



Saudi Arabia's autocratic practices in the Mediterranean region (2011-2021)

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Abstract

This paper examines Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the Mediterranean and broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region between 2010 and 2021, highlighting its counter-revolutionary stance and support for autocratic regimes. Traditionally characterised by a status quo-oriented foreign policy aimed at preserving regime stability and the legitimacy of the Al-Saud monarchy, Saudi Arabia adopted a more assertive and proactive regional role during this period. This shift was driven by a combination of regional instability following the Arab uprisings, the relative decline of key regional powers, perceptions of U.S. disengagement, concerns over Iran's regional influence—especially after the 2015 JCPOA—and the availability of financial resources due to oil booms. Leadership changes in Saudi Arabia further intensified its regional activism, particularly under King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who pursued a more aggressive stance against Iran and political Islam, notably the Muslim Brotherhood. The paper explores the Saudi approach by applying the theoretical framework and definitions developed by Achraimer and Pace's Concept Manual (2024) for SHAPEDEM-EU project. First, the paper looks at how Saudi Arabia conceptualises its foreign policy, to see what ideas and norms are promoted and what is their relationship with democracy. Then, it focuses on the tools employed by the Saudi regime in the countries of the Southern shore of the Mediterranean in terms of autocracy support and its nuances. Lastly, it reflects on the EU's relationship with Saudi Arabia in its completing role of democracy support in the same region.

Introduction¹

Trying to assess the impact of an absolute monarchy like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) on democracy/autocracy support may appear like a futile exercise. Students of the country's history have often underlined how a reactionary foreign policy aimed at status quo preservation has been a constant element of the Saudi authorities, due to their primary interest in guaranteeing the survival of the regime and the legitimacy of the Al-Saud family in power (Wright, 2011; Al-Rasheed, 2010; Gause, 2010). Yet, investigating how the Kingdom approached and reacted to developments in Europe's 'Southern Neighbourhood'² during and after the 2010–2011 uprisings can provide a deeper understanding of KSA's regional role, offering useful insights on how the EU could deal with Saudi Arabia in their shared neighbourhoods.

In the decade between 2010 and 2021, Saudi Arabia played a major role in countering the revolutions and defending the status quo, carving out a more proactive regional role than in previous decades. The increased capacity to influence the regional environment was facilitated by several concurring factors. From 2011, the region experienced the gradual decline of leading regional powers (Egypt, Libya, Syria and from 2003 Iraq). At the same time, in the 2010s the Gulf states shared a sense of abandonment from the traditional US ally, because of its perceived disengagement from the region, coupled by an increasing threat perception about Iran's hegemonic aspirations, exacerbated by the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). Moreover, between 2002 and 2008, the Gulf states experienced unprecedented liquidity due to major oil booms, which provided them with a wide range of power projection instruments (Gervais, 2017). Lastly, Saudi Arabia experienced an increasing foreign policy activism after Salman bin Abdulaziz became king in 2015, and his son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) became defence minister and later

¹ Note: The content of this article was last updated on July 2023.

² The paper focuses on the Southern rather than the Eastern Neighbourhood due to the much greater Saudi presence and subsequent impact in terms of (potential) competition / partnership with the EU.

Crown Prince. MBS was particularly vocal in exacerbating the rivalry with Iran, facilitated by a strong relation with the Trump administration (01/2017—01/2021). However, the Saudi role in condemning Iran and countering the revolutions in the region started already in 2011, under King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, who was particularly interested in suppressing any Islamist reformist movement (especially the Muslim Brotherhood) in the neighbouring countries. Both themes, Iran and political Islam, thus remained central under both leaders and affected the Saudi counter-revolutionary role in the region.

Bahrain and Yemen are the two most emblematic cases in which Saudi Arabia has directly interfered with the domestic transitions. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries activated the joint and combined military force “Peninsula Shield” to suppress the protests and protect the Al-Khalifa family’s grip on power (Gozansky, 2014). Since then, Saudi Arabia has increasingly exercised political and economic influence on Bahrain in a client-patron relationship that led the Al-Khalifa authorities to fully align with KSA in the following years (Andersen, 2012). In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has been politically involved since the 2011 protests and transition, by being at the forefront of the regional and international dialogue initiatives. In 2015, Saudi Arabia launched the military operation “Decisive Storm”, aimed at dismantling the Houthi forces and directly shaping the political future of Yemen (Bennet, 2013; Baron, 2015). In addition to these two cases, Saudi Arabia played an evident role in countering the revolutions in Egypt, and, at least initially, supported regime change in Syria and Libya. Beyond these most striking cases, the Kingdom affected the domestic evolution of many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with different intensities.

