

SOFT POWER STRATEGY OF SAUDI ARABIA UNDER
THE VISION 2030: INSTITUTION BUILDING AND POWER CONVERSION

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CONVERSION"**

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ABSTRACT

SOFT POWER STRATEGY OF SAUDI ARABIA UNDER THE VISION 2030: INSTITUTION BUILDING AND POWER CONVERSION

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This thesis examines how Saudi Arabia's official soft power strategy evolved under Vision 2030. Through qualitative discourse analysis of official documents, institutional reports, news articles and secondary sources, the study traces the transformation from an implicit, religiously derived soft power approach to a deliberate, comprehensive strategy. It establishes a pre-2016 baseline and notes three systemic failures including credibility gaps between public diplomacy messaging and domestic reality, institutional fragmentation and overlap in bureaucracies, and constraints emerging from the path dependence caused by the post-1979 religious bargain, which suppressed cultural industries and prohibited leisure tourism. Due to these systemic deficiencies, the Kingdom faced a condition of “unrealized soft power” especially in the Western world, despite possessing potential resources. The findings reveal that Vision 2030 initiated fundamental institutional restructuring vis-à-vis soft power architecture. The Ministry of Culture, established in 2018 as Saudi Arabia's first standalone culture ministry, now coordinates eleven specialized commissions. The decades-long cinema ban was lifted; leisure e-visas opened the country to tourists for the first time; and high visibility investments were made in

sports mega events and giga projects such as NEOM, which function as attention generating mechanisms supporting new strategic narratives painting the Kingdom in a pleasant light. Contributing to the soft power literature, this thesis argues that domestic institution building can function as a central component of soft power strategy rather than being merely a precondition, thereby extending existing theoretical frameworks by demonstrating how resource creation and conversion can occur simultaneously in cases where cultural sectors have been previously prohibited.

Keywords: Soft Power, Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia, Public Diplomacy, Institution Building

ÖZ

VİZYON 2030 KAPSAMINDA SUUDİ ARABİSTAN'IN YUMUŞAK GÜÇ STRATEJİSİ: KURUM İNŞASI VE GÜÇ DÖNÜŞÜMÜ

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Bu tez, Suudi Arabistan'ın resmi yumuşak güç stratejisinin Vizyon 2030 kapsamında nasıl evrildiğini incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, resmi belgeler, kurumsal raporlar, haber makaleleri ve ikincil kaynakları nitel söylem analizi aracılığıyla incelemek suretiyle, Suudi Arabistan'ın örtük ve dini temel alan bir yumuşak güç yaklaşımından bilinçli ve kapsamlı bir stratejiye geçişin izini sürmektedir. Çalışma, 2016 öncesi döneme ilişkin bir temel çerçeve oluşturmakta ve üç sistemsel zorluğa dikkat çekmektedir: kamu diplomasisi ile yurtiçi gerçeklik arasındaki farklılıklardan doğan güvenilirlik açıkları, bürokratik yapılardaki kurumsal parçalanmışlık ve görev alanlarındaki çakışma ile 1979 sonrası uzlaşmadan kaynaklanan patika bağımlılığı kapsamında, kültürel endüstrileri baskılayan ve eğlence amaçlı turizmi yasaklayan kısıtlayıcı politikalar. Anılan sistemik yetersizlikler nedeniyle Krallık, potansiyel kaynaklara sahip olmasına rağmen özellikle Batı dünyası ile ilişkisinde “gerçekleşmemiş yumuşak güç” durumuyla karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Tezin bulguları, Vizyon 2030'un yumuşak güç mimarisi açısından köklü bir kurumsal yeniden yapılanma sürecini başlattığını göstermektedir. 2018'de kurulan Suudi Arabistan'ın ilk bağımsız Kültür Bakanlığı, artık on bir uzmanlaşmış komisyonu koordine etmektedir. Onlarca yıllık

sinema yasağı kaldırılmış, tatil amaçlı e-vizelerle ülke ilk kez turistlere açılmış, Krallığı resmeden stratejik anlatıları destekleyen dikkat çekici mekanizmalar olarak işlev görmekte olan NEOM gibi “giga projeler” ve spor etkinlikleri gibi yüksek görünürlüğe sahip yatırımlar yapılmıştır. Bu tez, yerel kurum inşasının yalnızca bir ön koşul olmaktan ziyade yumuşak güç stratejisinin merkezi bir bileşeni olarak işlev görebileceğini savunmakta ve böylece kültürel sektörlerin daha önce kısıtlandığı durumlarda kaynak üretimi ile kaynakların güce dönüşümünün eş zamanlı gerçekleşebileceğini göstererek mevcut teorik çerçeveleri genişletmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yumuşak Güç, Vizyon 2030, Suudi Arabistan, Kamu Diplomasisi, Kurum İnşası

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATM	Arabian Travel Market
CDF	Cultural Development Fund
CPVPV	Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice
DIEC	Development Investment Entertainment Company
F1	Formula 1
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GEA	General Entertainment Authority
IR	International Relations
IUM	Islamic University of Medina
KASP	King Abdullah Scholarship Program
K-Pop	Korean Pop Music
MBC	Middle East Broadcasting Center
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOC	Ministry of Culture
MWL	Muslim World League
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PD	Public Diplomacy
PIF	Public Investment Fund
PR	Public Relations
RSFF	Red Sea Film Festival
SAR	Saudi Riyal
SCT	Supreme Commission for Tourism and National Heritage
STA	Saudi Tourism Authority
UFC	Ultimate Fighting Championship
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USIA	United States Information Agency

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Strategy Under Vision 2030

For much of the early 21st century, Saudi Arabia's international image was defined by a narrow set of characteristics stemming from its Wahhabi roots. The Kingdom was widely recognized as a major oil exporter and a key security partner for Western powers in the Middle East, specifically the United States. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia held a central position in the Islamic world as the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina and with its embracement of puristic Islamic doctrine of Wahhabism. The Kingdom maintained a conservative social order domestically with strict religious rules being enforced thoroughly. Cultural industries remained underdeveloped and often restricted due to state policy. Cinemas were banned, music was restricted, and the state had limited leisure tourism policies. In this context, despite possessing considerable influence in religious affairs and global energy markets and being included in close security cooperation mechanisms with the USA, Saudi Arabia was not perceived as an attractive country by the Western publics.

This situation began to change dramatically following the announcement of Vision 2030 in April 2016. Vision 2030, led by the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is a comprehensive and ambitious national transformation programme built around three core pillars, as stated in the document itself: A Vibrant Society, A Thriving Economy, and An Ambitious Nation. Since 2016, a series of high-profile reforms have reshaped the Kingdom's social, cultural, political, and economic landscape thoroughly, in what would only be considered improbable a mere decade earlier. To name a few, the decades-long ban on public cinemas was lifted; the country was opened to leisure tourism for the first time; and entertainment infrastructure was

developed on an unprecedented scale. Furthermore, the Kingdom has pursued hosting rights for major international sporting events, including the FIFA World Cup in 2034, organized desert raves with world famous DJs at MDLBeast Soundstorm, and began the development of audacious, innovative giga projects that shocked the world. Taken together, these developments marked broadening of the domains through which Saudi Arabia seeks to attract international attention and engagement.

While most of these reforms were closely linked with the Saudi goal of diversifying economy away from oil dependency, economic goals were not the only aim of the pivot. It is important to note that Vision 2030 and its associated infrastructure frame these reforms in terms of national image in addition to economic diversification. As will be demonstrated, official documents frequently link culture, tourism, and sports to concepts such as “image”, “reputation”, “perceptions”, “quality of life”, and Saudi Arabia's standing on the world stage, especially the Western world. This rhetoric clearly suggests that the reforms are not merely economic in nature but also strategic in their intent to reposition how the Kingdom is perceived internationally. The analysis of these official policy texts shows a deliberate effort to develop a new soft power strategy for Saudi Arabia, moving away from the city on the hill effect that stems from exceptional religious influence of the Kingdom that seems to have created attraction only for a narrow audience. Instead, Vision 2030 offers deliberate and simultaneous cultural production and export, experiential tourism, high visibility sporting events, and futuristic and innovative giga projects with an emphasis on sustainability. In sum, in terms of soft power strategy, Vision 2030 can be understood as an attempt to expand and actively manage the range of assets through which the Kingdom generates international attraction and soft power.

This rapid change raises the compelling analytical question this thesis seeks to answer. How did Saudi Arabia shift from a restrictive approach that largely ignored Western attraction to a Western-oriented deliberate high visibility soft power strategy built on film, music, tourism, and sports within less than a decade? Further, fundamentally, this transformation is not simply a matter of just increased activity or policy experimentation. It involves fundamental rethinking of state goals, instruments and narratives regarding national identity that constitute Saudi Arabia's

soft power strategy. In order to understand this evolution, careful examination of the ways in which official policy documents conceptualize soft power, assign new roles, devote resources to previously prohibited sectors, and construct a revised narrative of what Saudi Arabia is needs to be conducted. This chapter introduces the research puzzle, presents the central research questions, outlines the core argument, and describes the methodology used to trace and analyze this strategic evolution.

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study addresses a critical gap in the scholarly understanding of Saudi Arabia's post-2016 soft power transformation. While Vision 2030's launch in 2016 has generated substantial academic attention, most of this attention was directed towards the reasons behind Vision 2030 and the transformation of Saudi society that followed. Yet the institutional architecture underpinning this transformation is even more recent than the strategy itself. The Ministry of Culture was separated from Ministry of Culture and Information and established as a standalone body only in 2018 for example, with specialized commissions being established from 2019-2020 onwards. Consequently, literature examining this emergent soft power infrastructure is scarce, with existing scholarship either adopting policy-oriented perspectives or focusing narrowly on isolated branches of activity such as sports diplomacy without analyzing the broader institutional ecosystem.

This research makes two distinct contributions to literature. First, on the theoretical level, it builds on Nye's (2011) distinction between soft power resources and conversion, and Baldwin's (1979) concept of unrealized power. While the resource-conversion differentiation is acknowledged in foundational soft power theory, it has been applied less systematically in empirical work. By applying this lens to the Saudi case and situating it alongside recent conversion-focused studies (e.g. Crowley-Vigneau et al., 2022; Lee, 2009), and specifically Grix and Brannagan's (2016) conceptualization of soft power resources as a part of "soft power package" rather than a static property; this thesis argues that domestic institution building should be analyzed as a central component of post-2016 Saudi soft power strategy. In the Saudi context, where many cultural and entertainment sectors were deliberately constrained

or underdeveloped prior to Vision 2030, the state could not simply “manage” the existing assets and it was compelled to launch a comprehensive strategy to create them. Therefore, this study analyzes institutions not merely as administrative bodies, but as strategic engines used to generate, professionalize, and project Saudi influence and generate attraction globally. In this unique context, the very creation of cultural industries and related institutions functions as an explicit instrument of the broader soft power strategy, making this “resource creation as soft power strategy” dynamic particularly salient in Saudi Arabia compared to established cultural powers that can leverage long-standing institutions and sources.

Second, at the empirical level, this study contributes to the comprehensive mapping of the institutional infrastructure of Saudi Arabia’s new soft power infrastructure. Existing literature has documented the sociopolitical transformation from conservative to moderate Islam, the drivers behind the change led by Vision 2030 such as economic diversification, and the outcomes of specific initiatives such as sports investments. However, the literature on the comprehensive administrative soft power architecture that has emerged has been scarce, tending to focus on individual sectors or to adopt policy-oriented analyses rather than comprehensive and holistic institutional mappings. This study aims to open the “black box” of the Saudi state to reveal how the fragmented and overlapping bureaucracies have been reorganized into a centralized soft power apparatus.

1.3. Literature Review

Most of the literature on Saudi Arabia’s transformation explains either why the Kingdom is undergoing such transformation, focusing on economic diversification or elite politics; or approaches the image rehabilitation attempts critically. Much less attention has been paid to how exactly the state apparatus has been developed and reconfigured from an inefficient bureaucratic setup to a comprehensive one, and came to implement a new soft power strategy. This section situates this thesis within the literature by reviewing the existing literature on the matter.

Following Vision 2030, a significant portion of the literature aims to explain the causes and drivers of Saudi Arabia’s transformation. Analyses guided by political

economy interpret Vision 2030 within the context of the rentier model and the need to diversify away from oil dependency economically, thus recalibrating the social contract around diversification and employment (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025; Faudot, 2019). Abuhjeeleh (2019) reads the Kingdom's new approach to tourism, a policy that will be covered through the lens of soft power, as a strategy to diversify away from a "single oil-based economy" and capitalize on Saudi Arabia's "virgin and undiscovered" landscapes. Complementing this, another strand of identity focused work tracks how the state is recalibrating its social and narrative foundations. Bunzel (2025), Dogan-Akkas (2025), and Aldossry (2024) focus on the shift from religious to national identity, showing how religion is shifting to a position where it is situated subordinately to politics; and how new commemorations, such as the newly celebrated 1727 Founding Day, and giga projects such as NEOM and Diriyah are utilized to decenter Wahhabism and construct a "new Saudiness", while Özev (2024) in particular conceptualizes the broader trajectory of the Kingdom post-2016 as a move from a rentier-state configuration and pan Islamic legitimacy that was prevalent before, toward a "territorial nationalism" centered on loyalty to the Saudi state and territory. These studies contribute to the understanding of why such a transformation was deemed necessary and what this transformation is attempting to accomplish in terms of national identity and economic diversification domestically; yet, they contribute little to how this transformation engages foreign publics.

Studies on sports and related mega events discuss the Saudi engagement with foreign publics and attraction, but still only partially engage with the broader Saudi strategy and domestic institutions that are utilized in that strategy. One strand of research treats sports investments as instruments of sportswashing and soft power. Scholars like Boykoff (2022), Ganji (2023), and Bianco and Sons (2023) employ the sportswashing concept to analyze how Saudi Arabia utilizes mega events and takeovers such as Newcastle United and LIV Golf as strategic tools for reputation laundering and soft power projection. In contrast, Crossley and Woolf (2024) criticize this analysis, arguing that "sportswashing" has become a reductive "common-sense" frame that obscures the complex local dynamics of these acquisitions.

Grix et al. (2023) navigate this tension by unpacking the specific political mechanisms of sportswashing and situating it not as mere image laundering but as an

initial step in a longer-term strategy. Work by Grix and co-authors stand out in this area, as they critically conceptualize sports mega events and club ownership as part of a broader “politics of attraction” and soft power “assemblages” linking Gulf sovereign funds with Western sports industries (Grix et al., 2023; Grix & Brannagan, 2016; Grix & Lee, 2013), arguing that such events seek to convert the enhanced visibility they provide into prestige, status and long-term influence rather than delivering immediate “image laundering”. Ettinger (2023) on the other hand, looks at primarily the motivations and implications of Saudi sports diplomacy, reading it as a project of authoritarian capitalism and strategic binding of Western financial and political elites, arguing that economic and geopolitical objectives take precedence over soft power accumulation, which is a longer term, secondary goal. Similarly, Devendra (2025) advances a “geoeconomic” perspective, comparing the emerging Saudi soft power institutions to Qatar’s “more institutionalized” model, finding the Saudi approach relatively “ad hoc”.

While this body of work represents a significant contribution to the debate on reputation management and soft power strategy, it remains sector-specific, analyzing sports investments primarily through the lens of external relationships and diplomatic outcomes. Consequently, these studies tend to treat the Saudi state and its vehicles such as the Public Investment Fund as unitary actors, leaving the broader domestic administrative apparatus and the internal strategic reconfiguration that enables this multi-sectoral soft power projection largely unexplored.

Only a small number of academic works engage directly with institutional design, and even these tend to remain sector specific, not engaging with the broader Saudi soft power strategy. Al-Tokhais and Thapa (2019) provide an account of UNESCO World Heritage site governance, documenting the overlapping responsibilities between the former Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, municipalities and environmental authorities, subsequently highlighting an uneven capacity across sites. In the sports domain, Bataineh et al. (2025) and Davis et al. (2025) show how the Public Investment Fund’s acquisition of stakes in domestic football clubs and its creation of LIV Golf represent a structural shift in governance, and crucially note that PIF has become a central actor in sports organization rather

than merely a source of capital. At the level of public diplomacy, Algamedi's (2025) study is perhaps one of the most comprehensive, mapping a wide range of post-2016 institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, the General Entertainment Authority and the Public Diplomacy Agency. Although Algamedi (2025) approaches mentioned institutions primarily through the narratives they produce and does not engage with the broader soft power strategy of Saudi Arabia that encompasses the mobilization of narratives, it still constitutes one of the most significant contributions that directly address the soft power architecture.

Ultimately, a clear analytical gap remains regarding the comprehensive soft power strategy and institutional architecture of Saudi Arabia post-2016. While scholars have adeptly diagnosed the reasons behind Saudi Arabia's transformation such as economic diversification, ideological shift and scrutinized specific sectors and projects that constitute Saudi image, the strategic implementation of Saudi soft power policy remains understudied. By applying Nye's framework distinguishing resources from conversion processes, this study investigates the Saudi Soft power strategy through mechanisms employed by the emerging Saudi State apparatus, critically treating domestic institution building as a part of that broad strategy. Further, it challenges characterizations of Saudi strategy as merely "ad hoc" instead revealing a sophisticated, centralized strategy designed to employ the national narrative and generate attraction and soft power through the constructed state apparatus.

1.4. Research Puzzle and Question

The strategic shift described previously presents a puzzle that extends beyond mere descriptive policy change. From a soft power perspective, the question is not simply a shift in related policy fields, but rather how a state can fundamentally reconfigure its attraction strategy and build infrastructure to support its policies from the ground up. Saudi transformation is particularly interesting in that it works against established institutions and power bargains, entrenched bureaucratic and cleric cultures, and longstanding international perceptions that prove difficult to alter. Saudi Arabia is a state with a deeply rooted identity in religious conservatism, yet it seeks to transform

precisely this identity and aspects that stem from it. In a very short time frame, the Kingdom has moved from restricting cultural production and entertainment to actively promoting them as vehicles for international engagement and economic diversity, all the while retaining the same political regime and claiming continuity with religious heritage. The analytical challenge, therefore, is to understand how this strategic reconfiguration has been conceptualized and operationalized within official policy framework, with a baseline of significantly fragmented state apparatus. How does a state navigate such a significant shift in its soft power strategy?

This puzzle has conceptual implications for the study of soft power. Existing scholarship posits that soft power depends not only on the possession of attractive resources, but also on the strategic capacity and will to mobilize and deploy those resources, effectively converting them into soft power. Sources of soft power do not automatically get converted into outcomes. The analysis presented in this thesis approaches Vision 2030 and related policies as both resource building of potential attraction resources and conversion infrastructure.

Against this background, the main research question guiding this study can be stated as follows:

- How has Saudi Arabia's official soft power strategy evolved under Vision 2030?

This main research question is accompanied and operationalized through three key sub questions as follows:

1. What configuration of soft power resources, institutions, and narratives constituted Saudi Arabia's soft power prior to Vision 2030?
2. How do Vision 2030 and associated strategies in culture, tourism, and sports seek to reshape Saudi Arabia's national image?
3. Which policy instruments and narratives are used in the post Vision architecture to construct Saudi Arabia's desired external image, and what themes constitute that image?

These questions correspond directly to the empirical work of the thesis. Chapter 3 reconstructs the pre-Vision configuration of Saudi resources and institutions, and covers the challenges the previous soft power apparatus or lack thereof faced; while chapter 4 analyzes the Vision era documents and sectoral strategies in depth. Together, they focus on analyzing the strategy of the Kingdom regarding soft power by looking at explicit formulation of objectives, policy tool choices and strategic narratives constructed. National image is treated not as fixed property but as something the Saudi state actively seeks to shape through policy and communication. The empirical focus of this thesis is therefore on the official discourse, derived from strategy documents, and other primary and secondary sources that demonstrate state policy. The aim of this study is to map the transformation of Saudi soft power strategy over time, not to determine whether the strategy has succeeded or failed in achieving its objectives. While results or processes are occasionally covered as context, the empirical object of analysis remains the Saudi soft power strategy itself for this thesis. The political system that produces the said strategy is not endorsed or condemned, and frequently covered issues such as domestic human rights or political freedoms are acknowledged as potentially relevant for the international reception of this strategy but essentially lie beyond the scope of this study. Similarly, the effectiveness of the strategy in changing external perceptions or behavior is outside the scope of this study and remains a question for future research.

1.5. Argument(s)

This thesis argues that Vision 2030 marks a qualitative shift in the soft power strategy of Saudi Arabia. It makes three core claims. First, soft power moves from a largely implicit byproduct of religious leadership claims and religious diplomacy to an explicit comprehensive -including religious leadership and diplomacy but not limited to it- strategy with elaborately defined objectives. Second, the Kingdom invests systematically in institutional infrastructure for both developing soft power resources and soft power conversion, including brand new comprehensive cultural bureaucracy, giga projects that generate attention and support strategic narratives, and tourism platforms that enable foreign audiences to experience the transformation of Saudi Arabia first hand. Third, the emerging soft power strategy seeks to

reposition Saudi national image by promoting a new strategic narrative of the Kingdom as an innovative and progressive state that pursues sustainability and begins to align this image with concrete policy changes. Together, these shifts constitute an attempt to expand the available resources for soft power, build conversion mechanisms for pre-existing or recently developing resources, and construct strategic narratives that align with the new aspired Saudi identity.

The first claim is primarily developed in Chapter 3, which sets the baseline for pre-2016 soft power architecture of Saudi Arabia, demonstrating that Saudi soft power emerged largely as by products of religious leadership with limited explicit strategic framing. Historically, public diplomacy efforts were often reactive and fragmented, rather than organized around dedicated institutions and clearly stated goals. This chapter serves to compare and contrast the content of Chapter 4, which shows that Vision 2030 introduces a more deliberate approach to soft power, with objectives related to Saudi image in the world explicitly articulated in high level documents.

Second claim is substantiated through Chapter 4. Vision 2030 significantly develops and diversifies the sectoral portfolio through which Saudi Arabia generates international attraction and soft power. Many cultural sectors are offered institutional support and developed domestically, while also being treated as exportable assets. Tourism policy introduces leisure visas and allows foreign audiences to experience the transformation of Saudi Arabia first hand. Hosting and sponsoring sport events generate attention along with giga projects, which further support the strategic narrative of Saudi transformation. In summary, all these initiatives form an integrated soft power toolkit that creates multiple venues of engaging foreign publics and potentially generating soft power.

