

The Examination of the Identities Defining Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

This article employs the theory of constructivism to examine how Saudism, Bedouin/tribal identity, Wahabism, the geopolitics of Saudi Arabia, and its rentier state identity affect the country's foreign policy determination process. Social constructivism theory suggests that social identities determine national interests and policies. This study aims to analyze the semantic transformations within Saudi Arabia's identity and their effects on contemporary politics, along with the country's geopolitical standing and the resulting strategic directions. A comprehensive framework of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is drawn from various approaches to the identities mentioned. Analyzing the historical and geopolitical narrative of events and concepts that define Saudi identity by using constructivist theory helps us understand how these identities impact Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in international relations. This study provides insights into the complexities of Saudi Arabia's identity and foreign policy, highlighting the importance of understanding the role of social identities in national interests and policies. Constructivist theory combined with regional studies will enable a more effective analysis of the different identities and policies in international relations.

Keywords: Construction of National Identity, Saudi Arabia, Saudi Identity, Social Constructivism.

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Suudi Arabistan'ın Dış Politikasını Belirleyen Kimliklerin İncelenmesi

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Öz

Bu makale, Suudizm'in, Bedevi/kabile kimliğinin, Vahhabizm'in, Suudi Arabistan'ın jeopolitiği ve rantier devlet kimliğinin dış politika belirleme süreci üzerindeki etkisini inşacı teori üzerinden analiz etmektedir. Sosyal inşacılık teorisi, sosyal kimliklerin ulusal çıkarları ve politikaları belirlediğini öne sürer. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Suudi Arabistan'ın kimliği içindeki anlamsal dönüşümleri ve çağdaş siyaset üzerindeki etkilerini, ülkenin jeopolitik konumunu ve sonuç olarak ortaya çıkan stratejik yönlerini analiz etmektir. Ayrıca, bir ulus devleti haline gelmesinden bu yana benimsediği politikalar, özellikle İslami kimliğiyle ilişkili olarak incelenir. Bahsedilen kimliklere çeşitli yaklaşımlar listelenerek, Suudi Arabistan'ın dış politikasının kapsamlı bir çerçevesi çizilir. Çalışma inşacılık teorisini kullanarak, Suudi kimliğini tanımlayan olay ve kavramların tarihsel ve jeopolitik durumunu analiz ederek, bu kimliklerin Suudi Arabistan'ın dış politikasını nasıl etkilediğini anlamaya yardımcı olmaktadır. Suudi Arabistan'ın kimlik oluşumu üzerine yapılan bu makale, inşacı teoriye dayalı olarak kolektif kimlik ve dış politika konularında önermeler geliştirerek Uluslararası İlişkiler teorilerine katkıda bulunur. Bu makalede Bölgesel Çalışmalar ile birleştirilen İnşacı teori, inşacılığın Uluslararası İlişkilerin farklı kimlikleri ve politikalarını daha etkili bir şekilde analiz etmesine imkan sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal İnşacılık, Suudi Arabistan, Suudi Kimliği, Ulusal Kimliğin İnşası.

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1. Introduction

In international relations, theories sometimes aim to solve problems and sometimes just reveal the problem by examining people, history, and behaviors from different theoretical frameworks. In international relations, the constructivist theory is used to explain the problems of the modern age, such as identity, migration, human rights, and environmental . According to this approach, social constructivism theory states that social reality is not fixed and static but built in an ongoing change.¹ This perspective argues that international relations are socially constructed. Concepts such as anarchy, sovereignty, power, security, interest, and conflict are social phenomena that are examined, questioned, and occur in social construction. There is no fixed, solid, single reality. Therefore, international relations can be shaped in different ways, historically and socially. Constructivists examine the social and cultural dimensions of social change and its impact on political orientations.² The constructivist approach places a greater emphasis on the role of society and culture compared to other alternative theories. It posits that changes in people's values and fundamental beliefs lead to corresponding policy changes. This approach highlights the impact of ideas, norms, and discourses in shaping the evaluation of outcomes³. Constructivists argue that the state, like the market and international organizations, is built in a social environment that gives it meaning, purpose, behavior, and orientation.⁴

Identity, one of the most comprehensive concepts of international relations, is considered both constructive and destructive, both good and bad. At this point, the way identity is viewed can completely change the results of an analysis. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is built on specific identities such as Saudism, Islam, Wahhabism, Bedouin tribe social structure, and rentier state, where a transition between identities is

¹ David N. Balaam & Bradford Diman, *Uluslararası Ekonomi Politige Giris*, trans. Nasuh Uslu (Ankara: Adres Publishing, 2020), 147.

² Cagla Gul Yesevi, "Uluslararası İlişkiler Bilim Dalında Sosyal İnsancılık Yaklaşımının İncelenmesi," *Electronic Journal of Political Science Studies* 12 no. 2 (January 2021): 55.

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Balaam & Diman, *Uluslararası Ekonomi Politige Giris*, 149.

possible depending on periods. It is possible to explain foreign policy based on these identities with the theory of constructivism. The constructivist theory argues that the determinant factor in the foreign policy of countries is identities. Therefore, the country's interests are based on the identities that are decisive in foreign policy and are shaped in direct connection with these identities. According to the constructivist theory, identities are created through the distinctions in the internal dynamics of the countries. Differences can be shaped as self/other or friend/enemy. These distinctions are formed in a certain way. In short, it is impossible to talk about identity without the construction of the 'other'.⁵

Based on this approach, in this study, how identity affects Saudi foreign policy is examined within the framework of the constructivist approach. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is interpreted by a new generation of researchers, considering internal dynamics, unlike the studies put forward in the period before the 1990s. The main argument put forward by the new approach is that Saudi Arabia's foreign policies cannot be understood only by external factors and that domestic policy also affects foreign policy.⁶ Therefore, it can be argued that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy identities are fed by various internal dynamics. On the basis of the identities that provide foreign policy, there are Saudi Arabia's history, geopolitics, Bedouin culture, Islamic religion, and regional leadership discourses. The foreign policy identities shaped by the internal dynamics listed within the scope of the study are examined.

