

A Perspective on Saudi Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

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Abstract

This research analyzes the soft power and cultural diplomacy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Over the years, the Kingdom has been using its cultural diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy for the promotion of its soft power at regional and global level. The analysis suggest the use of soft power and cultural diplomacy are part of Kingdom's foreign policy, bringing a wider gesture of aptness and goodwill. In this sense, the study of cultural diplomacy allows the understanding of new concepts and ideas of international insertion, with the participation of higher education institutions, research centers, government agencies and non-governmental organizations. King Abdullah has pioneered this initiative of soft power projection of the Kingdom through cultural diplomacy. The study revolves around the era of King Abdullah (2005-2015) while significant reinforcement of this policy is undertaken by King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS).

Key Words

Cultural Inclusion, Soft
Power Public and Social
Policies, Cultural
Diplomacy

Introduction

The process of globalization has brought interdependency at the level of states, region and above all at the global level by ending the previously practiced seclusion. Being economically rich, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been actively participating in the global economic activities, especially for the welfare of deprived and poor societies and states. The primary focus of the successive Saudi regimes have been service to humanity through welfare measures like eradication of hunger programs (Qureshi, 2014), allocation of special grants for the establishment of institutions, funding contribution to the UN peacekeeping missions, production and dissemination of biofuels (Nizami et al., 2016). These aspects are part of the Saudi culture and have ultimately promoted soft power of the Kingdom at international level. This service to humanity has been since the decade of 1950s; however, with the passage of time, there has been augmentation of this programme with King Abdullah brining massive reforms and later King Salman further refining it.

Over the last three decades, the Kingdom has recognized the importance of using its cultural diplomacy and soft power as the most significant tool for attaining the development within the Kingdom (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2012), and outside at international level in line with Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Varis, 2007). MDGs emerged from the Millennium Declaration of the United Nations, adopted by the 191 member states on September 8, 2000. Ending the extreme poverty, hunger, promoting gender equality and eradicating diseases, that kills millions around the globe are part of MDGs. In Saudi Arabia, the sustainable development of Saudi society and implementation of MDGs are part of its Vision-2030, set by Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman (MBS) in 2017 (Sayfayn, 2018). Though, the concept of cultural diplomacy and soft power was initiated by King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, King Salman and MBS gets the credit of continuing it in the contemporary time.

This study covers the key role, the Saudi Kingdom has been playing for promotion of global socioeconomic welfare which highlighted its cultural aspects and soft power projection. The current administration of King Salman, in particular, arouses the sensation of a diplomacy that maximizes the prestige extracted from important friendships consolidated international relations over a brilliant political career. What can be seen between 2015 till 2018, during a brief period of leadership so far, is the great achievement of national objectives (Al-Rasheed, 2017), with special emphasis on the participation of specialized bureaucracies specific foreign policy formulation, with positive results towards Saudi foreign policy.

Culture, International Relations and Globalization: A Perspective

The flow of relationships between societies has always existed, in several fields of interaction such as economic (Strange 1970), political and cultural (Held, McGrew et al. 2000), and, over time, have become more complex, dynamic and important (Featherstone, 1990). As well as this interaction became inevitable, it became clear that what happened in other societies also influence the domestic dynamics of a state beside its international relations. These relationships between states, their actors, international organizations, multinationals organizations, higher education institutions and academic exchanges are grouped in the soft power. Soft power emanates in large part from the values, which expressed in culture, in the politics, adopted internally and at international level. On the other hand, 'smart power', released in 2004 by Suzanne Nossel, would be the point of balance between 'hard power' and 'soft power' for the exercise of hegemony, and would be the ability to influence and act both by force and consensus (Nosel, 2004).

Globalization manifests in the social, political, economic and cultural contexts (Baylis, Smith et al. 2017). It is a system of comprehensive international model that shapes national policies, and from virtually every country. Globalization, according to Held and McGrew (2001) refer to entrenched and enduring patterns of global interconnection, "...human will to know the other, to approach and gain with this approach, as evidenced in the great navigations, a fact considered by many to be the beginning of globalization. Without entering in this questioning, it is true to affirm that globalization was born "[...] driven by the trans nationalization of production and consumption, by the volatilization of finance, greater role for transnational actors, technological innovations [...] ". (Tomlinson, 1999). Everyone's dream is to live in a republic that knows how to reject imperialism, imposition, and corruption. Culture can play an important role in overcoming barriers, promoting cooperation and reducing mutual mistrust. Countries like United States, France, England, Spain, Germany and Japan, among others, recognized the value of using culture as a facilitator of their International agenda and ends. France was a pioneer in incorporating culture in favor of its interests even before 19th century.

