointed Minister of Defense in 2015 and climbing up the political ladder all the way to Crown Prince in less than three years, MBS has managed to significantly restructure the Kingdom's power structure. He has achieved an unprecedented centralization of power, personally controlling every decisive sector of the country, and distanced himself from the two traditional pillars of the Al-Saud rule, Wahhabism and royal consensus. On one hand, since the beginning of his rule, he has promoted policies that limit the power of Wahhabism in the country, countering centuries of Saudi history. On the other, he has also disregarded traditionally established practices that have ensured the continuity of the Al-Saud family in power for all these decades, such as seniority and rule by consensus. Given this need to find alternative sources of legitimacy to justify his rule, one of the tools used has been Foreign Policy. With the goal of assessing to what extent his Foreign Policy has been shaped by this personal quest for legitimacy, the main decisions taken since his appointment as Defense Minister in 2015 have been analyzed, and in doing so, two diverging tendencies have been observed.

From 2015 to 2018, the decisions that have been assessed exhibit a general trend of assertiveness in the regional sphere, pursuing a harsher stance in the regional rivalry with Iran. While the potential backlash derived from all these actions was significant, risk aversion seemed to greatly decrease when potential reputational gains as a strong leader and regional dominance were at stake. This tendency is aligned with the 'Crusader' leadership style, into which this research has categorized the figure of MBS. This group of leaders is very proactive in the pursuit of their goals, being prone to take direct and assertive action to solve what they perceive as a problem, something that can be clearly seen with the War in Yemen, the Saad Hariri incident or the Qatar Blockade.

While all of these decisions received, to some extent, international condemnation, major repercussions did not arrive until the decision to brutally clamp down on dissent and order the killing of Jamal Khashoggi. This event plunged Saudi Arabia into hefty diplomatic isolation amongst its traditional Western allies, and to many, it was the ultimate sign of his weak instincts for how these countries functioned and thought, largely caused by his lack of experience with the West derived from his deeply Saudi upbringing. This, added to his reticence to accept external information derived from his 'Crusader' leadership style, turned out to be "a blind spot that frequently led him to miscalculate how his riskier gambits" would be perceived (Hubbard, 2020, p. 43).

After the global repercussions that the assassination had in many places in which the figure of MBS had been once viewed as the Kingdom's sponsor of change and modernization, the young prince seemed to undertake a much lower profile, curtailing his international travel and public appearances. This approach was also reflected in his foreign policy decision-making, and during the following years, a shift in the previous tendency, accompanied by an underlying distancing from the traditional Western allies of the Kingdom, can be identified.

From 2021 onwards, the decisions analyzed tend towards the prioritization of regional stability, retracting from most of the policies taken in the previous years and abandoning the quest to portray his leadership as assertive and decisive. In this period, the potential gains derived from these decisions are much more extensive than the potential losses, contrary to what has been observed during the prior tendency. This would be in line with an apparent fluctuation towards a 'Strategic' leadership style, which involves a focus on avoiding obstacles that limit the leader's maneuverability, leading to a higher motivation towards minimizing risks.

Hence, it can be stated that during the first period, the foreign policy approach undertaken by the Crown Prince sought to promote the reputation of his leadership as decisive and powerful, based on a harsh anti-Iranian stance with the goal of establishing Saudi regional dominance. While the majority of these decisions failed to deliver the expected results, the vast exposure derived from such a controversial foreign policy approach, has in fact, been a crucial factor in the consolidation of the existing global perception of Mohammed bin Salman as the *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia. Following the repercussions of the Khashoggi events, a significant change took place, and the policies pursued during this second period focused on prioritizing regional stability, seeking to minimize risks and repair the damaged image of the leader.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, the distancing of Mohammed bin Salman from the historical relation of the Kingdom with the Wahhabi doctrine and the traditionally established practice of royal family consensus, two pillars of the Al-Saud rule since its inception, has forced him to find alternative sources of legitimacy to justify his rule. Taking this into account, this research project has attempted to analyze to what extent the foreign policy undertaken since his rise to power has been shaped by this personal quest for legitimacy.

Ensuing the analysis undertaken, the research has categorized the figure of MBS under the ‘Crusader’ leadership style, a group that tends towards direct action in the pursuit of the leader’s goals. Accordingly, after the study of the main foreign policy decisions taken since his rise to power in 2015, a clear tendency towards assertiveness in the regional sphere and low-risk aversion when potential reputational gains as a strong leader and regional dominance were at stake has been identified up until the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi. Hence, it can be stated that during this period, the foreign policy approach undertaken by the Crown Prince sought to promote the reputation of his leadership as decisive and powerful, based on a harsh anti-Iranian stance to establish Saudi regional dominance.