In line with this purpose, first of all, general information about the theory of social constructionism is given in the study. It is emphasized how the theory of social constructionism views international relations, including its focus on identity. In the next section, the general characteristics of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy will be explained. Afterward, Saudi Arabia's political history and the features that make up its identity are

⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Uluslararası Politika Teorisi*, translated by, Osman S. Binatlı, (Ankara: Phoenix Yayınları, 2015), 56.

⁶ Nicholas Onuf Greenwood, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in social Theory and international Relations*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1989), 2;22-23.

examined. The main reason why Saudi Arabia's local identities remain strong is that its historical and cultural past is rooted in and nourished by hostilities or friendships. In conclusion, it is be argued that these dynamics play a significant role in shaping the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia.

2. Social Constructivist Approach

The rationalism-reflectivism debate, or more commonly known as positivism versus postpositivism, which is the third major debate in the history of international relations, forms the basis of social constructionism.⁷ Constructivism theory mostly tries to show the change in international relations and adopts the idea of a question-oriented working method rather than a method-oriented.⁸ The constructivist approach focuses much more on society and culture than other alternative theories. The constructivist approach, which has also become popular in international relations after the 1980s, has been defined as a third alternative option between positivism and post-positivism.⁹ This definition is based on ontological and epistemological sources, specifically on the philosophy of being and the philosophy of knowledge. The constructivist approach views social reality and knowledge as constructed rather than based on accepted theories.¹⁰ According to the constructivist approach, while the identities of political and social actors are constantly reconstructed by society, identities play key roles in

⁷ Mustafa Kucuk, "Uluslararası İlişkiler Kuramında Konstruktivist Donusu Anlamak", *Ege Akademik Bakış* 9, no. 2 (April 2009): 773.

⁸ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 423.

⁹ The constructivist approach in the field of international relations emerged in the 1980s as a response to the limitations of positivism and post-positivism. According to this approach, social structures and norms play a critical role in shaping state behavior and the international system. It emphasizes the importance of social identities, norms, and ideas in shaping foreign policy and international relations.

The constructivist approach is often seen as a "third alternative option" between positivism and post-positivism because it goes beyond the traditional positivist emphasis on material factors such as power, and the post-positivist focus on discourse and language. Instead, constructivism focuses on the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping international relations. See: Jeffrey. T. Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory", *World Politics* 50, no.2 (1998): 324.

¹⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Stanford University Press; Stanford, CA, 1991), 22-27.

forming new orientations and activities. In short, actors and structures are ultimately built. The constructivist approach states that international relations are similar to social relations and that they are social processes and structures. It is argued that these social processes and structures are constructed by rules, institutions, and individuals who have transitioned from the regional to the universal and from the adaptable to the regional level, thus shaping our social relations in a two-way manner.¹¹ In addition, the construction process of tools such as norms, rules, institutions, identity, and culture that define relations in society is determined by two-way interactions that similarly take place. Onuf, who studies the effects of his constructivist approach in the field of international relations, argues that society and the individual are constantly shaped in two directions. The state, one of the leading actors in international relations, is formed within the framework of social relations rules, and some structures are built as a result of institutions. The formation of states results from social relationships and interactions, which along with their formation processes, constitute the international society and system.¹² In addition to Onuf's approach, the constructivist approach bears the following aspects. Ideas and cultural development are important in the process of constructing the discourse and reality of international relations. Political and social interests are subjective and also related to changing identities. Some have different perspectives among social constructivist thinkers, but they mostly focus on identity, norms, values, culture, national interests, and international governance. In general, states are considered as the main political actors, but a state understanding that shows standard and universal reflexes cannot be mentioned. To clarify, it is essential to understand that states shape international relations through their actions, perspectives, and interpretations. In other words, states actively create and influence the global political landscape based on their behaviors and beliefs. Social structure also has a restrictive effect on these activities, understandings, and orientations, and these effects are shaped by the "identities" and

¹¹ Polat S. Alpman, "Sosyal Teorinin Konusu olarak Kimlik: sosyal İnşacı Yaklaşım", *Sosyoloji Araştırmaları Dergisi* 21, no. 2 (October, 2018): 2.

¹² Nicholas Onuf, *Making Sense, Making Worlds: Constructivism in Social Theory and International Relations*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 25-28.

“values” of states.¹³ The “identities” and “values” of states are formed in a social and historical process. This formation process takes place both at home and abroad. As Gokcekuyu mentioned, “most definitions of identity in social sciences assume the phrase to be a unit of analysis, a challenging task when the phrase is so heterogeneous”.¹⁴ In the international arena, common values and understandings that change over time are built. Although states obtain their own identities and values through them, they do not have a passive structure. They actively participate in the construction of values and orientations in the international arena.¹⁵ According to Alexander Wendt, social structure consists of three basic elements, which are shared knowledge, material resources, and practices. To put it differently, constructivism stands out by viewing international politics through the lens of mercantilists who perceive it as a socially constructed process shaped by identity and interests¹⁶.