The Saudi Cultural Diplomacy and Global Standing during King Abdullah

The cultural diplomacy is responsible for creating and developing projects in which culture will be disseminated, acting in the defense of national values, aiming at the international insertion of that country. When contextualizing, Saudi Arabia, with its continental dimensions, as the largest sovereign state in the Middle East, geographically 5th largest in Asia, second-largest in the *Arab* world after Algeria and 12th-largest in the world) (Wilson and Graham, 2016). This is the only nation with both a Red Sea coast and Arabian Gulf coast, the largest economy in the Middle East (as of October 2018) and the 18th largest in the world. It has strong economy (the kingdom is categorized as a World Bank high-income economy with a high Human Development Index (UNO, 2013), and is the only Arab country to be part of the G-20 major economies) (Wynbrandt, 2010). It is considered to be the leader of the Islamic World (Al-Rasheed, 2010) standing strong in the GCC (Fasano, & Iqbal, 2003).

Saudi Arabia has an active voice in international forums, and achieves broader goals in economic development, culture, public opinion, national sentiment, and support for its foreign policy. These spheres have given the Kingdom an edge over rest of Arab World and even the larger Muslim countries.

Through its economic clout and larger cultural diplomacy, the Kingdom has acquired a special position, particularly during King Abdullah and now with King Salam and Crown Prince MBS; the post 2015 era. The concept of diplomacy, according to Martin Wight (2002), is the system and art of communication between states. The diplomatic system is the master of international relations. "Diplomacy is exercised by ambassadors, ministers, apostolic nuncios, diplomats, etc. Diplomacy comprises the external action of governments expressed objectives, values and standards of conduct linked to an agenda of commitments for which certain interests are intended (Cervo, & Lessa, 2014). Culture creates previously nonexistent links between different peoples. It does not depend on origins, geographical location, economy, etc. It has a universal character because its range is infinite (Lenczowski, 2008). In this sense, the culture of a country represents its identity among other nations. In the first place, the recognition of Saudi Arabia as a global political actor; consolidation of international economic conditions, allowing the development based on the Saudi comparative advantages concentrated in oil; in the construction of the political-strategic and economic-commercial relationship.

It is worth mentioning that, doctrinal innovations of King Abdullah (his foreign policy) have played a key role in the cultural diplomacy of the Kingdom. He ruled the Kingdom from 2005 to 2015 and contributed a lot towards current status of Saudi Arabia. This balance of Saudi foreign policy enters the negotiations for the conclusion of the Doha Round of the WTO's ambitious UN reform begun in 2005 by the then Secretary General Kofi Annan. This set of actions shows an active Saudi Arabia, eager to solve the impasses in the use of its most competent diplomacy. Saudi diplomacy has also been unique in solving conflicts. How to analyze the performance of Saudi Arabia in relations between Iran and the rest of the Arab and the Gulf states? How to act as a facilitator in relations

among the GCC states? Saudi Arabia has a long history of tradition of involvement, through their knowledge of the most numerous belligerent situations, as is the case in the Middle East, where it has been as facilitator, both between Israel and Palestine, and between Israel and Lebanon, playing a constructive role of rapprochement between neighbors. In fact, there is a Middle East without formal peace agreements and a Middle East defined by terrorism, conflict between states and civil war; between a Middle East which includes a powerful Iran and one dominated by Iran; uncomfortable relationship with the United States and one full of hatred for the country (Haass, 2006).

Establishing Connection between Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

Soft power and public diplomacy even if some scholars correctly point out that the concept of soft power, as well as the notion that cultural idea affect power, do not have its origin in Joseph Nye. Nye indeed, presented soft power as a positive instrument that should be used more by the states. As for public diplomacy, it can be used in an indirect way create a common understanding and situation to advance the objectives of national security. This may be related to the use of soft power. Soft power is culture power " (Snow, 2008, p.3, Nye (2004b) analyzes that the bases of soft power - standards, ethics, values, style, policies and institutions - can be referenced by the term "culture". In this sense, similar to culture, the concept of soft power can be applied and stretched beyond the activities of national governments and include the popular participation in efforts to strengthen the image of a nation through cultural exchanges, media, internet, tourism, and among various non- governmental organizations.

