Saudi Arabia and the Use of Soft Power

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**Saudi Arabia and the Use of Soft Power**

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**Introduction**

Present day events in the Middle East and North Africa have confronted Saudi Arabia with some of its greatest challenges as a nation. The political landscape has been transformed by popular movements for democratization (Arab Spring). The serious economic and political turbulence that confronts the region does not promise to ameliorate anytime soon. And in the greater sphere of global relations, Saudi Arabia faces a critical and uncertain future with the US disengaging from Iraq and the controversy over a nuclear Iran. Saudi Arabia’s domestic challenges have proved no less imposing. While common wisdom has harped on the abundance of Saudi hard power, couched in great oil wealth, as the Kingdom’s preponderant solution to its problems, in reality the Kingdom has made use of a significant endowment of soft power in facing its challenges. The strength and importance of this soft power has all too often gone unappreciated. Never has the need for a resolute continuation of the use of this soft power been more pronounced in order for Saudi Arabia to effectively confront its domestic and international challenges. This paper assesses the modern day international and domestic challenges facing Saudi Arabia and analyzes how the nation’s soft power can be employed to effectively deal with those challenges. Section one identifies the foundations of soft power. Sections two takes inventory of Saudi Arabia’s principal sources of international and domestic soft power. Section three analyzes the potential of this soft power as a means of confronting the Kingdom’s most pressing challenges and problems. Section four offers brief concluding remarks.
**I. What is Soft Power**

Joseph Nye developed the concept of soft power in 1990. Since then the concept has received much academic attention, but it is also one of the few concepts in academic political science that has garnered broad attention in the media and even among politicians.\(^1\)

Theoretically, soft power represents a Constructivist/Neoliberal vision of influence that is in contradistinction to the Realist vision of power. Realists have historically seen influence as a direct function of material resources: how large an army does a nation have?; how wealthy is a nation?; how well endowed is a nation in terms of territory, natural resources, and people?; and how technologically advanced is the nation? In this vision, the sources of influence are tangible assets with which nations can *extract* compliance on the part of other nations. This is referred to as *hard power*. While hard power can manifest itself in intangible ways (threats, alliance commitments, swaggering), the intangible avenues are always founded on some tangible pool of resources that can be activated in order to extract compliance (e.g., threats and swaggering are only effective if they are backed up by muscle). This hard vision of power accords well with the Realist obsession with the pervasive impact of anarchy (i.e., nations have no absolute authority which exists above them) on the behavior of nation-states. Since there are no absolute guarantors of a nation’s security, only physical assets can be relied on to meet an important challenge. While allies and international organizations may be abundant, there is no guarantee they will come to a nation’s aid when crises occur. Similarly, one may have generated much goodwill among other nations, but even so there is no guarantee that this goodwill could be turned into physical support in times of dire need. The vision draws heavily on a Hobbesian state of nature.\(^2\)

Soft power occupies the other end of the spectrum in terms of the foundations of national influence. Rather than coercing compliance through physical assets, soft power constitutes the *cultivation* of compliance through the creation of goodwill in the international community. The goodwill is essentially cultivated by building a positive image. The positive image endears nations with soft power to other nations in the international system, such that latter will be amicable toward the goals and interests of the soft power nation. To give a simple analogy, one can obtain goals and protect interests by being a bully (rely exclusively on hard power-i.e., muscle); but they can also do so by comporting themselves in ways that create respect, and thus others will be amenable to their goals and interests. In fact, over-reliance on hard power (*the hard power curse*) has a tendency to generate unfortunate consequences (*hard disempowerment*) for nations, and this often results in counter-productive outcomes (e.g., coercion generates resentment, which in turn could produce countervailing uses of force). The use of soft power

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\(^1\) The literature has become extensive. For good bibliographic sources and explanations of the concept, see Gallarotti (2010a, 2010b, and 2011).

\(^2\) Mearsheimer (2001) best articulates the Realist view of the effects of anarchy in the international system.
generally produces fewer such negative externalities. At some minimum manifestation, soft power will make other nations less inimical to the interests and objectives of soft power nations. At some more extreme manifestation, the respect and goodwill garnered by soft power nations actually make other nations pursue the interests and goals of the soft power nations. The most extreme manifestation in this respect is when a soft power nation becomes a role model, and other nations seek to adopt the role-model-nation’s policies (foreign and/or domestic).

The relationship between the two kinds of power is hardly simple and unproblematic. As noted, the difference is not founded on tangibility (as many scholars suggest). Hard power can be manifest in intangible or symbolic ways (threats, swaggering). Obversely, soft power can be realized through the use of tangible means (providing food aid to starving nations). Furthermore, soft and hard power unfold in ways that are not mutually exclusive, but often do so through interaction effects. For example, generating goodwill and respect may earn a soft power nation more military bases. Obversely, military support against potential enemies will garner much goodwill and respect on the part of the client nation. In this respect, both types of power can complement one another. But hard and soft power can also work at odds. For example, overly coercive policies can generate extreme enmity and vituperation on the part of target nations, thus completely compromising any sort of positive image of the perpetrator nations. Conversely, overreliance on goodwill may cause a nation to neglect the building of an adequate defense capability (i.e., this would be a moral hazard effect on the part of overly soft policies—soft disempowerment). Ultimately, in order for nations to achieve some optimal level of influence, they would have to rely on some combination of hard and soft power. This has been referred to as smart or cosmopolitan power (Gallarotti 2010b).

There are fundamentally two main sources of soft power: (1) domestic policies and actions and (2) international policies and actions (see Table 1). In terms of international actions and policies, nations must show respect for multilateralism. This constitutes a commitment to addressing regional and global issues in a cooperative way based on norms of equality and fair play: where actions and policies are considered within the framework of existing laws, principles and norms. In the case of more powerful regional players, international soft power is often garnered through enlightened leadership: i.e., making unilateral sacrifices in order to achieve collective regional goals. In this sense, the regional leader would function as a paternalistic provider in the theory of collective action. This is tantamount to a case of benevolent hegemony where the leading power disproportionately bears the costs of public goods for the region (Olsen 1965, Snidal 1985, and Kindleberger 1986). It is at this international level that the Constructivist and Neoliberal foundations of soft power are most apparent. Constructivists underscore the influence that can be generated by a commitment to norms and principles, while Neoliberals emphasize the advantages of multilateralism over unilateralism as a source of influence.

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3 Of course, soft power does not carry the guarantees that hard power does: one cannot guarantee that a friendly nation will come to one’s aid in time of war.
With respect to domestic sources of soft power, the two most important factors contributing to a nation’s soft power are its culture and political system. Culturally, there is much that can generate respect and endearment. Many of the specific factors cited as creating soft power at the domestic political level center around politically liberal principles. But non-democratic regimes can also generate outcomes that suggest popular support for political outcomes, and hence acquire soft power. At the basis of political soft power at the domestic level is an absence of political discontent within the system of government and its policies. So just as there can be illiberal democracies (Zakaria 2003), so too can non-democracies generate politically stable environments that generate soft power. This could be stated in a reformulation of Huntington’s concept of the political gap. Stable governing systems that create soft power minimize the gap between what governments produce and what the people demand. Hence to the extent that this gap is absent in a political system, soft power will be created irrespective of the nominal form of government (Huntington 1968).

