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THE ROLE OF SOFT POWER IN SHAPING SAUDI ARABIA'S REGIONAL AND GLOBAL POSITION

INTRODUCTION

The research objective of this paper is to verify the hypothesis that soft power is and will constitute the leading tool in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, particularly promoted by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (known by his initials as MBS). From the perspective of the authorities in Riyadh, for shaping a positive global image of Saudi Arabia, stabilizing the region, strengthening its position therein, maintaining close relations with Western countries while striving for independence from the USA, as well as effectively implementing the Saudi Vision 2030 program – which aims to make the Saudi economy independent from oil export revenue by transforming the country into a technological and business hub – the soft power measures will remain far more significant and effective. A modern, innovative, undergoing reforms, globally open (including to the West), and tolerant towards women Saudi Arabia aims to attract foreign tourists and investors across nearly all economic and cultural spheres and sectors. A reformed Saudi Arabia is also envisioned to play the role of an effective negotiator in regional conflicts (similar to the roles played currently by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt).

To verify this hypothesis, the Author of this paper will attempt to answer the following research questions: What soft power tools does Saudi Arabia utilize to implement its foreign policy objectives? What are the intra-state and extra-state reasons for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy being dominated by soft power instruments? How effective is Saudi Arabia in utilizing soft power tools in its policies? How are Saudi soft power initiatives perceived by leading intra-and extra-regional players (Iran, Turkey, USA, Russia, China, India)?

In verifying the hypothesis and answering the research questions posed in the paper, four major research methods will be utilized. These are: the historical method, which will enable the presentation of the genesis of Saudi dominance, the shaping of its political-economic-military power and the policy of hegemonization in the Persian Gulf subregion; the causal analysis, which will identify the main intra-state and extra-state factors conditioning and determining Riyadh's use of appropriate soft power

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tools; the systemic analysis, which will capture the interrelations between the specific Saudi political system (absolute monarchy undergoing reforms) and the necessity of employing soft power instruments; as well as content analysis method and critical analysis of sources (including Saudi sources).

The paper has been structured into five parts. These include an introduction outlining the methodological assumptions, followed by a second part aimed at explaining the genesis of the emergence of Saudi power over the past few decades. The third part focuses on highlighting the leading intra- and extra-state reasons and factors determining Riyadh's use of soft power tools. Subsequently, the fourth part concerns the analysis of specific examples of soft power tools used as instruments in Riyadh's foreign policy. Finally, the conclusions present the main findings from the analysis, including an assessment of the effectiveness of Saudi soft power initiatives and how they are perceived by key players in the regional and international arena.

THE FORMATION OF SAUDI POWER AND THE HEGEMONIZATION POLICY IN THE PERSIAN GULF

The genesis of contemporary, powerful Saudi Arabia undoubtedly dates back only to the 20th century. The modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia formally emerged as an independent state on 23 September 1932, following nearly 30 years of military struggles aimed at unifying most of the Arabian Peninsula. Previously, the Arabian Peninsula was home to entities such as the Kingdom of Hejaz (1916–1925) and subsequently the Kingdom of Nejd and Hejaz (1926–1932). The Saudi leader, Ibn Saud, was then titled the King of Hejaz, Sultan of Nejd and its Dependencies (Zdanowski, 2004: 119). It was he who ultimately restored the Saudis' dominance over the Arabian Peninsula and then unified its lands, becoming the first Saudi monarch of the independent state.

Over the centuries, the connections between the House of Saud and the Wahhabis have been crucial in shaping both the statehood and the subsequent power of Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism, a fundamentalist religious movement, emerged in the 18th century on the Arabian Peninsula. Its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, made a pact in 1744 with Ibn Saud, the emir of one of the Bedouin states on the Arabian Peninsula. In exchange for recognizing Wahhabism as the official religion, Ibn Saud, with the help of al-Wahhab and his followers, began the effective conquest of the Arabian Peninsula. In the territories they subdued, the Saudi-Wahhabi forces enforced obedience to Wahhabi radical Islam, whose main principles included purging Arabia of other religions and imposing Sharia law on the indigenous population (*Saudi Arabia*, 2017: 14–22).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Abdulaziz Al Saud, who rebuilt the fallen Saudi state, reaffirmed that ultraconservative Wahhabism remained the official religion in Sunni Saudi Arabia. However, it is important to note that in the 20th century, Wahhabism split into two main currents. Some ulama, residing at the Saudi royal court, opposed the radicalization characteristic of Wahhabism and called for liberal reforms in the country (Steele, 2017: 26–27) to stimulate its socio-economic development and strengthen its position as a great power in the regional and international arena.

