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Research Article

Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical Influence in West Africa: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: Throughout history, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has maintained close relations in Africa. The significance of Saudi-African relations has grown alongside the political evolution that directly and indirectly affected both parties' internal and regional stages. Due to its substantial political influence on the continent, West Africa is characterized as a zone of competition among various powers. Opportunities and challenges vary for several reasons, including the distinct characteristics and capacities of the rival powers in the West African region. In light of multilateral international rivalry, this article aims to assess Saudi Arabia's impact on West Africa, while exploring potential prospects and obstacles. It examines the different points of contention, which the majority of research on this topic is based on. The findings resulted from a thorough representation of the potential for future interactions between the two parties. The article scrutinizes the effectiveness of the old approaches adopted by the Saudi kingdom with regard to the new realities represented by the competition between major and middle powers in the region.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, International Competition, Saudi Arabia, West Africa

Introduction

The Arabian Peninsula is one of the most strategically located regions in the world, home to Islam's two holiest cities and to some of the largest proven oil reserves. Consequently, its foreign policies and role in international relations have been extensively studied over the years. The strategic significance of Saudi Arabia, in particular, has grown in recent years due to the interactions among the world's most influential powers (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 64; Czornik, 2024). During the 1960s, Saudi Arabia directed its religious diplomacy primarily toward Africa, aiming to balance the influence of secular ideologies and Arab nationalism (Alghannam, H. 2024). Saudi foreign policy in this era was marked by its representation as a middle power, actively shaping both regional and global stability (Chaziza & Lutmar, 2025). Additionally, Saudi Arabia's spiritual role in the eyes of Muslims, as argued by Kepel (2002), necessitated its commitment to fostering peace and prosperity for Islam and Muslims worldwide. In its earlier

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contact with West Africa, Bahi (2018) believes that the Saudi state prioritized establishing its religious presence before its political influence to counter competing ideologies such as Iranian Shiism. Thus, in addition to confronting the Sufi expansion, on the other hand, (Meservey, 2021). Saudi leaders sought to counter this trend through humanitarian and development assistance, as well as the establishment of educational institutions and cultural centers (Aloufi & Kim, 2024). With the return of West African students who studied at various Saudi universities, a significant aspect of the new Saudi orientation was realized, framed as an Islamic duty to address the spiritual needs of Muslim communities and contribute to the economic development of West African countries, most of which are Muslim-majority. While this orientation sometimes took on a purely religious dimension, it undeniably contributed to solidifying Saudi Arabia's influence among the West African population, granting it a form of political legitimacy. Recent developments in West Africa point to shifting positions among super and middle powers impacting the region (Belhaj, 2024). This serves as a clear indication of the potential for a revival, suggesting that the relationship between the region's countries and these powers is on the brink of a new era. In light of this situation, questions arise regarding the opportunities and challenges facing the relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the West African nations.

Scope and Methodology

Studies specifically addressing Saudi Arabia's relations with West African countries are limited, yet numerous works have examined relations between the kingdom and Africa more broadly. Both older and contemporary studies in this field possess varied backgrounds and encompass a range of topics. Research efforts sometimes focus on the broader framework, exploring the relationships between the Middle East and Africa, the Gulf states, or Arabs and Africa. The Kingdom, a significant political entity with a notable presence and influence on the political landscape of Arab states, Gulf states, and the Middle East, is a vital aspect of these studies. From this perspective, Grégoire and Schmitz (2000) explored the historical evolution of Arab-African ties, highlighting the role of Arab-African desert states in the relationship between the kingdom and the Arabian Peninsula. Recently, Belhaj (2024) conducted a study emphasizing the shift in Middle Eastern countries' connections with Africa from geopolitics to geoeconomics. The study highlighted the kingdom's initiatives to diversify its economy by engaging with Africa. Likewise, Kinkoh (2024) focused on the trade aspect between Africa and the Gulf states. His study indicates that the Saudi kingdom now ranks second among Gulf governments regarding commerce with African nations, signifying an improvement in its ties with the continent.