The objective of this paper is to reflect on the instruments employed by Saudi Arabia in Europe’s Southern Neighbourhood on the 2010-2021 period. First, it looks at how Saudi Arabia conceptualises its foreign policy, to see what ideas and norms are promoted and what is their relationship with democracy. Then, it focuses on the Saudi role in the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood in terms of autocracy support. Lastly, it reflects on the EU’s relationship with Saudi Arabia considering the latter’s role in the Southern Neighbourhood.

1 Discursive and behavioural practices and impact

1.1 The Saudi official discourse

The speeches made by the Saudi delegation at the UN between 2011 and 2021 and other official statements show how Saudi official discourse regarding the regional events revolved around four main concepts: economic development; humanitarian aid and human rights; moderation and stability; sovereignty and non-interference.

First, Saudi Arabia’s official discourse sponsors **international development** and prosperity based on sustainability and states’ equality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). King Salman bin Abdulaziz emphasised this role during the Saudi G20 Presidency in 2020: “it is our responsibility to extend a helping hand to developing countries and least developed countries to enable them to build their capacities and improve their infrastructure” (G20 march extraordinary meeting opening remarks, 2020).

Second, and intertwined with the previous, the Saudi officials have increasingly employed reference to **human rights** in their official discourse, presenting the country as the “**Kingdom of Humanity**” (KSA Government, 2023). Self-promotion as a moral actor working for the wellbeing of human beings without discrimination is often emphasised: “the Kingdom is the largest

provider of humanitarian aid and developmental aid in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and among the top three donor countries internationally” (KSA UNGA Delegation, 2021).

Third, Saudi Arabia has presented itself as the champion of **moderation** both in terms of religious and political practices (Salman bin Abdulaziz UNGA 2020; KSA UNGA Delegation 2015). The spirit of moderation has been coupled with an increased framing of political opponents and regional rival movements as *terrorists, extremist and/or radical*³.

Lastly, Saudi Arabia has insisted on its decennial role as the stronghold of **stability**. Through the words of the Saudi delegation: “**sovereignty is a red line** that cannot be crossed. My country rejects any intervention in its domestic affairs and any form of dictation by any country” (KSA Delegation UNGA, 2018). Implicitly, insisting on the principle of sovereignty equals arguing that the form of government is a domestic matter that should not be the topic of international debates or of pressures towards democratisation.

The next sections look more in detail at Saudi behavioural practices in the Southern Neighbourhood, so to trace and evaluate correlations between discourse and action, and to assess the Saudi role in supporting autocracy.

1.2 Saudi instruments in the Southern Neighbourhood

Saudi Arabia approached the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood with different instruments and intensities. The following paragraphs look at the Saudi role in each of the following cases: Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine.

1.2.1 Morocco and Jordan

The Saudi approach to **Morocco** and **Jordan** was mostly aimed at safeguarding their constitutional systems at a time when the 2011/12 uprisings were spreading demands for democratic reforms if not revolutions. The approach towards the Arab monarchies of Jordan and Morocco (but also of Oman and Bahrain) can be described as **authoritarian collaboration**. Saudi Arabia offered political and economic support to the governments of both countries, and these behavioural practices were coupled with a discursive emphasis by all sides on a shared “commitment to the same values and principles” in addition to reference to the common language, religion and civilisation (Full Text of HM the King’s speech..., 2016).

As a very first step, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) proposed both countries to join the organisation, and Jordanian and Moroccan officials took part in the GCC foreign ministers meeting in Jeddah on 11 September 2011. The offer was, however, never followed up and it later translated into a more limited strategic partnership. In parallel to the highly symbolic political gesture, the richer GCC states (KSA, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) contributed with 1.25 billion USD each to support development projects in Jordan and Morocco and prevent revolutionary “contagion” by addressing the socio-economic issues that fuelled most of the protests. The same approach was applied within the GCC to Bahrain and Oman in what is sometimes referred to as the “Gulf Marshall Plan” (Steinberg, 2014; Gamal El-Din, 2011; Logan, 2011).

³ The Saudi speeches at the UN between 1946 and 2021 are collected online in the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library: <https://ask.un.org/faq/93715>.