It was this group of Saudi intellectuals who, on 13 March 2003, sent a letter to the US President George W. Bush, welcoming the news of democratization of Iraq. On the other hand, a strong faction of radical, mainly young Wahhabis, remained loyal to the ultraconservative ideology of al-Wahhab from the 18th century. They called for jihad against infidels and against the Saudi security forces. They attacked the reformist ulama, whom they referred to as “ulama of the sultans”, believing that their fatwas were subordinated to the political aims of the rulers (Nelson, 2015: 51–55).

Therefore, it can be stated that throughout the subsequent decades of the 20th and 21st centuries, the dominance of one or the other Wahhabi current caused Saudi Arabia to either pursue a path of liberal reforms towards an absolute monarchy undergoing reforms or remain in the conservative stagnation of Sharia law in accordance with the 18th-century ideology of Wahhabism.

When analysing the issue of Saudi power formation both in the Middle East and its growing global influence, it is important to emphasize that since the 7th century, the time of Islam's birth, the area of modern-day Saudi Arabia has held a unique place for Muslims worldwide. It was in the territory of Saudi Arabia that the Prophet Muhammad was born, where the Hijra took place, and where the Al-Kaba shrine, to which Muslims from around the world pilgrimage, is located (Yağmur, 2016: 57–85). Saudi Arabia is viewed as the cradle of Islam, with the two most important sites in Muslim culture – Mecca and Medina. Hence, the official title of the Saudi king is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. In the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia is seen as a symbolic state, and its role, especially within Sunni Islam, is invaluable (Nelson, 2015: 61–71). In this context, for decades, the authorities in Riyadh have consistently pursued the goal of global expansion of Islam and rivalry with Shia states and groups perceived as adversaries (particularly the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran). Saudi hegemonization in the Persian Gulf subregion fits perfectly into the intra-Muslim competition for influence, and the export of Sunni Islam (including its extreme version), financed by Saudi Arabia through financial support for building mosques in various parts of the world, is undoubtedly one of the key factors building its position as a great power in the Muslim world (*The World...*, 2017: 314–326).

Among the leading factors constituting the great power status of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is also its economic potential. The country holds the second largest proven oil reserves in the world. It is the largest exporter of this resource among all its producers and the second-largest extractor globally. In 2022, Saudi Arabia's oil production was at 12 million barrels per day, which is its maximum capacity. Saudi Aramco, the state-owned oil company, remains the largest company in terms of gross income, surpassing companies such as Apple by more than double. Therefore, any decision by Riyadh regarding oil production levels significantly impacts the oil market and global price formation. It is also crucial to note that the Saudis quickly realized that building their position as a great power cannot rely solely on the exploitation of natural resources, as these are finite (*Country...*, 2024: 1–11). Hence, the new Saudi Vision 2030 aims to reduce the country's dependence on oil and diversify the Saudi economy.

Although Saudi Arabia remains a member of key organizations for the energy resources extraction market, such as OPEC and OPEC+, the awareness of the necessity to expand its influence and build a great power status has made its goals broader and

more global. This is exemplified by Saudi Arabia's membership in BRICS, announced in January 2024 (although in February 2024 there were indications that Riyadh was still considering its membership) (Ali, 2024). Nonetheless, it is important to note that Riyadh's turn towards the BRICS group is driven by several fundamental reasons. First, Saudi Arabia aims to strengthen cooperation with BRICS countries to enhance economic diversification and reduce its dependence on oil extraction and export. Second, as a leading oil exporter, Saudi Arabia sees joining BRICS as an opportunity to further develop its economy and open new trade possibilities. Third, membership in the BRICS group could help Saudi Arabia pursue its regional hegemonic and great power ambitions and play an increasingly significant role on the geopolitical stage. Fourth, which is particularly noteworthy, membership in BRICS could indirectly revive Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, as Iran has also become a member of this group. Fifth, it would undoubtedly strengthen Riyadh's political position and create an opportunity for it to play a leading mediator role in the Arab world, presenting real competition to Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in this regard. Finally, membership in BRICS constitutes a signal for the USA that the strategic partnership does not have to continue under the current terms, as Riyadh seeks greater independence in its domestic and foreign policies (Malik, Kohar, Tungkagi, 2024: 77–88).