Nonetheless, the data analyzed and results obtained from the above-mentioned policies suggest that there have been clear instances of risk miscalculations by the MBS’ regime, culminating with the assassination of Khashoggi in 2018. The reputational damage derived from this instance seemed to, on the one hand, shift the previously observed assertive tendency towards the prioritization of regional stability, and on the other, trigger a fluctuation of the alliances of the Kingdom.

The strong Western condemnation of the severe violation of human rights by MBS’ regime significantly soured the relations with these countries, who had once viewed MBS as a modernizing figure. Additionally, the removal of the Trump administration from office in 2020 further strained the relations between the two historical allies, as Biden had voiced out significant less receptiveness to the approach of the Crown Prince. This extended isolation in the West, a region that MBS had prioritized during his first years in power, developed a renewed focus eastwards during the following years.

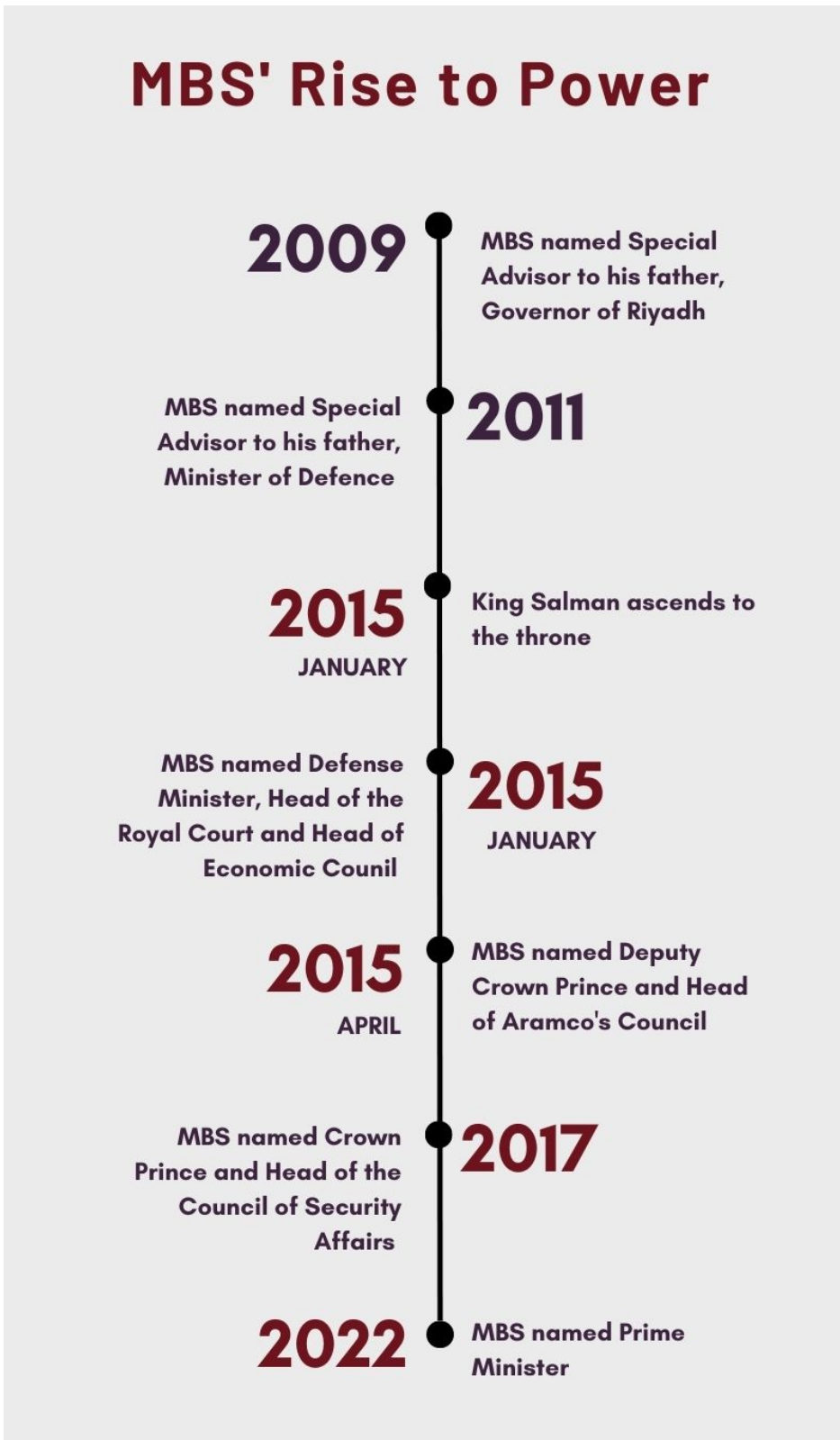
Building on an already preexisting vital economic partnership, signs of a disengagement between the US and Saudi Arabia opened up the door for China to develop its relationship with the Kingdom beyond trade, boosting a closer political alliance. The depth of this new partnership was largely