In neighbouring Jordan, Saudi Arabia coupled GCC aid with additional economic measures aimed at limiting the effects of rising energy costs⁴. Saudi Arabia additionally provided support to the Jordanian authorities to deal with the Syrian refugees and both countries cooperated on the Syrian front from 2012 (Steinberg 2014). Also, since 2016, Jordan has received from the Kingdom 13 million USD worth mostly in food security. After the 2018 protests, Jordan received additional 2.5 billion USD loan guarantees and central bank deposits from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE (KSRelief, 2023; Mason, 2023). In addition to these economic instruments, Saudi Arabia has been involved in Jordan's domestic politics through ambiguous relations with Jordanian high-level officials. For example, the former head of the Jordan's Royal Court, Bassem Awadallah, later became economic adviser to Mohammed bin Salman (BBC, 2021). When the Jordanian authorities arrested him for being part of an alleged attempted coup in 2021, KSA was indirectly accused as "foreign entities" were said to be involved in the planning. Saudi Arabia denied its involvement while pressuring—without success—the Jordanian government to drop the charges and let Awadallah fly to KSA (Sengupta, 2021; Chulov and Safi, 2021).

1.2.2 Egypt

In **Egypt**, Saudi Arabia worked to undermine the political transition after the 2011 revolution and re-establish the *ancien régime*. The Kingdom had good relations with President Hosni Mubarak and offered support to him in January 2011. After his demise, the Saudi regime adopted a cautious approach, by supporting Field Marshal Muhammad Husain Tantawi and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) on 11 February 2011 and agreeing to send 6 billion USD economic aid in May of the same year.

The situation started to change when the Muslim Brotherhood led by Mohamed Morsi won the parliamentary elections of November 2011 – January 2012 (with 50% of votes), and the presidential elections of June 2012. President Morsi adopted policies that were perceived by the Saudi regime as threats: it opposed persecutions of MB-oriented parties in the Gulf, promoted a competing interpretation of political Islam to the conservatory Saudi one and worked towards a revival of relations with Iran (Frisch, 2013)⁵. Even if President Morsi initially tried to appease Saudi Arabia by visiting the Kingdom in 2012 and showing no interest in exporting the revolution, the KSA showed no intention in establishing a working relation with him (Steinberg, 2014). In addition to these political concerns, Saudi Arabia had a pressing economic interest. The Kingdom, like other Gulf states, had largely invested in Egypt in the privatization process between 2000 and 2008 (e.g., in real estate, banks and infrastructures) and had a strong economic interest in avoiding an economic collapse of the country, which was risking bankruptcy in the first half of 2013 (Al-Toraify, 2013; Kingsley, 2013).

In this context, the Saudi approach to the Egyptian counter-revolution was of fully-fledged **autocracy support**, through economic military and political instruments that brought back the old regime. First, it backed the second political force after the MB, i.e., the Nour Party, which was formed in 2011 by members of the Salafi Call and was the only Islamist party to support the July

⁴ Energy costs raised after the revolution in Egypt, which was one of Jordan's most important and cheapest gas importers. The measures included opening the Saudi market to Jordanian fruits and vegetables, easing cross-border movements and increasing cooperation among customs authorities.

⁵ Morsi visited Iran in August 2012 and in the same month proposed at the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit to create a contact group composed of Iran, Egypt, KSA, and Turkey to find a diplomatic solution for Syria (Global Times 2012; NPR 2012).

2013 coup (Lacroix, 2022). Also, it interrupted funding to the Morsi government and was the first state to officially (and enthusiastically) endorse the July 2013 coup (Riedel, 2013).

Once the coup was secured, the Saudi approach to the Egyptian government translated into **authoritarian collaboration** to safeguard the status quo. KSA provided President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi with economic aid including direct cash injections to the central bank, grants and energy transfers (Allinson, 2022; Nordland, 2013). The deposits continued at around 2,5 billion USD per year between 2015 and 2021 (Steinberg, 2014; Mason, 2023). In addition, the two countries increased their energy cooperation. Through its financial support, Saudi Arabia also (in)directly allowed Egypt to increase its arms expenditure and to become the world's third arms importer between 2014 and 2018 (Butter, 2020). Moreover, Egypt became the first MENA partner, and the 5th world partner, of KSA in terms of raw material imports, replacing Syria after it dropped positions from 2012 (World Bank, 2020). The cooperation improved also concerning migrant workers: in 2017, Egypt counted as the second most important beneficiary of remittances from both skilled and low-skilled workers from KSA, while 39% of the remittances in Egypt came from Saudi Arabia (De Bel-Air, 2018).

In parallel, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE worked to safeguard their investments in Egypt: in 2014, they sponsored a donors' conference that proposed changes in the country's investment law to stabilise the conditions for foreign investments (Ziadah, 2021). Also, Egypt became a loyal Saudi ally in terms of military support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, in providing air support to eastern aligned general Khalifa Haftar in Libya, in joining the "Quartet" against Qatar between 2017 and 2021, and in other concessions, such as the controversial transfer of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Mason, 2023).