Saudi Arabia's relationship with Africa, particularly West Africa, is another area of study. Gresh's (1983) research is considered one of the first to examine the kingdom's connections with non-Arab African nations. The study indicates that the kingdom relied on a religious strategy rooted in Wahhabi thought to establish relationships with African nations during this period. In contrast, Augé (2020) noted in his study on the kingdom's objectives on the continent that it depends on the influence of regional and international institutions, as well as peaceful mediation, in its relations with Africa. This study intersects with Ani's (2022) work, which addressed the potential diplomatic dimensions of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Africa. One of the most notable studies closely related to this one was conducted by Sounaye (2017), examining the Salafi revolution in West Africa. The article concluded that Salafism significantly impacted the public and religious spheres in the region. Freitag's (2022) study, which is significant in this context, argued that a new element was emerging, marked by the rise of new competitors in the region, such as Türkiye.

Given the kingdom's religious significance, nearly all previous studies that directly examine the its relationship with West Africa focus on the religious dimension. Additionally, these studies emphasize public and traditional diplomacy, exemplified by humanitarian aid and diplomatic exchanges. Considering the importance of these elements, this study explores the opportunities and challenges within the relationship between the kingdom and West African nations using an analytical method. I will consult primary sources, such as government publications like Strategy 2030, which outlines the new Saudi foreign policy strategy. By employing a qualitative approach to analyze various sources, I will also review secondary material that specifically address this topic.

West African Geostrategy

The region covers the western part of Africa, including large zones of the Atlantic Ocean and bordering the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. Its population is dynamic and rapidly growing, with an estimated total of 446,481,809, accounting for 5.47% of the world's population (United Nations, 2022). The population of the region is expected to double over the next 30 years (Cour & Snrech, 1998). The region comprises three distinct linguistic blocs, a result of its colonial past. The English-speaking region includes Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. The Francophone region comprises Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. The smaller Portuguese-speaking region includes Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau. The linguistic divide is reflected in the existence of two economic subgroups within the region: the West African Economic and

Monetary Union (UEMOA), which includes all French-speaking countries except Guinea, and the other subgroups, consisting of Guinea and the five English-speaking countries, have separate monetary units.

The West African countries we are studying cannot be considered a homogeneous bloc primarily composed of Islamic nations. In fact, several countries have Muslim majorities, such as Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. Others have a more fragmented religious landscape, with Muslim, Christian, and animist communities coexisting, as seen in Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Ghana. This religious diversity typically reflects a religious segregation, with Islam prevalent in the north and Christianity often dominant in the South (Alesina, 2023). Due to its large population, substantial economy, oil wealth, and the region's strongest military force, Nigeria is recognized as the regional hegemon in West Africa, particularly after the return of civilian rule in 1999. Globally, Nigeria ranked seventh in population in 2021 (Statista, 2022), and its economy represents nearly two-thirds of the West African region's GDP (African Development Bank Group, 2022).

In addition to the region's generally low level of social and economic development, the disparities in economic potential among the member countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are significant (five of which: Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal, represent 90% of the entire group's GDP). This poses a major challenge to the integration of their economies, along with the substantial trade barriers stemming from underdeveloped transportation networks, especially since Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are landlocked countries (Czermínska & Garlińska-Bielawska, 2018). Despite these challenges, by adopting a document entitled the ECOWAS Vision in 2020, the organization established ambitious goals to be reached by the end of the decade. These goals include eliminating trade and customs barriers, establishing a common monetary union, strengthening regional infrastructure networks, and implementing measures to enhance regional security. With respect to foreign trade, the implementation of the Common External Tariff of the (ECOWAS) is considered one of the document's most important steps.

On the other hand, the region is among the most fragile in the world due to its structural weaknesses, political instability, social tensions, and modest economic performance. This limits the capacity of the region's governments, and while it is not a "failed state" in the strict sense of the word, as governments continue to fulfill their basic sovereign responsibilities, some areas may drift away from central state control (Luntumbue, 2014). This security gap creates a void that civil society, including influential religious organizations and actors, quickly finds ways to fill

(Sounaye, 2017). However, the role of these actors is sometimes insufficient to resolve recurring political crises in certain countries.

West Africa Under the Influence of Global Rivalry

One notable and important aspect of the Cold War era was the involvement of the superpowers in the continent's affairs. During this period, China was particularly active in Africa, especially from 1949 until the mid-1970s, despite the primary conflict being between the US and its major adversary, the USSR. Through material assistance and military training, China supported the Maoists and various insurgents in African nations (Shinn, 2019, p. 64). Over time, the political approach to international relations has evolved as the ideological component of great power competition in Africa has diminished. Today, states' foreign policies are often expressed in ways other than military force, which symbolized survival and power during the Cold War. To ensure their security, stability, and interests at local, regional, and global levels, as well as to assert their presence on the international stage, governments have developed diverse strategies tailored to their national context, resources, history, and interests. Generally, the most powerful rival nations on the continent now prioritize economic ties.