Beyond the political outcomes, the soft power created by culture derives from special characteristics in a society that other people find appealing or venerate. Organic or cohesive qualities among people of a culture generate great respect and appeal among foreign societies. Similarly, a life perceived as manifesting a high quality is equally attractive. Furthermore, lifestyle itself is subject to critical scrutiny. Some lifestyles generate especially broad approval, whether merely respect or copied. Other qualities such as tolerance and opportunity are subsumed within the greater categories of quality of life and lifestyle. These qualities account for the greater appreciation of particular lifestyles. It is for these reasons that the U.S. is often identified as a cultural hegemon, especially among the youth of the world. In terms of the influence of an American lifestyle, the U.S. is the greatest net exporter of culture in the world (Barnet and Cavanagh 1996). Finally, a nation may be endowed with very special significance as a cultural entrepot. In the case of the U.S., it is an entrepot of modern popular culture, globalization, and capitalism. Rome is a cultural entrepot as the center of the Christian and ancient worlds. Many nations possess qualities of cultural significance, even if they are not cultural entrepots. While they may generate less cultural soft power, they nonetheless attain significant influence due to their special cultural qualities.

It is tempting to look at attempts to garner soft power as actions based on decisionmaking rules that deviate from self-interest. This is wrong because while soft power does require the investment of resources to produce a strong and positive image, it also generates greater influence in the world polity. And it is most rational to make investments that will generate significant returns in terms of power. In this respect, soft power in general (but not always) is similar to cooperative moves in strategic games like Stag Hunt or Prisoner’s Dilemma. For the best individual outcomes (in terms of where the games end up), you must also attain the best or a

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4 Interestingly, Machiavelli’s _Prince_ is a testament to the possibilities of non-democracies creating liberal political outcomes. For Machiavelli, autocrats could only survive if they honored principles of civil government. On this point, see Gallarotti (2010b, pps. 107-125).
very good collective outcomes. And hence these games require individual decisions about optimal moves to be undertaken in the context of what is also good for the group: i.e., employing social utility functions.

Table 1. Sources of Soft Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to contribute to multilateral solutions to international problems</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for international laws, norms, regimes and institutions</td>
<td>--Social Cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental reliance on cooperation and a reluctance to solve problems unilaterally</td>
<td>--Quality of Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect international treaties and alliance commitments</td>
<td>--Opportunity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Tolerance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Lifestyle</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--Cultural Significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutions and political outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>function in a way that are perceived as legitimate and desirable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


II. Saudi Soft Power

International Sources

Saudi Arabia emerged as the principal candidate for a regional as well as international leadership role in the postwar period. It is the largest, most populated, and top producer of oil in the Middle East. It is also the very religious capitol of Islam (often called the “most Islamic nation”), as well as the leading entrepot for Arab culture. In this respect, one can say that Saudi Arabia is the center of four important worlds: the Middle East, the Arab world, the Muslim world, and world of energy. In this respect, the Saudi’s emerged as natural leaders of important regional and international communities. Considering the political and economic importance of these four networks, the fact that Saudi Arabia is the lynchpin to all four makes Saudi Arabia one of the most important and influential nations in the world. No doubt this core position in these networks has endowed Saudi Arabia with hard power (i.e., power over material resources), but the Saudis have been especially astute at balancing this hard power with initiatives to raise and maintain its standing and image among its network of nations. The foreign policies of Saudi Arabia in the later-half of the 20th century and more recently are a testament to this quest to balance its material resources with a vigorous quest for soft power in its most important networks of international relations, i.e., ultimately a quest for Cosmopolitan or smart power (Gallarotti 2010b). The postwar period saw Saudi Arabia manifesting a commitment to multilateralism in these communities by building strong networks of cooperation in both the region and the world at large. At the global level it joined the U.N. in 1945, shortly after the organization’s founding. It has emerged as an important member of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and more recently the World Trade Organization. Regionally, it was a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Arab League, Muslim World League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. It has also expressed strong support for the formation of an Arab Customs Union by 2015 and Arab Common Market by 2020. In the words of the Saudi Foreign Ministry itself, Saudi foreign policy is strongly grounded in a major soft-power framework that is oriented around the following principles and goals:

“good-neighbor policy, non interference in the internal affairs of other countries, strengthen relations with the Gulf States and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, strengthen relations with Arab and Islamic countries for the benefit of common interests of these countries, as well as advocate their issues, adopt nonalignment policy, establish cooperation relations with friendly countries, and play effective role in the international and regional organizations” (The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia 2005).

This policy has been pursued in four multilateral networks: the Gulf, the Arab community, the Muslim community, and the international community at large. The Gulf Circle, or Persian Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates), represents the principal network within which Saudi foreign policy has been marshaled in the
postwar period. Based upon cultural, religious, geographic, historical, and even blood connections; Saudi Arabia has most closely worked within this network in attending to both its specific and milieu goals. This network functioned well informally until 1981, with formal status being proclaimed in the form of a regional union called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC has made vigorous attempts at cooperating on all issues that have both important domestic and trans-border implications for all of its members. While international unions among less developed nations and even unions among developed nations have historically issued rhetoric about a need for concerted cooperation in order for each member nation to achieve its full potential, the GCC has achieved such a level of cooperation to a far greater extent than most other regional blocs or unions. The substantive manifestations of coordination span the field of important issues, from a security entente to cultural exchange.

The GCC has recently taken major steps in consolidating a union by creating a common market in 2008 (that eliminated all barriers to trade in goods and services) and a monetary council intended to deliver a common currency. Most recently in 2012 the six members announced that the GCC would be moving toward a more formal security and economic confederation. The special success of the GCC no doubt emanates largely from the connections noted above, but it is all the more reinforced by Saudi leadership and the special connection in energy. The Saudis have been the principal foundation of economic and military support not only for the union, but also domestic support for each of the members. For example, 70% of Bahrain’s state oil and gas revenues come from the Saudi’s Abu Shafah oil field. This enlightened leadership has been a principal source of Saudi soft power in the region. And with respect to the energy connection, as members of OPEC, the economic fates of the six nations are tied together in a far more crucial way, a way that separates them from most regional blocs. Maintaining a cartel places them in a position of vulnerability interdependence, whereby any unilateral initiatives that would upset collective targets and objectives have the potential to undermine the economic fates of both the individual nations undertaking the actions and the fates of the other cartel members. In this case, the group as a whole faces a prodigious need to reign in unilateral policy orientations because of the inherent prisoner’s dilemma of defection which afflicts cartels (in any given play of the game, each nation in a cartel faces individual incentives to refrain from cooperating on production quotas, no matter what other nations do). In the longer run, such dilemmas can be solved by iterated play. But even under iterated play, there needs to be a leader that keeps the cartel functioning in the face of defection (what the Saudi’s have historically done—see below) or very close connections between the members that would allow them to collectively solve the problem. The later is a far more difficult a solution, but the GCC can be said to have demonstrated that kind of cooperative capacity (The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia 2005, Gause 2002, Moran 1981, and Knickmeyer and Delmar-Morgan 2012).