3. The General Outlines of Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Policy

Saudi Arabia claims to be the natural leader of the Arab world, especially in the Gulf region, and its biggest rival is Iran, a Shiite country. The two states, which frequently come face to face on regional issues, approach the problems from different sides. Saudi Arabia is uncomfortable with Iran’s expansionist policies.¹⁷ However, Saudi Arabia, the protector and host of the holy cities, has close relations with other Islamic countries. The fact that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation is in Riyadh shows this situation. However, it cannot be said that the Kingdom’s relationship with other Islamic countries is stable, and there are occasional tensions and disagreements.

The concept of “regional powers” is an expression used to describe how

¹³ Birgul, Demirtas. *İnsacılık*, *Uluslararası İlişkilere Giriş*, ed. by Saban Kardas ve Ali Balcı, İstanbul: Kure Publishing, 2014), 117.

¹⁴ Ertugrul Gokcekuyu, “An Analysis of Al-Djurjani’s Definition of Identity – huwiyya: The then and Now” *Alsuna: Journal of Arabic and English Language* 4, no.2 (June 2022): 203.

¹⁵ Ibid, 117-118.

¹⁶ Tayyar Ari, *Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorileri* (Bursa: MKM Yayıncılık, 2013), 499.

¹⁷ Gerd Nonneman, *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, (Routledge, July 2005), p. 1-3.

states assume and maintain the region's leadership. In fact, there is no generally accepted definition of this concept. Still, it is mostly used for giants with more military, economic, and scientific power in a certain geographical area than others. These are states that also have severe effects on neighboring countries around them.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is built on maintaining stability in the region, aimed at a consistent approach to avoiding conflict.¹⁹ However, the 2011 Arab Spring movement led to remarkable changes in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. To maintain its dominance and stability in the region, the kingdom has begun to increase its military power, as well as to fuel sectarian politics, impose sanctions and implement other restrictive policies, increasingly resorting to military force, sectarian politics, and sanctions or other restrictive measures.²⁰

Saudi Arabia has played a leading role in promoting Arab unity and cooperation, particularly through its active involvement in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC is a political and economic union of six Gulf Arab states, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The organization is aimed at enhancing regional security, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange.²¹

In terms of its regional posture, Saudi Arabia has been a leading player in the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The kingdom has been a strong supporter of the Syrian opposition and has provided significant financial and military assistance to rebel groups. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia has led a coalition of Arab states in support of the internationally recognized government against Houthi rebels.²² It can be said that Saudi Arabia acts as a leading country in foreign policy, but it is also clear that there are situations where the opposite is true. During the embargo

¹⁸ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and powers: The structure of international security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 62.

¹⁹ Neil Partrick. *Conclusion. In Saudi Arabian foreign policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. by Neil Partrick, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 314.

²⁰ Jens Heibach, "Public diplomacy and regional leadership struggles: the case of Saudi Arabia," *International Politics*, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-021-00310-7>.

²¹ Partrick, 112.

²² *Ibid*, 230.

process against Qatar, Qatar took steps against Saudi Arabia, and today the UAE is taking steps against Saudi Arabia despite Saudi Arabia's opposition.

It should be added that the strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has turned into a proxy war that has become even more intense after the Arab Spring movement in 2011. This rivalry rests on two pillars, power policy over the region and religious-ideological separation. In fact, issues of sectarianism and nationalism can be thought of as political forces used to gain an edge in the competition between the two countries or to limit the influence of the rival.

There are three primary reasons for the current tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The first stems from their regional power struggle. Iran sees itself as the natural leader of the region due to its size, population, and historical heritage. Conversely, Saudi Arabia views itself as the natural leader of the Arab side of the Gulf. This tension has been exacerbated by Iran's strong opposition to the US military presence in the region and its perception of the Saudi-US alliance as a threat to its national security. The second reason for the tension is a series of ongoing disputes over land and sea borders. For example, Iran has made claims over the oil fields of Bahrain and Kuwait, and it has also occupied three islands in the Persian Gulf, the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa. Lastly, the third reason for the tension is economic competition between the two countries, particularly with regard to the setting of oil prices and the struggle for control over OPEC.

Iran has a high population but smaller oil reserves and is willing to offer higher oil prices due to the need to rally after the Iraq war. In this context, the possibility that high pricing will affect the world energy market negatively, in the long run, does not seem to be a priority for Iran. For all reasons, the arms race between the two countries has increased and made the rivalry between the two countries a source of serious fear in the region.²³

²³ F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East: The Challenges of Political, Economic and Security Transition" *Council Special Report* no. 63 (USA: Council on Foreign Relations: December 2011):15-16; Meir Litvak, "Iran and Saudi Arabia: Report Title: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the New Regional Landscape Begin,"

The political-ideological approach draws attention to the rival government models of Iran and Saudi Arabia, each of which claims Islamic legitimacy and has opposing views on the regional order. The Iranian administration does not approve of the monarchy regime, which according to the Shiite sect, it finds contrary to Islam and attaches importance to the leadership of religious authorities in politics. Although Iran has an authoritarian political system, the government gives the people a chance to participate in the government through elections and advocates a populist line. This structure is quite contrary to the Saudi monarchy system and its domestic policy.²⁴ Sectarianism complicates this rivalry because Shiites and Wahhabis are at both ends of the Islamic spectrum. Wahhabis regard Shiites, whose belief in the twelve imams is a core religious tenet and whose ceremonial grave visits are contrary to Wahhabism, as disbelievers.²⁵ Due to the clash of strategic interests and profound ideological animosity, it is highly probable that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia will persist for an extended period of time.