A total of €235 billion in goods was traded between the 27 EU member states and Africa in 2018, accounting for 32% of all trade in Africa. In contrast, Africa's commerce with the United States amounted to €46 billion (6%), while its trade with China reached €125 billion (17%) (Kappel, 2021). Counterterrorism has been the main focus of U.S. involvement in West Africa. The Pan-Sahel Initiative is a counterterrorism effort that was launched in 2002 by the George W. Bush administration. The program's objective was to help countries in the region, including Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, strengthen their capacity to combat terrorist organizations. This relationship was further solidified with the establishment of AFRICOM in 2007, which deployed some U.S. military personnel to assist countries in the region as part of the global war on terrorism (Kepe et al., 2023).

In the meantime, to maintain their influence in a rapidly changing region, European Union nations—led by France—have attempted to adjust their policies toward West African nations. The European Union has urged countries in the region to ensure the continuation of economic partnership agreements, as it seems increasingly invested in doing so. Furthermore, relations between West African nations and the EU have been significantly influenced by geopolitical changes since the Russo-Ukrainian War. After becoming overly dependent on Russian energy exports, European nations are now eager to seek alternative suppliers. With the support of West Africa, Europe may diversify its energy sources. To explore energy

partnerships in the gas and renewable energy sectors, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Senegal and Niger in May 2022 (ESG voices podcast series, 2022).

China's involvement in West Africa is gradually increasing, similar to that of the U.S. and the EU. Africa is currently China's second-largest overseas contract market (Abodohou & Sua, 2020). Over the past 20 years, China has played a significant role in the oil sectors of Guinea-Bissau, Benin, and Nigeria. A 1,980-kilometer pipeline from Niger to Benin is currently under construction. Additionally, the first-ever Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in West Africa occurred in Senegal in 2021. When China attempted to build a military facility in Equatorial Guinea's port of Bata in West African waters, it became clear that Beijing aimed to enhance its strategic influence in the region. The station would increase China's naval presence throughout the Atlantic Ocean, which includes crucial areas for West African nations. Between 2014 and 2019, China engaged in 39 military exchanges with countries in the Gulf of Guinea (Choudhury, 2022). At the 2023 Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, Xi Jinping emphasized the will to increase support in personnel training and other areas in the Gulf of Guinea, also to assist in information exchange and maritime rescue, conduct regular exchanges of ship visits and joint exercises with relevant countries, and expand practical cooperation in the areas of exchanges between military academies, medical services, and hydrographic surveys (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

Russia has increasingly shown interest in Africa in recent years. In terms of the number of high-level trips to the continent, Russia has surpassed the US since 2010. In 2019, the year of the first Russia-Africa summit, this number peaked. Among 55 nations, Russia currently maintains 36 embassies in Africa (Kepe, 2023). Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari and Russia signed a new military cooperation agreement in August 2021 that encompasses technology transfer, staff training at suitable educational institutions, and arms sales along with after-sales services (El-Badawy, 2023). India's engagement with West Africa is particularly evident in areas such as training, education, development partnerships, and energy security (Czermńska, & Garlińska-Bielawska 2018). India now operates diplomatic missions in 20 of the 25 countries in West and Central Africa (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Nigeria is one of India's largest oil suppliers, and the two countries have always maintained a close relationship. Through frequent port visits and joint naval drills in the Gulf of Guinea, the Indian Navy has begun to establish its presence. To conduct anti-piracy operations, the Indian Navy's INS Tarkash was first deployed to West African waters, including the Gulf of Guinea, in 2013. In addition to port visits to Dakar, Senegal, Lomé, Togo, and Lagos, Nigeria, India has also engaged in combined naval exercises with the Nigerian Navy (The Print, 2022).