In this respect, the hard power of oil money has allowed it to build up significant good will as a store of soft power. Roughly 90% of Saudi export earnings and 75% of the government revenues come from oil exports (Jones 2010, p. 6).
Unlike in other regions that feature asymmetrical power relations among its members, the Saudi’s have resisted taking too strong a hand in guiding the many multilateral initiatives of the members of the circle. It is difficult to see even attempts at proclaiming some special authority based on its cultural and economic power. Indeed the Saudis have maintained a much softer type of leadership that is based on collective goals and enlightened intervention, i.e., hegemonic aid and support with some strings attached. Within the Arab and Muslim communities, whose major organizational manifestation are the Arab League, the Muslim World League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation; Saudi Arabia has reinforced its multilateral relations within the GCC. Within the circle of the independent Arab states, the Saudi’s have taken a central role in pursuing the objectives of prosperity, security and solidarity. Its leadership has taken the form of principal mediator in Arab disputes as well as the principal source of international aid to Arab states. Moreover, it has taken a leading role in pursuing goals of common interests among the states, especially in addressing a stable and fair solution to the Palestinian question. More recently the Saudi’s have coordinated and pushed for an especially engaged role in the political problems in Yemen, Libya and Syria in order to encourage political transitions that would not disrupt the structure of League membership and chemistry (Gause 2002 and The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia 2005).

Relations in the Arab circle have, in turn, been reinforced by Saudi leadership in the circle of Muslim states. This circle has always been an especially important collective venue for Saudi foreign policy, especially in its organizational forms--The Muslim World League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Since Islam is regarded as the foundation of Saudi foreign policy, like domestic policy, the Islamic alliance forms a crucial conduit through which Saudi Arabia manages and marshals its multilateral soft and hard power. These two organizations are especially important venues for marshaling Saudi soft power as the religious capitol of the Islamic world (see below). As with the GCC, the cooperation within the Muslim group essentially seeks to enhance the security and prosperity of each member through the collective efforts of the entire community. And as with the Arab circle, Saudi leadership and aid are among the most important factors in maintaining the solidarity of the group and prosperity of each member. Saudi Arabia receives requests from Islamic countries not only in times of humanitarian disaster, but also for development needs such as building an airport in Senegal or roads in Yemen. Al-Yahya and Fustier (2011) depicts the maintenance of its role as leader of the Muslim world as the key foreign policy priority of Saudi Arabia. Responding to any call for assistance is but a fulfillment of a long array of obligations by the Kingdom to the Islamic World. The promotion of pan-Islamism has been central to Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy and to making the best out of its religious soft power. Broadly understood as an ideology based on the solidarity of the umma, or community of believers, pan-Islamism contains a normative imperative to help other Muslims in time of crisis and to work toward a sort of unity between Muslims that does not conflict with the new world fabric. In contrast to a secular nationalist political ideology, the political and social order fostered by Saudi Arabia is derived from a religious precept with religious identity, not culture or ethnicity, at its core. Rubin (2010) noted that the use of political ideology has been an instrument of alliance building (through power of persuasion), as well as a way to bolster domestic legitimacy. However, apolitical ideologies are more effective in reaching beyond the conscience of the public to reinforce consensus. In light of
the appreciation of the extraordinary impact of the Saudi Arabian cultural propagation in other countries, Woollacott, (2002) rejects the claim that the resulting position of authority relies on either Saudi Arabia’s current alliance with the U.S. or on its extensive oil reserves.

The multiple channels of solidarity among the three overlapping communities allow the Saudi’s much more influence and flexibility in guiding the course of foreign relations among its allied nations. The frequency and diversity of the institutional interactions give the Saudi’s extensive agenda power, which ultimately translates into greater influence over domestic and foreign policies of the member states within each of the three circles (Gause 2002 and Rubin 2010a).

Within the greater international circle, the Saudi’s are more intent on taking opportunities within the world system for domestic security and prosperity, then forming more intimate alliances like the ones in the previous three circles. But even here, while the fate of the outer circle is not as important as the developments within the Kingdom’s three inner circles of allies, still there are networks of cooperation that are crucial to the welfare of the Kingdom, and it is within these networks that Saudi Arabia continues to work to preserve the viability of its multilateral arrangements. The most important of these is the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Historically, the Saudi’s have been the principal reason for the success of the cartel through their role as swing producer. Like any other cartel, OPEC has been plagued by the ever-present threat of dissolution as a result of defection, as each member faces a common prisoner’s dilemma incentive to cheat (in this case, produce more oil than it should) irrespective of what other members do. The Saudis have historically maintained collective quotas in the face of cheating by cutting their own production below levels that would maximize their revenues. Hence, they have sacrificed extensive economic benefits in order to keep the cartel alive. While the Saudi’s have also used more punitive measures in maintaining discipline in the cartel, such as diplomatic confrontations and occasional resort to overproductions that would drive prices down significantly, still the Saudi’s have shown an ongoing willingness to accept the burden of cheating by sacrificing their own revenues. But the leadership of OPEC has also been crucial to navigating another important sphere in the Kingdom’s foreign relations: its relations with the West. In this respect, enlightened leadership placed the Saudi’s between two conflicting objectives: to maintain the viability of the cartel while keeping the price of oil at levels that would not alienate Western consumer nations. Saudi Arabia can be said to have dealt fairly perspicaciously in this precarious position between a rock and hard place. As Gause (2012, p. 204) notes, the Saudi’s have deftly followed a soft path of “quite consensus building and deal making.” Moreover, while it has shown the willingness to sacrifice revenues in order to boast the

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6 A growing literature attests to the widespread and growing influence of religion on international relations via interfaith conferences, symposia and initiation of formal and informal dialogs. Saudi Arabia’s religious position makes it essentially a religious hegemon in terms of soft power. On the influence of religion on international relations, see Fox and Sandler (2004) and Haynes (2007).

7 Saudi Arabia’s swing producer role emanates from its prolific oil production (world’s largest exporter of crude) and abundant reserves (1/4 of the world’s reserves), but also the speed with which it can produce oil: it can produce an additional 2 million barrels overnight (Gause 2002.)
revenues of other OPEC nations, it has indulged in another kind of benevolent leadership on the other front by boosting production beyond OPEC targets when Western nations have been especially victimized by high oil prices, even though it has been far from an OPEC dove in its support for a high price of crude oil. This power over oil makes Saudi Arabia one of the key lynchpins in the global economy, as swings in the global economy since the 1970s have been strongly influenced by the price of oil ((Moran 1981, Amuzegar 2001, Faucon and Said 201, Gause and Jones 2012, and Rifkin 2011).

Both the Kingdom’s special role in the global economy and the geo-politics of the Middle East has brought it into a critical relation with the US. While there has been much to disrupt this relation, still the relation is strongly set in soft bilateralism. The interests of the two nations have accorded on many fronts, often due to the willingness of the Saudis to accommodate American foreign policy goals. The Kingdom has consistently interceded in OPEC arrangements to prevent ruinous energy prices for the West, accommodated American security interests in allowing American air bases and military passage for its operations, served effectively as a balancer in the Middle East, offered its services to quell regional friction in peace initiatives pushed by the US, and taken a strong stand against terrorism (Gause 2002).