4. Factors Forming the Identity of Saudi Arabia

4.1. Saudism

One of the identities that shape the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia is being Saudi. When we look at the historical background of this identity, it is necessary to focus on how the concepts of “Saudi Arabia” and “Saudiness” are interpreted. From this point of view, it should be noted that the word “Saudi Arabia” refers to the period of Saudi Arabia as a national state. In fact, “Saudiism” is a concept indicating the lands on which one lives, as well as the blood ties that one has. “Saudi” is a name that means high-ranking and high-level positions. The two-worded country name Saudi Arabia also means ‘Rising Arabia’. The word ‘Suud’ is synonymous with the Arabic word ‘Rifat’. The concept of “Saudism”

ed. by Joshua Teitelbaum, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* no. 13, (Macca: Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Iran and Saudi Arabia: Religious and Strategy, 2017): 50-51.

²⁴ Meir Litvak, “Iran and Saudi Arabia: Report Title: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and the New Regional Landscape Begin,” ed. by Joshua Teitelbaum, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* no. 13, (Macca: Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Iran and Saudi Arabia: Religious and Strategy, 2017): 50-51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*,52.

refers to the political and social ideology that has been associated with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the House of Saud, the ruling family of the country. This ideology is rooted in the country's history, culture, and religious traditions, particularly the strict interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism.²⁶

Saudism emphasizes the importance of a strong, centralized government that upholds Islamic principles and traditions, particularly the idea of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law.²⁷ It also emphasizes the importance of loyalty to the ruling family and the promotion of its interests as a central tenet of the country's political system.²⁸ As Maestri says, The role of religion (the Wahhabi version of Islam) in forging Saudi Arabia as a state (dawla) certainly comes to the fore within the unification process (tawahhud) under the leadership of the al-Saud. No doubt, elements of Arabian tribal political culture and structures intertwine with Islam within Saudi statehood. Since the proto-states of the 18th and 19th centuries, they contributed to the state-building process and to the emergence of some cohesion forces intermingling with the religious factor and impacting on the consolidation of al-watan (the homeland/fatherland) as 'the nation'.²⁹

One of the main features of Saudism is its emphasis on the preservation of traditional Islamic values and customs, particularly in regard to gender roles, morality, and social norms. This has often been seen as promoting a conservative and restrictive approach to social and cultural issues, particularly concerning women's rights and freedom of expression.³⁰ Another key aspect of Saudism is its emphasis on the role of the state in the economy, particularly through its control of the country's vast oil reserves. This has led to a strong state-dominated economy, with limited

²⁶Madawi, Al-Rasheed, *Kingdom without borders: Saudi Arabia's political, religious and media frontiers*, (UK, London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers, 2008): 155-59.

²⁷ Joseph, Nevo. "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1998), pp. 35–36.

²⁸ Elena, Maestri. "4. Saudi National Identity: Historical and Ideational Dimensions". *The Struggle to Define a Nation: Rethinking Religious Nationalism in the Contemporary Islamic World*, ed. by Marco Demichelis and Paolo Maggolini, (Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias Press, 2017): 95-122.

²⁹ Ibid.,

³⁰ Ibid.,

opportunities for private enterprise and foreign investment. Overall, Saudism is a complex and multifaceted concept that is deeply rooted in Saudi Arabia's history, culture, and religious traditions. While it has been criticized for its conservative approach to social and cultural issues, it remains a powerful force in shaping the country's political and social landscape.

4.1.1. What is the Origin of the Saudis?

The territory that is now known as Saudi Arabia has a rich and diverse ethnic history that spans thousands of years. Archaeological researches carried out in the Ma'rih region in Yemen towards the end of the last century show that this region has an ancient history dating back to 10-15 centuries BC and has a prosperous civilization. Ancient Arab historians and ancient Arab narratives show South Arabia, especially around Yemen, as the oldest homeland of the Arab nation, as these ideas and rumors are suitable for geological and archaeological studies in recent times.³¹ It is an accepted fact today that the successes of these southerners, known as the Kafatanis, in the genealogy connection based on the Torah narrations, had a significant impact on the sons of Ismail, who settled in the Hejaz region, known as the Adnanis.³² It is also challenging to distinguish unequivocally between northern Arabs and southern Arabs, although there are significant differences between them. In the old books based on the stories of the Torah, it is known that they were descended from the son of Noah, Shem, who is also called the second Adam, but in general, the Arabs constitute the chief type of the communities called Semitic nations, since they have a common language in all of the basics they speak or are very similar to each other.³³ Many ideas have been put forward about where these Semitic communities first came from and where they spread. According to the generally accepted idea today, the expansions that give the appearance of a Semitic country to Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine are due to Semitic groups that came

³¹ Madawi, Al-Rasheed, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, (UK, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002):15-17.

³² Ibid, 17.

³³ Neset Cagatay, "Samiler-Araplar ve Guney Arabistan Devletleri," *Ankara Universitesi İlahiyat Fakultesi Dergisi* IV, no. 3-4 (1957): 44-48.

to the north from Arabia.