Remaining in the economic domain, it is also worth noting that one of the factors strengthening Riyadh's position both regionally and globally is its well-functioning banking system, which ranks second only to the UAE in the Arab world in terms of size. Saudi Arabia has 36 licensed institutions, including 11 national banks. In addition to commercial banks, there are also four Islamic banks in Saudi Arabia, including the largest such institution in the world, Al Rajhi Bank, as well as five specialized credit institutions that do not engage in deposit-taking but provide long-term developmental financing for the agricultural processing sector and small and medium-sized enterprises. A strong point of Saudi banks is their high liquidity and capital adequacy. Saudi banks do not experience problems with loan quality. For example, at the end of 2022, the percentage of non-performing loans was just 1.8% (Lepczyński, 2024).

Objective factors also contribute to the strengthening of Saudi power, such as its large territory (ranking 12th globally at 2,149,690 km²), geopolitical location, and broadly understood demographic issues. Located on the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia shares land borders with seven countries: Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the UAE and Yemen. Consequently, Riyadh's domestic and foreign policies are heavily influenced by the stability or instability of its neighbours (Benjamin, 2016: 151–174). For instance, of immense significance are: the civil war and the largest humanitarian crisis globally in Yemen (partially resulting from Riyadh's military intervention starting in March 2015); the policy of the UAE, which despite its small size, has recently taken various actions to attain the regional power status, competing with Saudi Arabia; Qatar's policy, which supports extremist terrorist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and maintains close ties with the antagonistic Iran (the 2017 diplomatic crisis); the destabilization of Iraq, caused initially by the US military aggression in 2003, followed by the emergence of ISIS on parts of Iraqi territory, and finally the dominance of the Shia majority leaning towards Iran (Potter, 2017: 51–64).

To summarize, it is important to note that nearly 60% of Saudi Arabia's population is under 30 years of age. The Saudi society is thus young, although it is also considerably diversified. On the one hand, there are individuals who are eager for change, open to reforms and view Saudi Arabia as a rising power. This segment of the population is expected to drive reforms, digitalization and the overall transformation of the country. On the other hand, Saudi society is still deeply rooted in religious conservatism and even Islamic fundamentalism, stemming from a strong sense of Saudi Arabia's unique role and place in the Muslim world and the predominant influence of Wahhabism. Moreover, it should be noted that there are more non-Saudis in the 25–54 age group. These are often foreign workers, usually coming for a short period contract. Therefore, it is difficult to point out how huge a part of society, in reality, is for the changes and can be viewed as a part of a stable driver of reforms, digitalization, and the country's overall transformation (Benjamin, 2016: 97–120).

INTRA- AND EXTRA-STATE DETERMINANTS OF SOFT POWER DOMINANCE IN SAUDI ARABIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Saudi Vision 2030

The government program Saudi Vision 2030 was first announced on 25 April 2016. It is a flagship Saudi project aimed at profoundly transforming the image of Saudi Arabia from a conservative Wahhabi absolute monarchy to a modern and advanced state. The Saudi Vision 2030 project defines the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's aspirations to become a global centre for tourism, culture, sports and entertainment (*Vision 2030*, 2024: 6–83). Its originator and promoter is the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (commonly known as MBS) (*Future...*, 2024). The primary goal of Saudi Vision 2030 is to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil, diversify and modernize the economy, and develop the public services sector. It is based on three major pillars: 1) maintaining Saudi Arabia's status as the centre of the Arab and Muslim world; 2) establishing Saudi Arabia as a global investment powerhouse; 3) strengthening Saudi Arabia's strategic position in the Gulf subregion (*Saudi Vision...*, 2024).

Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS)

The figure of Crown Prince and heir to the throne of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman, has undoubtedly been one of the most crucial factors shaping Saudi domestic and foreign policy in the last decade (Mallat, 2018). The influential figure of MBS, despite his reformist and soft power profile, remains highly controversial both domestically and internationally (Lima, 2023: 1–22). The most significant shadow cast over MBS's image is the case of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi dissident journalist and political commentator who was murdered and dismembered on MBS's orders by Saudi operatives inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 (House, 2019: 1–44).

It is worth adding that the biggest traditional and new challenges for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which the Saudi Crown Prince still has to face, include: the strengthening of Iran's position in the region and its increasingly effective efforts to build a Shia Crescent with countries in Saudi Arabia's immediate vicinity; the not-so-successful privatization of part of Saudi Aramco; the decline in oil prices, which affects the ability to finance and complete the flagship mega-projects of Saudi Vision 2030 on schedule; deteriorating relations between Riyadh and Washington and Riyadh's efforts to reshape the bilateral relations by reducing dependence on the USA; the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's disproportionate response, which caused one of the largest humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip; the suspension of efforts to normalize relations with Israel; and declining public support for Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.