**Domestic Sources**

Just as Saudi Arabia has long been beset by various international challenges that have tested its soft and hard power endowments, its domestic conditions have been no less difficult. The Kingdom has been historically beset by religious, geographic, political, socio-economic, and even tribal divisions. These divisions were often exacerbated by outside forces in order to undermine the strength of the ruling regime: Nasser in the 1950s and 60s, Iran in the 1980s, and Saddam Hussein in the 1980s and 90s. Indeed, Saudi society is anything but homogeneous, and its veil of Islamic devotion masks a fundamentally fractured society. Even the birth of the Kingdom was a struggle to unite independent regions that had been at odds for centuries. The ruling regime has had to draw on all of its hard and soft power resources to make this fractured system function as a stable and prosperous state. As with international soft power, a great deal of the domestic soft power enjoyed by the Saudi ruling regime emanates from its hard power, more specifically oil wealth. The ruling family has historically used this oil wealth to solidify its rule and invest in domestic political and religious stability. This hard “distributive” capacity has been responsible for bringing the factions that potentially challenged the legitimacy of the state and regime into a stable co-existence. The fact that the Saudi’s are far richer than any other of the regimes in the region and the fact that their economy is doing relatively better than other regional economies, suggests that this distributive power is relatively more potent than in other nations. We saw microcosmic manifestations of the relative superiority of Saudi hard capacity in the wake of the Arab Spring, during the time which King Abdullah ratcheted up transfers to a variety of groups far more than was done in nations faced with revolutionary movements. In March of 2012 the King instituted a large bailout to Saudi citizens and institutions. Distributions were also increased to selected religious institutions. He even convinced businesses to give larger bonuses to their employees. The Saudi’s experienced little fallout from the Arab Spring (some small
demonstrations in Shia areas, some petitions for reform, and some activity in the media), which reflected a political legitimacy that created significant immunity to the revolutionary virus. The regime used little physical force to counter demands for reform. In this respect it has historically been the case that the Saudi’s classic hard power resources, physical suppression through the use of police and armies, have played a smaller part in consolidating the state. And this is a reflection of not only the effectiveness of the distributive strategy, but also of the inherent stability of the regime that emanates from a greater domestic soft power (Gause 2002, Lippman 2012, and Gause and Jones 2012).

The two principal sources of the Kingdom’s domestic soft power emanate from the ruling family itself and the nation’s religious prominence. Interestingly, many of the soft power sources that derive from politically liberal principals are apparent in Saudi Arabia as well. The absolutist structure of governance obfuscates a system that possesses many of the characteristics of liberal political cultures. The ruling regime actually functions according to broad norms of majoritarian public interest and consensus among the ruling elite. Hence in terms of outcomes, governance is pluralistic because the ruling family members need to be on board on important issues, and society is in general not subjected to extensive gaps between public interests and regime outcomes. In this sense, the regime functions much like European principalities in the Middles Ages, which were often titular monarchies but functioned as civic republics. This was the result of the survival and resilience of Roman institutions in guiding the political practices of ruling families throughout this period in European history (Lindsay 1962). While Saudi men do not have the political agency that citizens in liberal democracies have, they enjoy a great many of the freedoms that the later citizens enjoy (women, of course, are yet to acquire such freedom). So in terms of political outcomes, the enlightened paternalism of the Saudi regime is closer to democratic liberalism than regimes of oriental despots. Indeed, the ruling family has shown a very long tradition of sensitivity to popular moods, given their willingness to depose kings that were seen as unfit, as well as a willingness to deny successors that proved to be widely unacceptable in the public eye.

Beyond this ascension of civic republican outcomes, the Al Saud family itself enjoys a personal legitimacy among the Saudi public that gives it significant soft power. The present line is the only ruling family that the nation has known. Moreover, they are venerated as a heroic legacy of the founder of the Kingdom, King Abdul-Aziz, who overcame great obstacles in joining independent regions that had been in an adversarial relationship for centuries. The initial triumph has carried much political currency for his airs, which have been seen as carrying on the great union. In fact, much of the perception of the family is embedded in a belief that they are the ones that are they key force in maintaining the delicate union among a fractured society. Furthermore, unlike a variety of autocrats in the Middle East and beyond, who have been seen as Western puppets or not of the people, the Al Saud are home grown people who descend from the original Saudi tribes. Moreover, the Al Saud enjoy a greater religious legitimacy relative to other ruling families in the Middle East. The rise of the family, as a ruling elite, was facilitated by an alliance with Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the founder of what would become known
as Wahhabism, which represents the dominant branch of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. These special characteristics give the Al Saud a robust political legitimacy. The strength of this legitimacy is historically evident in movements for domestic reform (whether from the right or the left). Such movements have principally taken the form of quests for regime change rather than regime transformation, i.e., demands for change from within the ruling structure, rather than demands to change the ruling structure itself (Riedel 2011 and Lippman 2012, pps. 9-17).