The inhabitants of the region were the nomadic Bedouin tribes, who migrated across the Arabian Peninsula around 3,000 BCE. These tribes were known for their skills in navigating the harsh desert terrain and were skilled in trading and commerce. Around the 7th century CE, the Islamic prophet Muhammad began preaching in the region and laid the foundations of what would become the Islamic faith. The religion spread quickly across the Arabian Peninsula and brought with it a unifying cultural and linguistic identity.³⁴

Throughout the centuries, Saudi Arabia was home to a number of different ethnic groups, including Persians, Turks, and Africans, who migrated to the region for various reasons such as trade or religious pilgrimage. In the 18th century, the Saudi dynasty was established by Muhammad bin Saud, who formed an alliance with the religious leader Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Together, they created a state that was based on the principles of the Islamic faith and governed according to its laws.³⁵ Today, the population of Saudi Arabia is primarily made up of Arab Muslims, with smaller communities of non-Arab Muslims, such as Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis, as well as expatriate workers from around the world.

4.1.2. Saudi Identity

Saudi Arabia was established as an independent kingdom in 1932, but prior to this date, there was no mention of Saudi citizenship. However, the Saudi identity, which is formed through the concepts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism, has gradually gained validity in the political arena. It was only after the mid-1950s that Saudi Arabia began to be visible both at the regional level and in international politics. In the early stages of its national development, Saudi Arabia's main concern was to consolidate its presence and power in the Arabian Peninsula.³⁶

³⁴ William L. Cleveland, Martin Bunton, *A Modern History of the Middle East*, 6th Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2016):1-3.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

³⁶ Majed Alharbi, "Reimagining the Ever-Changing Construct of Saudi Writerly Identity: A Heuristic Approach," *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)* 11. no. 4

The Saudi identity, which is based on Bedouin tribal life, Islam, and Arabic language, has been expressed differently by writers and thinkers. Joseph Nevo expresses Arab culture, even in a narrow sense, Bedouin tribal culture, Islamic culture, and geographical location as the determining factors of Saudi identity.³⁷ Although these components are not always in harmony, each contributes to the shaping of the mentioned identity. This contribution may vary with the effect of the economic and cultural structure that varies from country to country.

It is natural to have a conflict between the concept of patriotism in the national sense and the broad perception of the Muslim ummah. Because the reflection of Arab nationalism limits the concept of ummah. Moreover, the development of the nation-state understanding has narrowed this concept even more.³⁸ This conflict is particularly evident in the social and political structure of Saudi Arabia. Namely, the Muslim community (ummah) that uses the religion of Islam as a source of legitimacy goes beyond the borders of the Saudi state.³⁹ Nonetheless, the rulers constantly emphasize that the common identity of Saudi Arabia is a part of the Ummah.

4.2. Wahhabism

The main factor in determining the benefits and strategies in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is the Islamic identity. Hosting the holy cities of Islam, Mecca, and Medina, and being the country where the Wahhabi sect, which is the most conservative interpretation of Islam, was born and spread, is effective in determining the Islamic identity in the norms and values of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Although there are different sects of Islam as a minority in Saudi Arabia, the school of Mohammed Bin Abdul Wahab, known as Wahhabism, is the only sect that the state officially accepts and draws its religious discourse from. In other words,

(December 2020):256.

³⁷ Joseph Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (July 1998): 34.

³⁸ Mamoun H. Al-Fandy, "State Islam and State Violence: The Case of Saudi Arabia". (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 1993): 32.

³⁹ Ghaysuddin, M. *The Impact of Nationalism on the Muslim World* (London: Al-Hoda Publishers, 1986), 41.

the Saudi religious institution fully assumes the Wahhabi identity and prominent religious leaders are chosen among the seniors of this sect.⁴⁰

Wahhabism is an influential factor that directs the formation of the Saudi identity and the international politics of the kingdom.⁴¹ The Wahhabi sect, which emerged in the 18th century in the Arabian Peninsula under the leadership of Mohammed bin Abdul Wahhab, has been important in the political structures of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. It is a movement that aims to return to the practices of the early days of Islam and to cleanse the religion of corruption.⁴² According to the Wahhabi interpretation, all situations not mentioned in the Qur'an and Sunnah are considered bid'ah⁴³ and should be abandoned. The Wahhabi school claims that religion should only be lived as it first came and practiced and that all adaptations and innovations should be avoided.⁴⁴ The main sources of decrees and shari'ah in Islam are the Qur'an, Sunnah/hadith, qiyas, and consensus, but the Wahhabi understanding is based on hadiths in these sources.⁴⁵ The opposing interpretations found in other sects are

⁴⁰ Tawfiq Al-Saif, "Relationship between state and religion in Saudi Arabia," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6, no. 3 (July, 2013): 377.

⁴¹ Mustafa Oztop, "The Boomerang Effect of Mohammad Bin Salman in Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy," *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 6, no.1 (April, 2019): 208-09.

⁴² İsmail Akdoğan & Ridvan Kalaycı, "Suudi Arabistan'da İhyacı Hareketler Olarak Sahve ve Vehhabilik," *Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 1, no.1 (May, 2014): 158-60.

⁴³ Bidat (Arabic: بدعة), word for word, is innovation, and it means doing something unique according to Islamic law, putting forward a brand new business, acting contrary to the general opinion, and inventing something unique before. See Ahmet Ozdemir, "Determination and Evaluation of Major Practices Defined as Bid'at in Hanafi Fiqh Books," *Diyanet İlmî Dergi* 5, no. 1 (September, 2021):1-16.

⁴⁴ Kerime Cesur Turhan, "Vehhâbî Hareketinin Misyonu Hakkındaki Yaklaşımlar ve Harekete Yoneltlen Eleştirilere Verilen Cevaplar," (Approches Regarding the Mission of the Wahhabi Movement and Answers Given to the Criticisms Directed to the Movement), *Journal of Divinity Faculty of Recep Tayyip Erdogan University* 16, (December 2019): 410.