Third claim is developed in Chapter 4. Vision 2030 and related strategies place sustained emphasis on themes such as moderation, openness, sustainability, futurism, and innovation. Cultural infrastructure, giga projects, and sports events are utilized as tools to demonstrate this new Saudi Arabia. In contrast to the pre-Vision era described in Chapter 3 where severely restrictive policies created credibility gaps that inhibited public diplomacy efforts and efforts to project a positive image, post-Vision

Era themes are accompanied by regulatory and institutional changes such as the lifting of the cinema ban, organization of music festivals, and moderate social liberalization. Drawing on Nye's emphasis on the importance of consistency between a state's policies and communication for soft power that is covered in Chapter 2, this thesis interprets these developments to act as countermeasures for the congruence gaps. It does not claim that such congruence is complete and uncontested, but rather that Vision 2030 represents a notable step towards aligning narrative and policy in the sphere of soft power.

1.6. Limitations and Scope

The scope of this study is limited by several factors. Most fundamentally, the thesis analyzes strategy articulation rather than effectiveness or outcomes. It documents what Saudi Arabia says it is doing and the institutions it has built to do it. It does not measure whether these efforts succeed in changing foreign perceptions or behavior. The question of whether Vision 2030's soft power investments actually generate attraction among Western publics remains empirically open to study. Polling data and media sentiment analysis could address this question but lie beyond the present study's scope.

Further, the thesis does not engage in normative evaluations of Saudi Arabia's political system or domestic human rights conditions. While acknowledging that these factors significantly affect international reception of Saudi soft power efforts and likely constrain their effectiveness, normative assessment of the regime lies beyond the analytical scope.

Additionally, multiple limitations bound the claims of this study. First, the reliance on official sources represents a significant limitation. As the subject of analysis is state strategy, the study design focuses on primary materials, which consist predominantly of government documents reflecting the state perspective. While this is appropriate for analyzing official strategy, it means the study cannot capture implementation gaps, internal debates, or unintended consequences that official discourse may obscure. The thesis treats documents as "structures of signification"

revealing strategic intentions, but acknowledges that intentions and outcomes often diverge. Second, the focus on English-language materials, while justified by the study's emphasis on Western oriented soft power projection, necessarily excludes Arabic language sources that might reveal different strategic priorities or internal contradictions especially in the pre-Vision era.

1.7. Methodology, Sources, and Outline

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine the evolution of Saudi Arabia's soft power strategy. Discourse is understood here as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena” (Hajer, 2002, p. 63). Official documents of Vision 2030, related programs and institutions are analyzed, focusing on State's official engagement with infrastructure, policy instruments and narratives with relation to soft power strategy. Vision 2030 is treated not as a neutral description, but as “structures of signification which construct social realities” (Milliken, 1999, p. 229) utilizing specific “story lines” (Hajer, 2002, p. 63) to position the state internationally.

Analytical focus is on institutional design and approach to soft power and public diplomacy. The employed method allows for the systematic examination of how Vision 2030 and related initiatives conceptualize soft power objectives such as international attraction, assign roles to different newly created institutions. For the analysis, these texts are not only providing insight into state intentions but also serve as performances of strategic identity that reveal how policymakers seek to position the Kingdom internationally viewing politics as a “play of ‘positioning’ at particular ‘sites’ of discursive production” (Hajer, 2002, p. 62).

The data corpus differs significantly across the two periods analyzed in the Chapters 3 and 4. For the pre-Vision baseline, the present analysis relies primarily on news articles and secondary sources due to limited availability of official English language policy documents during this period. It is important to note that the scarcity of comprehensive official English language strategy documents before 2016 is itself indicative of the Kingdom's limited emphasis on systematic international

communication and soft power strategy articulation during this period. This documentation asymmetry reflects the strategic shift from fragmented state infrastructure and closed off approach to comprehensive and coordinated institutional approach.

For the analysis of Vision 2030 era strategy, the corpus shifts to primary reliance on official policy documents, particularly those published after 2019 when institutional development accelerated and thus the number of English language materials available increased. Core Vision era sources include the Vision 2030 founding documents, annual reports, various reports from Ministry of Culture and its commissions, Saudi Tourism Authority plans and campaigns, giga project materials, and Public Investment Fund reports. News articles and secondary sources supplement this primary documentation where relevant.

This thesis maps the strategic evolution of soft power strategy rather than measuring outcomes. It does not assess whether Vision 2030 has succeeded in improving Saudi Arabia's international image, nor does it track changes in foreign public opinion. Tourism statistics or other metrics that could be interpreted to approximate soft power success are only utilized to provide context where relevant. The analysis remains at the level of institutional design and policy pertaining to soft power. Understanding how states select policy instruments and construct strategic narratives to achieve soft power goals constitutes a distinct analytical contribution to literature. Further, Vision 2030 represents a rare case of rapid, comprehensive strategic reconfiguration in soft power policy. The speed and scope of this shift make the case itself analytically significant.

CHAPTER 2

SOFT POWER

Before examining definitions of power and boundaries of soft power in detail, it is useful to clarify the significance of this conceptual work for this thesis. The Saudi case that will be presented in later chapters hinges on distinguishing power resources and the instruments that create attraction from said resources.

This chapter lays the theoretical foundation that the thesis will utilize in later chapters; first by reviewing how leading IR scholars have defined power as an issue and context specific relationship, then by explaining how Nye's account sets the boundaries of what constitutes soft power. These distinctions will guide the rest of the thesis in operationalization of Public Diplomacy (PD, hereafter) and analysis of Saudi soft power that will be covered.

2.1. Introduction

“Soft power” is everywhere. It is invoked to explain the reach of K-Pop, the appeal of universities, the pull of democratic ideals, and even the fallout from foreign policy failures. Precisely because the term has travelled so far, it risks meaning too much and too little at once. Owing to its heavy usage in policy and media circles, soft power is often subjected to a variety of misuse and conceptual stretching. Public diplomacy is treated as soft power itself; nation branding is equated with attraction; propaganda, disinformation and inducement get treated as “soft power” while attraction generating use of military power sources through myths is considered “hard”, as the military is included. Without clear distinctions between resources, instruments and outcomes, concepts and definitions blur into the general idea of “non-coercive” power.

In this chapter, I clarify the concept of soft power and put guardrails around the usage of the concept for the remainder of this thesis. First, this chapter anchors the concept of soft power in the broader conversation regarding power in the wider International Relations literature. It distinguishes resources from outcomes and emphasizes the relational and issue/context specific nature of power. This means specifying “who influences whom, about what, and under which conditions” in any case where power is to be analyzed. It also means acknowledging that assets do not automatically get translated into influence unless they go through “power conversion”. This principle keeps the present analysis from conflating the sources of attraction from the exercise of soft power.

Building on that foundation, this chapter adopts Nye’s working definition of soft power, “getting what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment”, emphasizes that attraction is audience-relative and often credibility-dependent and sets boundaries to ensure that the term is not stretched to mean “anything non military”. Attraction arises when culture, political values, or foreign policy are perceived as legitimate and congruent with policy. Next, transitioning from sources to instruments, this chapter explores how strategic narratives, public diplomacy, and nation branding translate resources of power previously discussed into soft power.

In the next section, I situate soft power within broader IR debates on power, emphasizing the differentiation of resources from outcomes and the problem of conversion. I then set analytic boundaries for soft power and proceed to show how public diplomacy, strategic narratives and nation branding function in the process of converting resources into attraction.

2.2. Situating Soft Power

2.2.1. Power as a concept

Power is an elusive concept that has been constantly contested in literature. Across social science, including IR’s classics have focused on the concept of power. Morgenthau, Carr, and later Mearsheimer have focused on power in many of their

works, and the concept of power has been situated at the heart of many IR theories, yet its definition remains a topic of debate. Being such a basic concept, power is central to many things and sees extensive non-academic usage, causing it to be ambiguous and unsophisticated about certain aspects of it. At its core, it can be said that power is about affecting outcomes, changing things, and controlling others.

Moving from a variety of ambiguous definitions that allude to a general sense of controlling outcomes, we are inclined to think of power as the resources that allow an actor to change things. How much money an individual has or how mighty a country's military tends to be correlated to how powerful they are perceived as after all. Yet, all the resources one can think of do not inherently change outcomes by themselves. Dahl provides an interesting conceptualization of power that highlights the issue with this understanding of power as resources, taking a relational approach to power in his seminal work (Dahl, 1957). He treats power first and foremost as a relational and outcome focused concept, stating “A has power over B, to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957, p. 203). He distinguishes “bases” which are resources of power that *could* be exploited, from power, but do not necessarily mean they grant power to an actor per se. He explains: “Unutilized bases do not translate into power, as no outcomes are changed, no behavior is altered. It must be exploited in some fashion if the behavior of others is to be altered.” (Dahl, 1957, p. 203).

Baldwin (1979) later developed a more sophisticated concept of power, arguing that political power should not be equated with a stock of resources or capabilities but treated as a contextual, issue-specific relation, specifying that “all generalizations about power should be set in a context specifying (as a minimum) who is trying to get whom to do what.” (Baldwin, 1979, p. 181). First, he analyzes the “paradox of unrealized power”, where an actor appears to have resources necessary to exercise power but cannot successfully do so. He posits that “can be explained either in terms of inadequate conversion processes or in terms of mistaken judgments regarding the fungibility of power resources” (Baldwin, 1979, p. 169), drawing attention to the fact that sources of power might not always be converted to relations of power. Further, in his analysis of “the paradox of unrealized power”, he emphasizes two things:

political power is low in fungibility and consequently power in one domain does not equate to power in another domain. He explains: “Because political power is multidimensional and political power resources are low in fungibility, more power in one policy-contingency framework may mean less in another.” (Baldwin, 1979, p. 174).

Baldwin's observation regarding power conversion is insightful, and Nye has developed this further. According to Nye (1990), thinking about power only as resources misses the crucial part of actually causing a behavior change in others. He points out that some states possess impressive resources, yet they fail to move others in their preferred direction, while other states manage to set agendas and change behavior because they are good at power conversion. Separate from power and the resources that enable it, the concept of power conversion “is the capacity to convert potential power, as measured by resources, to realized power, as measured by the changed behavior of others.” (Nye, 1990, p. 27).

Similarly to Baldwin, Nye also points out that power is issue-specific and increasingly less fungible, claiming that any analysis regarding power must ask “Power for what?” (Nye, 1990, p. 189) and specify the context. He explains “The effectiveness of a power resource depends upon the context. For example, having superior battle tanks helped the U.S. to prevail against Iraq in desert warfare; they were less successful in the context of swamps and jungles in Vietnam.” (Nye, 2021, p. 198). Taken together, “power” is a relational and contextual capacity. It is not a collection of resources but the ability to shape others' behavior or preferences, within a specified scope and domain. For the purposes of this thesis, I adopt Nye's formulation that power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants (Nye, 2011, p. 90).

2.2.2. Nye's Account & the Boundaries of Soft Power

Origins of Soft Power: Joseph S. Nye, Jr. developed the concept of “soft power” and introduced the term in his seminal book titled “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power” (Nye, 1990). Underlying power behavior is recognized as being

as old as human history and it can be traced back to figures as far back like Lao-tzu in 630 BCE, or closer like E.H. Carr's concept of power over opinion. In contemporary literature, Nye is credited with coining the specific terminology of soft power and developing the concept within modern international relations theory.

Nye (2021) recounts the process of developing this process in order to attempt two puzzles, one of policy and one academic. The academic puzzle was related to the dominant theory of the time, Structural Realism, which, he perceived, is a simplistic view of power where one dominates the other. However, he wanted to develop a theory “that is not limited to situations of A controlling/dominating B, as realists would arguably have it, but that includes instances of A achieving desired outcomes in concert with B.” (Bakalov, 2019, p. 134; Nye, 2021, p. 200). The policy puzzle was borne out of late 1980s perception of inevitable U.S. decline and empire overstretch, mainly by Paul Kennedy (Nye, 2021, p. 199). Nye felt that something was missing in the analysis of traditional American power resources such as military and economic might. Especially in the successful conclusion of the Cold War, he recognized that attraction generated by the Western culture and ideas played a significant role in addition to the Western economic and military might.

Analytical boundaries of soft power: Nye defines soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” (Nye, 2004, p. 256). He subscribes to the relational definitions of power discussed in the previous sections. Hard power is military and economic powers, used as carrots and sticks to coerce an actor to behave a certain way, while “agenda-setting that is regarded as legitimate by the target, positive attraction, and persuasion are the parts of the spectrum of behaviors” that are included in the concept of soft power (Nye, 2021, p. 201).

As discussed previously, Nye defines power as issue-specific and separates the resources of power from the power itself and emphasizes the process of power conversion. Accordingly, “some resources that are commonly associated with hard power in most contexts can also produce soft power in another context” (Nye, 2021, p. 201). Although military and economic resources are traditionally associated with

hard power even the outcomes generated by hard power can indirectly contribute to soft power through the “city on the hill effect” (when a state generates influence without necessarily taking deliberate action) or similar mechanisms of attraction by example (Nye, 2004). In addition to using said resources for peaceful and helpful means, creating an aura of power or myth of invincibility inevitably creates some soft power, as humans are intrinsically drawn to stronger rather than the weaker (Nye, 2004).

Of course, soft power resources are not limited to the ones that are conventionally hard power related. Nye determines three primary resources for soft power which are a country’s culture (*in places where it is attractive to others*), its political values (*when it lives up to them at home and abroad*), and its foreign policies (*when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority*). (Nye, 2004, p. 25). Culture is defined by Nye as “the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society” (Nye, 2004, p. 25) and it encompasses high culture, which includes literature, art, and education and popular culture, which focuses on mass entertainment such as film, music, and fashion. Crucially, Nye emphasizes that these sources generate attraction when the target audience finds it attractive, meaning a piece of media could be found attractive in one context and appalling in another. Generalizing from this, when a country's culture draws on “universal values”, the potential of its culture to create attraction rises. Conversely, “narrow values and parochial cultures are less likely to produce soft power.” (Nye, 2004, p. 25).

Second primary source of soft power is political values and domestic policies. Political values such as democracy, human rights, individual opportunities, and civil liberties are highly appealing, just like the openness of a society. Final source is foreign policy, where diplomacy and multilateralism boost the attraction a state generates. In any case, the conversion of the last two primary sources into soft power is contingent on them appearing legitimate in the eyes of others: political values, when lived up to at home and abroad, and legitimate appearing foreign policies generate soft power, especially when multilateral (Nye, 2004, p. 70).

Additionally, Nye highlights two aspects of soft power that are crucial. First, soft power is increasingly contingent on it being seen as credible. Reputation is critical in

this digital era and information that appears to be mere propaganda is entirely counterproductive; it does not generate attraction but can diminish it (Nye, 2008). Second, the substance and the style of a country must match. If a country's approach to soft power does not match its foreign policy actions or domestic policies, it is unlikely to be successful and cause the said country's policies to appear hypocritical, once again diminishing attraction (Nye, 2008).

2.3. From Sources to Instruments: Strategic Narratives and Public Diplomacy

This section explains how soft power sources of culture, political values, and foreign policy are translated into practice via strategic narratives and public diplomacy.

2.3.1. Public Diplomacy: what it is (and is not)

PD is a set of tools that encapsulate state engagement with foreign publics, oriented to credibility and dialogue. Classic summaries define PD as a “process by which international actors seek to accomplish the goals of their foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics” (Cull, 2008, p. 31) or as “the communication of an international actor's policies to citizens of foreign countries” (Pamment, 2013, p. 1).

In this chapter, I treat PD as the implementation layer of soft power, a set of instrument families that can carry strategic narratives and foster soft power. PD serves as one of the primary mechanisms of “power conversion”, converting power resources into soft power by creating attraction in the publics of other countries. PD itself is not soft power, it is one of the primary ways of utilizing the resources of attraction that already exist (Nye, 2008). Thus, states utilize PD to “wield”, generate, or enhance their soft power (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2008; Ohnesorge, 2020). As Cull puts it, PD “can be the mechanism to deploy soft power, but it is not the same thing as soft power, any more than the army and hard power are the same thing” (Cull, 2008, p. 19). The implicit objective of PD is to advance the actor's strategic interests (Pamment, 2013). It accomplishes this by influencing foreign citizens whose views can ripple into the policy area, directly or indirectly. By targeting both mass and elite audiences, PD can reframe narratives and reshape the environment in which officials

make decisions, indirectly influencing the decision making process in a country or directly influence decision makers themselves, as the audience of PD is not limited to narrowly conceived “public” but can include the decision making elite; such as legislators, senior bureaucrats, military officials, academics and journalists.

One caveat about the audience is the necessity that the audience in question must find the resources that are being communicated attractive in the first place (Nye, 2008, p. 95). As discussed in the previous sections, power is issue- and context-specific, and to bolster soft power, states must utilize the tools of power conversion in appropriate contexts, or the process does not generate results. For example, exporting Hollywood content that conflicts with conservative social norms to conservative Muslim countries, no matter how great the movies are or how expertly communicated they are, would only cause repulsion, not attraction (Nye, 2008, p. 95). Having framed PD as engagement with foreign publics with the aim to influence and in turn create soft power, the immediate boundary problem appears to be how PD differs from propaganda in practice. PD and propaganda are differentiated by both approach and intent to convey the message to foreign publics. Propaganda by definition includes manipulation and functions opaquely, with the goal of removing the option of free deliberation from the target audience, in turn securing the desired responses (Melissen, 2005, p. 18). Propaganda is dependent on compelling the audience by controlling the narrative, ensuring the audience has no option but to accept the message, while PD thrives with transparency and any indication of deception entirely erodes PD's effectiveness, causing it to undercut rather than engender soft power (Zaharna, 2010, p. 78).

In this sense, propaganda is coercive, not co-optive. Where PD curates choices and invites consideration from the target audience, thus remaining consistent with the logic of attraction; propaganda constrains choices through deception and control and accomplishes its goal by the logics of hard power and coercion (Nye, 2021; Zaharna, 2010, p. 78). Efforts of communicating content that are not credible are often perceived as pressure, rather than persuasion, repelling rather than persuading (Nye, 2008). Further, audiences can infer intent from the way communication is organized, emphasizing the importance of the differences between propaganda and PD in the sense of institutional design, in addition to the content.

Credibility is a scarce currency in the contemporary world and states are dependent on it if they are to accrue soft power (Nye, 2008). Whether PD is read as propaganda or information largely depends on credibility, and credibility largely depends on the congruence of policy and image and the institutional design that surrounds the communication. (Nye, 2008; Pamment, 2013). If states operate with the “assumption that appearance and reality can somehow be two different things without audience ever noticing”, a gap emerges between their rhetoric and policy, causing a credibility deficit that communication alone cannot repair (Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2008, p. 101). One example is U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East clashing with U.S.' rhetoric regarding freedom and democracy, making the PD efforts ineffective, as they were seen by the Middle Eastern public as hypocritical and disingenuous (Melissen, 2005). Similarly, the U.S.' mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo were inconsistent with American values, delivering a costly blow to American credibility that could not be reversed by communication efforts alone (Nye, 2008, p. 101).

To ensure PD does not lose credibility, many states rely on credibility firewalls such as arm's-length cultural and educational institutes that are insulated from overt day to day political control, preventing shorter-term foreign policy goals from undercutting longer-term cultural diplomacy (Pamment, 2013, p. 53). U.S. State Department officials for example realized the advantage of such insulation and positioned private sector nonprofit organizations to serve as a buffer between the government and the program, thus “keeping the government at arm's-length” (Mueller, 2020).

This illustrates the importance of the governance models for PD efforts that states can employ. Two classic models emerge from practice: the centralized model and the disaggregated or arm's-length model. The centralized approach was exemplified by the U.S in the 1980s where all overt PD arms were grouped within a single agency, USIA (Cull, 2008, p. 36). Conversely, the British model utilizes a disaggregated structure that separates functions, with organizations like the British Council operating under an arm's-length relationship to the government (Cull, 2008; Pamment, 2013, p. 74). These institutional designs can also include different firewalls between areas of activity, to separate and manage divergent organizational priorities, and the existence of “multiple identities and a lack of homogeneity within a target audience” (Fisher, 2020, p. 251).

In sum, when PD utilizes manipulative or deceptive tactics that are commonly associated with propaganda, it destroys the necessary conditions for mutual trust and transparency, which are crucial for the message to be effective. This causes the public to view the nation as hypocritical and causes the nation to suffer a debilitating credibility deficit. If successful in deceptive tactics, propaganda crosses into the territory of hard power, coercing the audience by removing the option of refusal of the message. With credibility constraints and governance architecture in place, rest of this section turns into practice and explores different PD typologies, drawing from Cull (2008), before turning to digital PD and unconventional platforms such as sports mega events.

A taxonomy of Public Diplomacy: Under the credibility and governance constraints previously outlined, PD practice can be categorized into five clusters. Listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting will be the primary elements of PD practice (Cull, 2008; Snow & Cull, 2020), and I will examine each of them and their different aspects, such as the usual timeframe of their operation, typical infrastructure, their source of credibility and how their position related to the government affects that credibility.

First, listening supplies the evidential base for PD, preceding all successful public diplomacy. It is the deliberate starting point of all PD activities, defined as an actor's attempt to collect data about foreign publics and their opinion to redirect policy or the wider PD approach (Cull, 2008), which makes it useful for both short term and long term approaches. Traditional research methods employed in listening included media monitoring and public opinion polling (Pamment, 2013) and the usual infrastructure consists of monitoring technology and language trained staff (Cull, 2008, pp. 34–35). Aiming to discern what the publics of other countries think is not a new idea, and the listening step of PD often integrates and overlaps with traditional intelligence work. More modern methods incorporate systemic digital social listening and leveraging software to monitor online data, such as blogs or social media platforms (Cull, 2008; Pamment, 2013). For PD to be effective, the collected data must be utilized as the foundation for PD related decision-making and states must ensure “a mechanism to feedback results and advice into the administration of PD

and back into the highest level of policy making” (Cull, 2008, p. 48) should exist. In terms of credibility, listening benefits from perceived connection to government, if it implies that the state in question is listening to world opinion (Cull, 2008, p. 36).