overlooked by the US and European countries, which after the spark of the Russian invasion of Ukraine witnessed how the economic and political leverage of Saudi Arabia was reemphasized due to the global energy repercussions of the war, renewing interest in rekindling relations. It was not until the Chinese-brokered agreement to reestablish diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran was announced that attention began to be put on the increasing role of China in the region.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of the figure of MBS and his impact on the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia since his rise to power, identifying two major shifting trends throughout his decision-making and a fluctuation in the traditional alliances of the country. Moreover, the focus of this paper on the individual level has contributed to the available knowledge regarding the impact of individual decision-makers and the important role that leadership can play in foreign policy within the Foreign Policy Analysis field.

Notwithstanding, the reality studied in this project is ever-evolving, and as every day goes by, new developments take place. Further pursuing this line of research during the following years will shed some light on two different areas. On the one hand, it will help determine whether this observed new tendency towards regional stabilization is a signal of increased leadership experience and learning from the blowback of past mistakes, or if former assertive patterns are adopted again as time goes by, especially if the international environment becomes favorable to Saudi Arabia again and allows for a complete post-Khashoggi rehabilitation. On the other, new insights regarding the evolution of the Kingdom's alliances will be able to indicate if the current fluctuation towards a partnership with China continues to be pushed, if the US rekindles its closeness with the Saudi Kingdom, or if some kind of balance between these two major powers is achieved.

Annex I: Timeline of MBS' Rise to Power



Source: Author's own production

Annex II: Classification of leadership styles

	Responsiveness to constraints	Openness to information	Motivation (Orientation)	
			Problem Focus	Relationship Focus
Crusader	Challenges constraints	Closed to information	Expansionistic	Evangelistic
			Focus is on expanding one's power and influence	Focus is on persuading others to accept one's message and join one's cause
Strategic	Challenges constraints	Open to information	Incremental	Charismatic
			Focus is on maintaining one's maneuverability and flexibility while avoiding the obstacles that continually try to limit both	Focus is on achieving one's agenda by engaging others in the process and persuading them to act
Pragmatic	Respects constraints	Closed to information	Directive	Consultative
			Focus is on personally guiding policy along paths consistent with one's own views while still working within the norms and rules of one's current position	Focus is on monitoring that important others will support, or not actively oppose, what one wants to do in a particular situation
Opportunistic	Respects constraints	Open to information	Reactive	Accommodative
			Focus is on assessing what is possible in the current situation given the nature of the problem and considering what important constituencies will allow	Focus is on reconciling differences and building consensus, empowering others and sharing accountability in the process

Source: Author's own production based on (Hermann et al., 2001)

Annex III: Table analyzing FP decisions (2015-2020)

FP Decision	Potential Gains	Potential Losses
Launch of Operation Decisive Storm (2015)	External	External
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Win regional influence and position KSA as a key player of the region - Contain Iranian influence and its ability to project power in the region - Protect Saudi southern borders - Secure access to Red Sea trade routes and control of the strait of Bab el-Mandeb - Strengthen ties with the allies involved in the Saudi-led coalition - Enhance his reputation globally as a strong and decisive leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic cost of an armed conflict, especially if it prolongs over time - Increasing regional instability if the operation fails to fulfill its objectives - Possible international opposition over likely humanitarian violations if the operation prolongs in time - Loss of international credibility as a leader if the operation goes wrong
	Internal	Internal
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boost domestic nationalist sentiment, portrayed as a battle against terrorism and Iranian aggression - Consolidation of power by demonstrating MBS' leadership and authority agency within the Kingdom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possible political backlash from factions within the royal family - Domestic unrest as the costs of the war begins the be more evident - Loss of domestic credibility as a leader if the operation goes wrong
Cutting diplomatic ties with Iran (2016)	External	External
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help strengthen position as a decisive leader willing to take bold action to protect KSA's interests - Win regional influence in the power struggle between KSA and Iran - Increase the economic pressure on Iran, as the decision also included economic measures - Send a clear message that KSA would not tolerate Iranian aggression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Escalating regional tensions, which could bring increased instability and conflict in the region - Possible economic costs if Iran retaliates - Strained relationships with other countries that have close ties with Iran
	Internal	Internal