⁴⁵ Fiqh method has been the subject of numerous works as a branch of science that examines how the Qur'an and Sunnah, which are the main sources of the Islamic religion, should be understood, and the issues related to worship and treatment based on these sources. In fiqh terminology, sunnah firstly refers to the second proof of the legitimacy of the shari'ah provisions and is defined as "the word, deed or approval of the Prophet Muhammad" (approval). Qiyas is the act of finding a solution by comparing a verse regarding its acceptance as halal or haram and/or the situations that are not sunnah by comparing it with similar issues that have been decided before. According to

not allowed in Wahhabism as Wahhabis claim to represent an uncontested understanding of “true Islam.”⁴⁶ This strict interpretation and understanding of religion, which is subsidized by the Saudi Arabian government, can have extremely harsh and destructive results in the social sphere when used as a political tool by the state.⁴⁷

Another feature of the Wahhabi sect is that it has deep cultural and historical ties with Saudi Arabia, its origin. This implicitly gives Saudi citizens a privilege.⁴⁸ Because some non-Saudi influential personalities, whose help was very important during the establishment of this religious school, have never succeeded in gaining leadership status in the traditional religious movement. Many clerics in Saudi Arabia engage in various cultural and social activities under the auspices of the official religious institution, and although they are nominally subordinate to the state, their work is independent of the state. One of the most important of these activities is the Quran Memorization Associations, with 26.500 teachers and 25.000 personnel working in these associations who train 515.000 students communities mentioned above. Activities in which religious leaders participate in leading positions include Al-Birr (philanthropic) societies, many of which fall under the jurisdiction of regional emirs and are run by the clergy but operate independently of the state.⁴⁹

The movement is the approach adopted by the majority of Saudi clerics. While the clergy with the highest status still encourage the people to support the state, they also find the management of the royal family legitimate and declare that they deserve obedience. They also advise senior government officials on controversial issues, even though they know that executives do not always listen to advice. The general trend

Islamic law, *ijma* is the decision of Islamic scholars and mujtahids, based on the book (Qur'an), Sunnah and the evidence of qiyas according to some madhhabs, on the subjects of the shari'a (Islamic provisions) or combining them with other similar provisions. See Mustafa Kelebek “Ana Hatlarıyla Fıkıh Usulu,” *İslam Medeniyeti Araştırmaları Dergisi (IMAD)* 2, no. 1 (Aralık 2016): 139-144.

⁴⁶ Baladas Ghoshal, “Arabization Changing Face of Islam in Asia,” *India Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2010):69.

⁴⁷ Al-Saif, “Relationship between state and religion in Saudi Arabia,” 379.

⁴⁸ Al-Saif, “Relationship between state and religion in Saudi Arabia,” 378-382.

⁴⁹ Al-Saif, “Relationship between state and religion in Saudi Arabia,” 378-382.

among the top ulama in the kingdom is that no one should be allowed to criticize or defame the ruler, even if it is admitted that the state sometimes made wrong decisions and violated the law. According to them, the only solution is to support the regime's continuation by giving secret advice and suggestions to the ruler.⁵⁰ According to Domazeti, the Saudi family utilized religion, particularly Wahhabism, as a means to establish a stable political authority and a controllable society in Saudi Arabia. They were able to convert tribal, sectarian, and regional loyalties into a unified sense of common solidarity, emotions, and beliefs that transcended tribal affiliations.⁵¹ As a result, Wahhabism has emerged as the primary component of national identity and a tool for sovereignty, extending beyond the Saudi family's source of legitimacy.

4.3. Bedouin Tribal Structure and Culture

Arab societies in the Gulf are generally societies that have lived in tribal structures. However, in discussions of the emergence of the state and the formation of national identity, the role of tribal culture and tribal identity is often overlooked. The tensions that have been going on for many years between the tribes and the state are not so unsolvable. Previously, tribes, like states, focused on sovereignty and self-sufficiency. Still, in the 1950s, with the discovery of oil and gas reserves in the region, they were included in the state structure of Saudi Arabia as a result of increasing government power.⁵²

The origin of the local people of Saudi Arabia is based on Bedouin tribes. Tribes that adopted a nomadic life because of the scarcity of water and food caused by the arid desert climate in the Arabian Peninsula were known as Bedouins. While the majority of the Bedouin tribes were nomadic, some engaged in fishing or growing grapes, wheat, and dates in small villages on the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Caravan

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Riad Domazeti, "Suudi Arabistan'da milli kimlik ve aidiyet inşa sürecinde vehhabiliğin etkisi" (Doctoral thesis, Marmara University, 2022):