1.2.3 Tunisia

In the case of **Tunisia**, Saudi Arabia initially⁶ promoted **democracy resistance** by providing support to political parties that were perceived as mostly in line with the Saudi interests, which consisted in preventing the reformist Islamist party Ennahda to consolidate power after it won most votes in the 2011 Constituent Assembly election.

In practice, the Saudi approach to post-2011 Tunisia consisted in financing the secular party Nidaa Tounes, led by Beji Caid Essebsi, and individual leading figures before the elections in 2014. Also, Saudi Arabia tried to exercise influence through the media, by expanding its presence in outlets that criminalised Ennahda (Fenton-Harvey, 2019).

In the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections, Nidaa Tounes secured the majority at the expense of Ennahda, which however remained the second political force and was included in a coalition government. During the mandate (2014 – 2019) of President Essebsi, Saudi Arabia announced some aid pledges, proposed loans at preferential interest rates and conducted the first joint air drills with Tunisian air forces in 2018, while remaining cautious due to the continuous role of Ennahda in the government and the parliament (Ajroudi, 2018).

In 2020, Ennahda was increasingly looked at with suspicion by the KSA after its leader Rached Ghannouchi supported the campaign against Haftar in Libya and met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in January (Brumberg, 2021). After the constitutional self-coup of 2021,

⁶ Before the uprising, Saudi Arabia was a partner of President Ben Ali, and hosted him after his exile until his death in 2019.

Saudi Arabia employed economic and political instruments in support of the government of Kais Saied. The lack of clear and structured intentionality suggests that the Saudi monarchy positively welcomed a case of **authoritarian diffusion**, which immediately translated in **authoritarian collaboration** between the Saudi and Tunisian regimes. While reportedly the Emirati and Egyptian governments supported the 2021 constitutional self-coup by Kais Saied, a Saudi role has not been proven (Allinson, 2022). The limited use of direct counter-revolutionary instruments in Tunisia mirrors the limited economic stakes that the Kingdom had in Tunisia before the uprisings. Indeed, compared to other Gulf states, primarily Qatar, but also Bahrain, the UAE and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia had not invested much in Tunisia before 2010/2011 (Allinson, 2022). When Saied took power, Saudi Arabia showed public support to him and vaguely pledged to provide financial assistance in 2021 thus carefully placing its bet on the Saied in a moment of domestic and global uncertainty largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Reuters, 2021; Sons, 2022). In a more favourable context, in 2023, KSA announced that it would provide 87 housing units to Tunisia's low-income families and the GCC signed an MoU with the Tunisian government to foster cooperation, and in July 2023 it pledged to provide 50 million USD in financial aid to Tunisia (GCC Secretary General, 2023; Saudi Gazette, 2023; El Dahan and Saba, 2023).

As shown, the Saudi main objective in Tunisia was to weaken Ennahda, in an endeavour that has much in common with the KSA's anti-MB objective in Egypt. However, in terms the instruments employed, the Kingdom's role in Tunisia was much softer than in Egypt. Indeed, compared to Egypt, where the intentionality of Saudi autocracy support was evident in restoring the old regime, in Tunisia, Saudi Arabia did not play a direct role in transforming the institutional architecture. This can be partially explained by the limited interests that KSA had in Tunisia, compared to Egypt, in terms of geographic proximity, portion of migrant population living in the Kingdom (both factors also linked to the perceived threat of ideas contamination), and the size of the Saudi presence in terms of economic investments and consequent stakes.

1.2.4 Algeria

In **Algeria**, Saudi Arabia has cultivated its political and economic relations with the military forces in power, and reinforced cooperation after popular protests in 2019 led to the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, which also paved the way to a more prominent role for the military (Sayigh, 2021). KSA authorities were likely relieved by the ascent of Algeria's new President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in 2019 and the slow petering out of the Hirak protest movement in subsequent years. However, the KSA has limited itself to distant forms of engagement towards Algeria. On one side, this can be understood by Algeria's prioritisation of its independence. On the other, the lack of Islamist parties has left the country out of the Saudi primary concerns.

Despite a limited Saudi involvement compared to the other countries in the Neighbourhood, Algeria and the KSA signed a 2023 agreement to establish a joint Supreme Coordination Council aimed at generally improving bilateral relations (Harb, 2021, Hamad, 2023).