From this connection between public diplomacy and soft power, it is possible to understand why the Japanese government has focused its public diplomacy in pop culture, the main question in this work. The activities of public diplomacy demonstrate a broad range of soft power. The Japanese pop culture that arises, mainly, without intervention of the government and becomes popular in the world public has the attraction of soft power, and in a softer manner than when the Japanese government tries to politicize it. For this reason, it is believed that Japanese policymakers public diplomacy in pop culture as one of the Japanese strategies that allows Japan to exercise its soft power capabilities, according to the new conception of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is one of the instruments of foreign policy, which covers a range of different activities. In the past, public diplomacy was understood as the contact of governments with public opinions from other countries, and their efforts to inform, influencing and engaging those stakeholders in the pursuit of their policy objectives both national and external. Today, public diplomacy is the tool through which people and government and private sector groups influence directly and indirectly the attitudes and public opinions that influence the decisions of a foreign policy of another government (Snow, 2008). Public diplomacy is based on trust and credibility, so many times works well over time (Melissen, 2005). Nye argues that the soft power skills - communication, together with the other competences related to such as organizational management and political acumen - are of the critical elements for success as a leader. In this sense, some changes in this should have an effect on the change in foreign policy and, consequently, on the public diplomacy.

King Abdullah's Role in Promotion of Saudi Culture and Foreign Policy

The study of policies of international insertion, specifically through culture, in the period of King Abdullah, is extremely important to understand the Saudi yearnings abroad. The period (2005-2015), which covers the term of King Abdullah is of fundamental importance, because it is the largest representative of post-trade and economic openness and for being consolidators of prosperity in the country. Many political analysts and academic scholars have graded King Abdullah's rise to power in 2005 as most significant in the most trying time. It was the era of extreme phase of global war on terror under US and later, Arab uprisings. King Abdullah ruled Saudi Arabia at most important juncture of Kingdom's history from 2005 to 2015 and also remained as *de-facto* rulers for a decade before that. In fact, King Fahd, his predecessor had a stroke in 1995, thus Kingdom was being run by King Abdullah.

After the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, an al-Qaeda bombing campaign against Westerners inside the kingdom was very much likely. King Abdullah took on the clergy, who had promulgated an intolerant Islamist message in schools and mosques. "The state is proceeding, with the help of God, in its gradual and studied course of reform," he said, vowing to ignore both conservatives calling for "stagnation and immobility" and liberals seeking a "leap into darkness and reckless adventure". These reforms were relatively slow and only partially successful. However, they tilted the dynamics of Saudi policy towards gradual change. In fact, these developments made King Abdullah as a 'popular leader', particularly among an increasingly Saudi young population.

Saudi Arabia achieved many developmental goals in different sectors, for example, economic, health, education, social services, transportation, industry, electricity, agriculture and water. In his period, the number of higher education and universities almost doubled. New colleges, technical and health institutes were established. But above all, the establishment of King Abdullah's University for Technology and science (KAUTS) was the

greatest milestone. Other such seminal institutes include Prince Abdulaziz bin Musa'ad Economic City (PABMEC), (MoFA, 2015), King Abdullah's Economic City (KAEC) (KAEC, Economic Knowledge City in Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah, Jazan's Economic City, and King Abdullah's Financial Center (Moser et al, 2015). King Abdul-Aziz Center for National Dialogue (KACND) is one the distinguished institutes that has played a very momentous role in endorsing the principle of discourse (Partrick, 2016). Another role the center has been forming common understanding how to view the challenges facing the state and also understanding how to tackle these challenges in a diplomatic way.

Dynamism and Transparency in Saudi Policies

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has always committed to have a transparent and clear policy since the time of King Abdulaziz Al-Saud. Some of the unique features of this policy are temperance, understanding and prudence at all levels including the international level as well. The Kingdom exerts all its possible efforts in protecting Muslims' interests and causes. Saudi policy has been vibrant, honest and apparent and primarily committed to subjects related to Arab nation. In the last 20 years, the emergence of new issues on the international agenda, such as: human rights, environmental management, terrorism, cooperation and others, have transformed the priorities of states, including the Saudi Arabia. These transformations contributed to changes in the conduct of the world today.

In Saudi Arabia, this transformation occurs with the intensification of economic interdependence, with the adoption of a positive agenda in international negotiations, with economic opening, at the domestic level and the positivism in the Saudi foreign and internal policies. Saudi foreign policy can also be characterized by the continuity, which is manifested in practical terms with the predominance of the Islamic values, with its bureaucracy, as the body responsible for the country. One of the most striking features of diplomacy in the King Abdullah's period was restoring good relations with the regional countries and emphasis on the regional integration, as King Abdullah demonstrated on many occasions. For this, Saudi Arabia comes using soft power in building their regional leadership, accepting the role of guidance of the region, with financing from the government of Saudi Arabia for infrastructure works in other countries. In the arch of all reflection on the search for leadership in the region as a way of achieving its global goals, Saudi Arabia contributes its troops in UN Peacekeeping missions and also contributes financial resources, developing social projects, training their strength with a vision of guiding Saudi Arabian foreign policy.