This domestic political soft power is reinforced by a religious soft power that derives from the fact that Saudi Arabia is the capitol of Islam. It is the so-called "Land of the Two Holy Mosques": referring to Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and Al-Masjid al-Nabawi in Medina, the two holiest places in Islam. The “most Islamic nation” is visited by over one million pilgrims a year. It is host to a plethora of Islamic religious organizations and a prolific donor to Muslim charities and causes all over the world. While Saudi Arabia society is fractured in disparate ways, even religiously, there is a fundamental unifying force in Islam that cuts through all of the divisions. This religious status represents the Kingdom’s most robust soft power resource, both for domestic and for international objectives. This “green cloak of Islam” has generated preponderant political capital for the Kingdom (Lippman 2012, p. 13). Internationally, the outcomes in the most important multilateral networks in which the Saudi’s function and prosper are, to a greater or lesser extent, often influenced by the psychological power inherent in Saudi Arabia’s religious authority. A good part of Muslim scholars and followers of Islamic orthodoxy regard the Saudi religious leaders as the most authentic source of Islamic jurisprudence and religious doctrine. Frequently, this religious power has been intentionally marshaled to obtain specific goals, while at other times the desired outcomes have emanated from a less contrived and more spontaneous realization of this religious power. Domestically, this integration or synthesis of religion and political authority has been a most powerful political weapon for the regime. The integration of politics and Islamic law have lent great legitimacy to the ruling regime, as the objectives of the ruling regime are synonymous with Islamic doctrine. In essence, the regime is conterminous with Islamic law, thus sanctifying state interests and objectives. Moreover, the union between politics and religion in Saudi Arabia is greater in the Kingdom relative to other nations where important religious leaders function independently of the state. In Saudi Arabia, religious authorities are employees of the state, hence there is a far greater connection between state and religion. The legitimacy of governance created by this synthesis of religion and authority has garnered much soft power over conservative and liberal power networks in Saudi society and politics. And among these networks, while political outcomes themselves would seem deficient from a vantage point of Western liberal democracy, the support for such outcomes averts the perception of a political gap in Saudi society. Finally, Saudi Arabia’s prominent position in global Islam is reinforced and overlaid by Saudi Arabia’s prominence as a cultural center of the Arab world. Its position as an Arab entrepot of culture infuses its religious soft power with a strong political and nationalist element that makes the Kingdom a role model and respected leader in the cross-section of Arab culture and Islam (Lippman 2012 and Gause 2012).
Al Saud have undertaken initiatives in order to close political gaps between themselves and the various competing political groups in Saudi Arabia, thus garnering soft power from both sides of the political spectrum. In this respect, the ruling family has perspicaciously tried to walk the political tightrope between conservative and reformist groups so as to maximize its collective soft power over all of Saudi society. While the family has traditionally courted the favor of conservative groups much more than reformists, still it would be erroneous to think that the family does not care about courting soft power among liberal elements in Saudi society, and that such a courtship has not produced important political results. After all, attending to the needs of a modern society is itself self-enforcing. This is a lesson a number of fallen regimes learned in the Arab Spring. In fact, it has historically been the ruling family that has been the one to introduce modernizing elements into Saudi society and politics, often over the consternation of conservative groups. Indeed, it is a sign of the compelling force of modernity that liberal reforms would come in a system where conservative elements still dominate politics. Presently King Abdullah has shown a keen sensitivity to making changes so as to make Saudi Arabia fit better into the modern community of nations. He has made more such reforms in a short period than any other ruler in Saudi history. His creation of a National Dialogue, his human rights commissions, his fight against corruption, and his educational, legal, political, and social reforms have gone beyond the nominal institutions of political agency embodied in such things as the Consultative Council and the majlis system (i.e., political venues through which people can marshal a political voice to Saudi leaders) and have demonstrated a commitment to modernization in a more liberal direction. A most visible manifestation of social reform has taken place through greater restraints on the muttawain (the morality or cultural police whose harsh enforcement of Islamic law had become a symbol of the ultra-conservative nature of Saudi society), who are now enforcing a more relaxed moral order. Moreover, there is much generational momentum in compounding this movement, as many of the King’s grandsons are themselves products of modernity, and a number of their spouses have taken up social causes. Lippman (2012, p. 36) cites an extensive study on reform in the Kingdom undertaken by a group of experts on Saudi Arabia, and highlights their finding that Saudi Arabia is indeed moving

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8 There have been a number of popular provocations on political issues reminiscent of the Arab Spring process (i.e., networking and communication through modern media) that have gotten the attention of, and in some cases even responses from, the ruling family. To note a few, there was controversy over the floods in Jeddah in 2009, caused by government incompetence, that was amplified by video clips transmitted on the internet. Also in May of 2012, a video clip of a woman defying a mall policemen trying to cast her from a shopping mall for wearing make-up went “viral” on YouTube, getting over one million views worldwide within a week. In addition, political uprisings in Tahrir Square, Benghazi, and Dara were extensively televised on Al Jazeera (Lippman 2012, p. 35, Riedel 2011, and “Saudi Woman” 2012).
Much Saudi soft power is carried on the chariots of modern communications technology. The Kingdom has invested in a myriad of media sources, from television to newspapers. These chariots are principally active in Arab nations (thus enhancing the image of the Kingdom among Arabs and Muslims), but Saudi investment has also reached global media sources such as Fox News and Twitter. Indeed the Kingdom spends generously on infomercials and advertisements in order to bolster its legitimacy as a role-model state. With the advent of satellite communications and the launching of Arabsat and Nilesat, there is no limit on the ability of Saudi Arabia to reach out to any spot on the globe and relay messages of interest, or broadcast informative pieces through multilingual TV, radio channels, websites, and social networks. Saudi-financed broadcasting companies operate satellite radio stations such as MBC FM (Gulf music), Panorama FM (contemporary Arabic hit music), ART Zikr (Quran recital and religious speeches), and ART Music. Al Arabiya, a Saudi-owned television channel, is rated among the top pan-Arab stations by Middle Eastern audiences. The channel is engaged in an aggressive soft campaign of public diplomacy, as it is part of concerted efforts to dominate the world of cable and satellite television media in the Arab world (Hammond 2007 and Pintak, 2006).

In sum, Saudi Arabia has amassed a significant amount of soft power, contrary to global public opinion. It has access to many potential sources of such power both nationally and internationally with which to address its problems and attain its most important national objectives. The role of this soft power has heretofore been largely neglected or undervalued in relation to Saudi hard power. But while the Kingdom still has vigorous sources of hard power, its soft power will play a far greater role than most people perceive in promoting the national interest. In the remainder of this article, we will consider just how important these soft power sources will be for attending to Saudi Arabia’s major problems and objectives both internationally and domestically.

**III. The Potential of Saudi Soft Power in Dealing with the Kingdom’s Major Challenges**

*International Problems and Objectives*

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9 That the reforms are much more than just perfunctory window dressing is evident by the controversy they have generated among the more extreme critics accusing the regime of initiating a “westernization” of the nation (“Senior Saudi Cleric” 2012).
Saudi Arabia’s most important international problems and objectives lie in security, peace and stability in the Middle East; as well as peace, stability, and favorable relations within their other geo-strategic circles of interest (among Muslim nations, Arab nations, with the US, and with the West). Saudi Arabia requires a good deal of soft power at the international level for its security, especially given the fact that it has historically kept its armed forces limited from fear of military coups. Additionally, oil revenues suffered a long period of decline following the 1970s (having once more climbed to those heights again in real prices only in recent years). Given that this oil money has historically been the greatest source of Saudi hard power (i.e., its strategic transfers both domestically and internationally have purchased a great deal of security both in the form of domestic and international support), the secular decline in real revenues has been of critical significance to the endowment of Saudi hard resources. In conjunction with this limited hard power, the Kingdom has found itself between a number of conflicting forces. And its security has to a large extent been influenced by the state of relations within these conflicting environments: between the West and the “rest” (i.e., Muslim world), between the U.S. and anti-American regimes in the Middle East and Muslim world, between hawks and doves within OPEC, between the producer and consumer nations in the oil market, in the middle of an international sectarian divide, between Israel and nations hostile to Israel, and between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements in democratic uprisings of the Arab Spring. It is no wonder Saudi foreign policy has often taken on a schizophrenic style. Saudi fence walking has proved skillful and effective, but much of the success in staying on the fence has owed to a balance pole constructed out of soft power. Using hard power in these relations has been difficult because it has forced the Saudi’s to choose a side. And when that has occurred, significant alienation arose on the opposing side. The Saudis have always been able to restore amicable relations with the parties they alienated. But this restoration has often required significant soft power precisely because Saudi hard power has been far too limited to invest in all of these dyadic scenarios in ways that maintained stability and preserved Saudi interests. The Saudi’s are rich and materially powerful, but not enough to impose hard control over all of these conflicting environments. Moreover, aside from promoting side-taking, hard power has a tendency to ignite conflict because it constitutes the transfers of resources that can be used to marshal threat or force (i.e., such transfers tilt the material balance of power between competing nations and groups). Saudi Arabia’s ability to effectively navigate the middle ground and keep both sides on various issues mollified stands as one of the Kingdom’s most effective soft power resources. And in effectively using its soft power in this middle ground, it has for the most part been successful at keeping the peace in the Middle East (through soft balancing as well as hard balancing), keeping peace among Arab states, keeping peace among Muslim states, and being a platform for better relations with the West and the US. This is an especially crucial time to court US favor and support, as US policy toward the Middle East is in flux. Indeed, the Saudi’s could use their soft power to mold a more consistent policy that is closer to Saudi interests (Jones 2010 and Gause and Jones 2012).