1.2.5 Lebanon

Since the times of the civil war in **Lebanon** (1975-1990), Saudi Arabia has played an active role in influencing Lebanese domestic politics, by establishing close ties with influential political figures, such as the Hariri family. In this way, the Kingdom directly interfered in the democratic process, promoting **democracy resistance** in the form of reinforcing systems of **competitive authoritarianism** (Levitsky and Way, 2002). Through the political partnership, Saudi Arabia

gained economic access to the post-2006 reconstruction—largely through central bank deposits—and it became one of the most prominent investors in the country. From the Lebanese side, the relation with the KSA has been considered crucial especially for economic aid and the role played by Lebanese remittances from the kingdom, which compose around 20% of Lebanon's GDP (Mason, 2023). Despite the long working relations, the different positions towards Iran (and Syria) have repeatedly affected the cooperation between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, which alternatively used arms sales and military aid to reduce the influence of Hezbollah, which Saudi Arabia labelled as a terrorist organization in 2016.

The Saudi direct political interference reached its peak in 2017 with the detention of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Riyadh to pressure him into a resignation aimed at undermining Hezbollah (BBC, 2017; Barnard and Abi-Habib, 2017). In 2019, Saudi Arabia provided financial support against the liquidity crisis and all kinds of aid after the 2020 Beirut port explosion, which the Saudi regime directly attributed to “the hegemony of Hezbollah, a terrorist organization affiliated with Iran” (KSA UNGA Delegation, 2020). In 2021, Saudi Arabia employed the economic weapon in Lebanon by banning agricultural imports as a pressure for the resignation of the Minister of Interior, George Kordahi, after his official positions on Yemen had irritated the Kingdom (Talbot, 2022; Hubbard, 2021). In addition to political and economic instruments, Saudi Arabia has employed humanitarian aid to increase its influence in the country. Between 2006 and 2023, the Kingdom claims to have financed 54 humanitarian projects for a total value of 49,158,327 USD, mainly in the fields of food security and health (KSRelief, 2023).

1.2.6 Syria

The Saudi political position on **Syria** changed in the timeframe considered. Working relations with President Bashar Al-Assad before 2011 were often tense yet present, especially with regards to the two countries' approaches to Lebanon and Iran. While initially cautious regarding the evolution of the protests, after the summer of 2011, Saudi Arabia strongly condemned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (Al-Khalidi, 2011). The political end state envisioned by the Saudi authorities was the maintenance of the Syrian authoritarian system, but where the Iran-leaning Bashar Al-Assad would have “no place”⁷ (KSA UNGA Delegation, 2015).

In a first phase, the main diplomatic measures employed against the Syrian regime included withdrawing the Saudi Ambassador from Damascus and urging the Arab League to suspend Syrian membership in November 2011 (Steinberg, 2014). From 2013, the Saudi political pressures on the international community increased after the adoption of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2118/2013, which was perceived as the latest proof of the international unwillingness to intervene⁸. As a result, the Kingdom cancelled its speech at the UNGA Plenary Meeting in October 2013, few weeks later renounced its two-year seat at the Security Council and did not participate in the UNGA Plenary Meeting in 2014 (Al-Arabiya 2013; Al-Jazeera, 2013).

Also, Saudi Arabia provided direct military support to the insurgents. Until 2013, it backed the Free Syrian Army, hoping that it would guarantee the survival of the authoritarian structure without Assad (Allinson, 2022). From 2013, the Saudi military role changed in line with its political engagements. The perceived international immobility, the increasing role of the anti-

⁷ The political transition supported by Saudi Arabia was similar to the one proposed in the framework of the Gulf Initiative in Yemen.

⁸ While condemning the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government against the population and calling for a transitional body to determine the future of the country, the Resolution's implementation was slow and largely ineffective.

Iranian Prince Bandar bin Sultan in dealing with the insurgency, the chemical attacks by the Syrian government against civilians in September 2013, and the US cancellation of expected air strikes concurred in pushing Saudi Arabia to support additional insurgent groups such as Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam⁹) with light arms and anti-tank weapons, so to compete with other Islamist parties such as the Al-Nusra Front and then ISIS (Mason, 2023; Levitt, 2021; Steinberg, 2014).

In addition, Saudi Arabia got increasingly involved in the war in Syria through humanitarian aid. The Saudi authorities have allocated funds in support of internally displaced people and refugees through projects in Syria and through support schemes to Syrian students and workers in KSA (De Bel-Air, 2018; KSA government, 2023). The Saudi regime announced to have funded, by April 2023, 285 projects in Syria, for a total of 367 million USD, mostly focused on camp coordination, food security and health (KSRelief, 2023). Also, through the Ajeer Program, the Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development has funded a mechanism for temporary work access for Yemenis (since 2014) and Syrians (since 2016) (Arab News, 2014; 2016).