FP Decision	Potential Gains	Potential Losses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase domestic popularity among some segments of the population - Increase international recognition from allies that shared a similar view on Iran 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolation if other countries choose to maintain ties. This could undermine regional influence and difficult FP objectives - Increased security threats if Iran chooses to retaliate through proxy groups
Qatar Blockade (2017)	External	External
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consolidation and assertion of regional influence over Iran - Strengthening regional alliances with the countries involved in the blockade - Containment of Qatari influence, increasingly taking positions at odds with KSA - Pressure on Iran and limitation of its influence by isolating Qatar - Economic leverage in negotiations with Iran to extract concessions - Asserting himself as a powerful and decisive leader, specially against the Qatari emir 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strained regional relationships and implications for stability and cooperation - Humanitarian impact and negative view of the international community, possibly affecting reputation - Increased international pressure and scrutiny questioning legality - Potential blowback if Iran saw it as a provocation - Damage to reputation as a young modernizing leader - Destabilization of the GCC and the OPEC
	Internal	Internal
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase of domestic support by presenting a tough stance against a perceived regional rival - Consolidate power by demonstrating strength and influence to key power brokers within Saudi Arabia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Domestic backlash: may have been viewed negatively by those who have family ties to Qatar or who view the blockade as a sign of unnecessary aggression. - Economic costs: disruption on LNG trade and transportation routes
Saad Hariri Incident (2017)	External	External
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased leverage over Lebanon and weakening the influence of Hezbollah and Iranian influence in the country - Demonstration of willingness to use force in order to assert regional dominance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International backlash and wide condemnation due to sovereignty violation. - Damaged relationships, including Western countries that viewed Hariri as a stabilizing figure - Increased instability in Lebanon and potential regional ramifications if a power vacuum was created (could be exploited by Iran) - Threat of retaliation if Iran perceived It as provocation.

FP Decision	Potential Gains	Potential Losses
	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rallying domestic support from those segments of population that viewed Iran and its regional allies as a threat - Continue bolstering image as assertive leader 	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Damage of Saudi Arabia reputation as a country - Raising concerns about the wisdom of the decision and authority of MBS as a leader
Assassination of Jamal Khashoggi (2018)	<p style="text-align: center;">External</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assert dominance and send a clear message to other countries that MBS regime will not tolerate criticism and dissent 	<p style="text-align: center;">External</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International condemnation and outrage - Diplomatic isolation and sanctions as a retaliation - Legal repercussions, including lawsuits seeking compensation for his family - Damage to international reputation of MBS' leadership and image as a modernizer figure
	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assert dominance and send a clear message to the population of no tolerance for dissent - Consolidate his power within the Kingdom by the removal of potential critics 	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic consequences: investors pulling out from the Kingdom, especially from Future Investment Initiative, which MBS heavily promoted as part of Vision 2030 - Damage to reputation and possible loss of trust of Saudi society and within the royal family

Source: Author's own production

Annex IV: Attendance list Future Investment Summit 2018

Future Investment Summit 2018	
Attendees	Drop-outs
<p>International executives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Total CEO Patrick Pouyanné - PepsiCo Vice Chairman Mehmood Khan - Baker Hughes CEO Lorenzo Simonelli - Moelis & Co CEO Ken Moelis - Schlumberger CEO Paal Kibsgaard - SoftBank Investment Advisers managing partner Saleh Romeih - Singapore Exchange CEO Boon Chye Loh - Russian Direct Investment Fund CEO Kirill Dmitriev - VTB Bank President Andrey Kostin - Trafigura CEO Jeremy Weir - Bunge CEO Soren Schroder - Ferretti CEO Alberto Galassi - Investec Co-CEO John Green - HSBC Global Banking & Markets CEO Samir Assaf - EDF Senior Executive Vice President Marianne Laigneau - McKinsey & Co senior partner Hans-Martin Stockmeier - Bain & Co partner Norbert Hueltenschmidt - BOC International CEO Tong Li - Six Flags president of international development David McKillips - Mecasa Advisors Europe CEO Adnan Hassan - Tus-Holdings CEO Wang Jiwu 	<p>International executives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son - JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon - HSBC CEO John Flint - Credit Suisse CEO Tidjane Thiam - Standard Chartered CEO Bill Winters - BNP Paribas chairman Jean Lemierre - Societe Generale CEO Frederic Oudea - Goldman Sachs partner Dina Powell - Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman - BackRock CEO Larry Fink - Mastercard CEO Ajay Banga - Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi - Siemens CEO Joe Kaeser - Ford chairman Bill Ford - EDF CEO Jean-Bernard Levy - Thales CEO Patrice Caine - Glencore CEO Tony Hayward - London Stock Exchange CEO David Schwimmer - Google Cloud CEO Diane Greene - Viacom CEO Bob Bakish
<p>Politicians and public figures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan - Bahrain Economic Development Board Chief Executive Khalid Al Rumaih 	<p>Politicians and public figures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IMF managing director Christine Lagarde - World Bank president Jim Yong Kim - US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin - UK trade minister Liam Fox - French economy minister Bruno Le Maire - Dutch finance minister Wopke Hoekstra - Australian trade minister Simon Birmingham