The Abraham Accords and attempts to normalize relations with Israel

One of the crucial factors in Saudi Arabia's soft power strategy remains the establishment of a lasting, official and formal agreement with Israel. Normalization of bilateral relations is in the interest of both parties, and they have been cooperating in various fields for several decades (Yossef, 2021: 3–17).

Over the past decade, especially during Donald Trump's presidency, the geopolitical landscape regarding Arab-Israeli cooperation has shifted, allowing Riyadh to adopt a more flexible approach toward establishing an official agreement with Israel. In this case, the so-called Abraham Accords proved to be extremely helpful, with the United States and Saudi Arabia playing a key role in their signing. These events were a central component of President Trump's Middle East plan (*Rocznik Strategiczny...*, 2021: 309–321).

It should be noted that although Saudi Arabia and Israel did not maintain diplomatic relations, they have systematically strengthened unofficial ties over the past decade, partly due to their converging perception of the threat from Iran. The Saudi-Israeli cooperation has focused on the collaboration between their intelligence services. Nevertheless, despite the deepening cooperation, the Palestinian issue and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policies remained a fundamental challenge for bilateral relations. These policies included expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank, rejecting the two-state solution and employing force against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. While striving to normalize and formalize relations with Israel, the authorities in Riyadh continuously emphasized that without concessions on the Palestinian issue, establishing bilateral relations would be impossible (Oluwashakin, Aleyomi, 2023: 188–196).

The normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel would thus represent a step of enormous political and symbolic significance in the relationship between the Arab world and a Jewish state. The situation was deliberately complicated by Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. One of the aims of this attack was to derail efforts to finalize the planned Saudi-Israeli agreement. In the short term, Hamas succeeded in this regard. Given the plight of Palestinians, who were brutally treated by Israel, the escalation of a highly brutal military operation by Israeli forces in Gaza leading to its destruction and dysfunction, and accusations of genocide by the Israeli army against Palestinians – Riyadh could not remain indifferent and officially continue

talks for an agreement with Israel. As an Arab state, Saudi Arabia could not officially allow itself to betray the Palestinian cause. Consequently, efforts to reach the agreement were temporarily suspended. Importantly, it is a suspension, not a termination, which shows how crucial the pact will be for both countries. They will likely sign it once there is gradual stabilization in the Gaza Strip (Cooper, 2024).

Resumption of diplomatic relations with Iran and cooling of relations with the USA

On 6 April 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to reopen their embassies and resume official visits following an agreement to normalize their relations, signed on 10 March of the same year in Beijing (Chitsazian, 2020: 221–245). During the negotiations of the agreement, it was decided that the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran would meet to implement the accord, arrange for the return of their ambassadors and discuss ways to strengthen bilateral relations. The signed agreement included a confirmation of mutual respect for the sovereignty of both states, including non-interference in each other's internal affairs (*Great...*, 2024: 1–18).

It is important to highlight that the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has added a new dimension to the balance of power in the Middle East. This agreement is beneficial for both parties primarily for economic reasons. For Iran, it creates opportunities for development despite being a state under international sanctions, while for Saudi Arabia, it presents the potential for substantial investments in Iran. However, economic cooperation does not mean an end to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for dominance in the Middle East or attempts by each side to establish hegemony in the Persian Gulf subregion. The contradictions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are too deep and multifaceted to be minimized by a single agreement, especially since these countries pursue different foreign policy visions within their religious spheres – Shia (Iran) and Sunni (Saudi Arabia) (Zeihan, 2016: 176–213).

Equally important, as demonstrated by the Saudi-Iranian agreement, is the fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran do not need the United States to achieve their goals in the Middle East, with China easily filling the vacuum left by the USA. While the situation is clear for Iran – the United States and Iran do not maintain diplomatic relations and the USA is the leading initiator of sanctions against Iran – the situation is much more complex for Saudi Arabia. For decades, successive American administrations have aimed to bring Riyadh into their sphere of influence and even to make Saudi Arabia a client state (Jalal, Khan, Pitafi, 2023: 6–10). It should also be noted that the main obstacle to replacing the US-Saudi partnership with a Sino-Saudi one is the fact that for most GCC countries, Washington is still the primary guarantor of security, as evidenced by multi-billion arms contracts (over USD 140 billion in the case of Saudi Arabia) and the share of the Chinese side is still at 5% (*Saudi Arabia...*, 2024).