Advocacy involves the promotion of policies, ideas, or interests to a foreign public. It is typically geared toward short term, politicized objectives. Traditionally, advocacy work is differentiated from other sub categories of PD on the basis that its goals are different from the rest (Pamment, 2013, p. 43). Core tools include embassy press relations, as well as general informational work and lobbying efforts. Traditionally, advocacy has been characterized by unidirectional flow of information from the state to the foreign public, although new PD theories see “advocacy work as dialogue based, building on like-minded networks of government and non-governmental actors, with research informing the strategy, and engagement and collaboration providing the basis for persuasion” (Pamment, 2013, p. 30). Due to its nature in advancing foreign policy goals directly and immediate utility, advocacy is often situated closely to the government, often centralized (Cull, 2008, p. 32). Further, advocacy work derives credibility from proximity to government, gaining legitimacy by perceived connection to the government.

Cultural diplomacy is notoriously hard to pin down, occasionally used to mean PD or soft power, in policy circles. Cultural diplomacy is defined as “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad” (Cull, 2008, p. 33; Pamment, 2013, p. 30). Compared to the previously mentioned family of PD tools, cultural diplomacy reflects the nature of “soft power” conversion the most, creating attraction through culture and shared values (Melissen, 2005, p. 147). I treat cultural diplomacy as a PD family alongside listening, advocacy, exchanges, and broadcasting; a tool of power conversion that serves to cultivate and enhance soft power, subject to the credibility limitation previously mentioned. Typically, work is often carried out by specialized organizations like the British Council or Italian Cultural Institutes, which often distance themselves from the term public diplomacy (Cull, 2008, p. 33). While organizational architectures that situate cultural diplomacy institutions closer to government can work, arm’s-length delivery is crucial for

maintaining credibility, as cultural organizations require the appearance of distance from the government to flourish. As a long-term process, cultural diplomacy necessitates trust to effectively connect with foreign publics.

Historically, the “culture” in cultural diplomacy had been typically associated with high culture, such as literature, classical music, or painting (Goff, 2020). In the contemporary context, the cultural element has evolved to include popular culture in a broad sense which includes a wide range of products from Hollywood films to K-Pop. Many countries export products unique to their culture, such as the U.S.' use of “jazz's power as a cultural ambassador” (Melissen, 2005, p. 153), or Japanese manga and Korean K-pop being major cultural exports. Further, the use of popular culture can be strategically superior to high culture if the target audience is the wider public, as popular culture excels in mass accessibility compared to high culture (Goff, 2020).

Exchange diplomacy is another core component of PD, defined as “actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by sending its citizens overseas and reciprocally accepting citizens from overseas for a period of study and/or acculturation” (Cull, 2008, p. 33). This activity is typically considered a long-term effort and the element of reciprocity inherent in this practice makes it a two-way information flow (Cull, 2008). Main instruments of this practice are scholarships, fellowships, specialist exchanges (Cull, 2008; Nye, 2004). Exchanges rely on the “opinion leader” or “multiplier” model of communication, where citizens (sometimes referred to as “citizen diplomats”) share their personal positive experiences of foreign cultures with larger publics, which can be more convincing than mass communication (Pamment, 2013, p. 31).

International broadcasting is the fifth and final essential component of PD recognized in literature. It is defined as “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment by using the technologies of radio, television, and the internet to engage with foreign publics.” (Cull, 2008, p. 34), adapting to include digital broadcasting, social media, and netizen engagement in the modern media environment. In practice, international broadcasting can overlap with other components considering its wide range of possible applications. It runs on a medium-term time frame and features an

outward flow of information, benefiting from a perceived distance from the government.

While not a separate form of PD or a sixth category, it is important to mention how the recent developments in information technologies have affected practices of PD. The concept of “Digital PD”, referring to the practice of PD in this new era of media dissemination, brings with it a transition beyond mere top-down information dissemination, into network cultivation that aims at fostering dialogue, engagement and long-term relationships with foreign publics (Manor, 2019; Melissen, 2005). This approach stems from the fact that today's digital platforms can facilitate a communicative approach beyond the posting of official communiqués. It is important to note that while the rise of social media platforms such as X (*formerly known as Twitter*) can contribute to listening and information gathering significantly, the information flow from the governments to the foreign publics can still continue to be top-down when the proximity to government is significant (Bjola & Holmes, 2015, p. 124). This also serves to emphasize that the shift in contemporary media platforms has redistributed influence to non-state actors, causing “diplomats and MFAs [to lose] their monopoly over diplomatic communication as NGOs, civil society organizations, activists, bloggers, and even terrorist groups [can] disseminate public diplomacy messages online” (Manor, 2019, p. 12; Pamment, 2013). Maintaining credibility online remains crucial for PD in this digital era, as a nation's promoted self-image and perceived reality risks a debilitating credibility gap and potential crisis of legitimacy (Manor, 2019, p. 265).

In sum, PD specifies who communicates through which instruments under credibility and governance constraints, which will be significant for our analysis in the following chapters. Listening, advocacy, exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and international broadcasting are primary PD instruments, and they function under different rules of credibility. The content of the message transmitted by PD can vary depending on the nature of instrument and the goal of the state. It can range from routine informational outreach to advocacy of specific policies. Content of PD can also include or be organized around strategic narratives. In this sense, PD instruments can both convey existing narratives and serve as the platforms through

which narratives are developed, refined and deployed; to frame issues or generate attraction.

2.3.2. Strategic narratives

In a famous quote, Nye concludes that in this day and age, “success is not merely the result of whose army wins, but also whose story wins” (Nye, 2011, p. 8) and in a later essay acknowledges narratives to have become “the currency of soft power” (Nye, 2011, p. 104). Indeed, through simple observation we can point out that narratives are central to many happenings on the stage of international relations today. Nye (2011) gives the example of competing narratives of Serbia and NATO regarding the events of 2000, and Chitty (2024) provides many examples for this. Perhaps the most interesting is Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the competing narratives emerging from this.

The relationship between strategic narratives and PD is profoundly reciprocal. Narratives can function as the essential content of PD, while PD activities are necessary to validate, refine, and propagate narratives, often determining the success and validity of the narrative in question. Broad PD efforts cannot realistically be executed without strategic narratives as its substance, and strategic narratives cannot achieve their goals without the support of PD as the operational practice.

The primary function of strategic narratives is to frame issues in persuasive ways so that certain facts are brought to the forefront. Regarding framing, Nye (2011) gives the example of describing military actions as “entering Iraq” versus “invading Iraq” yields very different effects in terms of the power to shape preferences and the overall narrative. Miskimmon et al. (2013) conceptualize “strategic narratives” as “means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international relations in order to shape the opinions and behavior of actors at home and overseas” (Miskimmon et al. 2013, p. 248), a communicative tool which gives meaning to events with integrated interest. Strategic narratives can not only cause attraction, but they can also help integrate the narrators’ interests and goals, to persuade audiences to embrace the narrator’s preferred world view.

CHAPTER 3

THE PRE-VISION BASELINE

3.1. Introduction

Before analyzing Vision 2030's soft power strategy, it is necessary to establish what preceded it. This chapter reconstructs the pre-2016 state of Saudi soft power resources, institutions, and constraints. It begins with a brief historical overview of state formation and modernization before 1979, then examines the post 1979 settlement and its consequences, followed by a snapshot of Saudi soft power in 2015, right before Vision 2030.

3.2. Historical Background

3.2.1. State Formation and Modernization before 1979

Understanding Saudi Arabia's pre-Vision 2030 soft power constraints requires briefly examining the historical trajectory of the Kingdom that produced them. The conservative turn documented in the following sections was not an inherent characteristic of the Saudi state; it rather emerged from a specific political bargain in 1979 that restricted the state's options and empowered the clerics. Prior to this rupture, the Kingdom had developed a modernizing state bureaucracy and had maintained social environment that was considerably more open than what would follow.

As Al-Rasheed (2010) explains, the discovery of oil in 1938 and the subsequent developments initiated Saudi Arabia's transformation from a fragmented tribal polity into a centralized rentier state dependent on oil. Oil revenues provided the financial

foundation for state-building, thus enabling the construction of administrative infrastructure that would distinguish Saudi Arabia from its neighbors. However, it was under King Faysal's reign (1964-1975) that systematic modernization accelerated. Faysal implemented significant administrative reforms, centralizing authority and expanding the bureaucratic apparatus. As Hertog (2010, p. 78) notes, Faysal granted the clerics control over education and the judiciary as a "quid pro quo in which they agreed to tolerate institutional and legal modernization in other areas", which served as a capacity to manage clerical objections that would be constrained after 1979.

This administrative centralization allowed the monarchy to insulate key developmental sectors from traditionalist clerical pressures. Hertog (2010, p. 61-84) describes this era as the establishment of a bureaucratic order where the King held significant authority for policy decision-making, which allowed the state to compartmentalize religious influence. While specific social domains like women's education were conceded to clerical oversight as a part of the measures ensuring clerical contentment, the core functions of the modern state such as foreign policy or economic planning remained largely insulated from religious interference. This segmentation suggests that the later dominance of religious norms over all aspects of public life was not structurally inevitable in the Saudi case, but rather resulted from the specific historical collapse of this strategy.

The social and cultural atmosphere of 1970s Saudi Arabia differed markedly from the restrictive environment that would emerge later. Cinemas existed in major cities, television had been introduced in 1965 despite initial religious opposition, and urban centers exhibited relative openness in public life (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Lacroix (2011, p. 26) documents that while religious elites opposed certain modernizing policies during this period, "the practical consequences of this attitude were minimal because it did not provoke any notable reaction in society," indicating that the balance of power still favored the state.

Yet this relatively stable status of the Kingdom was not going to last and the seeds of future conflict among religious elites and the Saudi leadership were being sown. The

rising influence of the clerical elites was itself a product of state policies designed to counter external threats during the Cold War. The Saudi leadership actively encouraged the growth of the Sahwa (Awakening) movement, which was a hybrid of local Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood activism, with the intention of positioning Sahwa to act as a bulwark against secular Pan-Arabism and leftist ideologies (Lacroix, 2011). Hegghammer (2010) notes that this pan-Islamic policy initially served the regime's geopolitical interests, allowing it to project soft power globally. Yet, this strategy created a mobilized domestic infrastructure that would be emboldened by regional conflict and possessed the organizational capacity to demand the renegotiation of the social contract.

The 1973 oil embargo and subsequent price boom brought unprecedented wealth to the Kingdom but also intensified the aforementioned tensions. Rising oil revenues enabled the Kingdom to expand state capacity and societal expectations rose along with it. Meanwhile regional dynamics such as the Iranian Revolution emboldened Islamist currents within the Kingdom. By the late 1970s, the stage was set for the Grand Mosque seizure of November 1979, which would fundamentally alter the Saudi social contract. In response to this crisis, the regime "decided to slow down the process of social liberalization" (Hegghammer, 2010, p. 24), a choice that would empower conservative clerics over cultural and social spheres. This historical context is essential for understanding why Vision 2030's cultural liberalization constitutes a reversal of path-dependence constraints rather than unprecedented innovation. The Kingdom is, in significant respects, returning to possibilities that existed before they were foreclosed by the post-1979 settlement.

3.2.2. Foundations of the Crisis

International influence and soft power of Saudi Arabia from the 1970s to the 1990s was derived from structural resources of attraction. Oil wealth and custodianship of Islam's holiest sites situated the Kingdom in a unique position that made it possible to generate soft power without engaging deeply in power conversion tools. The very presence of these holy sites has constituted what Bettiza (2020) calls a "symbolic sacred capital", as the holder of around 20% of global proven oil reserves, the

Kingdom was able to increase foreign aid and spending after 1973. Without explicit aim to create attraction, petrodollars built regime-to-regime ties and policy access among foreign elites, particularly in Washington. Riyadh utilized its oil earnings in establishing formal, institutionalized ties with Washington, building its ties with other regimes and acquiring policy access among foreign elites, and further engaged in bailout diplomacy as a means of swaying foreign elites and demonstrating Saudi willingness to cooperate. An example of this is the economic and military commissions created by Kissinger and Crown Prince Fahd in June 1974; the economic track enabled a special “add-on” facility for off-auction U.S. Treasury purchases, tightening financial links, while the military track signaled an implicit security understanding alongside growing arms sales (Basosi, 2019).

Second, the Kingdom utilized its religious authority stemming from the ownership of Islam's holiest sites. This utilization was achieved primarily through a formal, state-led Islamic foreign policy, the strategic management of the annual pilgrimage Muslims undertake (the Hajj), and the construction of transnational religious alliances. Establishment of the Muslim World League (MWL, hereafter) aided Saudis' efforts to export Wahhabism to places such as Nigeria or Ghana by funding projects in line with the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (Commins, 2006). Hajj management and Muslim World League network projected religious legitimacy across Muslim majority states.

In sum, the Kingdom's international influence and attraction rested on two things: Utilizing oil leverage to develop deeper ties with the US, and utilizing its unique power sources, i.e. symbolic sacred capital to situate itself as the religious leader of the Muslim world, and engaging in checkbook diplomacy, and exporting Wahhabism. This configuration aligns with Mandaville and Hamid's (2018) conceptualization of “Islam as statecraft” where religious leadership functioned as the primary vehicle of Saudi soft power and diplomatic influence. Taken together, these structural sources and practices aimed at spreading Wahhabism generated a de facto “city on the hill” effect covered in the previous chapter. The Kingdom's visibility as the guardian of the holy places and as an oil linchpin set a reference point oriented toward producing attraction from foreign Muslim publics without

much overt messaging. Cold War bipolarity reinforced this pattern, as Saudi Arabia positioned itself as a bulwark against Soviet-backed Arab nationalism and post-1979 Iranian revolutionary Shia Islam through Islamic solidarity networks.

The 1979 Grand Mosque seizure presented the regime with the most profound internal challenge it faced since its foundation. In November 1979, Juhayman al-Utaybi and his fellow militants occupied Islam's holiest site for no less than two weeks (Hegghammer & Lacroix, 2007). This occupation struck at the heart of Al Saud's political authority, which fundamentally rested on their religious legitimacy. The insurgents demanded stricter Islamic observance, purification from Western influence, and the expulsion of foreign experts. These demands came shortly after the Iranian Revolution which itself had already challenged the Saudi Islamic leadership. Taken together, these events demonstrated that the regime could be ideologically outflanked by dissident groups claiming that the monarchy's commitment to Islamic values was insufficient. (Hegghammer & Lacroix, 2007)

The regime's response to this legitimacy crisis proved decisive for the trajectory of Saudi soft power over the following decades. Following the suppression of Utaybi insurgency with aid from French special forces, the regime engaged in a set of changes that constituted a conservative turn in the Kingdom. This turn manifested institutionally through increased power and budget for religious authorities, such as the capacity to take part in deciding on educational curriculum or monitoring media. The religious police, or the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice's (CPVPV) enforcement capacities were further strengthened, the state expanded funding for religious universities to increase teaching staff and student enrollments while the Ministry of Islamic Affairs acquired greater oversight of mosque networks and curriculum content. Moreover, measures were instituted to increase compliance with Wahhabi norms, including rigorous enforcement of business closures during prayer times and stricter gender segregation in public spaces (Hegghammer & Lacroix, 2007; Lacroix & Holoch, 2011).

This post-1979 arrangement between the Royal Family and the ulema created a form of path dependency that would constrain future policy changes and create trouble for

Saudi soft power for decades. Effectively, the regime had granted extensive control over the Kingdom's social and cultural spheres to ulama as the price of political stability and any subsequent attempt at social liberalization would necessarily require renegotiating this foundational legitimacy formula (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Additionally, this conservative shift coincided with further Islamization of the Saudi Foreign policy, driven partly by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which created opportunities for the Kingdom to project Islamic solidarity globally (Hegghammer, 2010). This dual process of domestic conservatism and international religious activism was aimed at enhancing Saudi Arabia's religious legitimacy both domestically and in the wider Muslim world. Saudi Ulema aimed to purge all Western influences and strictly enforce conservative religious rules domestically, while engaging in a state sponsored campaign to influence Muslims abroad (Fighel, 2009).

The soft power consequences of this post-1979 bargain were profoundly contradictory. On one hand, regime had reinforced its religious legitimacy, which increased the attraction of traditionalist masses in the Muslim world and strengthened the Kingdom's position as the leading defender of Sunni orthodoxy. Regime survival was inextricably linked to religious legitimacy and leadership, and the Saudi religious outreach had significantly increased; also serving the function of religious soft power (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018). Yet, as soft power and attraction is heavily dependent on issue and context, this emerging religious soft power of Saudi Arabia was limited to foreign Sunni Muslim audiences. In contrast to rising Saudi perception in Muslim audiences, this conservative turn constrained the Kingdom's ability to project a “moderate” image to Western audiences. The enhanced domestic conservatism was seen as “clearly offensive to Westerners” (McFarland, 2020) and reinforced negative perceptions of the Kingdom in the Western world. While U.S policymakers continued to prioritize alliance stability that Saudi Arabia provided, congressional critics and Western publics doubled down on denouncing the regime's policies and criticizing them for being repressive. Further, as Hegghammer (2010) explains comprehensively, “the Wahhabization and the pan-Islamisation” of 1980 Saudi Arabia” (2010, p. 24) had altered the social and political structure in a way that would enable extremists to fund or mobilize people to join the jihad in Afghanistan.

(DeLong-Bas, 2004; Hegghammer, 2010). Down the line, this made the Kingdom appear linked to the rise of Muslim extremism to Westerners; a perception that would come under scrutiny devastatingly after 9/11 and cause credibility gaps that would undermine subsequent attempts at public diplomacy targeted at Western audiences to emerge.

Next, the 9/11 attacks constituted the next major crisis for Saudi Arabia, causing catastrophic reputational collapse in the West for the Kingdom and undermining its soft power efforts. This crisis fundamentally shifted Saudi approach from reliance on inherent power resources mentioned earlier and the so called “city on the hill effect” in Muslim countries to active defensive public diplomacy to protect its image in the Western world. The shock to Saudi Arabia's attraction in the Western world was profound. As fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudi nationals, (The 9/11 Commission Report, 2004) Western media scrutinized the alleged links between Wahhabi ideology and Al-Qaeda's extremist stance and criticized the Kingdom heavily. Additionally, congressional inquiries and 2002 Joint Intelligence Committee report only served to add salt to the wound. Polls showed that the American public's view of Saudi Arabia plummeted in no time, declining from 56% in January 2001 to 24% by December 2001 (Gause, 2010, p. 144).

Statements of Saudi officials did not help alleviate the concerns of the Western public either. Saudi authorities were quick to deny any involvement and even denied that any Saudi citizen was involved, quickly pointing out that Bin Laden's citizenship was stripped, and Interior Minister Prince Nayif publicly – and prematurely – asserting that the Kingdom had no evidence linking Saudi Arabian citizens to the hijacking (Gause, 2010, p. 144). Taken together, the immediate Saudi response only served to add to the credibility gap, making Saudi statements seem untrustworthy. At the same time, it is important to point out that Western media coverage regarding the Saudi connections to the event tended to blur the crucial distinctions between state “carelessness” and deliberate support of radical terrorism (Cordesman, 2003). Further, Western coverage often “fail[ed] to go into any detail on the many things the Saudi government has done to deal with terrorism since 9/11” (Cordesman, 2003, p. 2) and disproportionately focused on the statements of Saudi

extremists (Cordesman, 2003). This media coverage continued even after the Kingdom's swift response to the May 2003 Riyadh bombings, which made it clear that Al Qaeda did not hesitate to take action against the Kingdom either, despite the perceived ideological connection. In the wake of the bombings, Saudi Arabia had engaged in a “jihad of its own against the terrorists” (The 9/11 Commission Report, 2004, p. 373) had questioned more than 1.000 individuals, and made more than three hundred arrests, demonstrating that the Kingdom itself had confronted the presence of Al Qaeda (Cordesman, 2003).

Saudi public response to 9/11 did not only consist of unfortunate public statements, however, as Saudi authorities were quick to hire top public relations agencies, recognizing the magnitude of the crisis at hand. Despite Burson-Marsteller's efforts, the Kingdom's reputational decline seemed to continue as Saudi authorities could not manage to pacify the “campaign” against the Kingdom as they perceived it (Burnham, 2013). In its pursuit, the Kingdom hired another PR agency, Qorvis Communications, and spent more than ten million dollars, (Burnham, 2013) reflecting its commitment to repairing its public image in the west. Qorvis in turn subcontracted multiple specialized firms for activities ranging from lobbying to media buying and created a comprehensive crisis communications apparatus specifically for repairing post 9/11 Saudi image.

In addition to PR outsourcing, Saudi authorities engaged in security cooperation with Western governments, demonstrating Saudi willingness to continuously engage with Western elites and support the image of Saudi Arabia as a Western ally. This was not borne only out of Riyadh's goal to fix its perception in the West however, as high-level leadership remained critical towards the Middle East policy of the United States. Unlike Western media, Bush administration attempted to “shield the bilateral relationship from political pressure and went out of its way to strengthen ties with Riyadh” also (Gause, 2010, p. 146). Further, after 2003 Riyadh engaged in significant international cooperation, establishing a Counter-Terrorism Committee with the United States and conducted joint operations and shared real time intelligence (Cordesman, 2003, p. 6), which helped bolster the narrative of the Saudi participation in the war against terror.

Other attempts to repair and rehabilitate the Kingdom's image were deployed further down the line. Crown Prince Abdullah advanced the “Saudi Peace Initiative” in February 2002, which would be adopted as the Arab Peace Initiative later, which proposed establishing normalized relations between the Arab states in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territories. While seemingly unrelated, this proposal was considered a diplomatic move, utilized as a deliberate public diplomacy strategy, an attempt to brand Saudi Arabia as a regional “peacemaker” and dialogue partner replacing the post 9/11 perception of a “terrorism supporter” state that was prevalent among the West publics in the West (Burnham, 2013, p. 3). Additionally, the Kingdom launched a media campaign with multiple radio spots and TV commercials, all utilizing quotes from President Bush, Secretary Powell, and Secretary Rumsfeld praising Saudi counter terrorism cooperation, yet a majority of the target audience believed that the Saudi government was “trying to capitalize on 9/11” with those messages, finding them insincere, (Burnham, 2013, p. 5) further highlighting that the Kingdom kept running into the issue of credibility gap.

3.3. Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the Pre-Vision Era

3.3.1. Religion

Religious influence was a primary dimension of Saudi soft power in the pre-Vision 2030 period, operating fundamentally through mechanisms of a transnational religious economy (Farquhar, 2017) Saudi religious diplomacy utilized its unique position as the custodian of the holiest places in Islam and its extensive financial resources available due to its vast oil reserves. The Saudi royal family utilized its “sacred symbolic capital” and adopted the title of “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques”, which is in line with the Saudi policy of asserting their role as the “leader of the Islamic world” (Bettiza, 2020). The strategic narrative adopted by the Saudi government was one of Islamic leadership, and this outlook was also adopted as a legitimizing strategy. This religious leadership was used to legitimize Saudi efforts not only domestically but internationally as well, serving to cement the Saudi leadership in international organizations (Bettiza, 2020).