Saudi Arabia today is being perceived as a country with great responsibility towards external relations. In the consolidation of Saudi Brand of a rich and diversified culture, including the music, traditional dance, it has no parallel. The Kingdom has Program for the Eradication of Child Labor, and a new awakening to the diffusion of knowledge, art and culture; community development, among other initiatives. King Abdullah's vision has contributed a lot in this entire development. He introduced economic diplomacy, cultural promotion and social programs in the Saudi foreign policy.

The use of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy contributes to the recognition of the States, through the establishment of cultural exchange between countries, in order to bring these actors closer together and, from there, into the trade, cooperation or political agreements. William A. Rugh in '*American Encounters with Arabs: The Soft Power of U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East*' reviews American way of communicating with the Arab world through numerous channels of information in order to display as well as project its 'soft power' policy. While mainly replicating U.S. model of soft power, the Arab states have also tried in developing 'public diplomacy' by tools of information as a way of soft power but Arab world lags far behind in projecting 'soft power' to its full potential (Rugh 2006).

The Future Prospects of Saudi Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

Public diplomacy plays a crucial role in international relations by establishing a dialogue with global community either to enlighten them or else inspire them. The purpose of public diplomacy is to explain and speak in favor of government policies and to represent a specific nation to the foreign public. For this, Saudi Arabia has implemented several methods of public diplomacy, such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchange programs and international broadcasting. The Kingdom has been able to advance its foreign policy interests as it has the unique approach of using both hard and soft powers. This approach is directly linked to Saudi Arabia being the home of the Islamic religion and one of the wealthiest nations in the world due to its huge oil reserves.

Cultural diplomacy includes the exchange of ideas, arts, sports, education, languages and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding. The Saudi government supports and empowers the sports sector in the Kingdom and Turki Al-Shaikh, chairman of the board of directors of the General Sports Authority, has focused on reviving the Saudi sports media as part of Saudi Vision 2030, since sports promote peace, development and international cooperation. Moreover, media, journalism and international

broadcasting play a major and positive role in promoting of peace by providing a truthful image of every country's culture and historical heritage.

Saudi Arabia is a Kingdom of Humanity as it is concerned with humanitarian assistance worldwide through different official and unofficial agencies. In the last three decades, the Kingdom has made remarkable strides, not only in terms of humanitarian assistance and relief work, but also in fostering regional and international cooperation. Historically, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undertaken a pioneering humanitarian role by serving the international community by coming to the aid of those affected by crises worldwide. The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief) was established in May 2015 under the patronage and guidance of King Salman. Saudi Arabia relief has provided humanitarian and development aid to various countries in four continents, with local, regional and international partners.

Educational exchange programs have enabled Saudi Arabia to preserve its position as a leader in the Muslim and Arab world. Such programs provide Saudi public diplomacy with an opportunity for the Kingdom to share its values, norms and culture with Arab, Muslim, and non-Muslim nations. In doing so, the Kingdom has reached out to the world by setting up a large numbers of mosques and other educational institutions. Exchange programs create interaction that turns into mutual understanding of others and has an effective influence by means of exhibiting an understanding of and respect for the different cultures and norms of other nations.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has also attracted foreign students by providing fellowships for study at intellectual institutions, such as King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). Furthermore, the nonprofit MiSK Foundation was established by Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman to develop Saudi youth and empower them to become active participants in the future of the nation. This is an example of a successful implementation of the Kingdom's cultural diplomacy as it encourages innovation and ensures sustainability in order to accomplish the higher goal of developing the human mind.

Saudi Arabia balances its desire to achieve public diplomacy goals with the need to remain true to its religious and cultural traditions. Nowadays, a country's public diplomacy is based on the value of its internal policy, culture and strength of its foreign policy. The use of public diplomacy can help us connect more positively, through building bridges, links and alliances with the international community. At the end of the day, all countries must adopt this method, as the entirety of the human race shares a universal element, which is "humanity", regardless of each country's different culture, religion, norms, language or political system. In summary, the Kingdom's policies towards humanitarian socioeconomic assistance at global level, its cultural and soft power diplomacy, especially during the reign of King Abdullah have added new credence and heights for the Saudi Arabia at global level.

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