However, the last decade, marked by the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and his foreign policy vision, has seen an increasing distance in the US-Saudi relations. This situation resulted in part from the persistent criticism from President Joe Biden regarding human rights abuses by the Saudi authorities. Of course, the growing

divergences in the US-Saudi relations do not imply that they have lost their strategic nature. The mutual ties and dependencies are too deep for events such as the Saudi-Iranian agreement or differences in views on the Gaza conflict to disrupt this strategic relationship (Blanchard, 2023: 1–29).

SOFT POWER TOOLS IN SAUDI ARABIA'S FOREIGN POLICY – CASE STUDIES

Riyadh's policy utilizing soft power tools involves not only adjustments in foreign policy but also, and perhaps most importantly, mega-investments in sports, infrastructure, architecture, tourism and social sectors. These mega-investments have two parallel dimensions. The first is the aim of building national branding. The second is the need to unite Saudi society around the royal family and strengthen MBS's internal position.

Sportswashing

To highlight some of Riyadh's largest and most significant soft power initiatives, it is essential to start with the widely publicized sports dimension. International sporting events organized by Riyadh have become a very accessible and extremely effective tool for creating a positive image of the host nation (Grix, 2016: 18–23), elevating the kingdom's prestige both regionally and internationally, as well as gaining favour and even acceptance of other international arena actors for the Saudi authorities' actions in various fields. For the authorities in Riyadh, sporting events have become a convenient element of public diplomacy aimed at national branding (Alhusein, 2022).

It is therefore important to emphasize once again that for at least a decade, Saudi major investments in sports have been an effective soft power tool used by the authorities in Riyadh to change the perception of the kingdom on the international stage. These investments are intended to symbolize the modernization, transformation and advancement of the country, attract foreign investors from other sectors and numerous tourists, and serve as an instrument for gaining approval and legitimacy from the Saudi society, particularly the young people under the age of 30, who make up the majority of the population. MBS, who is the face of these transfers and sporting events, uses sportswashing to create his image as a modern ruler who understands the needs of his society and works to strengthen Saudi Arabia's position and prestige on a global scale. Sportswashing is also aimed at normalizing relations between Western countries and Saudi Arabia, which will cease to be perceived as the most conservative absolute monarchy, permanently violating human rights in every dimension.

Infrastructure mega-investments

The authorities in Riyadh have invested in a number of monumental projects, among which it is worth highlighting at least a few key, controversial or most out-

standing ones. One of such ambitious projects is undoubtedly the futuristic mega-city NEOM, emerging in Tabuk near the Red Sea coast. As a prestigious ecological project, NEOM will utilize the latest technologies with a particular emphasis on artificial intelligence. It will feature a high-speed railway, driverless cars and flying drone-taxis powered solely by renewable energy sources, ensuring a zero-emission ecosystem. The project is designed to be a broad platform for international investments. NEOM aims to become a regional powerhouse in water production and storage, based on desalination. NEOM will consist of 10 projects, referred to as regions. So far, details of four of the regions have been announced: The Line, Oxagon, Trojena and Sindalah (NEOM, 2024).

Saudi blue economy

Saudi Arabia is undertaking a series of investments aimed at protecting marine areas, particularly the Red Sea ecosystem, ensuring inclusive and sustainable economic growth (*Future...*, 2024). By investing in these giga-projects, most of which focus on marine areas and are built based on sustainable development principles in line with UN goals, Saudi authorities are promoting the blue economy (*How...*, 2024). In recent years, while focusing on soft power actions, Saudi Arabia has made historic commitments to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 (Life Below Water). Under the Saudi Green Initiative, Saudi Arabia has committed to protecting 30% of its terrestrial and marine areas by 2030, in line with the “30x30” goal established under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

CONCLUSIONS

Saudi Arabia is thus a strategically significant state, and its foreign policy decisions have broad repercussions both regionally and internationally. This is particularly relevant given that over the past decade, there has been a fundamental shift in Riyadh's foreign policy from hard to soft power. This state of affairs is the result of several factors, including the rationalization of foreign and domestic policy goals, such as Riyadh's failure in the Yemeni civil war, ineffective pressure on Qatar, ongoing but ineffective rivalry with Iran, the depletion of Saudi oil resources, the need for economic diversification, the desire to reduce dependence on the United States, the goal of transforming Saudi Arabia into a technological giant, and the appointment of Mohammed Bin Salman as Crown Prince along with the implementation of his flagship project, Saudi Vision 2030.