Further, Saudi government engaged with transnational religious networks in numerous ways. Central to this engagement was the Islamic University of Medina (IUM), (Farquhar, 2017, p. 3), established in 1961 explicitly as a missionary venture, offering fully funded religious instruction (*although it is important to note that “worldly” education was slowly beginning to take place*) to mostly non-Saudi men who were expected to return to their home country and take on the role of a missionary after graduation. (Farquhar, 2017, p. 3). Other tools of foreign policy and soft power consisted of hajj and umrah management, which allowed the Kingdom to connect with the global Muslim community directly; multilateral organizations such as Muslim World League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (“sacred network capital”) further asserted Saudi religious leadership (Bettiza, 2020).

While the influence and attraction generated by mechanisms covered target Muslim majority publics and diasporas, the Kingdom also engaged in interfaith dialogue. Historically, the Saudi religious establishment had shown reluctance toward such dialogue, at times going as far as issuing fatwas against comprehensive interfaith engagement (Khalid Husain, 2022). This position shifted visibly in 2008 with the declaration of the Makkah Appeal for Interfaith Dialogue, which stipulated appropriate goals for Islamic initiatives and declared that Islam advocates dialogue. Following the Makkah Appeal, the MWL convened the World Conference on Dialogue in Madrid, introducing Saudi Arabia's novel approach to interfaith engagement to a global audience, although the efforts would not be completed into “a radically expanded and diversified [...] interfaith dialogue initiatives” until later (Husain 2022, p.1). Nevertheless, these interfaith efforts ran again into the issue of credibility (Khalid Husain, 2022). One of the primary organizations for this endeavor, MWL, was still widely viewed with suspicion and perceived as a tool of Saudi government to spread its specific understanding of Islam by the West (Khalid Husain, 2022). Moreover, early foundational diplomatic efforts like the Makkah appeal were criticized for being too restricted in scope.

3.3.2. Education and Science

Saudi Arabia’s educational diplomacy revolved around large-scale scholarship programs and academic partnerships intended to build goodwill and human capital.

One of the primary tools employed by the Saudi regime, The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) was instituted in 2005 following an educational agreement between Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and U.S. President George Bush. This program included a significant financial commitment, allocating nearly 2.4 billion USD annually (based on 2013–2014 data) to support over 100,000 students, in several ways (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Students enjoyed numerous benefits including monthly stipends which would also be extended to their spouses and children, full tuition, extensive health coverage, further financial incentives for academic success and allowances to ensure academic success such as private tutors (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). Overall, KASP was an extensive scholarship program designed to ensure bright Saudi students received best possible education under favorable conditions. Indirectly, however, KASP ensured that Saudi youth would engage with host communities worldwide and make everyday impressions on professors, peers, and local communities, cultivating mutual understanding between Saudi Arabia and host nations through cultural exchange among students. This would facilitate the spread of Saudi culture and language and help construct a favorable image of the Kingdom internationally (Alzubaidi et al., 2019). The KASP destinations prioritized Western countries such as the USA, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Western European countries for quality education and soft power return, the United States being the top choice with around one hundred thousand students enrolled. Institutionally, the Ministry of Higher Education (which was merged into Ministry of Education in 2015) managed KASP, with Saudi Cultural Missions in embassies providing on-the-ground support.

In addition to KASP, the Saudi government and royal philanthropies endowed academic chairs and centers abroad to influence scholarly discourse, engaging in educational diplomacy. A branch of the King Abdulaziz Public Library was built in Peking University, which included a center for Arabic-Chinese studies, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud donated 20 million USD each to Harvard and Georgetown in 2005, explicitly stating that “bridging the understanding between East and West is important for peace and tolerance” (Arenson, 2005). These endowments abroad and high-profile gifts helped Saudi Arabian government purport

an image of a country that valued education and helped establish positive relations inside the Beltway.

3.3.3. Culture

By 2015, Saudi Arabia's capacity to generate soft power through its cultural resources remained virtually non-existent. Many activities and products, be it high culture or popular culture, were severely limited, or outright banned throughout the Kingdom, hindering the chances of any homegrown cultural product being exported and in turn generating attraction. Cinema had been banned domestically since the early 1980s following the objections of religious authorities which were based on perceived “moral corruption” (Parasie et al., 2017). This eliminated both venues for exhibition and the chance of domestic film production. While there were underground attempts at cinema through short films, Saudi cinema never took off due to the continued religious opposition, lack of professional infrastructure, and lack of financial incentives that naturally stemmed from the exhibition ban (Alamri, 2021). Another crucial reason was the absence of copyright protection. The Kingdom's historical lack of intellectual property laws meant that films could not be effectively monetized, as unauthorized copies of media were easily distributed (Alamri, 2021).

Despite the exceptionally challenging climate in the Kingdom, there was a faintly emerging Saudi film industry. Many developments contributed to this foundational, albeit slow, emergence of Saudi cinema. Prominently, utilizing the political and financial influence of Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, The Rotana Group played a pivotal role in reviving the film industry, with the movie “Keif al-Hal?” (2006) representing the first venture of Rotana into the industry (Almuharib, 2023). Implementing self-censorship where necessary to not offend the Saudi society, the film was produced in UAE with a predominantly foreign crew. While the movie was not exhibited commercially in theaters in Saudi Arabia, it was screened at Cannes 2006 (Dowd, 2006), which constituted a significant symbolic achievement that, though far from sufficient to generate mass international attraction or any meaningful translation into soft power, it nevertheless represented a crucial first step from having

no cultural exports whatsoever to at least making Saudi creativity visible in elite international circuits. *Menahi* (2008) which was the first movie to be screened in Saudi Arabia in 2008 in decades as an exception to the ban (Child, 2009) and *Wadjda* (2012) were to follow. *Wadjda* held prominence among these movies, as the first feature film to be written and directed by a Saudi woman, Haifaa al-Mansour, and the only one of Rotana's three feature productions to be shot entirely inside Saudi Arabia. Unlike Rotana's previous productions, *Wadjda* did not shy away from sensitive topics, and covered the sensitive social issues faced by Saudi women in a male-dominated society, particularly depicting the patriarchal practices that restricted a young girl (Shabi, 2013). The movie garnered substantial international recognition, winning numerous accolades and receiving thirty-three nominations, including being nominated for the Oscars (Brooks, 2013). This success made it an unprecedented milestone for Saudi cinema on the global stage. These three films, produced by a single media group led by Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, underscored that the Saudi film industry was slowly but surely emerging, despite its structural deficiencies and the vehement opposition from religious institutions.

The Saudi Film Festival and modern technologies also contributed to the emergence of the Saudi cinema. First, developments in media technologies made watching movies possible and convenient even without public exhibitions, which pushed the exhibition ban into relative irrelevance especially for imported movies. Second, the Saudi Film Festival was founded in 2008, serving as the only location in the country to organize public screenings of local and regional films and served to sustain the notion of local cinema despite the constraints. While the initial versions of the festival, named "Saudi Film Competition" had no specific goal or agenda, "later editions of the festival began to promote local films, gather talent for networking and help the Saudi film industry grow" (Alamri, 2021, p. 127).

Similar to cinema, music production and performance in Saudi Arabia faced severe restrictions, hindering another potential avenue for cultural soft power. In line with the conservative turn following the events of 1979, religious authorities also cracked down on music, leading to decades of systematic suppression. While traditional forms of ceremonial music, like seen in the *ardah* sword dance were celebrated as

cultural heritage and performed widely, even by the Royal Family, contemporary genres of music such as pop, rap or metal were systematically banned from the public life in the Kingdom.

Wahhabi religious doctrine and the prevailing clerics in Saudi Arabia held that musical instruments were forbidden with few exceptions, a view that became the topic of many fatwas. While some minor clerics supported the view that music was not explicitly forbidden in Islam, the Saudi clerical establishment and the Grand Mufti remained firmly against what he described as “depravity” (Al Arabiya, 2010; Arab Weekly, 2017). Consequently, public concerts, music venues, and music lessons were banned although some exceptions such as sporadic performances in Jeddah festivals and rare official exceptions happened where male singers performed (Reuters, 2017). By 2015 however, even the exceptional public concerts such as those in annual Jeddah festivals were stopped (Al-Sulami, 2017). Additionally, regular school curricula remained absent from any music classes, while separate conservatories or music schools were not present anywhere in the Kingdom, only public musical education being received by military bands at military academies.

The religious police, also known as Mutawa or CPVPV, had been reported to strictly enforce prohibitions regarding music, shutting down private concerts, raiding music lessons, and confiscating musical instruments (Luck, 2020). As a result, self censorship was widespread in this area of culture as well, and music was limited to the underground scenes, which naturally lacked international visibility and could not attract international audiences.

A notable example was the heavy metal subculture in Jeddah, where musicians formed bands and performed only in private venues (Turrell, 2025). Saudi Arabia did produce popular musicians however, despite all the challenges posed by the prohibitions mentioned earlier. Most prominently, Mohammed Abdu, commonly titled the “Artist of the Arabs” was one such singer who held major concerts all around the Arab world, e.g. in Cairo, Kuwait and Dubai. Yet, Abdo could only rarely perform in his home country, (Al-Sulami, 2017) while female Saudi singers like Waed were completely barred from domestic performances.

In sum, by 2015, very few internationally recognized recording artists existed in the Kingdom, and they were only recognized in the Arab world in limited capacity. Saudi Arabia had barely any music exports, and had no concerts that could attract global audiences, had no venues, no conservatories, or no music industry to support local talent. Due to religious restrictions, the Saudi talent that could potentially captivate foreign audiences remained suppressed, having no clear path to perform and no incentive to pursue music.

Television remained similarly underdeveloped as a source of international attraction and soft power. The Saudi media landscape was characterized by what Zayani (2012) described as a “dual media strategy” involving de-territorialized expansion through “decentralized, open and modern transnational media systems abroad” alongside “state-controlled and state-managed” systems at home (Zayani, 2012). The Royal family and their associates pursued an agenda of media liberalization however, establishing television channels in a variety of places, like London, Rome, Cairo and Beirut and pursuing their goals, which would be difficult under the strict rules that governed the media sector in Saudi Arabia (Ratta et al., 2023). One of the leading Saudi owned broadcasters, MBC launched from a 12 million USD London headquarters in 1991 (Vivarelli, 2022) for example. These networks screened a plethora of content ranging from films to reality shows or animations, but they utilized foreign talent mostly, avoiding engagement with local Saudi Arabian talent (Sakr, 2016). Consequently, a distinction existed between Saudi owned television and television based in Saudi Arabia, with this separation actively hindering the emergence of a homegrown television industry (Ratta et al., 2023). In literature pre approval practices and ad hoc bans at the Riyadh International Book Fair signaled tight limits on contested literature and a weak enabling environment for publishers, which caused self-censorship practices among Saudi authors. For instance, in 2014, organizers confiscated roughly 10,000 copies across 420 titles and removed works by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish after protests (Flood, 2014; Trentwith, 2014). The following year, the fair reiterated that distributing materials without prior approval would violate regulations and trigger questioning by security authorities (Arab News, 2015).

Taken together, by 2015, Saudi Arabia had few exportable cultural assets - and that was largely a policy choice. Religious authorities' post-1979 empowerment led to systematic suppression of cultural production: cinema had been banned domestically since the early 1980s, eliminating both exhibition venues and the professional infrastructure necessary for film production; public concerts, music venues, and conservatories were absent, with the religious police enforcing prohibitions that drove musical talent underground or into exile; and television content was commissioned outside the Kingdom preventing the emergence of a domestic TV industry.

While isolated exceptions existed, mainstream approaches could not significantly overcome structural barriers such as the absence of copyright protection, pervasive self-censorship stemming from harsh enforcement of rules and lack of tolerance for progressive ideas, and the lack of financial incentives stemming from exhibition bans. As a result, Saudi talent that might have captivated international audiences remained suppressed, with no clear path to perform and no infrastructure to support production. The result was a near-complete absence of the youth-oriented “cultural magnetism” that countries like South Korea or Türkiye (K-pop and soap opera TV series respectively) mobilized to generate international attraction.

3.3.4. Tourism

Tourism functions as a powerful instrument for projecting soft power and shaping global perceptions; allowing countries to create and maintain positive international images through cultural exchange and heritage promotion (Demir & Demir, 2025). Through tourism, countries can generate lasting impressions through a number of ways, such as cultural festivals or natural environments, transforming visitors into informal ambassadors who shape perceptions in their home countries as a result (Demir & Demir, 2025). Yet, Saudi Arabia's tourism sector lacked the fundamental infrastructure and policies to fulfill this function by 2015. No leisure tourist visa category existed, heritage sites remained inaccessible to international and especially Western visitors, thus, the Kingdom did not attempt to utilize tourism as a vessel for soft power or economic gains.

By 2015, Saudi Arabia received 17.99 million international arrivals, with total tourism spending reaching 82.5 billion SAR (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). While this visitor volume can be interpreted as substantial, fundamental structural and institutional constraints remained throughout the preceding decade. Religious pilgrims constituted 48.7% of arrivals with 8.76 million visitors: 1.38 million of them undertaking Hajj or 7.38 million of them performing Umrah (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). These religious tourists, accounting for 57.6% of all tourism spending (Ministry of Tourism, 2025), had to operate within restrictive and highly controlled parameters, their visa categories limiting them to prescribed routes through Mecca and Medina, facing time-limited stays with no possible extensions for leisure and exploration (Sadi & Henderson, 2005). Business travel represented 1.88 million arrivals and 12.2% of tourism spending, driven by Saudi Arabia's oil and petrochemical industries, construction megaprojects, and a resident expatriate workforce exceeding eight million by the 2010s (Ministry of Tourism, 2025; Mufeed & Gulzar, 2014). Naturally, these functional visits involved no cultural engagement, with business travelers staying in international hotels and departing without engaging with the locals and experiencing Saudi life and country. Leisure tourism on the other hand, accounted for merely 1.58 million arrivals, 8.8% of the total visitors generating 6% of the tourism spending, the lowest share of any category (Ministry of Tourism, 2025). Consequently, millions experienced Saudi Arabia economically but not as a cultural destination, which would hinder the possibility of generating positive international narratives through visitors sharing their experiences and in turn generating attraction and soft power.

By 2015, Saudi Arabia possessed four UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Al Hijr, also as known as Mada'in Salih (2008), the At-Turaif Historic District in ad-Diriya (2010), Historic Jeddah (2014), and Rock Art in the Hail Region (2015) inscribed for their outstanding universal cultural value (Al-Tokhais & Thapa, 2019). Further, the Supreme Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCT) which had the primary goal of promoting the sector had identified over 10,000 attractions overall (Sadi & Henderson, 2005), yet these sites remained critically under-resourced and internationally invisible. SCT only planned to expand the tourism sector for visitors from GCC countries mainly, and the broader Arab world later (Sadi & Henderson,

2005). Saudi Arabia's visa regime allowed GCC citizens to visit freely, while no leisure tourist visa category existed for other countries, rendering heritage sites accessible only to the citizens of Gulf countries (Abuhjeeleh, 2019). In line with this, Abuhjeeleh (2019) notes that the Kingdom's "virgin and undiscovered" landscapes remained analytically invisible to global audiences, representing a large unrealized soft power asset. Furthermore, sites located in remote areas such as the Al-Hijr and the Rock Art in Hail Region lacked management plans for conservation, interpretation, or visitor management and consequently suffered from poor infrastructure, possessing no basic information services such as interpretive literature, signs, or maps (Al-Tokhais & Thapa, 2019). Domestic awareness proved equally deficient, showcasing the lack of importance given to these sites. A 2014 survey of 130 residents in Riyadh found that 97% were unaware of the Jabal Al Baloum mountains, 85% unaware of Raghdan Forest, 72% unaware of Jeddah's historic walls and gates, and 90% unaware of Jubail Island's dolphins; with 72 percent of respondents reporting that tourism information was "barely available" or "not at all available" (Mufeed & Gulzar, 2014). Geographically, majority of survey respondents had visited the Western region of Hijaz which encompasses Makkah, Medina, Jeddah, and Taif for religious purposes, while only a small percentage had visited the central regions (Mufeed & Gulzar, 2014); which serves to confirm that for decades, tourism activities revolved around religious pilgrimages and cultural tourism around heritage appreciation remained underprioritized and severely underdeveloped (Abuhjeeleh, 2019).

In sum, the state of tourism in Saudi Arabia had several strategic costs to the kingdom. Saudi Arabia had generated barely any positive exposure among non-Muslim Western publics and produced no word-of-mouth recommendations or experiential testimonials that could potentially create attraction in foreign publics. Regional competitors such as the UAE and Qatar gained soft power advantages through leisure visitor engagement, while Saudi Arabia closed its doors on the Western audience, not attempting to attract. Institutional configuration demonstrated this lack of attention to this subject, as Saudi Arabia lacked any formal tourism agency until establishment of SCT in 2000, which also did not intend or plan to expand tourism beyond the GCC and the broader Arab world (Sadi & Henderson,

2005). As a result, by 2015, the Kingdom possessed visitor volume, heritage assets that had the potential to draw cultural tourism, and sizable economic tourism activity but lack a comprehensive leisure tourism framework, which would constitute a massive untapped soft power asset that Vision 2030 would attempt to activate.

3.4. Synthesis

This chapter has documented a striking paradox at the heart of Saudi Arabia's pre-Vision 2030 soft power. While the Kingdom possessed substantial power resources, it systematically failed to convert them into broad international attractions and soft power. Even more puzzling, certain initiatives functioned effectively as “islands of efficiency” in a broadly ineffective Saudi state apparatus (Hertog, 2010). KASP successfully deployed exchange diplomacy, Hajj management projected organizational prowess, elite security cooperation built policy access; functioning as the previously mentioned “islands” where soft power policy was functioning, while the broader institutional landscape often constrained or unintentionally blunted translation into the favor of domestic legitimacy. This paradox cannot be explained by resource scarcity alone, as Saudi state ran into the problem of “conversion” of resources into soft power. Rather, it reflects fundamental problems of institutional coordination, credibility architecture, and path-dependent policy choices that limited soft conversion mechanisms.

Baldwin's concept of “unrealized power” and Nye's explanations of “power conversion” provides the initial theoretical entry point to the phenomena described in this chapter. As covered in the previous chapter, power resources do not automatically translate into influence without appropriate conversion processes, and Saudi Arabia's 2015 baseline exemplifies this disconnect. As discussed before, The Kingdom had identified over 10,000 heritage attractions yet received minimal cultural tourism; it possessed musical and cinematic talent yet produced limited, sporadic, and regionally concentrated cultural exports rather than the systematic output that generates mass international appeal. Majority of sectors shared the same pattern where resources are present, yet the conversion infrastructure was absent or institutionally blocked. Three mechanisms that together explain the conversion gap

emerge from the analysis: credibility gaps between policy and messaging; dysfunctional institutional architecture that lacked both coordination and independence; and deliberate path-dependent constraints from the post-1979 religious settlement.

First, credibility deficits undermined persuasion. As discussed in the previous chapter, Nye emphasizes that soft power requires policy-image congruence. When rhetoric contradicts visible policy, audiences perceive manipulation rather than attraction. Saudi Arabia's post 9/11 response exemplified this issue, as millions of dollars of PR spending and domestic policy changes and amplified counter terrorism could not land while the Western audiences perceived the Kingdom's domestic religious policies as extremist. Similarly, promoting interfaith dialogue abroad, positioning as regional peacemaker through the Arab Peace Initiative ran into the same problem. The result, as Zaharna theorizes, was that persuasive communication read as propaganda - coercive pressure rather than co-optive attraction. Audiences interpreted Saudi messaging as "capitalizing on 9/11" precisely because they perceived the substance to contradict the message.

Second, institutional dysfunction prevented effective conversion. This manifested in two interconnected ways. Pamment and Cull document how successful PD requires arm's-length institutions that create perceived distance from government, like the British Council model that insulates cultural diplomacy from short-term political interference. Saudi Arabia lacked such infrastructure in their crisis management efforts in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Everything was attributed to government control, ensuring that all communication, regardless of content quality, faced skepticism and got interpreted as "insincere" by Western audiences. Simultaneously, institutional fragmentation meant that successful initiatives operated in isolation. Hertog's (2010) "islands of efficiency" model of Saudi bureaucracy was no different in terms of soft power policies, and these initiatives operated in a setting where they were surrounded by clientelist bureaucracy. This aligns with Al-Otaibi's (2019) findings on bureaucratic fragmentation and Al-Tokhais and Thapa's (2019) documentation of the "overlapping responsibilities" between tourism bodies and municipalities that paralyzed effective site management. Different ministries pursued

independent objectives with no central coordination body aligning sectoral initiatives across education, culture, tourism, and religious diplomacy, making a comprehensive push for generating international attraction difficult.

Third, path-dependent suppression stemming from an earlier bargain actively blocked changes in the power conversion infrastructure. The 1979 Grand Mosque crisis response empowered religious authorities in exchange for domestic stability, granting them veto powers and extensive oversight of social and cultural spheres. This bargain caused cultural liberalization and related policy changes to threaten the legitimacy formula underpinning regime survival. Religious authorities held veto power over cultural production, resulting in cinema bans, music restrictions, and the externalization of television. This was not merely passive neglect of cultural spheres, but active constraint by the clerical establishment. As a result, 1979 stability bargain prioritized domestic religious legitimacy over international attraction, which proved to be a structurally limiting decision on soft power conversion, even when individual initiatives (like KASP) worked well. This situation created a profound contradiction in the Saudi state apparatus. KASP sent 100,000 students abroad, creating multiplier effects through citizen diplomats, textbook exchange diplomacy that would produce genuine attraction in the long term. Yet simultaneously, cinema remained prohibited, music was driven underground with few exceptions, and television production had become externalized. The state had built billions in tourism infrastructure for hajj and inscribed four UNESCO World Heritage Sites, yet visa policy restricted leisure travel to only GCC nationals, causing the almost eighteen million annual arrivals to generate minimal positive exposure apart from religious pilgrimage.

Similarly, cultural talent managed to emerge despite the extreme constraints posed by prohibitions. Haifaa Al-Mansour demonstrated international appeal with *Wadjda*, Mohammed Abdu filled concert halls across throughout the Arab world, and Saudi produced hit series like *Tash Ma Tash* existed, but these remained exceptional rather than systematic. The crucial pattern was that most cultural output with soft power potential existed not thanks to policy support but despite policy constraints. Individual talent was navigating around institutional barriers rather than being enabled and “pushed” to a wider international audience by state infrastructure.