The Saudi political position—and subsequent instruments—changed again in 2018. KSA announced to have “worked to unite the Syrian opposition groups so that they can negotiate with the regime and ensure Syria’s security, stability and unity and prevent foreign intervention or any attempt to partition the country” (KSA UNGA Delegation, 2018). This position further evolved in the following years. In 2020, KSA supported a peaceful solution focused on maintaining territorial integrity and the departure of “militias and mercenaries” (King Salman’s Opening Remarks..., 2020). In 2021, the Kingdom called for a generic UN-sponsored solution (KSA UNGA Delegation, 2021). All these steps prepared the way for the rapprochement between the Saudi and Syrian regimes, which culminated in the readmission of Syria to the League of Arab States in May 2023 (Al-Jazeera, 2023). Reduced tensions with Qatar and Iran in the past few years/months can be interpreted as a way for the KSA to lower its engagement in Syria, among others, and focus its resources on domestic issues, economic diversification ventures abroad, and the war in Yemen.

1.2.7 Libya

In **Libya**, as in Syria (and Yemen), Saudi Arabia adopted a legal argument in its positions, rallying with the international community’s decisions. In general, the Saudi priority in terms of a preferred political solution has included unity and territorial integrity of the state, and the fight against “terrorist groups” (KSA UNGA, 2016; 2018). However, while rallying with the Arab League in support of the 2011 NATO intervention, the KSA later allegedly supported Khalifa Haftar’s LAAF¹⁰ with 10 million USD of financial support in 2019, while not directly providing military equipment and technology (Eaton et al, 2020). Diplomatically, Saudi Arabia showed support to Haftar by hosting the General in Riyadh in March 2019, just days before he launched a military offensive against the UN-recognised government in Tripoli (Fenton-Harvey, 2019). Since 2020, the Saudi government has increasingly supported a peaceful solution among the parties and has re-engaged the Tripoli government with the overarching aim of maintaining stability. In 2023, Saudi

⁹ Jaysh al Islam was formed in 2013 with the aim of overthrowing Assad’s government and establish an Islamic government. It opposed both Al Qaida and the Islamic State for their pan-Islamic programs and strong anti-West stances (Stanford CISAC 2019).

¹⁰ The Libyan Arab Armed Forces is a non-state armed actor that, since 2014, has performed para-governmental activities in Eastern Libya.

Arabia discussed the possibility of reopening its embassy in Tripoli after a visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister (Middle East Monitor, 2023; TRT World, 2020).

In both **Syria** and **Libya**, the Saudi support to specific insurgent groups promoted **democracy resistance** as Saudi involvement (like that of other external actors) prevented any evolution towards domestically driven transitions, especially democratic ones. As the situation on the ground shifted, both in Syria and Libya, Saudi Arabia moved towards more structured forms of **autocracy support**, aimed at preserving the old regimes by supporting internal reconciliations and paving the way for an active and profitable Saudi role in the reconstruction phase.

1.2.8 Palestine and Israel

Direct relations between Saudi Arabia and the **Palestinian** National Authority have been largely based on humanitarian aid. From 2000 to 2023, the Saudi administration claims to have financed 110 projects for more than 369 million USD, in the fields of food security, health, camp coordination and education. By April 2023, Palestine figured as the second recipient of Saudi aid after Yemen (KSRelief, 2023). On the diplomatic level, relations between Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian political forces have been fluctuating since the 2000s. Tensions with Hamas alternated with Saudi mediating attempts between Hamas and Fatah. Since the Arab uprisings, the Saudi regime has intensified its positions against Hamas, especially after the organisation welcomed the election of Morsi in Egypt and sought closer relations with Iran, with sporadic displays of reconciliation between 2015 and 2018 (Majidiyar, 2018; Al-Mughrabi, 2017).

The oscillating Saudi approach towards Hamas was coupled with heavy-hand measures in the Kingdom, such as revoking the organisation's fundraising activities and arresting Hamas-leaning individuals. In 2019, 68 Palestinians were incarcerated in KSA with the charge of being members of an unidentified terrorist organization (Ahmadi, 2023). In 2021, Mohammed al-Khudari, the head of the Hamas delegation in KSA, was sentenced to 15 years of prison, even though he was released in October 2022 (Abu Amer, 2019). At the same time, Saudi Arabia and (more directly) the UAE have interfered in the rifts and reconciliation attempts between the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and former Fatah leader Mohammad Dahlan (Essaid, 2016).

In the meantime, Saudi Arabia has increased informal cooperation with **Israel** after the Arab uprisings, especially in the fields of intelligence, surveillance, cybersecurity and other counter-insurgency instruments, such as the NSO Group's spyware Pegasus (Middle East Eye, 2022; The Times of Israel, 2018).