Saudi soft power aims to create a positive global image of Saudi Arabia, stabilize the conflict-prone Middle East region, develop a new model of regional security, and thereby strengthen Saudi Arabia's position as a key player in the Middle East. It also seeks to maintain close relations with Western countries and China while gradually reducing dependence on the USA.

From the perspective of the authorities in Riyadh, the shift towards soft power is intended to portray Saudi Arabia as a modern, innovative, open and tolerant monar-

chy, which will attract foreign tourists and investors across almost all economic and cultural sectors. By primarily using soft power, Saudi Arabia also sees its role as an effective negotiator in regional conflicts, aiming to take over the role of a successful mediator currently held by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

Soft power is not merely a temporary tool but will be the leading instrument in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the coming years. The face and symbol of this soft power strategy will remain Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, while the tools used to implement this soft power will mainly include sportswashing, infrastructure giga-projects, the blue economy and the progressive (sometimes superficial) liberalization of socio-cultural life, aimed at engaging foreign capital in the kingdom, mega-investments and increasing tourism revenues to outcompete the UAE.

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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia, a regional power with hegemonic ambitions, plays a crucial role in shaping the balance of power in the Middle East and is also involved in the rivalry between major extra-regional powers (USA, Russia, China, India) for influence in the region. The research

problem is contained in the statement that in the mid-2020s, in order to maintain its prestige and strengthen its great power status while effectively competing for regional dominance against the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey, Riyadh's authorities have rationalized their selection of foreign policy tools, shifting the focus from hard power to soft power. This shift is evident in Riyadh's decisions such as: efforts to end the war in Yemen; attempts to de-escalate the conflict with Iran; resolving the diplomatic dispute with Qatar; restoring Syria's membership in the Arab League; efforts to improve relations with Turkey; employing sportswashing; and prioritizing blue economy initiatives. The shift resulted from the fact that Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman started to perceive soft power as the most effective means to stabilize the regional situation, which is a *conditio sine qua non* for implementing the giga-projects under Saudi Vision 2030, diversifying the Saudi economy, facilitating Riyadh's leadership among Sunni Arab states and reducing dependence on the USA.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, soft power, Mohammed Bin Salman, Saudi Vision 2030, sportswashing

ROLA SOFT POWER W KSZTAŁTOWANIU REGIONALNEJ I GLOBALNEJ POZYCJI ARABII SAUDYJSKIEJ

STRESZCZENIE

Arabia Saudyjska, mocarstwo regionalne o ambicjach hegemonicznych, odgrywa kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu bliskowschodniego układu sił, jak również wpisuje się w rywalizację mocarstw zewnątrz-regionalnych (USA, Rosja, Chiny, Indie) o wpływy na Bliskim Wschodzie. Problem badawczy zawiera się w stwierdzeniu, że w połowie trzeciej dekady XXI wieku, by utrzymać prestiż i umacniać pozycję mocarstwową, a przy tym, by prowadzić skuteczną rywalizację o dominację w regionie z szyicką Islamską Republiką Iranu, czy z Republiką Turcji, władze w Rijadzie dokonały racjonalizacji doboru instrumentów w polityce zagranicznej, co wiązało się z przesunięciem środka ciężkości z hard na soft power. Było to widoczne w takich decyzjach Rijadu jak: działania na rzecz zakończenia wojny w Jemenie; podjęcie prób deeskalacji konfliktu z Iranem; wygaszenie sporu dyplomatycznego z Katarą; przywrócenie członkostwa Syrii w Lidze Państw Arabskich; próby ocieplenia relacji saudyjsko-tureckich; stosowanie sportwashingu; postawienie na blue economy. Taki stan rzeczy wynikał z faktu, że soft power zaczęła być postrzegana przez następcę tronu Mohammada Bin Salmana jako najbardziej skuteczny środek do ustabilizowania sytuacji w regionie, co stanowi *conditio sine qua non* realizacji giga-projektów w ramach Saudi Vision 2030, dywersyfikacji saudyjskiej gospodarki, ułatwienia Rijadowi liderowania wśród sunnickich państw arabskich, zmniejszanie zależności od USA.

Słowa kluczowe: Arabia Saudyjska, soft power, Mohammad Bin Salman, Saudi Vision 2030, sportwashing