⁵²Courtney Freer, "21st century Bedouin politics: Considering the modern power of tribes in the Arabian Peninsula," Brookings, accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/12/21st-century-bedouin-politics-considering-the-modern-power-of-tribes-in-the-arabian-peninsula/>

trade was common among nomadic tribes, and these caravans transported products such as spices, leather, precious stones, silk, and tea from India to other parts of Anatolia, Africa, and Asia. In tribes that constantly migrated to find water and food, support and cooperation were essential for survival. It was impossible to survive in the desert as individuals so that close family and tribal relations developed. There was a non-written but verbal culture, the agreements were made verbally, and these verbal agreements were strictly followed because the reputation in the society was very important, and nobody wanted to tarnish their name. Bedouin tribes have a patriarchal culture. As it was difficult to survive under the harsh conditions of climate and geography, men had to be more warlike, protective, and brave. In addition, hospitality, benevolence, and generosity were important characteristics of the Bedouins.⁵³ It can be said that Bedouins, like other nomadic communities, have a simpler and more primitive way of life, since they cannot create advanced cultural structures that can occur in a settled order. In Bedouin tribes, blood ties were the most binding factor in relations, and members of the same tribe had responsibilities to each other. The traditional organizational structure of the Bedouin society can be found in the social, political, and cultural life of Saudi Arabia today. As Salzman mentions, it should also be acknowledged that the concepts of tribe and state are not necessarily at odds with each other, as they have historically coexisted and collaborated. In fact, tribes have assimilated into states and even supported their formation, while governments have worked to incorporate tribal groups into the central authority. However, the relationship between tribes and the state is complex and involves struggles over hegemonic identities.⁵⁴

Despite attempts to suppress it, tribalism has persisted in the public sphere, as demonstrated by the diverse forms of tribal representation. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, profound changes have prompted people to

⁵³ Basak Ozoral, "Bedevi Asiret Yapısından Şehirli Modern Topluma Donuşum Surecinde Dubai Orneđi," *İbn Haldun Çalışmaları Dergisi* 3, no.1(January 15, 2018):118-119.

⁵⁴ Philip Carl Salzman, "The Middle East's Tribal DNA," *The Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 1, (2008): 24.

adapt their interactions, behaviors, and communication styles.⁵⁵ Today, the tribal ties have weakened considerably compared to the first years of the kingdom, but there are still strong and effective tribes in the country and they are active in the decisions to be taken on political issues. The power of the tribes in politics is proportional to the population they have.⁵⁶ The Bedouin tribal structure continues to be one of the dynamics that make up the identity of Saudi Arabia today. It encompasses social relations ranging from who can marry whom, the responsibilities of the sheikh, the patriarchal social structure to the influence of the tribes on politics.

4.4. Geopolitics: Rentier State Structure and the Importance of Oil Revenues

According to Haushofer, geopolitics is the relationship between the geography in which a state exists and the political life form (i.e., the state) that changes under the influence of the historical developments in that region.⁵⁷ Saudi Arabia's distinctive geographical structure, characterized by abundant natural resources and a relatively small population, has led to a unique economic, socio-cultural, and political environment that has played a significant role in shaping the identity of its people.

Saudi Arabia is one of the largest and most important players in the global oil market, as it produces more than a tenth of the world's oil production and has a quarter of the world's known reserves. The Kingdom is also an important OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) member and plays a vital role in OPEC's decision-making process.⁵⁸ Saudi Arabia has different aspects from other oil-producing countries. To

⁵⁵ Sebastian Maisel, "The New Rise of Tribalism in Saudi Arabia," *Nomadic Peoples* 18, no. 2, (special issue: Reshaping Tribal Identities in the Contemporary Arab World 2014):110-111.

⁵⁶ Angus McDowall, "Saudi tribalism lingers for kingdom's settled Bedouin," Reuters, accessed May 8, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-saudi-bedouin-idUKTRE80019Y20120125>

⁵⁷ Derwent Whittlesey, "Haushofer: The Geopoliticians," in Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy; Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1944, 388.

⁵⁸ Anton Nakov, & Barrau Nuno, "Saudi, Arabia and the Oil Market," *The Economic Journal* 123, no. 12, (December 2013):1335.

begin with, the country methodically curtails its production, possessing a spare capacity surpassing the combined spare capacities of other nations. Furthermore, its production fluctuates considerably, granting it the ability to influence the global oil supply and employ this leverage in shaping international policies. A primary objective of the country is to avert abrupt surges in oil prices and maintain stability, thereby forestalling any potential energy crises.

According to OPEC, Saudi Arabia's proven oil reserves were approximately 266 billion barrels as of the end of 2017, which is approximately 18 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. In 2017, Saudi Arabia produced an average of close to 10 million barrels per day (MMBD) of crude oil, about 13 percent of global production. Proven reserves at this production rate will last for about 70 years. Although this is a hypothetical figure, as more and more oil reserves are discovered, the Kingdom fears that its reserves will be depleted. There will be no alternative source of income. Saudi oil exports in 2017 included approximately 7 MMBD (on average) of crude oil and 1.4 MMBD of exported petroleum products. The total value of Saudi exports was \$231 billion. The amount of oil exported from Saudi Arabia and the close coordination with other major producers in the Gulf (Kuwait and UAE) give the Kingdom a leadership role in OPEC and the oil industry.⁵⁹

The main policy of Saudi Arabia is to use the income from oil exports to the maximum until all reserves are depleted while at the same time developing alternative income sources (within the Vision 2030 plans). This policy encourages the development of energy-saving technologies and alternative energy sources in oil-consuming countries and does not support excessively high oil prices. Rising oil prices can discourage the pursuit of alternative energy sources, but Saudi Arabia faces a challenging reality in the short and medium term. The Kingdom requires significant income from oil exports to address its current account deficit, pay for expensive arms deals, finance the ongoing war in Yemen, and

⁵⁹ Shmuel Even & Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and the Oil Prices", Institute for National Security Studies, No. 1125, accessed by July 3, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/saudi-arabia-oil-prices-challenge/>

prevent internal conflicts in other Middle Eastern nations. These factors come at a high cost, making the situation a serious challenge for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia holds significant importance for the US in preventing oil shortages caused by Iran and regulating global oil prices. However, it is worth noting that the Kingdom requires higher oil prices to meet its own economic needs. As a rentier state, Saudi Arabia's form of government plays a crucial role in sustaining the Kingdom's continuation.⁶⁰ Because the rentier state does not collect taxes from the people due to the high income obtained from natural resources, the high income and prosperity obtained from the sale of natural resources instead of production results in the political system not being questioned.