Without deliberate conversion mechanisms, these scattered successes could neither scale nor compound into comprehensive soft power.

By 2015, Saudi Arabia had reached a structural ceiling. The Kingdom had started to implement policy and initiatives directed to generate soft power, yet it could not generate cultural magnetism that competitors like South Korea, Türkiye, or the UAE successfully deployed because path-dependent constraints blocked such production. The Kingdom could not deploy credible public diplomacy because policy-image gaps were too difficult to overcome due to prevailing perceptions in the West and institutional dysfunction ensured propaganda perceptions. It could not coordinate sectoral initiatives because fragmented bureaucracy and religious veto players prevented integration of comprehensive policy changes.

That said, two caveats must be highlighted in this analysis. First, sector performance varied significantly by audience. Religious diplomacy resonated strongly in Muslim majority countries even as it faced skepticism in the West, demonstrating that conversion failure was not absolute but audience specific, as was theorized by Nye. Second, developments indicating that change was underway existed, such as KASP's decade of success, Rotana's film experiments, the 2014 mixed-gender blues concert in Jeddah, and even a short-lived plan of a pilot leisure visa program. These initiatives demonstrated that capacity existed but lacked the institutional coordination and policy consistency, likely a result of domestic bargaining. Consequently, mentioned attempts lacked the scale to constitute a comprehensive soft power strategy. The problem was not absence of all conversion but rather its fragmentation and the contradiction between isolated successes and broader structural constraints.

The Vision 2030 era should therefore be read as an attempt to replace “islands” with a well coordinated conversion portfolio while preserving enough arm's-length texture to gain credibility with skeptical audiences by building a comprehensive conversion infrastructure and renegotiating the post-1979 bargain. The next chapter examines how Vision 2030 and the creation of the Ministry of Culture attempt to resolve this conversion gap by simultaneously building cultural resources and new mechanisms for their deployment.

CHAPTER 4

VISION 2030 AND THE SAUDI SOFT POWER STRATEGY

4.1. Introduction and Political Context

Having established the pre-Vision 2030 baseline in Chapter 3, this chapter turns to the transformation initiated with Vision 2030 in 2016. It traces how Vision 2030 constructed a comprehensive state apparatus for soft power, systematically building both cultural resources and conversion mechanisms across multiple sectors. The following analysis focuses first on the institutional architecture of the Ministry of Culture and its commissions, followed by sectoral case studies in film, music, sports, mega-projects, and tourism. Throughout this chapter, official documents are analyzed to reveal how Saudi policymakers conceptualize and operationalize the Kingdom's pursuit of international attraction and soft power.

While the reasons behind this transformation are outside the scope of this thesis, political context behind Vision 2030 can help comprehend this change more accurately. This institutional transformation can be said to have emerged within a complex regional environment shaped by inter-Gulf competition, with mainly Qatar and the UAE. Qatar's successful hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, its cultivation of Al Jazeera as a global media platform demonstrated the viability of sustained soft power investments in the Gulf context. Further, the UAE's earlier diversification into tourism also served to establish a regional precedent. Saudi Arabia's post-2016 institutional development and emerging soft power architecture can be understood partly as a response to this competitive landscape, seeking to leverage its superior scale and resources to establish regional primacy.

Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia's soft power efforts are bound to operate under persistent international criticism and scrutiny regarding human rights and political

freedoms. This study does not evaluate these accusations as domestic political arrangements lie beyond its analytical scope. However, it can be speculated that these criticisms constitute one of the reasons for the Kingdom's emphasis on image rehabilitation in the west. Further, from a soft power perspective, such criticism is analytically significant as it represents precisely the type of credibility constraint that Nye (2008) identifies as limiting soft power. As seen in the previous chapter, Western media coverage has shown an inclination to simultaneously highlight such concerns while reporting Saudi efforts to win Western audiences, leading the audience in question to discount Saudi cultural initiatives or tourism campaigns. Whether Vision 2030's strategy of demonstrating transformation through observable policy change can overcome these challenges remains an open question, one which this thesis does not aim to answer, but the challenge itself continues to shape the strategic environment within which Saudi soft power operates.

Against this backdrop of regional competition and external scrutiny, Vision 2030 represents the Kingdom's most comprehensive attempt yet to construct a state apparatus on soft power generation. The following sections document how official strategy has moved from the limited and fragmented approach identified in Chapter 3 toward explicit objectives and systematic investment across culture, sports, tourism, and narrative construction.

4.2. Culture

Recalling Baldwin's concept of "unrealized power" and Nye's "conversion" mechanism discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter analyzes how Vision 2030 operationalizes these concepts to move beyond the "islands of efficiency" of the pre-Vision era to a comprehensive ecosystem designed to manufacture attraction.

4.2.1. Cultural Infrastructure: Resource Building and Conversion Mechanisms

This chapter argues that Vision 2030's cultural agenda represents a deliberate attempt to turn Saudi Arabia's previously 'unrealized' cultural power into exportable soft power by building both domestic resources and conversion infrastructure. As

covered in the previous chapter, Saudi Arabia's post 1979 bargain created what Baldwin (1979) called a state of “unrealized power”, where resources existed but weren't converted into soft power. Further, Saudi Arabia had systematically neglected and even prevented the development of certain cultural industries such as cinema through prohibitions, preventing cultural resources that could create attraction to exist in the first place. Vision 2030's cultural transformation represents a systematic attempt to solve the conversion problem that was presented through simultaneous infrastructure building at two levels.

First, resource building. By creating domestic capacity through institutions that contribute to the development of domestic cultural resources through various ways such as talent pipelines, physical infrastructures or financing mechanisms, Saudi government develops raw materials of soft power. Second is conversion infrastructure. By establishing mechanisms that translate domestic resources into international visibility and attraction through festivals, platforms, incentive programs, and strategic partnerships, Vision and related institutions convert the present cultural resources into soft power.

The following sections examine how Saudi Arabia constructed this dual infrastructure across cultural sectors, with particular attention to governance models designed to address the challenges identified in Chapter 3.

Vision 2030's founding document (2016) elevated culture from marginal afterthought to a major aspect of transformation under the “Vibrant Society” pillar. The document's articulation of cultural importance marked a dramatic rhetorical shift by stating that Saudi Arabia “consider[s] culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life,” while candidly acknowledging that “the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our prosperous economy” (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 22). Moreover, Vision 2030 positioned culture as serving triple functions of first, enhancing domestic quality of life; second, contributing to economic diversification; and third, projecting Saudi identity internationally (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 17).

The Kingdom operationalized Vision 2030's cultural ambitions by establishing its first dedicated Ministry of Culture. This institutional creation centralized cultural policy under cabinet level leadership, with Prince Badr bin Farhan Al Saud was appointed as the Kingdom's inaugural Minister of Culture, with an explicit mandate “to oversee and lead the cultural transformation of Saudi Arabia” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 13). The ministry was positioned as “the engine that powers Saudi Arabia's cultural transformation,” serving as “guardian for the cultural sector” responsible for ensuring “laws and policies are in place to allow the cultural ecosystem to flourish” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 13). Further, a series of Vision Realization Programs were launched within the framework of Vision 2030, with the Quality of Life program directly addressing the cultural infrastructure of Saudi Arabia. Under the Quality of Life Program’s implementation plan, (Vision 2030, 2023), an extensive situational analysis of the Saudi cultural landscape was provided and the challenges such as “Organizational challenges that lead to limited participation, lack of cultural events, and lack of necessary support to enable artists and intellectuals” or simply the “Lack of cultural infrastructure” was listed, along with efforts to mitigate the present challenges. The program also presented a Sector Gap Analysis, along with Sector Initiatives intended to cover those gaps, indicating the Saudi divergence from the previously covered Saudi bureaucracy model of “islands of efficiency”. Instead, Vision 2030 attempted to revise the entire bureaucracy, establishing an extensive state apparatus.

In March 2019, the Ministry published the report titled “Our Cultural Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” articulating a mission “to support and enable a vibrant Saudi Arabian culture that is true to its past and looks to the future by cherishing heritage and unleashing new and inspiring forms of expression for all” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 12). The strategy identified three main objectives for its work: “promoting culture as a way of life, enabling culture to contribute to economic growth and creating opportunities for global cultural exchange” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 12). These three objectives serve to operationalize Vision 2030's cultural vision through an explicit dual mandate for the purposes of this thesis. The first objective addresses domestic resource building by cultivating cultural participation within Saudi society to strengthen national identity (Ministry of Culture, 2019) and

the third objective explicitly articulates the engagement with foreign audiences as a portion of the Vision's outlook for culture by identifying ““creating opportunities for global cultural exchange” as a main objective (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 12). Saudi culture must be projected internationally, not merely develop domestically.

In line with this, the MOC Cultural Vision report detailed this conversion mandate through six specific roles the Ministry would undertake, with the fourth role titled as “Becoming a bridge to the world” revealing intentional soft power design (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 14). This role commits the Ministry to “engaging in international cultural exchanges” to “showcase Saudi culture to the world,” to “increase global awareness of our cultural offer by developing partnerships and identifying platforms for the exchange of ideas,” and crucially, “exporting our own cultural treasures” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 14). This explicit articulation of international projection of culture distinguishes Vision 2030's cultural policy from mere passive cultural development. With MOC, the state is intentionally building infrastructure to convert cultural resources into global visibility and attraction.

The five other roles complement this international projection mandate; “leading the sector” through policy and funding priorities; “developing the ecosystem” by supporting public and private cultural institutions; “enabling regulations” to create clear frameworks consistent with “international best practice”; “recognizing and nurturing talent” through specialist education programs and scholarships; and “Preserving Saudi heritage and culture” to document the Kingdom's history for future generations (Ministry of Culture, 2019). This comprehensive role definition addresses multiple bottlenecks identified in Chapter 3 such as the regulatory obstacles through enabling regulations, fragmented institutions through ecosystem development, and talent gaps through systematic nurturing programs.

MOC's Vision document identifies 16 distinct cultural sub-sectors and to operationalize strategy across these sectors and announces “the intention to establish new sector commissions” to “assist in driving forward sector specific agendas” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 14). Specifically, “11 new Commissions” dedicated to distinct priority sub-sectors would be established, “each with a dedicated team

helping to drive activity forward” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 17). This commission structure was justified as ensuring “faster and more efficient execution of plans” and creating “a clearer path to attracting top talent and leadership” through focused sectoral expertise (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 17).

It is important to note that the commission governance model incorporated arm's-length autonomy designed to address credibility challenges. The strategy specifies that “the Ministry will drive the overall priorities of the sector and the commissions that fall within its portfolio, while giving commissions freedom to manage their own activities” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 16). Further, while commissions “will report to the Ministry of Culture,” each “will have autonomy to act according to the interests of its sector,” operating “within the parameters set by the Ministry” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 17). Each commission would have “a board of well qualified directors appointed by the Ministry” with “rigorous reporting processes,” but would possess autonomy over day-to-day operations including “funding support, the execution of strategic plans,” and “development of their specific sector” (Ministry of Culture, 2019, p. 17). This balance between ministerial oversight and operational independence mirrors successful international cultural institutions like the British Council (Pamment, 2013), building credibility firewalls into institutional architecture.

By 2024, the Vision 2030’s Annual Report (Vision 2030, 2025) would come to describe the transformation as a “Cultural Renaissance”. The commission system had become operational across the cultural ecosystem, with each commission following parallel institutional patterns of licensing, talent development, infrastructure building, and event organization. The Heritage Commission for example was responsible for documentation, preservation, restoration, and sustainable management of cultural heritage. Reflecting the efforts to preserve traditional crafts, The Commission's National Antiquities Register and National Urban Heritage Register were expanding dramatically each year, adding thousands of documented sites in 2024, while the National Register of Artisans grew to over 9.000 practitioners, (Ministry of Culture, 2025). The Commission's activities demonstrate the dual mandate in practice as domestic preservation through comprehensive documentation alongside international

engagement through cultural exchanges, including artisan residencies in Florence, Italy, and hosting regional forums like the Forum on Antiquities and History of the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries were engaged in simultaneously.

The Literature, Publishing and Translation Commission followed a similar policy, operationalizing both resource building and conversion mechanisms of said resources. Consequently, by 2024 the Kingdom's publishing infrastructure had grown substantially, with over 530 publishing houses representing significant year over year growth. The Commission's "Tarim" translation initiative produced hundreds of books translated into and out of Arabic, addressing the conversion challenge directly by ensuring the literary works published reached foreign audiences directly (Ministry of Culture, 2025). Through programs like the Writers Incubator, the commission aided talent development by supporting "emerging Saudi authors in their writing, publishing, and regional promotion, particularly in niche literary genres such as mystery, science fiction, autobiography, and travel (Ministry of Culture, 2025). Additionally, the Commission provided three research grants in 2024 to aid talent development. These grants consisted of a Philosophy Grant (SAR 60.000, benefiting 19 researchers), a Translation Grant supporting publication of translation research, and two new Children's Literature grants (one at SAR 60.000 for 10 researchers, another at SAR 8.500 in partnership with Princess Norah University for 6 researchers), collectively supporting dozens of Saudi researchers in producing peer reviewed scholarly work.

The Visual Arts Commission organized dozens of exhibitions in 2024, including high-profile international partnerships such as the "Imagine Picasso" exhibition, and collaborated across commissions on events like the "Art and Fashion Studio" exhibition with the Fashion Commission (Ministry of Culture, 2025). Crucially, the Commission also organized multiple international art residencies in the UK, Switzerland, and France, benefiting dozens of Saudi artists. These residencies functioned as conversion mechanisms, with Saudi artists gaining exposure to the international art scene while foreign audiences also became familiar with Saudi art. The Fashion Commission organized Red Sea Fashion Week and Riyadh Fashion Week featuring hundreds of Saudi brands, alongside the Kingdom's first fashion

awards ceremony in partnership with international luxury group Chalhoub. The Museums Commission licensed dozens of museums through the Abde'a platform and launched professional training programs in Museum Studies in collaboration with Saudi universities, thereby building the specialized human capital necessary for world class museum operations.

This commission ecosystem demonstrates comprehensiveness of sectoral coverage. Each commission follows similar logics of licensing, infrastructure building, talent development and crucially, international engagement. The Cultural Development Fund was established to finance many of these cultural initiatives and distributed millions of SAR across many commissions, with individual commissions receiving substantial allocations enabling major programming and further cementing their autonomy.

While all 16 sectors received systematic institutional attention through the commission structure, film and music sectors emerged as particular priorities given their high international visibility potential and existing global distribution infrastructure. Especially the Saudi cinema's transformation from 35 years of prohibition to international festival presence, and music's evolution from religious police enforcement to state-sponsored mega-festivals serve to exemplify Vision 2030's cultural conversion logic at scale. The following sections examine these two sectors in depth, tracing how resource building and conversion mechanisms operated in domains that moved from total suppression to strategic priority within seven years. The cases presented in depth demonstrate the speed, intentionality, and soft power orientation of Vision 2030's cultural infrastructure building and international attraction building aspirations.

4.2.2. Cinema: From Prohibition to International Presence

Vision 2030 and associated state infrastructure have prioritized the film industry and positioned culture as a central aspect of the Kingdom's transformation, and cinema emerged as a highly visible mechanism for demonstrating Vision 2030's successful implementation in the area of culture. While the Vision 2030 document does not

explicitly articulate aspirations to develop an advanced Saudi film industry, it implicitly foreshadowed the reversal of the longstanding cinema ban by declaring the intention to provide a variety of cultural venues and carefully support talented Saudi directors (Vision 2030, 2016, p. 12).

Prior to the detailed institutional development that followed Vision 2030, The Minister of Culture and Information had announced the reversal of the cinema ban in December 2017 (Chulov, 2017). The opening of cinemas functioned as a “spectacular, publicity-generating deliverable,” (Ciecko, 2023, p. 223) serving the purpose of attracting global media attention internationally. This decision to remove the ban of cinemas and later on support the development of Saudi film not only aimed to develop a soft power resource and develop mechanisms of power conversion; it also constituted a move that would be perceived as a visible commitment to change and modernize by the Saudi government (Ciecko, 2023).

The first commercial cinema opened in April 2018 with a screening of Black Panther, (Reuters, 2018) and seven licenses were issued to major cinema operators including international chains AMC and VOX Cinemas that same year (Shesha & Yusuf, 2021). The scale of ambition was substantial with targets called for 350 theaters with over 2,500 screens by 2030 (Arab News, 2018) and the Public Investment Fund (PIF) would establish the Development Investment Entertainment Company (DIEC), with the allocated budget of SAR 10 billion to increase the Kingdom's cultural and entertainment offering” and “build local capacities within the Kingdom” (Public Investment Fund, 2018). However, exhibition infrastructure alone could not generate soft power resources, and Saudi Arabia needed domestic production capacity to create a truly Saudi film industry that could engage with foreign audiences and potentially create attraction. While removing the limitations against the establishment of a domestic film industry, consuming foreign films in Saudi theaters did not create cultural resources that could be projected internationally by itself, and the Kingdom required the capability to produce its own cinematic content that could represent Saudi culture abroad.

As the Saudi state moved from general “entertainment” goals to specific sectoral strategies, film turned into an explicit priority with the founding of the Ministry of

Culture (MOC) as a distinct institution, which identified it as one of 16 sectors to develop and promote. Unlike the Vision 2030 document, the MOC founding cultural vision document explicitly recognized cinema's importance and intended to provide institutional support through a dedicated Film Commission and develop local talent, thereby contributing to the development of what could be cultural resources of soft power. Further, the MOC declared the intention of reaching foreign audiences through Saudi films, stating that the “The Kingdom has already been represented at international events such as the Cannes Film Festival and the Venice Biennale. We will continue to showcase [Saudi] cultural mission on a global stage”. (Ministry of Culture, 2019).

The Film Commission, established in February 2020 as one of eleven cultural commissions under the Ministry's oversight, articulated an ambitious vision statement declaring the Kingdom's aim “to be a world leader in filmmaking” and positioning itself as “the primary patron of the film industry in the Middle East and North Africa” (The Film Commission, 2025). The Commission was structured with “arm's length governance” through a board that provided operational autonomy, and its legal mandate included the explicit objective of “Saudi brand-promotion” (Ciecko, 2023, p. 229) alongside fostering the film industry domestically, marketing Saudi films internationally, licensing film related activities, organizing industry events, and creating favorable regulatory conditions for aspiring filmmakers. The Film Commission's authority was consolidated through a 2024 Council of Ministers resolution that granted it jurisdictional oversight over all aspects of the cinema industry such as the production, distribution, import, and operation licenses (Ministry of Culture, 2025).

In 2019, the Ministry of Culture had launched what it described as “the largest competition to fund Saudi films, with prizes up to 40 million riyals,” explicitly positioning it “within the quality of life program, one of the programs for achieving the Kingdom's vision 2030” (The Film Commission, 2019), and the competition, named the Daw Film Directors Competition was managed by the Film Commission after its founding. The competition encompassed four tracks; supporting screenplays, developing them, supporting film production, and supporting Saudi students studying

filmmaking at international institutes. The Ministry had aimed “to organize the competition to support national talents specialized in the film industry, and to provide a financing and logistical platform for the production of Saudi films” (The Film Commission, 2019). In 2021, the Film Commission demonstrated substantial financial commitment by signing cooperation agreements with 28 Daw competition projects, with total contract worth reaching over 10 million USD for screenwriting and feature film production) (Arab News, 2021; Shesha & Yusuf, 2021). Moreover, in the Cultural Scholarship Program filmmaking emerged as the second most prominent specialization among scholarship recipients, with 115 new scholarships awarded in 2024 alone and almost equal gender distribution in the filmmaking specialization (Ministry of Culture, 2025). The Film Commission also organized two artistic residencies focused on scriptwriting and production phases (Ministry of Culture, 2025).

Following the establishment of the Film Commission, the institutional framework that was emerging saw a substantial expansion of financial support mechanisms in subsequent years. The Cultural Development Fund (CDF) was established by Royal Decree in early 2021 with initial allocations of SAR 181 million for cultural projects, and functioned as a major funding source specifically for film (Ministry of Culture, 2022). By 2023, the CDF had launched the Film Sector Financing Program as part of its “Ignite” Initiative, financing entities such as Telfaz11 and Tamkeen Talent Foundation, while the Film Commission's own incentive program went on to support 60 Saudi films that year (Ministry of Culture, 2024). The Red Sea Fund, associated with the Red Sea International Film Festival, awarded grants to 92 films in 2023 across development, production, and in-progress stages (Ministry of Culture, 2024). This financial ecosystem expanded further in 2024, when the CDF allocated SAR 40.7 million to 15 film projects and contributed SAR 60 million to a film industry investment fund established with MIFIC Capital and Ruya Media Ventures, marking film as the largest recipient of CDF support that year (Ministry of Culture, 2025). The Red Sea Film Foundation's fund supported 50 works in 2024 while the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) provided grants to 15 additional film production projects (Ministry of Culture, 2025). In sum, the emerging Saudi soft power apparatus thoroughly mobilized the financial resources of the state to support

the development of the Saudi film industry which could constitute a source of soft power that had the potential to be converted into actual attraction.

Festival platforms provided additional incentives, with the Saudi Film Festival offering awards totaling SAR 2.24 million and the Red Sea International Film Festival's Yusr Awards providing SAR 1.155 million in 2023, while the Saudi Film Festival's production market allocated 39 monetary and service awards to winning projects (Ministry of Culture, 2024). The Film Saudi incentive program offered a 40% cash rebate to attract foreign productions while ensuring Saudi landscapes and heritage sites received exposure through global distribution networks (Film Commission website). This way, the “location library” of Saudi sites to film was strategically marketed to international filmmakers, operating on the conversion logic that films watched by millions worldwide would integrate Saudi Arabia into global visual culture and create film tourism potential as audiences seek to visit filming locations.

This approach leveraged foreign productions as vehicles for Saudi soft power, embedding the Kingdom's visual imagery into globally distributed cultural products. The Red Sea Film Festival (RSFF) represented another critical conversion mechanism. RSFF constituted a platform where promising Saudi films could be showcased alongside international selections. As an annual event that is based in Jeddah, it included over 100 films from more than 60 countries. RSFF served the functions of bringing the international film industry such as filmmakers or critics to Saudi Arabia and exposing them to Saudi cinema, while also signaling the Kingdom's participation in the global film community. As a whole, RSFF actively facilitated the projection of Saudi cultural products to influential foreign audiences while simultaneously enhancing the Kingdom's image as a progressive state. Together, incentivizing foreign productions, marketing locations internationally, and creating showcasing platforms served as the Kingdoms explicit attempts at not only developing resources but also actively converting them through strategic dissemination and visibility generating events to ensure that the Saudi cultural products being developed would reach global audiences.