Saudi military limitations became starkly apparent in 1980s when the Kingdom had to invite in 20,000 Pakistani troops as insurance against an Iranian invasion. Similarly, in 1991 the rulers had to engage in a most unpopular course of action: to allow non-Muslim foreign troops into the country to defend against a possible invasion by Iraq (Lippmann 2012, p. 185 and Riedel 2011, p. 163).
Within the sectarian divide, the Kingdom’s religious prominence as capitol of Islam has provided a focal point for accommodations and peaceful co-existence among conflicting groups and nations. In its most immediate international sphere of interest, the GCC, the hard power of transfers have been overlaid with the soft power of a benevolent and sacred leader of both the Arab and Muslim cause. Interestingly it is within this more intimate circle of Saudi geo-strategic operations that the strength of Saudi soft power is perhaps most visible. While the Saudi’s have issued a good deal of material (hard) support to this Arab circle of nations, it is far short of the amount required to support the economies of these nations and assure their security. Much of the loyalty and cooperation that these nations demonstrate toward Saudi Arabia comes from the endearment and legitimacy it generates through its special cultural and religious position, as well as from its enlightened foreign policy in the region. We see a similar dynamic in the second (greater) circle of Saudi geo-strategic interest: the greater Muslim community. Saudi soft power has also manifested itself on both sides of the West/US/Israel/OPEC versus the rest (Muslim nations) dyads of relations. While the “rest” tend to be tied to Saudi Arabia religiously and/or culturally, and hence are much influenced by Saudi soft power, still the Saudi’s have cultivated enough good will among the West, Americans, oil consumers, as well as defenders of Israel to lay claim to a fairly desirable image on both sides of the battlefield, and thus making the Saudi’s one of the few nations that can influentially walk the tight-rope between these geo-strategic rivals. Given the importance of all these sets of relations, and the Saudi’s soft influence over their course, one could claim that the Saudi’s are among the most important nations of the world with respect to global security.

In contests that pitted the Saudi’s squarely against a menacing opponent, hard power was no doubt a factor, but ultimately it was soft power that often proved the decisive weapon. Nasser’s attempt to overthrow the Al Saud family in the 1950s and 60s was marshaled on a soft war that Egypt could not win: trying to undermine Saudi Arabia’s religious influence through an invocation of support through the pan-Arab nationalism. This initiative failed because the religious affinities to Saudi Arabia were too strong. The Al Saud counter-initiative to proclaim Islam as the foundation of regional governance proved stronger than Nasser’s nationalist invocation. This led to the formation of the Islamic Conference Organization, which would go on to serve as an important venue for Saudi soft balancing. Furthermore, even on the pan-Arab contest, Saudi Arabia had a greater claim to the role of an Arab entrepot. Similarly, Saddam Hussein’s attempts to target Saudi Arabia as a territorial prize foundered. While it faced a strong deterrence effect from the US security umbrella, still the soft power of Saudi culture made that objective quite unsustainable, as popular reaction to such an invasion in the Arab and Muslim worlds would have significantly compromised Iraq’s relations with those nations. In terms of the regional balance of power, the Saudi’s reacted to both the rise of a menacing Iraq and a more

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11 As noted, soft and hard power are often interlinked. Saudi Arabia has been the largest donor in the world since 1973 as measured by ODA/GNI. In addition, the nation has consistently issued the greatest proportion of Arab aid—70% in the decade 1995-2004. This aid has, within the various recipient circles, garnered a strong positive image for the Kingdom (Villanger 2007).
confrontational Iran in the 1980s by soft balancing through the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council. This institution, like many others founded on Saudi initiative, was also consecrated in the legitimacy and appeal of Saudi leadership based on an identification of the Kingdom’s special position in the Muslim and Arab worlds (Gause 2002 and The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia 2005).  

Iran has for some time made used of religious symbols to undermine Saudi legitimacy as the spokesperson for global Islam: it has targeted what Iran considered to be a disaffected Shia minority in the Kingdom in hopes of fomenting revolution or uprisings. But here, even with the sectarian divide, Saudi cultural power has kept even Shias supercharged by external provocation relatively subdued and compliant. Furthermore, the Saudi’s have skillfully reached out to different religious groups in other nations in order to shield themselves from the potential instability fomented by strong sectarian upheavals in other nations. Courting majority Sunni populations, or Shia minorities, or even the Muslim Brotherhood in foreign nations all fall under an initiative of soft balancing in ideological struggles that have important security implications. In this respect, Saudi Arabia has done much to solve one of its most important problems: fallout from sectarianism in its geo-strategic circles of interest (Gause and Jones 2012).

Saudi soft power has also been, and will continue to be, of importance in addressing two other international problems/objectives that bear on regional peace and political stability: stable political transformation in the wake of the Arab Spring and the regional balance of terror. Weapons of mass destruction will continue to be sources of potential instability in the Middle East. Israel has already built a significant arsenal, and Iran has been seen as a nation intent on developing nuclear weapons. Interestingly Saudi Arabia has reacted with greater alarm to the latter than the former. But Saudi soft power deriving from religion and Saudi leadership among its regional allies exhibits elements that cut against proliferation. From a purely religious standpoint, there has been much emphasis on the incompatibility between Islamic doctrine and the possession of weapons of great destructive power. Many clerics and non-clerics alike have underscored that the very pacifist ideological foundation of Islam itself (the word deriving from the Arabic "Salema," which means peace, purity, submission and obedience). Even the religious leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, came out strongly with a fatwa against nuclear weapons as haram (forbidden) under Islamic teachings. Iranian leaders have been repeating this mantra continuously as a means of deflecting accusations that Iran is intent on building nuclear weapons. Such widespread beliefs could function as a strong impediment against building an arsenal of such weapons, especially a large arsenal. The Saudi’s have embraced this philosophy, as their interests fall mainly in the area of developing nuclear power as an alternative energy source. And even though the Saudi’s are concerned about Iranian possession of a bomb, still Iran has not announced that it would definitively arm itself. This preference for nuclear energy over arms, and the Saudi’s consternation over proliferation both send an important message to its

12 At times, the use of soft power for the purpose of shifting the balance of power in the region would take a more direct unilateral form, such as in the first Gulf War when King Fahd secured fatwas from important clerics that supported the use of Saudi territory as a springboard for the US war against Iraq (Gause 2002).
regional and non-regional associate states: that the commendable path is one which develops technology for peaceful purposes rather than for war (“Ahmadinejad…” 2012).