In short, the rentier state structure is a factor that has an impact on the construction of the Saudi identity. Although the income that the state generates from natural resources provides a high level of prosperity to its citizens, those who do not pay taxes are unable to participate in and question the government and thus have a more passive citizen identity. Additionally, the material comfort provided to Saudi society by the rentier state's income negatively affects productivity and work motivation while at the same time triggering high levels of consumption.

5. Conclusion

The constructivist approach, which tries to explain the relationship between society and the individual, first emerged in sociology. When we adapt social constructivist thought to the discipline of international relations, it takes the state as the main actor and explains the relationship between the state and the international community. It aims to achieve lasting peace by increasing cooperation in international relations. It also uses identities for this. The opinion of a state against another state creates an identity that is positioned next to or against that state. This identity determines the interests of the state. According to its interests, the state

⁶⁰Rentier state is a term used to describe states that derive all or almost all of their national income from the export of natural resources. Export revenue comes from abroad and accrues directly to the government, and "only a few of the managers are engaged in the creation of this rent (wealth), the majority are concerned only with its distribution or use." See Michael Herb, "No Representation without Taxation? Rents, Development, and Democracy," *Comparative Politics* 37, no. 3 (April 2005): 298.

creates “us” and “the other”.

When Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy is examined, it is seen that the common values developed over time form the identity of the country and affect domestic and foreign policies. This study highlights that Saudism, the prevailing ideology in Saudi Arabia, embodies a self-identified, dynasty-based identity rooted primarily in the region of Najd. It places great emphasis on a strong, centralized government governed by Islamic principles. Wahhabism serves as the lens through which Islamic principles are manifested in Saudism. Consequently, references to Sharia-based law and Islamic principles are associated with Saudism, owing to its close affiliation with Wahhabism. Loyalty to the ruling family is a fundamental aspect of the country’s political structure. The Bedouin/tribal identity, rooted in the indigenous population of Saudi Arabia, continues to impact the social, political, and cultural aspects of the country. While tribes and states historically coexisted and cooperated, conflicts over dominant identities arise. Wahhabism, a conservative sect closely tied to Saudi Arabia, influences the country’s foreign policy, shaped by its Islamic identity and hosting of holy cities. The rentier state framework and the abundance of oil wealth impact Saudi identity, with tax-exempt citizens, assuming a passive role and increased consumption levels.

These variables also determine the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. It is suggested that Saudi Arabia, being one of the influential factors in its foreign policy, has the potential to foster unity among the Arab nations through the alliance of their shared ethnic identity. The tribal cultural ties that the constructivist approach emphasizes have brought Saudi Arabia closer to the Gulf Arab countries with a similar social structure. In this context, Saudi Arabia acts together with countries that speak the same language and religion, share similar Bedouin tribal culture and history, and have similar economic structures. Saudi identity also necessitates establishing strong relations with Gulf Cooperation countries. According to the constructivist approach, values and beliefs play a significant role in shaping Saudi Arabian foreign policy.

Considering the geopolitics of Saudi Arabia, it is understood that Saudiness is an identity that is powerful in the region. The constructivist

approach asserts that conflict and cooperation are situations brought about by values and beliefs. This approach can also be used to explain the Saudi Arabia-Iran tension. Saudi Arabia, known for its representation and leadership in Sunni Islam, has adopted a foreign policy aimed at serving as a role model for regional countries in response to Iran's pursuit of regional dominance and its Shiite crescent initiatives. According to the constructivist perspective, cultural and value transformations occur due to changes that take place over time. When analyzing the changing policies of Saudi Arabia, the effect of the high welfare level created by oil revenues on cultural values and political expectations cannot be denied. In this context, oil revenues are not only an economic resource for Saudi Arabia but also an identity that has a meaning in determining its politics and international policies. The concept of citizenship in Saudi Arabia cannot be analyzed without considering the impact of oil revenues on state administration, domestic politics, foreign policy, and economic power.

The four important characteristics that were crucial in the construction of the Saudi Arabian identity have been examined in a historical context, and the changes that have taken place up until today have been discussed. Each of these identities gained more visibility in certain periods and became influential in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Therefore, while considering the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, the decisions taken and the policies developed can be interpreted by considering these four identities mentioned in the article.

It is noted that the constructionism approach, which suggests that Saudi Arabia tries to form a national identity by utilizing Wahhabi Islam, Saudism, and tribal identities and imposes its policies on the conflictual ground in the region through the facilitation of a great power identity, institutionalizes itself as a late-evolved and authoritarian actor and generates a global reaction to its identity policies. However, due to its rentier state feature, it also benefits from passive citizen factors while making policies, and it is argued that the source of actor behavior is identity. It is emphasized that this perspective provides a noteworthy point of view in the literature on the subject.

As a result, the constructivist theory combined with regional studies will

enable constructivism to analyze the diverse identities and policies of International Relations more effectively. The regional differences in various regions also represent alternative options in the social and political structure of International Relations. These regional differences invite Constructivist theory to examine how International Relations are constructed not only in terms of understanding how they were built but also how they have been and can be constructed in different temporal and regional contexts.

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