4.2.3. Music: Event Driven Strategy and Domestic Normalization

Saudi Arabia's music strategy under Vision 2030 reveals fundamentally different soft power structure than its film sector, shaped by different constraints. While positioned within the same “vibrant society” pillar, music succeeds in drawing international audiences to Saudi venues over the outbound content projection that drives film policy. While the goal is still to “build an industry out of thin air”, Saudi artists releasing a record breaking 52 singles in 2023 (Ministry of Culture, 2024) (*roughly one per week*), which appears rather underwhelming compared to film's aggressive push for theatrical releases and festival presence. The strategy's ambitious economic targets such as the 500M USD recorded revenue by 2034 (Ministry of Culture, 2025) and regional export aspirations exist alongside this minimal domestic output, with the state prioritizing long-term social normalization through “controlled liberalization” (Abdelrahim, 2024) rather than immediate industry maturation. More than 20.000 kindergarten teachers trained, embedding music as one of nine cultural fields in national education frameworks (Ministry of Culture, 2024); and distributing 8.000+ instruments to schools (Ministry of Culture, 2023) constitutes generational social engineering, normalizing music consumption for children raised under entertainment restrictions.

Yet, non-Saudi artists structurally produce more singles than their Saudi counterparts (Ministry of Culture, 2024), and Saudi artists maintain “low presence in top 10k streams” despite massive infrastructure investment and commitment (Ministry of Culture, 2025). This dependency continues to persist even as the state apparatus pursues talent development through various ways. Professional scholarship programs remain limited with 10 to 17 total students across years and no women are enrolled in 2024 despite training (Ministry of Culture, 2024, 2025). Considering the lack of immediate domestic production compared to the award-winning cinema industry, music strategy revolves around foreign content dominance while building consumption infrastructure and social acceptance, while still keeping domestic content production as a goal. As Abdelrahim (2024) observes, the strategy “targets long-term normalization of music consumption through early childhood education rather than immediate professional workforce development.”

One way Saudi Arabia utilizes music is to generate attraction and facilitate branding through events with international attendance. Mega festivals anchored by the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) function as instruments for destination image shaping first, while also providing platforms for Saudi content. MDLBEAST's Soundstorm festival exemplifies this approach, as its 2019 debut attracted 400.000 attendees and generated extensive media coverage (Madani, 2022), positioning the event first as a symbol of social transformation rather than a showcase for Saudi artists. Madani's (2022) analysis of MDLBEAST's Instagram strategy reveals how the festival was deployed to project a “new Saudi” image through frames of “opening up,” “positive change,” and “national pride”. Through music festivals, audience consumption of international electronic dance music acts becomes the vehicle for youth mobilization and brand-positive messaging for the Kingdom. This pattern extends across the GEA's portfolio with major festivals collectively drawing 457.000+ visitors in 2024 (Ministry of Culture, 2025) to the Kingdom, leading to positive experiences with Saudi Arabia. Yet these events primarily showcase international headliners, positioning Saudi Arabia as a destination for music consumption, not an origin for content creation especially for Western audiences. International headliners generate global media attention, attendance by international visitors validates the “opening up” (Madani, 2022) and “controlled liberalization” (Abdelrahim, 2024) narratives.

Additionally, regional export ambitions exist but remain aspirational, constrained by both the lack of domestic production capacity and the structural barriers Arabic language music faces in Western markets. Abdelrahim (2024) notes that Saudi investments reshape regional cultural landscapes, pulling talent from Egypt, while economic projections include a 1.8 Billion USD live market by 2034 (Ministry of Culture, 2025). Yet unlike film where subtitles and dubbing can bridge language gaps, non-English music faces inherent export difficulties to Western audiences, making regional dominance a more pragmatic ambition than global content competition.

In conclusion, the strategy's current emphasis on domestic normalization serves as a critical foundational step for soft power conversion by establishing internal

congruence; a “modern” national image cannot be sustained internationally without running into credibility issues if the domestic policies remain culturally restrictive. In this context, mega festivals like MDLBeast function as high visibility mechanisms of social proof that extend far beyond the attendees. By generating globally circulated imagery of mixed gender crowds and youth dynamism, these events generate attention and validate the state’s narrative of transformation for the wider international public.

4.3. Sports, Tourism, and Giga Projects

By 2023, Saudi Arabia's tourism sector had achieved what looked, on paper, like a goal that was too ambitious and reached the Vision 2030's goal of 100 million annual visitors seven years ahead of schedule with inbound international tourist numbers rising to 29.73 million in 2024. Simultaneously, the Kingdom secured hosting rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup (Al Jazeera, 2024), operationalized a Formula 1 circuit (Smith, 2020), and established itself as a destination for boxing mega-events, while simultaneously announcing audacious giga projects that generated global attention and signaled long term transformation of the Kingdom to the world such as NEOM's futuristic city powered by renewable energy, the Red Sea Project's luxury eco resorts, Qiddiya's entertainment capital. These are not parallels that should be treated as coincidental but evidence of a strategy operating through three simultaneous mechanisms. First, generating attention through sports and spectacle; second, positioning Saudi Arabia through aspirational identity claims; and third, building operational tourism capacity through access reforms and infrastructure.

Institutional architecture regarding tourism that has been built since 2020 is in line with this approach. In February 2020, Ministry of Tourism was established as a dedicated policy-making body. Two months later, the Saudi Tourism Authority was created as the operational arm, with the STA Statute granting it “public legal personality and financial and administrative autonomy” while remaining “organizationally associated with the Minister” (Statute of the Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023). The Heritage Commission split off to handle preservation, thus allowing the STA to focus entirely on promotion and visitor conversion. This

institutional foundation coordinates three mechanisms that operate in parallel. Sports and spectacle serve to generate global visibility and attention for Saudi Arabia; aspirational positioning of the Kingdom shapes how audiences interpret that visibility; and access infrastructure converts attention into actual visits, forming stronger bonds with the audience. These mechanisms reinforce each other and are often interdependent. Attention can widen the audience that encounters Saudi messaging; aspirational positioning offers frames through which that attention is interpreted; and access measures determine how much of that interest converts into actual trips.

4.3.1. Attention: Sports Mega-Events and Global Visibility

Saudi Arabia's sports sponsorship strategy functions as paid media for tourism brand building, leveraging moments of peak global attention to broadcast the “Saudi, Welcome to Arabia” message. The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar provided an excellent opportunity to advertise, and the Kingdom didn't miss it, moving to secure regional sponsorship rights for Europe, positioning “Saudi, Welcome to Arabia' ads in stadium side panels for one minute during a match” and placing the tourism brand “in the background of all European teams' news conferences” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023, p. 98). Across the tournament, Saudi tourism advertisements appeared on 1.024 TV appearances, with the sponsorship extending beyond the World Cup to Champions League and English Premier League matches (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023, p. 98). The Kingdom also launched a dedicated “Feel More” campaign in November 2022 to promote Saudi destinations during the World Cup period (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023). The FIFA website featured the campaign logo specifically “to attract visitors from European nations” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023, p. 98). This European focus was strategic as the region had seen declining tourism awareness due to “geopolitical tensions” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2024, p. 37), and the World Cup offered unparalleled reach. STA explicitly recognizing the fact that Saudi tourism efforts attempt to compensate “geopolitical tensions” further demonstrates the utilization of tourism as a image rehabilitation tool. In general, by reaching billions watching football, Saudi Arabia

attempted to associate itself with positive emotions of sport and draw attention to itself, potentially generating tourism interest.

The Kingdom utilized celebrity endorsements to add human scale to this broadcast strategy. In May 2022, the Kingdom signed football star Lionel Messi as Saudi Tourism Ambassador, deploying one of the world's most recognized athletes as the face of Saudi tourism. Messi “promoted new tourism packages, with pages on the 'Visit Saudi' website bearing pictures of him in various Saudi cities” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023, p.30), thereby creating a direct link between celebrity appeal and tourism conversion. By December 2022, the STA launched an international advertising campaign with the participation of Messi (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023), precisely timed to coincide with peak World Cup visibility.

By 2023, this sponsorship approach had evolved into a systematic strategy of cultivating a wide portfolio of events and competitions to sponsor. The STA articulated that sponsorships aim to “create a brand association and brand access with consumers around their area of passion to make Saudi relevant to them when they are most engaged” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2024, p.42). In 2023, this sponsorship portfolio included some of the biggest sports events such as FIFA Club World Cup, Asian Federations Cup in Qatar, Indian Premier League, and La Liga, the second most watched domestic football league in the world (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2024). These sponsorships delivered “high reach through broadcast rights, in stadia visibility and social media channels” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2024, p.42) and ensured that over time, through repeated exposure, the Kingdom could draw global attention to its newly emerging image and audiences could draw positive associations with Saudi Arabia.

This sponsorship infrastructure didn't remain limited to sports however, and extended to physical brand presence at many elite forums. The Kingdom “participated as the largest pavilion in the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) in Dubai” in May 2022 and opened a Saudi Café on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos the same month, positioning itself as a “premier event partner” at World Travel Market London in November (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023, p.14-32). These presences

served to signal openness and global integration reinforcing the message that Saudi Arabia is not just buying advertisements but participating in the international events, creating positive associations.

While sponsorships work to increase visibility and draw attention to the Kingdom, they don't create particular reasons for global audiences to actually visit Saudi Arabia. Mega sport events serve as a reason to facilitate such inbound traffic. One key example of this is the Saudi participation in the Formula 1. The Saudi Arabian Grand Prix operates on the Jeddah Corniche Circuit built in 2021 (Formula 1, 2020), with the event being integrated into the Saudi seasons campaigns (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023). Multiple Formula E races and the Dakar Rally constitute parts of the Kingdom's annual calendar and round out the motorsports portfolio. These events appeal to affluent international tourists and facilitate travel to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, these races broadcast Saudi Arabia itself to the world, with the Red Sea coastline, urban skylines and desert vistas of the Kingdom being exhibited to foreign audiences. Going beyond just sponsoring, Saudi Arabia becomes the part of the content, as the backdrop and the destination of the event.

Combat sports followed a similar model, as The Kingdom hosted, integrated many boxing events into its Riyadh Season programming (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2024), with high profile boxing matches such as Fury vs Usyk or UFC events being hosted in Saudi Arabia. These events created a “bucket list” appeal, with audiences tempted to attend a once in a career world heavyweight championship bout in an exotic location; and the events themselves turned into tourism products for the Kingdom, packaged and sold through the Visit Saudi platform alongside hotel bookings and cultural excursion. Niche markets also received attention from Saudi tourism efforts. LIV Golf brought golf's global and affluent fan bases to the Kingdom with courses planned for the Red Sea Project, NEOM, and Diriyah as permanent tourism infrastructure, while Gamers8 targets the younger global audiences. This effort is formalized by the National Gaming & Esports Strategy (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2022) which demonstrate the ambition to make Saudi Arabia the global 'center of the game' by 2030 through eighty-six state-led initiatives. Participation in the e-sports niche exemplifies the image rehabilitation aspect of Saudi soft power aspirations.

Strategically, it positions Saudi Arabia as a tech forward and youth friendly state, countering the long-lived stereotypes of the kingdom as a purely traditional or conservative society.

Crucially, football serves as one of the primary aspects of the Saudi sports diplomacy, given its unmatched global reach. Saudi Pro League investments such as global superstars such as Cristiano Ronaldo's, Karim Benzema's or Neymar's signing to Saudi clubs normalize the kingdom as a football destination with star players attracting foreign audiences to watch Saudi league and generating recurring international visits for league matches. Further, the FIFA World Cup 2034's hosting rights represent the capstone project for Saudi football engagement. The World Cup is one of the biggest tourism events in the world, generating millions of visitors in a concentrated period. Moreover, it provides a decade of advance marketing as World Cup related discussions will include Saudi Arabia until the event happens, and will continue to mention Saudi Arabia after it concludes; providing the Kingdom with unmatched global visibility. Thus, the 2034 World Cup serves not only as a sporting event, but as a marketing and branding tool that provides the kingdom with over a decade of anticipation and legacy.

This attention infrastructure operates across multiple dimensions. Sports sponsorships and celebrity endorsements broadcast the message to billions; mega event hosting creates specific reasons to visit and positions Saudi Arabia as a popular destination; giga project announcements establish the Kingdom as a place of transformation and innovation. This visibility enables the positioning and infrastructure mechanisms that convert the attention into actual visits, perception change, and ultimately attraction.

While scholars such as Boykoff (2022) and Ganji (2023) characterize these investments as “sportswashing”, the Saudi strategy's integration with tourism infrastructure and the broader soft power state apparatus suggest a dynamic more complex than an attempt to launder international reputation by distracting foreign publics. The mechanism described here aligns more closely with Grix et al.'s (2023) conceptualization of a “politics of attraction,” where sports mega events function as

the visibility engine within a broader “soft power package” (Grix & Brannagan, 2016). By attempting to convert the attention generated by sports into physical visits and direct engagement, the Kingdom seeks to engage foreign publics to its narrative of transformation rather than simply distracting them from its human rights record, moving the strategy beyond defensive image management that is described in sportswashing studies, toward soft power conversion

4.3.2. Aspiration: Giga Projects as Symbolic Capital

Alongside sports mega events covered in the previous subchapter, Saudi Arabia’s portfolio includes giga projects as a complementary arm of its soft power strategy. The Kingdom has 5 giga projects underway; NEOM, The Red Sea Project, Qiddiya, Diriyah, and ROSHN. The economic intention behind these projects is often emphasized, but they also function within Vision 2030’s reputational mechanisms, as they are instruments for “powering the Kingdom's strategic ambitions and country brand on the world stage” (Public Investment Fund, 2022, p. 39). While sports events and sponsorships generate constant attention to the Kingdom through recurring visibility; giga projects such as the NEOM, The Line, the Red Sea Project, and Qiddiya serve as spectacles that project the image of a future Saudi Arabia that invites foreign audiences to imagine what the Kingdom is becoming not so subtly. Named in Vision 2030 as flagship initiatives for economic diversification and quality of life (Vision 2030, 2016), these projects have in practice been deployed not as ordinary infrastructure but as carefully staged symbols of national transformation that situates Saudi Arabia as a nexus of innovation, sustainability and luxury rather than oil and religious conservatism alone (Vision 2030, 2016).

To begin with, NEOM exemplifies this aspirational branding. Marketed as an ultra futuristic innovation zone it promises to “be the first city in the world to be completely run by renewable energy” (NEOM, 2025), a zero-car urban environment over a massive area that is roughly the size of Belgium (*Saudi’s 3 Largest Projects*, 2025). The Line, NEOM's flagship component launched in 2021 (Public Investment Fund, 2022), offers an especially potent visual. It comprises a 170 kilometers linear city encased in mirrored facades, powered entirely by renewables, with essential

services never more than a five-minute walk away. Trojena, the mountain tourism cluster within NEOM officially described as “a new global destination for mountain tourism, offering a unique experience based on its geographical and environmental diversity” (Public Investment Fund, 2023, p. 56), adds another layer of spectacle by promising outdoor skiing in the Arabian desert.

While many has speculated that the project is unfeasible and that especially the Line component will not be completed in the form it was promised in, (Killing, 2025) the project's soft power value lies not in whether every promise materializes exactly as envisioned. The audacity of the project itself inherently generates attention and frames Saudi Arabia in a futuristic and progressive way that was unthinkable previously. The claim itself, and the evidence of serious construction such as “more than 115.000 dedicated company employees and contractors” working at “more than 100 active development sites” by 2024 (Public Investment Fund, 2025, pp. 62–63), or the subsidiary company ENOWA’s efforts on establishing “NEOM’s world-class, sustainable energy and water systems” (Public Investment Fund, 2023, p. 59) with the world's largest green hydrogen production plant reaching 60% completion (Public Investment Fund, 2025) converts imagery that is considered speculative into further proof of aspirations, not mere spectacle. Further, the project has been integrated with global sports spectacle through its designation as the host destination for the FIFA World Cup 2034, with “a state-of-the-art stadium [which] will boast a capacity of 45.000- 50.000 seats” (Public Investment Fund, 2025, p. 63) inside the Line hosting matches, ensuring that NEOM's futuristic imagery will be broadcast to billions during one of the world's most-watched sporting events. Clearly, the message is less about the technical specifics and more about transformation, making it known to the world that Saudi Arabia is a place where previously unthinkable urban forms and leisure experiences are now on the table.

The strategic approach extends to other giga projects of the Kingdom. Qiddiya, for example, is branded as an entertainment and sports capital with theme parks, racetracks and arenas designed to compete with established leisure hubs in Europe and East Asia. The convergence of giga projects and sports strategy becomes most explicit here, as Qiddiya's SAR 100 million sponsorship agreements with Al Hilal

FC and Al Nasr FC in 2022 (Public Investment Fund, 2023) and its 45,000 seat ROSHN Stadium designated to host some FIFA World Cup 2034 matches (Public Investment Fund, 2025) ensure the project will be showcased through the very sports mega events that form the first pillar of the attention aspiration strategy. Unveiled as PIF's fifth giga-project in 2023, Diriyah, in turn, anchors the narrative in historical depth. With a SAR 64 billion investment (Public Investment Fund, 2024), the “birthplace of the Kingdom” is being rebuilt as a heritage and luxury district, where restored Najdi architecture surrounding the “UNESCO World Heritage Site of At-Turaif” (Public Investment Fund, 2024). Taken together, these projects weave a story in which the Kingdom's future is elevated through innovation, openness, modernity and ambition; without abandoning its past.

As soft power instruments, giga projects operate at the intersection of generating attention, narrative framing, and tourism infrastructure when completed, as seen in The Red Sea Project's opening of four operational resorts (Public Investment Fund, 2025) which enabled influencers and travel journalists to experience and amplify the transformation of the Kingdom from a closed conservative country to one that is aspiring to be the most welcoming to foreigners. Their renderings and launch events generate media coverage similar to sports spectacles, albeit with less recurrence but with a more explicitly aspirational charge. Ultimately, they invite foreign audiences to imagine Saudi Arabia as a destination worth visiting, investing in or at least watching. Giga projects do not constitute a fundamentally different mechanism than sports, but they function as a distinct way of pursuing the same policy of creating global attraction. Both work in tandem, generating visibility and supporting the transformation narrative of the Kingdom, but giga projects are weighted more heavily toward long term aspiration and narrative building than constant exposure and attention.

Where sports mega events deliver recurring global attention through familiar spectacles to a variety of audiences, giga projects cultivate sustained curiosity through the promise of unprecedented experiences and innovation; possibly allowing select audiences to witness and share the transformation firsthand eventually.

4.3.3. Access and Conversion Infrastructure

Attention generated by sports sponsorships and the narratives of transformation cultivated through giga projects both mutually reinforce the third pillar of this soft power strategy: tourism infrastructure. While sports mega events and giga projects each generate soft power effects independently (*the former through recurring global visibility and the latter through projections of national transformation*) tourism creates a distinct conversion pathway that serves to amplify both, while also benefiting from them. It serves dual strategic functions in Vision 2030's soft power architecture that together address the credibility gap identified in Chapter 3.

First, tourism enables direct experiential engagement. Whereas sports broadcasts and giga project renderings generate mediated attention, tourism allows foreign audiences to form firsthand impressions through lived experience in the Kingdom. A visitor who attends a Riyadh Season concert, explores Al Ula's heritage sites, or stays at a Red Sea resort experiences the transformation of the Kingdom directly, potentially generating attraction through positive experiences with Saudi hospitality, emerging richness of culture and the overall transformation itself.

Second, the very act of opening the Kingdom to leisure tourism serves as material proof of the “opening up” narrative that Vision 2030 promotes to the world. Reading about Saudi Arabia's social reforms in international media is one thing; witnessing women driving to concerts, encountering mixed gender public spaces, or interacting with young Saudi professionals at tourism sites is another. The policy shift is not merely instrumental but also serves as a strategic signal to foreign audiences. As Saudi Arabia transforms into an accessible and hospitable destination from a previously closed state, the political reforms, policy shifts toward moderate Islam, and the transformation of the society become tangible and directly observable to foreign visitors, in turn allowing them to serve as informal validators of change. This directly challenges the Western stereotypes of Saudi Arabia as a backward society and credibility gaps that came to haunt Saudi Soft power efforts previously.

The foundational transformation is visa liberalization, which carries both practical and symbolic weight. In a historic reversal for a Kingdom previously accessible

primarily through pilgrimage, business or family ties, Saudi Arabia launched an e-visa system for tourists from initially 49 countries, issuing leisure visas to non-Muslim visitors outside the Gulf for the first time in its history. Event linked visas further reduced friction by tying visa processes closely with events such as Saudi Seasons festivals, Formula 1 races or concerts, thus creating a streamlined journey from event discovery to visa approval (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2024).

4.3.4. Positioning through Aspiration and Identity Claims

The soft power mission underpinning this attention strategy is presented explicitly in official strategy documents. The Saudi Tourism Authority frames its mandate explicitly as perception transformation and not merely economic activity. The STA aims to “dispel negative perceptions of the country” while raising “the profile of Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2023 p. 26). This language reveals tourism's dual function within Vision 2030. In addition to diversifying the Saudi economy and reducing oil dependence, tourism serves as a tool to reposition the Kingdom's global image. Sports mega-events and spectacles work in tandem with institutional efforts to bolster tourism. Whereas tourism promises to “open hearts and minds and create real connections between people” (Saudi Tourism Authority, 2024, p. 7), event hosting and mega-project announcements serve to generate the visibility and positive associations needed for a Kingdom that has been perceived as closed and radical for a long time. Both mechanisms address the perception barrier identified in Chapter 3 and contribute to dealing with the challenge of transforming how international audiences perceive Saudi Arabia.

More broadly, this positioning strategy advances Vision 2030's identity themes of moderation, youth empowerment, openness, and cultural bridging (Vision 2030, 2016). The story told through tourism and events is not simply about what the recent additions into the Kingdom such as stadiums, resorts, or festivals, but about who Saudis are. Mixed gender crowds at football matches and music festivals, women driving to arenas, and young Saudis working as event organizers or tour guides collectively perform a different national self-image than what was previously

apparent: a society with moderate Islamic values that insists tradition and modernity are compatible.