With respect to stable political transition among Arab Spring nations and potential prospects for political upheavals elsewhere, Saudi Arabian soft power promises to wield extensive influence. As much as the political upheavals in the Arab Spring were characterized by popular movements for democratization, they also exhibited strong elements of Islamic populism. After all, it was presidents and soldiers that fell in the Arab Spring, but no Arab monarchs. These latter nations did enjoy greater hard power (i.e., greater oil wealth with which to buy greater support), but some of them also had abundant political soft power (i.e., tended to have systems of governance that were more closely in sync with Islamic law and ideology, and dynastic lines that enjoyed a good deal of legitimacy as ruling families). So too did Saudi Arabia avoid the turmoil, partly because of its oil wealth, but also because of the political legitimacy generated by the Al Saud and their veneration of Islamic governance. Hence, the need for Islamic populism was undercut by the fact that these nations already conformed to the canons of such a political ideology. Given the rise of this Islamic populism, politics in these nations are destined to promote a congruence with Islamic religion and ideology for some time. With this greater Islamic political reification, Saudi Arabia’s soft religious power should be all the greater within this constellation of nations. And this power will be augmented all the more by the fact that Saudi Arabia is the world’s major Arab cultural entrepot (Yom 2012 and Hudson 1977).

**Domestic Problems and Objectives**

Internal political and social stability, and economy prosperity represent the Kingdom’s principal domestic objectives. As noted, Saudi Arabia has enjoyed much hard power in their oil wealth as a means of purchasing such outcomes. Yet while it has remained relatively wealthy relative to other nations in the region, it has hit on harder times in the 1980s and after, until the oil price boom of the last decade. And now the price of oil has hit a downward spiral at the writing of this paper. While some bravely quote the price at which the Saudi’s can sustain an effective distributive state (often cited as over 100 dollars a barrel), one which can purchase stability, it is clear that the economy has struggled after the 1970s. Those, like Yom (2012), who predicate political stability in Middle Eastern monarchies based on oil revenues and careful manipulation of this oil wealth by clever monarchs, fail to explain the sustained political stability in the Kingdom when oil revenues were down (1980s and 90s) and when there was dissention in the royal family (and hence a crisis of leadership) as in the 1960s between King Saud and Prince Faisal.13 In such cases, even with difficulties of succession and oil wealth looming, the soft

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13 Interestingly, the oil boom of the 1970s itself created numerous problems that led to a crisis of the state both from Shiites and Sunnis. The former were upset that they were too often left off the distribution list of oil wealth, while the latter reacted to the grand projects and consumption as a corruption of traditional Islamic society (with the Sunni rebel occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 serving as the most extreme manifestation of their vituperation). The ruling family did use hard power methods to send a message about subversive activities (through police action), but perhaps even more important was the soft campaign engineered in response to the
power based in religion and dynastic veneration of Saudi leadership promises to remain a compelling barrier to political instability in Saudi Arabia. While King Abdullah undertook selected transfers in the wake of the Arab Spring, they far from removed the lion’s share of conditions in the Kingdom (unemployment, desires for greater political agency on the part of various groups) that led to upheavals in other nations. Indeed, the transfers helped, but the most valuable currency for the Al Saud was composed of strong perceptions of legitimacy based in soft political and religious power. In fact, King Abdullah and leading clerics concomitantly undertook a soft initiative in the media to underscore the link between the ruling family and the protectorate of a Muslim state, thus reifying the idea that political allegiance was tantamount to religious devotion. The same soft buffers that shielded the Saudi state from an Arab Spring, will also continue to work as a hedge against upheavals even when Saudi hard power declines. One especially crucial buffer, which will not only contribute to domestic stability, but also influence in its main geo-strategic circles of interest, promises to be its political congruence with the Muslim Brotherhood. The ties between the Saudis and the Brotherhood go well back, and were especially strong when Saudi Arabia supported and sheltered Brotherhood members in the 1950s when the organization went underground. The Brotherhood today has emerged as the single most important political organization in the Muslim world, controlling either a majority of the legislatures or comprising important opposition groups in the governments of a number of Muslim nations. There is much natural conservative political commonality between the two: the desire for Islamic society, the belief that governance and law should be based on the Koran, and a Sunni religious base. But they also share some moderate qualities that would appeal to the reformers and moderate Muslims. The Brotherhood is important for enhancing the Saudi image in other nations, and in doing so brings in that many more animated supporters of the Kingdom (Jones 2010, Hudson 1977, Rubin 2010b, and Yom 2012).

Another potential threat to political stability in the Kingdom is the transfer of power. This problem of succession inherently requires a political buttress of soft power to maintain stability in the face of a transition of authority, especially so if there develops controversies among the ruling family. King Abdullah has taken positive steps in this direction with the creation of the Allegiance Institution (AI), which contains the most important family members and ultimately has authority over successors, and a process by which succession can take place in an orderly fashion. Notwithstanding the King’s formal succession process, there are still uncertainties about how well the process will function in the face of disagreements among key family members. There is great diversity in the family politically and socially, and the dispersion of authority among the Al Saud present potential obstacles to a smooth transition. King Abdullah has drawn on religious soft power to sanctify the process by grounding it in Islamic law (i.e., linking it to the Koran and the Venerable Prophet), and thus making it more difficult for family members and conservative political groups to challenge. But on the more reformist side, the process enjoys the rising social discontent. King Faud initiated a grand campaign to reinforce the legitimacy of the ruling family by underscoring the religious foundations of political authority. The initiative resoundingly reified the vision of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic state and society. Not only was there a rhetorical initiative that more vigorously associated the ruling regime with the practice and laws of Islam, but there was also robust public investment in creating Muslim institutions, e.g., expanding powers of the religious police, building more religious schools (madrasas), and injecting a greater element of Muslim studies into higher education (Jones 2010, pps. 218-222).
soft power of a checks-and–balance system among the power centers in the ruling family. The King can still name a successor, but the successor has to be approved by the AI. In the event of a disagreement between the King and AI about succession, the AI will have the final word. Hence, the AI process promises to garner soft power from differing ends of the political spectrum, and hence has the potential to deliver a stable transition of power (Lippman 2012, pps 31,32 and Gause 2002).

Social stability will depend on the ability of the Saudi leaders to provide an environment that promotes harmonious co-existence among diverse groups in a society with many cleavages. This will mean a political and economic space that minimize gaps between broad-based popular desires and political-economic outcomes. Sectarianism presents itself as one of the more threatening cleavages. The fact that the modern Saudi state has successfully navigated its way throughout its history without tumultuous religious rifts is testament to the vigorous application of both hard and soft power. Oil money has purchase a great deal of harmony, but as noted above, the most important currency in maintaining a stable regime in the face of a fractious social structure proved to be the organizing powers of the general appeal to Islam, identity politics based on Arab culture, and the veneration of a ruling family. Specifically with respect to the Shia minority in the Kingdom, Saudi leaders have always tried to step gingerly around issues that might stir discontent within its ranks. While this trend of accommodation and sensitivity has characterized a historic style, more recently King Abdullah has raised the ante on creating religious bridges among the major sects in the Saudi Islamic community. Since 2003 the ruling family has taken vigorous steps toward quelling sectarian confrontation by pushing the idea of religious tolerance. It invited Shia representatives to the Saudi National Dialogue meetings and pushed to have Sunni clerics visit Shia communities. In 2008 the King sponsored religious tolerance conferences in Madrid and Mecca, and even invited the controversial and outspoken Iranian Shia political leader Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to Mecca. These political-religious initiatives have shown increasing manifestations in the greater Saudi society as we see a growing trend in media and movies that demonstrates religious reconciliation, with artistic portrayals of intra-Islamic unity becoming a more common theme (Sunni-Shia Strife, 2012, p. 67; Jones 2008; and Gause and Jones 2012).