Source: Author's own production based on (Alkhalisi and Mullen 2018)

Annex V: Table analyzing FP decisions (2021-2023)

FP Decision	Potential Gains	Potential Losses
<p align="center">Al Ula Declaration (2021)</p>	<p>External</p>	<p>External</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve relations with Qatar, which could facilitate economic cooperation and stability in the Gulf region - Promote regional stability - Strengthen regional alliances, which could have positive geopolitical implications for the region - Help mend international reputation, damaged by human rights violations in the Yemen war and assassination of Khashoggi - Reposition himself as a pragmatic and problem-solving leader - Further isolate Iran in the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Risk of Saudi Arabia and MBS leadership seen as weak at the international level
	<p>Internal</p>	<p>Internal</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possible economic cooperation boost - Reposition of MBS as a pragmatic and problem-solving leader - Strengthen national unity and dwindle domestic critics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential backlash from hardline supporters of Anti-Iranian measures - Risk of Saudi Arabia and MBS leadership seen as weak domestically
<p align="center">Reestablishing of diplomatic ties with Iran (2023)</p>	<p>External</p>	<p>External</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve regional stability - Enhanced diplomatic influence to shape Iran’s position on key issues - Increase cooperation on energy issues, like stabilizing oil prices and coordinating production levels - Improve security cooperation - Higher probability to reach solutions for Yemen conflict - Reposition of MBS as a pragmatic and problem-solving leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential backlash and distancing from the US due to the role played by China - Potential implications for the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel

FP Decision	Potential Gains	Potential Losses
	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased economic opportunities - Repositioning of MBS as a pragmatic and problem-solving leader 	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential backlash from hardline supporters of Anti-Iranian stance
Saudi-Houthi Talks (2023)	<p style="text-align: center;">External</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved regional stability if peace talks reach agreements - Enhanced security and border protection if peace agreements were established - Further step on the rapprochement with Iran - Repositioning of MBS as a stabilizing figure in the region - Mending the international condemnation of Saudi Arabia over human rights violations 	<p style="text-align: center;">External</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Saudi Arabia perceived as weak by rival groups - Perception of the long operation as a failure
	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic cost savings if the war comes to an end - Reduced refugee influx fleeing from the conflict 	<p style="text-align: center;">Internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Potential backlash from hardline supporters of Anti-Iranian stance

Source: Author's own production

Annex VI: Non-exhaustive list of official visits of MBS

Non-exhaustive list of official visits of MBS					
	2017	2018	2019	2021	2022
Regional visits		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - March: Egypt - September: Kuwait - November: Tunisia - December: Mauritania - December: Algeria - *December: Morocco did not receive MBS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - November: UAE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - June: Egypt - December: UAE - December: Oman - December: Qatar - December: Bahrain - December: Kuwait 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - June: Egypt - June: Jordan - June: Turkey - November: Qatar
	Total: -	Total: 5	Total: 1	Total: 4	Total: 4
Visits to the West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - March: US 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - March: UK - March: US - April: France - April: Spain 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - July: Greece - July: Cyprus - July: France - *July: Biden visits KSA
	Total: 1	Total: 4	Total: -	Total: -	Total: 3
Visits to Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May: Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May: Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - February: China - February: Pakistan - February: India - June: Japan - June: South Korea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May: Pakistan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - November: Thailand - *December: Xi Jinping visits KSA
	Total: -	Total: 1	Total: 5	Total: 1	Total: 1

Source: Author's own production

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