This narrative directly responds to the credibility gaps documented in Chapter 3. Earlier public diplomacy efforts struggled because they asked foreign publics to believe claims of moderation while domestic policies told a different story. Vision 2030's approach attempts to reduce this dissonance by altering some of the domestic practices themselves, while allowing foreign audiences to experience this change directly. When foreign visitors attend events, interact with Saudis in newly liberalized public spaces, and share their experiences, they function as informal validators of change. Tourism and sports thus become vehicles for demonstrating rather than merely asserting transformation—forms of soft power conversion grounded in direct experience rather than in official slogans alone.

In the language of Baldwin (1979) and Nye (2004), this tourism infrastructure allows power resources to be converted into influence. Tourism mobilizes existing resources such as heritage sites like at At Turaif or natural landmarks along the Red Sea coast; or recently developed events such as F1 Grand Prix races or Riyadh Season's and converts them into attraction through direct experiential engagement rather than mediated representation. The strategic advantage of tourism lies in how it addresses the credibility problem endemic to Saudi soft power. By generating attraction through demonstration rather than assertion, and by making the Kingdom's shift from extreme conservatism toward moderate Islam and progressive social policies directly observable, tourism directly addresses the credibility gap and the distrust that Western audiences has shown toward the Kingdom that was covered in Chapter 3. When a football fan sees Saudi Arabia advertised during a Champions League match, becomes intrigued by NEOM's imagery, secures a visa in minutes and books a Riyadh Season package, then arrives to witness women driving to concerts, encounter mixed gender audiences at festivals, and interact with young Saudis confidently navigating global tourism norms, the transformation narrative shifts from claim to observable reality. In this sense, the visitor's firsthand experience of the social reforms that Western media often skeptically reports – reforms that clash with decades of stereotypes about Saudi society – functions as a form of social proof that

narrows the gap between prior images of the Kingdom and its present trajectory; addressing the credibility gap directly through lived experience rather than only official messaging which could be perceived as insincere. Upon returning home, such visitors become potential informal advocates whose testimony carries weight precisely because it stems from direct observation. Where sports and giga projects cultivate awareness and narratives at scale, tourism enables a smaller but strategically vital cohort of foreign audiences to validate those narratives through lived experience, in turn enhancing a reinforcing loop in which each mechanism amplifies the others.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to answer how Saudi Arabia's official soft power strategy has evolved under Vision 2030. Through qualitative analysis of official documents, institutional reports, and secondary sources, the preceding chapters have traced a fundamental transformation in how the Kingdom conceptualizes and operationalizes its strategic approach to soft power. The findings reveal that Vision 2030 marks a qualitative shift from an implicit and religiously derived soft power strategy to a centrally managed and institutionally comprehensive soft power strategy.

Chapter 3 established the pre-Vision 2030 baseline, demonstrating that while Saudi Arabia could theoretically generate soft power especially through religious capital as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, many soft power resources were left underutilized. Heritage assets including four UNESCO World Heritage Sites, geographic position at the crossroads of continents, and latent creative talent suppressed by restrictive policies lacked conversion infrastructure that would generate soft power. Thus, the Kingdom faced what Baldwin (1979) would term a condition of "unrealized power". Resources were present but inadequately converted into international attraction beyond the limited conservative Muslim audiences.

Three systemic failures underpinned this failure to generate soft power. First, credibility gaps emerged from the fundamental disconnect between Saudi public diplomacy messaging and domestic political and social reality. The post 9/11 period enhanced and exemplified this problem, with fifteen of nineteen hijackers being Saudi nationals, American favorability toward the Kingdom collapsing rapidly. Public relations campaigns that followed were perceived as "insincere" precisely due to the credibility gap mentioned previously, as claims of religious moderation

clashed with restrictive domestic policies on a variety of social issues. Second, institutional fragmentation and bureaucratic inefficiency characterized the pre-Vision bureaucracy. No central coordinating body existed for soft power activities and successful initiatives like the King Abdullah Scholarship Program operated as what Hertog termed “islands of efficiency” within a broader landscape of clientelist bureaucracy and overlapping responsibilities. Third, path dependence constraints that stemmed from the post 1979 religious bargain empowered the Kingdom’s clerics over social and cultural policy, thus leading to active suppression of cultural industries and prohibition of leisure tourism and further blocking reform attempts, consequently inhibiting the very resources that could generate attraction and soft power.

Chapter 4 documented the dramatic institutional transformation under Vision 2030, which lies at the heart of this thesis. Beginning in 2016, the Kingdom began the construction of an entirely new state apparatus for soft power. The Ministry of Culture, established in 2018 as the first standalone culture ministry in Saudi history, coordinates eleven specialized commissions covering distinct cultural sub-sectors from film to music to heritage, ensuring the comprehensiveness of this approach to culture. The chapter then traced this institutional architecture across multiple sectors, focusing on two key case studies. First, in film, the thesis documented a trajectory from complete prohibition to extensive state support toward both domestic development and utilization of film as a medium to generate international attraction. The lifting of the 35-year cinema ban in 2017, the establishment of the Film Commission in 2020, the creation of multiple financing mechanisms including the Daw Film Competition and the Red Sea Fund, and the launch of the Red Sea International Film Festival as a conversion platform for showcasing Saudi talent globally are among the many initiatives that show the importance of film in the emerging Saudi cultural infrastructure. Second, in music, the analysis presented in this thesis demonstrated that the Saudi strategy prioritized high-visibility conversion events like MDLBeast Soundstorm alongside domestic capacity building.

Following this, the sports and mega-events section analyzed how the Kingdom engaged in sports investments which as attention generating mechanisms within a

broader conversion strategy. The thesis documented that Saudi Arabia deploys high-profile investments such as the acquisition of Newcastle United, LIV Golf, the Saudi Pro League signings, Formula 1 hosting, and the successful bid for the 2034 FIFA World Cup. Further, giga projects such as NEOM, The Line, Diriyah, and the Red Sea Project function as narrative devices projecting themes of futurism, sustainability, and innovation, thus positioning Saudi Arabia as a country building the future rather than the previous image of extreme religious conservatism and closedness. Finally, the tourism analysis revealed how the 2019 e-visa system opening the country to leisure travelers from 49 countries for the first time creates a critical conversion pathway in line with the emerging literature that analyzes tourism as a soft power tool.

The main research question asked how Saudi Arabia's official soft power strategy has evolved under Vision 2030. The evidence presented supports three core claims that together constitute the thesis argument.

First, soft power has moved from largely a byproduct of religious authority with a narrow target audience to explicit comprehensive strategy. Prior to Vision 2030, Western-facing efforts were reactive and defensive; under Vision 2030, official documents explicitly articulate objectives related to image and cultural export. The Ministry of Culture's mandate to "bridge to the world" reveals intentional design that is unprecedented in Saudi history.

Second, the Kingdom has invested systematically in dual infrastructure for both resource development and conversion. Critically, this analysis serves as the thesis's core theoretical contribution. Uniquely, as cultural sectors were previously prohibited, the state was compelled to create cultural resources rather than just managing or utilizing them to generate attraction. The thesis demonstrates that institutional architecture includes two parallel goals: resource building through mechanisms such as talent pipelines, or by providing extensive financing and conversion mechanisms of those resources through mechanisms such as festivals or tourism infrastructure. Third, the emerging strategy seeks to reposition Saudi national image by aligning international narratives about the Kingdom with domestic

policy change. Vision 2030 also reduces the dissonance between claims and reality by altering restrictive domestic practices that fundamentally constituted the credibility gap.

The following table synthesizes the transformation documented across the thesis, contrasting the pre-Vision 2030 configuration with the Vision 2030 era across key analytical dimensions.

Table 1. Comparison of Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Configuration Before and After Vision 2030

Comparison Domain	Pre-Vision 2030 Era	Vision 2030 Era
Strategic Approach & Governance	Largely limited soft power relying on religious leadership and oil wealth. Public diplomacy was reactive, fragmented, and lacked central coordination.	Explicit, comprehensive strategy with elaborately defined objectives regarding international image. Centralized state apparatus with new specialized bodies like the Ministry of Culture and its 11 commissions, and the Saudi Tourism Authority. State-led institution building functions as a primary aspect of soft power strategy.
Cultural Resources & Infrastructure	Cultural industries severely restricted or banned due to the post-1979 religious bargain and state policy. Cinemas were banned, music was restricted, and no professional infrastructure to support aspiring artists existed. Limited exportable cultural assets. Talent was suppressed or driven underground / abroad.	Culture elevated to a central pillar within the Vision ("Vibrant Society") with massive state investment in infrastructure and talent development. Cinema ban lifted, dedicated commissions established for film, music, and arts to build domestic capacity and export Saudi culture globally.
Tourism & Access Mechanisms	No leisure tourist visa category existed and non-GCC citizens couldn't visit the Kingdom easily. Tourism was dominated by religious pilgrimage (Hajj/Umrah) within strict parameters, with heritage sites remaining internationally invisible. The country was effectively "closed off" to Western publics.	Introduction of leisure e-visas, opening the country to foreign tourists for the first time. Aggressive tourism targets and development of giga projects (NEOM, Red Sea) as global destinations. Tourism used as a mechanism for direct experiential engagement to prove transformation.

Table 1. (continued)

<p>International Narrative & Credibility</p>	<p>Image defined by narrow Wahhabi roots, oil export, and security partnerships. Perceived as a conservative, closed society; not seen as "attractive" in the West. Suffered severe credibility gaps where official messaging was perceived as propaganda because it contradicted domestic reality.</p>	<p>Promoting new narratives of moderation, openness, sustainability, futurism, and innovation. Utilizing high-visibility sports mega-events and giga-project spectacles to generate global attention and signal transformation. Attempts to align narrative with visible policy changes (e.g., mixed-gender events) to address former credibility gaps.</p>
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This comparative overview illustrates the scope and intentionality of the transformation. Across every dimension the shift from pre-Vision to Vision era represents fundamental reconfiguration rather than incremental adjustment.

This thesis contributes to soft power scholarship in several ways. Most significantly, it demonstrates how domestic institution-building can function as a central component of soft power strategy rather than a precondition, while existing literature tends to treat institutions as administrative infrastructure that enables soft power projection only. The Saudi case reveals that when cultural resources do not exist or have been deliberately suppressed, their creation functions as a part of the broad soft power strategy. This finding extends Nye’s resource conversion framework by highlighting cases where conversion and resource creation occur simultaneously and interdependently while further building on Grix and Brannagan’s conceptualization of “soft power packages”. The thesis also challenges characterizations of Saudi strategy as merely “ad hoc,” as the evidence presented reveals sophisticated institutional design. Additionally, the thesis contributes to literature on Gulf state soft power by providing comprehensive institutional mapping of certain key institutions that were not previously documented and analyzed. While existing scholarship has examined specific sectors in isolation (particularly sports investments), this study traces the broader architecture connecting culture, sports, tourism, and narrative building into an integrated strategic state apparatus.

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. Most pressingly, outcome-focused research could assess whether Vision 2030’s soft power

investments actually change foreign perceptions. Longitudinal polling of Western publics, media sentiment analysis tracking coverage of Saudi Arabia before and after major initiatives, and reception studies examining how target audiences in the Western world interpret Saudi cultural exports would complement the strategy focused analysis presented in this study.

Further, a comparative analysis could present another direction for future research. How does Saudi Arabia's post-2016 soft power architecture compare to Qatar's longer established soft power institutions, or UAE's approach? Such comparison could illuminate whether the patterns identified here represent a unique Saudi response to unique constraints or a broader Gulf or authoritarian model of generating soft power.

Research on domestic politics and soft power sustainability could examine how Vision 2030's cultural liberalization process interacts with religious establishment resistance, generational change in Saudi society, and succession dynamics. The institutional architecture documented here is heavily dependent on Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's authority and personal ambitions. Thus, questions about the durability of this strategy under different leadership remain open.

This thesis has documented Saudi Arabia's transformation from conversion failure to coordinated strategy. The Kingdom actively inhibited soft power resources and lacked mechanisms to convert what resources it happened to possess before 2016. Vision 2030 is systematically building both cultural industries and the infrastructure to project them internationally by creating an integrated apparatus spanning culture, sports, tourism, and narrative construction.

Whether this strategy ultimately succeeds in reshaping how Western publics perceive Saudi Arabia remains uncertain. The credibility challenges identified in Chapter 3 have not disappeared entirely; yet, the institutional sophistication documented here suggests that dismissing Saudi efforts as distraction or simple public relations efforts misses their strategic depth. The Kingdom is not simply paying for visibility and diversifying economically. The Kingdom is constructing the cultural industries,

tourism infrastructure, and conversion platforms that could sustain soft power projection over the long term.

The speed, scope, and intentionality of this transformation make the Saudi case analytically significant for understanding how states build soft power in the 21st century. Where established cultural powers leverage decades of institutional development and organic cultural production, Saudi Arabia demonstrates that determined state actors can attempt to compress this timeline by creating ministries, commissions, film industries, music festivals, and tourism systems within less than a decade. Whether resources assembled this rapidly and deliberately can generate the authentic attraction that Nye associates with soft power remains the central question for both scholars and Saudi policymakers.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKE ÖZET

Suudi Arabistan'ın uluslararası imajı, yirmi birinci yüzyılın büyük bölümünde Vahhabi kökenlerinden neşet eden birtakım özellikler bütünü çerçevesinde şekillenmiştir. Krallık; önde gelen bir petrol ihracatçısı, Batılı güçler için Orta Doğu'da stratejik önem arz eden bir güvenlik ortağı ve Mekke ile Medine'de bulunan kutsal bölgelerin hamisi olarak tanınmaktaydı. Yurt içinde ise Krallık, Vahhabizmden gelen katı dinî kuralları sıkı biçimde uygulamakta ve muhafazakar ve din odaklı bir toplumsal düzeni devam ettirmekteydi. Sinemaların yasak olduğu, müziğin kısıtlandığı ve devletin eğlence amaçlı turizm politikalarının sınırlı kaldığı bir ortamda kültür endüstrileri ya gelişmemiş ya da çoğu zaman devlet politikası nedeniyle kasıtlı olarak baskılanmış durumdaydı. İslam dünyasında sahip olduğu nüfuz, küresel enerji piyasalarında sahip olduğu güce ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ile yakın güvenlik iş birliği mekanizmalarına sahip olmasına rağmen, Suudi Arabistan, Batı kamuoyları tarafından çekici bir ülke olarak algılanmamaktaydı.

Söz konusu durum, kapsamlı bir ulusal dönüşüm programı olarak faaliyet göstermeyi amaçlayan Vizyon 2030 programının Veliht Prens Muhammed bin Selman liderliğinde Nisan 2016'da ilan edilmesini takip eden süreçte dramatik biçimde değişmeye başlamıştır. Canlı Bir Toplum, Gelişen Bir Ekonomi ve Hırslı Bir Millet sütunları altında düzenlenen faaliyetlerden müteşekkil program kapsamında. 2016'dan bu yana, bir dizi yüksek profilli reform hayata geçirilmiştir. Söz konusu reformlar Krallığın sosyal, kültürel, siyasi ve ekonomik durumunu, henüz on yıl önce dahi mümkün görülmeyecek biçimlerde yeniden şekillendirmiştir. On yıllarca süren kamuya açık sinema yasağı kaldırılmış, ülke ilk kez Körfez vatandaşı olmayan yabancılar için eğlence amaçlı turizme açılmış ve eğlence sektöründe benzeri

görülmemiş ölçekte bir altyapı inşa sürecine başlamıştır. Bununla birlikte, Krallık, 2034 FIFA Dünya Kupası da dâhil olmak üzere büyük uluslararası spor etkinliklerinin ev sahipliği haklarını elde etmeye yönelmiş, MDLBeast Soundstorm'da dünyaca ünlü DJ'lerin sahne aldığı çöl müzik festivalleri düzenlemiş ve küresel düzeyde dikkat çeken, Krallığın uzun vadeli dönüşümü sembolize eden iddialı “giga proje”lerin geliştirilmesine başlamıştır. Bahse konu reformların büyük kısmının Suudi Arabistan'ın ekonomisini petrol bağımlılığından uzaklaştırma hedefine yakından bağlı olduğu literatürde sıklıkla dille getirilmekle birlikte, bu çalışma ekonomik çeşitlendirmenin 2016 sonrası dönemde görülen değişikliklerin tek amacı olmadığını iddia etmektedir. Vizyon 2030 ve ilgili kurumsal altyapı söz konusu reformları yalnızca ekonomik çeşitlendirme bakımından değil, açık biçimde ekonomik saiklerin yanı sıra Suudi Arabistan'ın ulusal imaj açısından da değerlendirmektedir. Resmi belgeler, kültür, turizm ve sporu sıklıkla “imaj”, “itibar”, “algılar”, “yaşam kalitesi” ve özellikle Batı dünyası bağlamında Suudi Arabistan'ın dünya sahnesindeki konumu gibi kavramlarla ilişkilendirmektedir. Bu retorik, reformların yalnızca ekonomik değil, aynı zamanda Krallığın uluslararası alanda nasıl algılandığını yeniden konumlandırmaya yönelik stratejik bir niyete sahip olduğunu işaret etmektedir.

Bu tez, Suudi Arabistan'ın resmi yumuşak güç stratejisinin Vizyon 2030 çerçevesinde nasıl evrildiğini incelemektedir. Ana araştırma sorusu üç alt soruyla desteklenmektedir: Vizyon 2030 öncesinde, Suudi Arabistan'ın yumuşak gücünü hangi yumuşak güç kaynakları, kurumları ve anlatıları yapılandırmaktaydı? Vizyon 2030 ve buna bağlı kültür, turizm ve spor stratejileri, Suudi Arabistan'ın ulusal imajını nasıl yeniden şekillendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır? Vizyon sonrası mimaride, Suudi Arabistan'ın arzuladığı dış imajı inşa etmek için hangi politika araçları ve anlatılar kullanılmakta ve bu imajı hangi temalar oluşturmaktadır? Bu çalışma, resmi belgeler, kurumsal raporlar, haber makaleleri ve ikincil kaynakları nitel söylem analizi aracılığıyla incelemek suretiyle, Suudi Arabistan'ın örtük ve dini temel alan bir yumuşak güç yaklaşımından bilinçli ve kapsamlı bir stratejiye geçişin izini sürmektedir.

Bu tez, kuramsal çerçevesini Joseph Nye'in yumuşak güç kavramına dayandırmaktadır. Bu kapsamda, yumuşak güç Nye tarafından istediğini zor

kullanmak ya da ödeme yapmak yerine çekicilik yoluyla elde etme yeteneği olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Dahl'ın ilişkisel güç tanımı ve Baldwin'in "gerçekleşmemiş güç" kavramı üzerine inşa edilen çalışma, güç kaynakları ile bu kaynakları güce "çevirmek" için gerekli dönüşüm süreçleri arasında ayırım yapma yoluna gitmektedir. Bahse konu ayırım, Suudi Arabistan vakasını anlamak açısından büyük önem taşımaktadır, zira, Suudi Arabistan vakası çekicilik ve yumuşak güç potansiyeli taşıyan kaynaklara sahip olmanın tek başına yumuşak güç üretmediğine; devletlerin, bu güç kaynaklarını ve "dönüşüm mekanizmalarını" (conversion mechanisms) iki ayrı şekilde yumuşak güç stratejisi kapsamında araçsallaştırabileceğine yönelik bir örnek teşkil etmektedir. Baldwin'in "gerçekleşmemiş güç paradoksu" ise, aktörlerin güç kullanımı için gerekli görünen kaynaklara sahip oldukları, ancak bunları başarıyla harekete geçiremedikleri durumları tanımlamakta olup, anılan kavram Suudi Arabistan'ın Vizyon öncesi yumuşak güç manzarasını karakterize etmektedir

Nye, üç temel yumuşak güç kaynağı tanımlamaktadır: bir ülkenin kültürü (başkaları için çekici olduğu takdirde), siyasi değerleri (yurt içinde ve yurt dışında bunlara bağlı kaldığı durumlarda) ve dış politikaları (meşru ve ahlaki otoriteye sahip olarak algılandığında). Kültür ise, hem edebiyat, sanat ve eğitim gibi yüksek kültür olarak tanımlanan unsurları; hem de film, müzik ve moda gibi kitlesel eğlenceye dayalı popüler kültür unsurlarını kapsamaktadır. Nye açısından kritik olan husus, yumuşak güç üretiminin güvenilirlik (credibility) şartına bağlı olmasıdır. Nye'a göre günümüzde güvenilirlik hayati önem taşımakta ve yalnızca propaganda olarak görünen bilgi çekicilik üretmek bir yana, var olan çekiciliği bile azaltabilmektedir. Bununla birlikte bir ülkenin yaklaşımının özü ve üslubu, iç politikalarıyla uyumlu olmak zorundadır; aksi takdirde bu ülkenin kamu diplomasisi çabaları ikiyüzlü görünerek çekicilik üretmek yerine ülkenin imajını olumsuz yönde etkiler. "politika-mesaj uyumu" (policy-image congruence) ilkesi olarak tanımlanan bu durum, Suudi Arabistan'ın tarihsel yumuşak güç sorunlarını anlamakta bilhassa önem arz etmektedir.

Tezin üçüncü bölümü, Vizyon 2030 ile başlayan büyük dönüşümü tam manasıyla kavrayabilmek adına, Suudi Arabistan'ın 2016 öncesindeki yumuşak güç durumunu, tarihsel kökleri ve yapısal çıkmazlarıyla birlikte kayda geçirmektedir. Anılan bölüm,

Krallığın zengin kaynaklara sahip olmasına rağmen, neden bu kaynakları uluslararası çekiciliğe dönüştüremediğini, Baldwin'in "gerçekleşmemiş güç" (unrealized power) kavramı üzerinden okumaktadır.

Öncelikle, yaygın kanının aksine, Suudi Arabistan'ın içine kapalı ve kültürel olarak durağan yapısının Krallığın ezelden beri sahip olduğu değişmez bir özellik olmadığı vurgulanmaktadır. 1979 öncesinde, özellikle Kral Faysal dönemindeki idari reformlarla modernleşme yolunda ilerleyen, büyük şehirlerinde sinemaların faaliyet gösterdiği ve toplumsal yaşamın görece daha açık olduğu bir Suudi Arabistan mevcutken, 1979 yılı, Krallığın kaderini değiştiren kesin bir kırılma anı olarak tarihe geçmiştir.