This ability to quell sectarian controversies in Saudi society is a necessary condition for dealing with one of the Kingdom’s other major problems: that of terrorism. In that the two problems are inextricably linked, then the same arsenal of soft power that quells sectarian strife, also becomes the key weapon against terrorism. The resilience of the regime to terrorist activity has been apparent in the war against an al-Qaeda jihad from 2003 to 2006. While the Saudi population sympathized with the idea of embracing a traditional vision of a Muslim state, they were abhorred by the jihad’s targets and means. This vituperation was reinforced by the soft campaign which the rulers waged against the organization. In a vigorous media initiative, the Al Saud was able to undermine the terrorist cause by linking the jihadist acts to religious and cultural taboos. The ruling family underscored the basic principles of Islam, which detest violence, and they promoted a vision of the rebellion as a challenge to a ruling family that upheld Muslim law and governance, thus linking the targeting of the ruling family as a war against Islam itself. While much hard power (police action) was used in rooting out suspected terrorists, the ultimate victory of the regime was won on the softer battleground of ideas. No such an insurgency could persist without a favorable host society. And the greater legitimacy of the
regime, founded on religious and political principles, created a somewhat toxic refuge for such terrorist activities. A compelling manifestation of the regime’s victory in the soft war was evident in the fact that of the 26 proclaimed terrorists on the most wanted list, 20 were apprehended within 18 months of the first bombings, and the other 6 fled the country. Saudi Colonel Alshehri’s (2010) elaborate study of the optimal means of fighting terrorism in the Kingdom resoundingly underscores the critical role of soft power as a sustainable solution to the problem. The effectiveness of soft war against terrorism in the Kingdom has led Alshehri to proclaim the Saudi case as a role model for nations fighting domestic insurgencies (Alshehri 2010; Lippman 2012, pps. 186-189; and Hegghammer 2010).

Social stability in Saudi Arabia will also be strongly dependent on the ability of the regime to provide prosperity and economic opportunities to the society at large, a lesson not lost on the regimes that fell in the wake of the Arab Spring. While political agency was a driving force of the Spring, the ignition mechanism and persistent factor sustaining the Spring was the state of the economies in those nations. The Saudi economy is generally in a better state than those of the victims of the Arab Spring. Employment is relatively moderate at about 10.5, having fallen from 11.5 in 2005. Nominal GDP has roughly doubled since 2005. Oil production is up from 8.2 million b/d to 9.6 b/d in the past several years, inflation has remained fairly low over the past decade (averaging about 5%), bank lending has increased, and the exports of non-oil products have shown a strong performance in the first quarter of 2012. But there are signs of weakness that bode poorly for future social and political stability. Youth unemployment (ages 20-24) is 43%. It rose 20% in 2009 alone. Demographic trends promise to make this problem even more acute, as Saudi society is very young with 80% of the population under the age of 30, 60% under 20, and 40% under 13 (the Saudi median age is 22). Moreover, recent trends show the population doubling every 20 years, which would mean the need for a high and consistent economic growth rate in order to keep GDP/PC rising over that period. Meanwhile the Saudi economy remains fairly undiversified with just 15 leading sectors. In terms of the energy sector, there are also foreboding developments on the horizon. While oil sales have increased, the price of oil has declined in the first half of 2012 from over 100 dollars a barrel to under 85 dollars. Like many oil economies, the Saudi’s are plagued by some of the unfortunate characteristics of the resource curse. It will be difficult for an undiversified economy to pick up the slack caused by declining revenues from resource exportation. But even here, trends in Saudi energy use forebode a declining capacity to export oil even if production is stable. Energy use in Saudi Arabia has been increasing by 7% a year. The Saudi’s presently consume 4 out of the 9 million b/d they produce. Extrapolating from these numbers, if nothing changes, then Saudi Arabia will be a net oil importer by 2035. It is therefore not surprising that the Saudi’s have been vigorously pursuing the development of nuclear energy.

The Saudi leaders will have to muster all of the soft power they can in the face of these economic trends, especially given the potential decline of their most important hard power resource: oil revenues. No doubt the Saudi leaders of this and future generations will spend hundreds of billions of dollars in hopes of creating a more complex-industrial economy, and this will take some time. But outside of the economic glory days of the prosperous distributive state in the 1970s, the Saudi economy has always faced difficult conditions in differing degrees. In fact, economic difficulties have long plagued the entire Arab Spring region. Some nations, such as Saudi Arabia and the other Arab monarchies of the Gulf, were able to weather the storms,
largely from the use of hard power deriving from oil revenues, but a good deal of soft power was also expended in riding out the most difficult times. The soft power of Saudi Arabia has been the one consistent and powerful counter-weight to social instability in difficult political and economic times: the ruling family has a centuries-long history of successfully navigating through crises of the state, so much so that Riedel (2011, p. 166) calls them “the come-back kids. While the Kingdom has much in common with nations that were victims of the Arab Spring, it is also endowed with far more soft power than the regimes that fell in the face the popular movements. This soft power promises to be the Al Saud’s principal weapon in a future of uncertainty regarding the state of oil revenues and regional political turmoil (Riedel 2011, Gause and Jones 2012, Lippman 2012, Jones 2010, and “Saudi Economy” 2012).

IV. Conclusions

Saudi Arabia stands as an enigma in the global public eye. Blinded by the high price of oil, the last several generations of foreign observers have seen the Kingdom as a global behemoth that has enjoyed a throng of hard power resources emanating from its resource wealth. This has never been the case, even at the height of its oil earnings in the 1970s. The true glory days of oil were relatively brief, and its army was never a prodigious military force. Hence its hard power was too often exaggerated. And yet, in the face of this limited hard power, the Kingdom was able to navigate difficult waters domestically, regionally, and globally to preserve a strong and stable state and society. Beset by menacing outside forces, caught in between opposing factions in international disputes, and also beset domestically by a fractured society, the Kingdom ultimately found ways to persevere. Much of this perseverance owes to a set of assets many observers undervalued or even failed to perceive altogether: Saudi Arabia’s soft power. Ironically, in this liberal age, many would see a monarchy that takes refuge in a vision of a traditional society as the anti-thesis of soft power. Oddly enough, what has been widely perceived as a weakness has ended up in fact becoming one of the regime’s greatest strengths. Indeed, oil wealth gave Saudi Arabia one of its most prodigious weapons in confronting its many international and domestic challenges, but it has been its soft power that has quietly and modestly formed the undercurrents that have guided Saudi Arabia through the treacherous waters in the modern period.

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