Both actors have considered Iran as their main regional rival. In this context, in June 2015 a former Saudi General and a former Israeli Ambassador spoke at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington about Iran and the risks of the JCPOA. Moreover, both states – together with the US – have shared a common antagonism towards Hezbollah. Already in 2006, Saudi Arabia had denounced Hezbollah rather than Israel during the war in Lebanon, in line with the Saudi's strong anti-Iranian/anti-Islamist rhetoric at the time (Mueller, 2022). In 2017, Israel tacitly accepted the transfer of the islands in the Strait of Tiran to Saudi Arabia from Egypt in exchange of a commitment by KSA to respect Israel's freedom of navigation (Haaretz, 2022; Mueller, 2022; Cook, 2017).

Since 2020, Saudi Arabia has informally legitimised the Abraham Accords, which aimed at normalising relations between Israel, Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan. Through Bahrain, the KSA and Israel have established more direct—despite still unofficial—contacts, and the Saudi authorities have authorised flights from/to Israel to cross its airspace (Riedel, 2022). In the

financial field, the Saudi Investment Fund has started to be present in Israel through Jared Kushner's private equity firm Affinity Partners (Kaplan, 2022). Moreover, the Trump-proposed "deal of the century" opened an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to potentially become the administrator of the Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, in open contraposition with the Palestinian Authority, which re-emphasized the Jordanian custodianship role under international law. Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia publicly expressed support for the "US efforts for negotiation¹¹" in 2020 (KSA Delegation UNGA, 2020).

Saudi Arabia's relations with **Israel** can fall within the sphere of **authoritarian (unofficial) collaboration**. While Saudi Arabia has not officially recognised Israel, since 2011 they have increased collaboration to prevent uprising contagion, especially through technological cooperation in the field of intelligence, surveillance and cybersecurity. In parallel, and largely specular to the authoritarian collaboration with the Israeli authorities, Saudi Arabia has not facilitated a democratic evolution in **Palestine**. Indeed, by framing relations with Hamas within the anti-radical rhetoric, the Saudi Arabia has contributed to an exacerbation of relations among the Palestinian parties. Its tensions with and pressuring of the Palestinian Authority has similarly been tailored to undermine the Palestinian leaderships already limited freedom of action and to ensure compliance with Saudi, Israeli and US policy priorities. In both instances, such actions can be described as forms of **democracy resistance** (i.e., countering or obstructing a democratic transition) as well blatant interferences in the affairs of neighbouring states, in this case the Palestinian occupied territories.

2 Conclusion and implications for EU democracy support

The instrumental nature of the Saudi approach towards the Southern Neighbourhood during and after the 2010/2011 uprisings shows why **autocracy support**, **democracy resistance** and **authoritarian collaboration** have been applied in different moments towards different actors. In the 2010–2021-decade, Saudi Arabia **identified the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran as the most threatening regional actors**. Subsequently, the KSA contrasted those actors perceived as allies/partners/proxies of these two forces, i.e., Qatar and Turkey, Hezbollah, Hamas, Assad and of course the Houthis in Yemen. When one or more of these actors started to be perceived as not threatening, the Kingdom changed its approach and reconciled with them in terms of discursive and behavioural practices.

Instead, **autocracy promotion** does not find concrete evidence in the Saudi approach, as the fear of contagion and economic considerations were much more salient than ideological motivations (i.e., the promotion of a particular ideology *per se*). Indeed, relations with the Southern Neighbourhood actors were not aimed at exporting ideas such as the Wahabi-oriented regime or the monarchical form of state. For example, relations with monarchical Jordan, despite the common quest for regime stability, have been hampered by long-lasting suspicions, especially regarding the historical rivalry between the Hashemite and Al-Saud dynasties and more symbolic competitions such as the issue of the custodianship of the Al-Haram Al-Sharif in Jerusalem (Mason, 2023). Similarly, Saudi relations with republican Egypt has historically been fluctuating and not influenced by the monarchic/republic divide. Indeed, the form of state

¹¹ Another important element in the informal negotiations on normalization, facilitated by the US, is the Saudi demand for launching a civilian nuclear program in cooperation with the US, and demands to expand and tighten defence ties with the US (Times of Israel 2023).

remained the same under Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, Morsi and Al-Sisi, i.e., an authoritarian republic. In the 1950s and 1960s, Nasser's Pan-Arab narrative and political/military adventures led the Saudi government to espouse a Pan-Islamist discourse and to provide refuge to the Muslim Brotherhood's members fleeing Nasserist persecutions. In the following years, however, contingent threat perceptions and opportunity/cost considerations have led Saudi Arabia to oppose the Muslim Brotherhood.