Kasım 1979'da Cuheyman el-Uteybi liderliğindeki radikal bir grubun Kabe'yi işgal etmesi eylemi, Suudi Kraliyet ailesinin dini meşruiyetine doğrudan ve şiddetli bir saldırı niteliğinde taşımıştır. Bu varoluşsal kriz karşısında rejim, siyasi bekasını güvence altına almak adına ulema ile tarihi bir uzlaşuya gitmek zorunda kalmış olup, söz konusu uzlaş, siyasi iktidarın sürdürülmesi karşılığında toplumsal ve kültürel alanın kontrolünün büyük ölçüde dini otoritelere devredilmesini beraberinde getirmekteydi. Bu tarihten itibaren Krallık, kendi yumuşak güç potansiyelini kendi elleriyle boğduğu bir "patika bağımlılığı" (path dependency) sürecine girmiştir. Bu kapsamda, dini seçkinlerin toplumsal politikalara müdahalesi neticesinde sinemalar kapatılmış, müzik kamusal alandan silinmiş, cinsiyet ayrımı keskinleştirilmiş ve din polisinin yetkileri artırılarak toplum katı bir Vahhabi disiplini altına alınmıştır. Böylece, kültürel endüstrilerin gelişimi bizzat devlet politikasıyla engellenmiştir.

Suudi Arabistan Krallığı boyunca uluslararası alanda yumuşak gücünü petrol zenginliğinden gelen finansal güç ve Haremeyn'in koruyucusu olma savı ile desteklediği, "kutsal sermaye" (sacred capital) kavramını ön plana çıkaran dini önderlik iddiasına dayandırmıştır. Söz konusu yapı, Müslüman dünyasında "tepedeki şehir" (city on the hill) etkisi yaratarak Krallığı muhafazakar Müslümanlar için doğal bir çekim merkezi haline getirmiştir. Buna mukabil, söz konusu özellikler Krallığı Batı kamuoyunda çekici kılmamış, aksine, iç politikada benimsenen katı dini uygulamalar ve Vahhabizimin ihraç edilmesine yönelik politikalar Batı toplumları ile Krallık arasında derin bir değerler çatışması yaşanmasına yol açmaktaydı.

Bu çelişkili durum, 11 Eylül saldırılarıyla birlikte Krallık tarihinin en büyük krizlerinden birine dönüşmüştür. Saldırıları gerçekleştiren 19 kişiden 15'inin Suudi vatandaşı olması, Krallığın Batı toplumları nezdinde bir tehdit unsuru olarak algılanmasına yol açmıştır. Amerikan kamuoyunda Suudi Arabistan'a yönelik olumlu bakış açısı, 2001 yılı içinde %56'dan %24'e dramatik bir düşüş göstermiştir. Krallık bu krize, Burson-Marsteller ve Qorvis gibi dev halkla ilişkiler firmalarıyla milyonlarca dolarlık anlaşmalar yaparak yanıt vermeye çalışsa da, bu çabalar Nye'in "güvenilirlik açıklığı" (credibility gap) dediği sorunla karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Suudi yetkililerin "hoşgörü" ve "iş birliği" mesajlarının ülkenin kendi içindeki katı yasaklar ve özgürlük kısıtlamalarıyla taban tabana zıt olması ise, söz konusu mesajların Batı kamuoyu tarafından samimiyetsiz bir propaganda olarak algılanmış ve reddedilmiştir.

2015 yılına gelindiğinde ise, Vizyon 2030'un hayata geçirilmesinin hemen öncesindeki dönemde, devlet yumuşak güç kaynaklarını mobilize edecek kurumsal bütünlüğe ve stratejik vizyona sahip değildi. Turizm ve kültür gibi alanlar, bürokrasinin ihmal edilmiş köşelerinde, yetkisiz ve koordinasyonsuz bir şekilde varlıklarını sürdürmekteydi. Örneğin, Krallık toprakları içinde dört UNESCO Dünya Mirası alanı tescillenmiş olmasına rağmen, ülkenin turizm politikası sadece Hac ve Umre ziyaretleri ile sınırlı kalmış; eğlence amaçlı turist vizesi kategorisi dahi oluşturulmayarak ülke Batılı ziyaretçilere fiilen kapatılmıştır.

Öte yandan, bu kurumsal çölün ortasında, Hertog'un "verimlilik adaları" (islands of efficiency) olarak tanımladığı, Kral Abdullah Burs Programı (KASP) gibi nadir başarı örnekleri ortaya çıkmıştır. 100.000'den fazla öğrenciyi Batı üniversitelerine gönderen bu program, uzun vadede bir "vatandaş diplomasisi" etkisi yaratabilecek olsa da, bu girişimler daha geniş bir stratejinin parçası olmaktan ziyade münferit başarılar olarak kalmıştır. Benzer şekilde, "Wadjda" filmi gibi uluslararası başarı kazanan kültürel ürünler, devletin desteğiyle değil, devletin koyduğu engellere rağmen, bireysel yeteneklerin sisteme direnmesiyle ortaya çıkabilmiştir.

Bu itibarla; Krallığın zengin bir tarihi miras, keşfedilmemiş doğal güzellikler ve bastırılmış bir genç yetenek havuzu gibi kaynaklara sahip olduğunu, ancak, 1979

sonrası düzenin yarattığı patika bağımlılığın ve bürokratik parçalanmışlığın bu kaynakların yumuşak güce dönüşmesine engel olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Bu bağlamda, Vizyon 2030 öncesi dönem, kaynakların var olduğu ancak bunları işleyecek dönüşüm mekanizmalarının siyasi tercihlerle bloke edildiği bir "gerçekleşmemiş güç" dönemi olarak tanımlanmaktadır.

Dördüncü bölüm, Vizyon 2030 kapsamında gerçekleşen önemli kurumsal dönüşümü kayıt altına almaktadır. Vizyon 2030 belgesi; mevcut durumdaki kültür ve eğlence olanaklarının vatandaşların beklentilerine yanıt vermediğini açıkça kabul ederek, kültürü inşa ettiği ekonomik saiklerle ilişkili temel işlevlerin yanında “Suudi kimliğini uluslararası alanlarda temsil etmek” hedefine de yer vermiştir. Bu yaklaşım, kültürel endüstrilerin aktif ve sistematik olarak kısıtlandığı geçmiş dönemlerden radikal bir ayrılığı ve yeni bir vizyonu simgelemektedir.

Kültür Bakanlığı, 2018 yılında krallığın ilk bağımsız kültür bakanlığı olarak hizmete başlamış, Vizyon 2030’un kültürel dönüşümünü hayata geçiren temel bir merkez konumuna gelmiştir. Bakanlık ivedilikle, film, müzik, kültürel miras, edebiyat ve yayıncılık, görsel sanatlar, moda, müzeler, mutfak sanatları, sahne sanatları, mimarlık ve tasarım ile kütüphaneler gibi farklı kültürel alt kategorileri kapsayan on bir uzmanlaşmış komisyonu bünyesinde barındırır hale gelmiştir. Bakanlığın Mart 2019 tarihli “Kültürel Vizyon” belgesi kültürel mirasa değer veren, modern ve ilham verici ifade biçimlerini kapsayıcı bir yaklaşımla sentezleyen, geçmişine sadık ve geleceğe odaklı, sürdürülebilir bir kültürel kalkınma modeli sunmaktadır. Bu kapsamda belirlenen üç ana hedef; kültürün bir yaşam biçimi haline getirilmesi için teşvikte bulunmak, kültürün gelişen ekonomiye katkıda bulunması ve küresel kültürel etkileşime zemin hazırlamaktır. Özellikle Bakanlığın dördüncü rolü olarak tanımlanan "dünyaya köprü olma" hedefi, stratejik bir yumuşak güç tasarımı ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çerçevede Bakanlık, uluslararası ortaklıklar ve kültürel diplomasi kanalları vasıtasıyla Suudi Arabistan’ın kültürel hazinelerini küresel dolaşıma sokma ve uluslararası farkındalığı artırma amacını taşımaktadır.

Suudi sinema endüstrisinde gözlemlenen niteliksel dönüşüm, Vizyon 2030’un kaynak yaratma ve kurumsal yeniden yapılanma stratejisinin en iyi örneklerinden biri

konumundadır. 2017 Aralık ayında 35 yıllık sinema yasağının kaldırılması, yalnızca hukuki bir düzenleme değil; aynı zamanda küresel kamuoyunun dikkatini çeken ve Krallığın modernleşme yönündeki kararlılığını simgeleyen stratejik bir çıktı işlevi görmüştür. Sektörün ticari girişimi, Nisan 2018’de Black Panther filminin gösterimiyle başlamış, bu süreçte AMC ve VOX Cinemas gibi büyük işletmecilere yedi ayrı lisans verilmiştir. Şubat 2020’de kurulan Film Komisyonu, Suudi Arabistan’ı film yapımında küresel bir lider olması ve Orta Doğu ile Kuzey Afrika bölgesinin birincil sektörel temsilcisi olarak konumlandırılması yönünde bir vizyon ortaya koymuştur. Bununla birlikte, yaklaşık “Daw” Film Yarışması, Kızıldeniz Fonu ve Kültürel Kalkınma Fonu gibi stratejik girişimler, gelecek vadeden yönetmenlere ve yapımcılara çok katmanlı destek mekanizmaları oluşturulmuştur. Kızıldeniz Uluslararası Film Festivali ise yerel yetenekleri uluslararası filmler ile birlikte sergileyen kritik bir dönüşüm platformu olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Öte yandan, Film Saudi teşvik programı ile yabancı yapımlar Suudi Arabistan’ı içeren çekimler yapmaları için teşvik edilmekte, Suudi Arabistan’ın görsel imajı uluslararası kültürel ürünlere entegre edilerek, sözkonusu uluslararası yapımların Suudi bir yumuşak güç aracı olarak kullanılması hedeflenmektedir.

Suudi Arabistan’ın müzik stratejisi ise muhtelif kısıtlamalarla şekillenmiş olup, film stratejisinden farklı bir yapı olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Film sektörünün uluslararası içerik ihracı odaklı yaklaşımının aksine müzik sektörü, uluslararası izleyicileri doğrudan Suudi Arabistan’a çekme, “kontrollü liberalleşme” politikaları ile uzun vadede normalleşme sağlama ve bu yolla Suudi Arabistan’a ilişkin belirli anlatıları destekleme hedeflerini taşıyan bir yapı sergilemektedir. Söz konusu stratejinin en somut araçlarından biri olan ve 2019’daki ilk çıkışında 400.000 katılımcıya ulaşan MDLBeast Soundstorm gibi mega festivaller, Suudi Arabistan’ın sosyal dönüşümünün küresel ölçekte sergilenmesini sağlayan mekanizmalar olarak işlev görmektedir. Bu gibi etkinliklerde Suudi sanatçıların performansından ziyade uluslararası ölçekte tanınmış sanatçıların ön plana çıkarılması küresel düzeyde medya ilgisine yol açmakta ve ülkenin dışa açılma arzusunu uluslararası kamuoyu nezdinde ispat etmektedir. Stratejik olarak bu dönüşüm aynı zamanda eğitim sistemi aracılığıyla müzik tüketimini erken çocukluk döneminden itibaren normalleştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. 20.000’den fazla okul öncesi öğretmenin eğitilmesi, müziğin ulusal

eđitim müfredatındaki dokuz temel kültürel alandan biri olarak yer alması ve okullara 8.000’den fazla enstrüman dağıtılması gibi gelişmeler, geçmişte katı kısıtlamalarla yetişen nesillerin aksine yeni kuşaklar için müziđi gündelik hayatın bir parçası haline getiren ve bunu normalleştiren nesiller arası bir sosyal mühendisliđi ortaya koymaktadır.

Suudi Arabistan, geniş çaplı yumuşak güç hedeflerini hayata geçirmek için; spor organizasyonlarıyla ve muhtelif gösterilerle (spectacle) Krallığa dikkat çekme, Krallığı prestijli bir “marka” haline getirme ve turizm kanallarını genişletme stratejilerini eş zamanlı olarak uygulamaktadır. Bu kapsamda, spor mega etkinlikleri ve sponsorluklar görünürlüğün ana itici gücü olarak işlev görmektedir. Suudi Arabistan’ın 2022 FIFA Dünya Kupası sırasında bölgesel reklam haklarını güvence altına alması, Lionel Messi’yi turizm elçisi olarak ataması ve FIFA Kulüpler Dünya Kupası, Hindistan Premier Ligi ve La Liga dahil olmak üzere sistematik bir sponsorluk portföyü oluşturması, Krallığın spor dünyasındaki görünürlüğünü artırmaya matuf hamleleri olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, Newcastle United’ın satın alınması, LIV Golf’ün oluşturulması, yüksek profilli transferler dahil olmak üzere Suudi Pro Ligi’ne yapılan önemli yatırımlar ve 2034 FIFA Dünya Kupası’nın Suudi Arabistan tarafından düzenlenecek olması, Krallığın sporu kullanma biçimindeki yapısal deđişiklikleri temsil eden diđer örneklerdir. Bahse konu girişimler "sporla aklanma" (sportswashing) olarak nitelendirse de, bu tez, Suudi Arabistan’ın uyguladıđı stratejinin turizm projeleri ile entegrasyonunun yalnızca itibar aklanmasından daha karmaşık olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu yaklaşım, sporun geniş bir yumuşak güç stratejisinin bir parçası haline getirildiđi daha sofistike bir yapıya karşılık gelen Grix’in "cazibe siyaseti" (politics of attraction kavramsallaştırmasıyla daha yakından örtüşmektedir.

Suudi Arabistan’ın Giga projeleri; fütürizm, sürdürülebilirlik ve inovasyon temalarını bünyesinde barındıran “stratejik anlatı” araçları olarak işlev görmektedir. NEOM, The Line, Qiddiya ve Diriyah gibi girişimler, geleceğin Suudi Arabistan’ını tasvir eden sembolik gösteriler olma amacı taşımakta ve uluslararası kamuoyunu Krallığın dönüşüm sürecini hayal etmeye davet etmektedir. Örnek olarak, NEOM’un dünyanın tamamen yenilenebilir enerjiyle çalışan ilk kenti olma vaadi ve The Line’ın 170

kilometrelik aynalı cephelerle kaplı doğrusal bir şehir olarak tahayyül edilmiş olması, bu projelerin cüretkâr ve dikkat çekici doğasını yansıtmaktadır. Analitik bir perspektifle bakıldığında, bu vaatlerin ilk etapta planlandığından daha mütevazı ölçekte tamamlanabilecek olması ise söz konusu projelerin dikkat çekmeye odaklı ve anlatsal kazanımlarını yadsımamaktadır. Özetle, projelerde olan bu cüretkar tasarımlar; doğası gereği dikkati üzerine çekmekte ve Suudi Arabistan'ı daha önce tasavvur edilemeyen ilerici bir aktör olarak yeniden çerçeveye oturtmaktadır.

Bununla birlikte, Suudi Arabistan tarafından ahiren ihdas edilmiş olan turizm altyapısı, uluslararası kamuoyu dikkatini fiili ziyaret imkanına yönlendirerek, doğrudan deneyimleyerek etkileşim kurma yoluyla güvenilirlik açıklarını kapatabilecek bir girişim olarak öne çıkmaktadır. 2019 yılında yürürlüğe giren e-vize sistemi, Krallık tarihinde ilk kez Körfez dışından seyahat edecek yabancı kitlelerin kolaylıkla ülkeye giriş yapmasına ve ülke hakkında ilk elden izlenimler edinmesine olanak tanımıştır. Bu bağlamda turizm, ikili bir stratejik işlev üstlenmektedir. Bunlardan ilki, ziyaretçilerin Krallık'ta yaşanan toplumsal dönüşümü (kadınların araç kullanımına tanıklık etmek ve karma cinsiyetli kamusal alanlarda bulunmak gibi) doğrudan deneyimlemesini sağlamaktır. Diğer stratejik işlevi ise gözlemlenebilir politika değişiklikleri üzerinden devletin “dışa açılma” anlatısını somut verilerle desteklemektir. Bu çerçevede, Suudi Turizm Otoritesi, kendi kurumsal yetkisini açıkça bir algı dönüşümü projesi olarak çerçevelemekte ve ülkeye yönelik yerleşik negatif algıları gidermeyi, aynı zamanda Suudi Arabistan'ın küresel bir turizm noktası olarak profilini yükseltmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Batı medyasındaki şüpheli yaklaşımların aksine, reformları yerinde tecrübe eden ziyaretçiler, bu süreçte samimiyetsiz olarak algılanan resmi mesajlardan ziyade kişisel gözlemlere dayandırıldığı için uluslararası medyada çok daha ikna edici ve nitelikli bir meşruiyet zemini oluşturmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak bu tez, Vizyon 2030'un Suudi Arabistan'ın yumuşak güç stratejisinde niteliksel bir dönüşümü temsil ettiğini ileri sürmektedir. Birincisi, Vizyon 2030 kapsamında hayata geçirilen düzenlemeler neticesinde Suudi yumuşak gücü büyük ölçüde dinî otoritenin bir yan ürünü olarak, dar bir hedef kitleye (başlıca muhafazakar Müslüman kamuoyuna) dönük ortaya çıkan bir yapı olmaktan çıkararak,

uluslararası imaja ilişkin ayrıntılı hedefler içeren açık ve kapsamlı bir stratejiye dönüşmüştür. Vizyon 2030 öncesinde Batı'ya dönük çabalar çoğunlukla tepkisel ve savunmacı nitelikteyken, Vizyon 2030 sonrasında resmî belgeler imaja ve kültürel ihraca ilişkin hedefleri açıkça ifade etmekte; Kültür Bakanlığı'nın "dünyaya köprü olma" yönündeki görevi, Suudi tarihinde benzeri görülmemiş ölçüde kasıtlı bir tasarım arz etmektedir.

İkincisi, Krallık hem yumuşak güç stratejisine kaynak teşkil edebilecek yerel unsurları geliştirme, hem de anılan kaynakların güce dönüşümü için çift yönlü bir altyapıya sistematik biçimde yatırım yapmıştır. Bu noktada önem arz eden husus, kültürel sektörlerin geçmişte yasaklanmış olması nedeniyle devletin yalnızca mevcut kültürel kaynakları yönetmekle yetinmeyip, aynı zamanda bu kaynakları baştan yaratmak zorunda kalmasıdır; zira, Suudi Arabistan'da kültür endüstrilerinin bizzat inşası, yumuşak güç stratejisinin açık bir aracı hâline gelmiştir.

Üçüncüsü, ortaya çıkan strateji, ulusal imajı yeniden konumlandırmak için uluslararası anlatıları iç politika değişiklikleriyle uyumlu hâle getirmeye çalışmakta; iddia ile gerçeklik arasındaki uyumsuzluğu, yalnızca mesajı iyileştirerek değil, aynı zamanda iç politika uygulamalarını değiştirerek azaltmayı hedeflemektedir. Söz konusu değişikliklerin yalnızca yumuşak güç stratejisine kaynak teşkil etmesi amacıyla gerçekleştirilmediği açık olsa dahi, kapsamlı iç politika değişiklikleri dışa dönük yumuşak güç hamleleri ile eşgüdüm halinde geliştirilmekte, yumuşak güç stratejisi iç politikada görülen değişikliklerden bilfiil beslenmektedir. Bu çerçevede strateji, salt iletişim tekniklerinin iyileştirilmesinden ibaret olmayıp, mesajın inandırıcılığını destekleyecek maddi politika değişikliklerine de dayanmaktadır.

Bu tez, yurt içi kurum inşasının yalnızca yumuşak güç projeksiyonunu mümkün kılan bir ön koşul değil, bizzat yumuşak güç stratejisinin merkezî bileşenlerinden biri olabileceğinin Suudi Arabistan örneği üzerinden gösterilmesi vasıtasıyla yumuşak güç literatürüne katkıda bulunmaktadır. Mevcut literatür, kurumları genellikle yumuşak güç faaliyetlerini yürütmeyi mümkün kılan idari bir altyapı olarak ele alma eğiliminde iken Suudi Arabistan örneği kültürel kaynakların mevcut olmadığı ya da kasıtlı olarak bastırıldığı durumlarda bu kaynakların yaratılmasının stratejinin

ayrılmaz bir parçası haline gelebildiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Söz konusu bulgu, Joseph Nye tarafından geliştirilmiş olan kaynak-dönüşüm çerçevesini, dönüşüm ve kaynak yaratımının eş zamanlı ve birbirine bağımlı olduğu vakaları da kapsayacak biçimde genişletmekte; bununla birlikte, Grix ile Brannagan'ın daha kapsamlı “yumuşak güç paketleri” kavramsallaştırması üzerine katkıda bulunarak, bu tür durumlarda kaynak inşası ile güç dönüşümünün birbirinden ayrılamaz hâle geldiğini vurgulamaktadır. Tez ayrıca, Suudi yumuşak güç stratejisini yalnızca spesifik sektörler üzerinden inceleyen ve stratejiyi “ad hoc” girişimlerin toplamı olarak nitelendiren yaklaşımlara meydan okumakta; bunun yerine Vizyon 2030'un merkezi koordinasyon, muhtelif sektörlerde sistematik yatırım ve açık biçimde ifade edilmiş olan yumuşak güç hedefleri içeren sofistike bir kurumsal tasarım süreci ortaya koyduğunu göstermektedir.

Sonuç olarak Vizyon 2030, Krallığın yumuşak güç üretimine yönelik bir devlet aygıtı inşa etme yönündeki en kapsamlı girişimini temsil etmektedir. Vizyon 2030, yumuşak güç bağlamında stratejik yaklaşım, kültürel kaynakların geliştirilmesi ve güce dönüştürülmesi, turizm erişimi ve uluslararası anlatı veçheleriyle incelenmiş olup, Vizyon öncesi dönem ile Vizyon dönemi arasındaki geçiş, basit bir düzenlemeden ziyade köklü bir yeniden yapılandırmaya işaret etmektedir. Bu dönüşümün, Suudi Arabistan'ın arzuladığı uluslararası çekiciliği üretmede nihayetinde başarılı olup olmayacağı ise; politika tutarlılığının sürdürülmesi, hedef kitlelerin tepkileri ve halen varlığını sürdüren güvenilirlik sorunlarının nasıl çözüleceği gibi faktörlere bağlı olacaktır. Bununla birlikte bu tez, Vizyon 2030 ile Suudi Arabistan'ın Krallık tarihindeki kurumsal olarak en kapsamlı yumuşak güç stratejisine doğru kesin bir geçiş yaptığı sonucunu net biçimde ortaya koymaktadır.

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