The perception of the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to regime survival rather than simply an ideological rival is confirmed by the role played by Saudi Arabia in support of other Islamist movements, and particularly the Salafi Al-Nour Party in Egypt. As shown by Stéphane Lacroix (2022), one of the most important differences between the two movements is that Al-Nour, as the other older Salafi organizations in Egypt, have called for obedience to the rulers (*ta'at wali al-amr*) while focusing on religious preaching and conservative social practices. Instead, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the affiliated movements that are usually referred to under the umbrella of political Islam, support regime-change if the rulers are considered unworthy. The contradictions between the Saudi Wahabi-based legitimacy, the oil-driven modernisation efforts, the alliance with the US, and the ruling family's corruption have thus put the Saudi regime under the spotlight of criticism from political Islam since the oil discoveries, and more prominently since the 1990s. This is why Saudi Arabia has seen the establishment of an elected government led by the Muslim Brotherhood at its borders (and the strengthening of the movement elsewhere) as an existential threat to be countered.

In the Saudi official discourse, the autocracy/democracy divide was never made explicit. Yet, emphasis on other concepts, such as stability, moderation or human rights, were instrumental to justify Saudi behavioural practices without incurring in strong international opposition, especially from the West.

In terms of the relations between discursive and behavioural practices in the cases under analysis, Saudi Arabia adopted two main approaches. **When** the Kingdom aimed to **defend the status quo** and reinforce the regimes in power, it adopted a narrative that insisted on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference, employing the rhetoric of terrorism/radicalism and Islamism to condemn its adversaries (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood). Conversely, **when** KSA supported direct interventions to **change the leadership** in power (e.g., in Syria), it employed the rhetoric of the humanitarian crisis and of the international responsibility to protect the local population in line with the UN principles.

These final points offer space for reflection on the EU role in the Southern Neighbourhood and its possible engagement with Saudi Arabia. Since its launch, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has been based on two complementary objectives: to strengthen prosperity, stability and security and to promote democratic values and human rights (EU Commission, 2023). In envisaging working partnerships with Saudi Arabia in the area, the EU needs to coherently reflect on whether the two main objectives of its Neighbourhood Policy are interlinked or can be decoupled.

In the 2011-2021 decade, the Saudi approach indirectly **contested** the EU one not only in its behavioural practices but also in the discursive justification of them. Indeed, Saudi Arabia also employed the discourses on prosperity, security and human rights, but with very different meanings that resonated better with the visions of the authoritarian governments in the region. Moreover, Saudi financial and humanitarian instruments were considered as more attractive for

authoritarian regimes because they were perceived to come with no strings attached compared to the European ones. However, the Saudi regime has very recently changed this approach (in 2023), announcing that strings are in fact there. The Saudi Finance Minister has announced that “we need to see reform” and that the government has increasingly been working with multilateral financial institutions in that sense (Essaid, 2023; Reuters, 2023).

If this process continues, the EU can find further windows of opportunity to challenge the Saudi approach in the Southern Neighbourhood and reinvigorate EU efforts on democracy support. Until now, the more general EU approach towards Saudi Arabia has oscillated with somehow schizophrenic results, especially with regards to the EU official discourse and the EU Member States behavioural practices.

In 2014, the EU Parliament approved a resolution on relations with Saudi Arabia, underlining the “European interest in a peaceful and orderly evolution and political reform process in KSA”, and to open a dialogue on human rights to make Saudi Arabia comply with its commitments in the field (Gomes, 2014). In 2018 the EU Parliament changed its tone in condemning women rights abuses in Saudi Arabia (EU Parliament, 2018a). Moreover, between 2016 and 2021, the EU parliament urged the Member States to apply an arms embargo against Saudi Arabia, following the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Yemen (EU Parliament, 2018b; 2021a). In 2021, another resolution called for the member states to make Saudi Arabia accountable for human rights abuses (EU Parliament, 2021b). At the same time, however, EU Member States have steadily remained among the most important trade and defence partners of Saudi Arabia, with France, Spain and Italy at the forefront (Wezeman et al, 2023). Moreover, the EU has shown increasing interest in developing economic, energy and political cooperation with the country (and the GCC in general), by releasing a communication on a “Strategic Partnership with the Gulf” in 2022 and by nominating a special representative for the Gulf region in 2023 (EU Commission, 2022; Council of the EU, 2023).

All these measures send contradictory messages not only to the Saudi authorities, but also to the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood, that hamper the credibility of the EU as a value-oriented actor and risk to sink its efforts in democracy support.

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