A clash of interests and shared values has emerged among these interacting powers due to the simultaneous use of imperialist or hegemonic strategies in the region and the large number of international players, including the United States, China, the European Union, Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, India, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. This competition has created a conundrum in the region, particularly in late 2021, after events in West Africa involving China, Russia, France, and the United States. For instance, the United States sent top officials to Equatorial Guinea to convince the country not to allow the construction of a Chinese base in the Gulf of Equatorial Guinea, a move that sparked concerns in Washington (Gurjar, 2023). Currently, Beijing's increasing influence and strategic presence in the geopolitics of West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea are evident, even though the United States has managed to block Chinese objectives in the region. Following an invitation from the Malian military junta to send military contractors from the Wagner Group in exchange for gold mining contracts, Russia's abrupt entry into West African geopolitics has angered France and other Western nations. This involvement is also a setback for European and French interests in the area. Expanding security relationships, often at the expense of Western ones, is no longer the only way that Russia has a presence in Africa; it easily collaborates with military juntas of any kind. Its involvement in West Africa is thus seen as regime-neutral. Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali now support the Russian presence, which coincides with the West's search for alternative gas and oil supplies following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, deeper relations between Russia and West African nations will only hinder this objective (Mallinson, 2022) and intensify the competitive dynamics in the region. Saudi Arabia has maintained a relatively strong presence in the region during this crisis. In addition to possessing one of the most potent diplomatic resources in the world, the Kingdom has been able to enhance its presence due to its religious influence. A 2002 survey found that 7.4% of the 1,854 local or international NGOs operating in Africa in 1980 were Islamic and mostly funded by Saudi Arabia. This figure increased to 5,896 by 2000, with 15.1% of those organizations being Islamic NGOs. In Nigeria alone, the number of Islamic NGOs rose from 54 to 523 (Salih, 2002). According to a different analysis, Gulf nations provided \$6.6 billion to Africa between 2000 and 2014, with Saudi Arabia accounting for the largest share at 55% (Billat, 2015). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia reportedly pledged \$100 million to Sahelian security initiatives (Augé, 2018).

Saudi Influence in West Africa: Strategies

History demonstrates a wide range of ongoing relationships between sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world. The Hajj pilgrimage initially focused on the relations between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Before air travel was introduced in the 1950s, the boldest West Africans undertook a journey to the holy sites, which could take months or even years (Grégoire and Schmitz, 2000). Since the fourteenth century, entire generations of young Africans from countries such as Senegal, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and northern Nigeria have crossed the Sahara to reach Mecca and Medina to study Islamic law and the Arabic language. At that time, the city of Timbuktu sent groups of students to Mecca and Medina for legal studies in Islam (Aïda Ammour, 2018). When Saudi Arabia first established connections with West African nations, it confronted a regional context filled with ideological opponents, such as Iran, as well as leaders of African socialist movements like Sékou Touré of Guinea and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Between 1973 and 1977, Saudi Arabia seized the opportunity of the widespread Arab-African rapprochement to expand its influence in West African countries, particularly those with significant Muslim populations. Following this, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) was established to nurture new Arab-African understanding, with Saudi Arabia serving as its headquarters. One significant outcome of this initiative was a commitment of \$1.5 billion in aid to Africa, including \$1 billion coming from Saudi Arabia alone (Gresh, 1983, p. 64). After this period, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's efforts against the West gradually advanced through both soft power diplomacy and traditional diplomatic methods.

Traditional diplomacy approach

The primary instruments for executing foreign policy are diplomatic contacts, which states facilitate through entities like embassies, consulates, and missions. These institutions include both governmental and non-governmental organizations that perform functions similar to those of formal diplomatic establishments. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has relied on governmental and non-governmental organizations, along with embassies and consulates, as institutional frameworks in its interactions with West African countries. Saudi Arabia became an observer member of the African Union in 2013. In addition to consulates, non-resident embassies, and interest sections, it maintains diplomatic relationships with forty-three African countries, including 28 resident embassies (Shabana, 2020). There are about 40 African embassies in Riyadh, out of the 55 member states of the African Union (Bamakhrama, 2023). Before 1972, Saudi Arabia generally approached its foreign policy objectives with West African nations cautiously, avoiding direct intervention in sensitive issues such as internal conflicts and wars,

while allocating relatively small amounts of foreign aid through diplomatic channels. With nine of the ECOWAS member states, it maintains direct relations through resident embassies and consulates. Saudi Arabia plays a significant role in uniting Islamic countries under the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the largest organization of the Muslim community, which includes 57 member nations, 22 of which are in sub-Saharan Africa. This fosters the consolidation and strengthening of unity and solidarity among member states to safeguard their collective interests on the global front (OIC, 2018).

The Organization now extends full membership and representation to all West African nations. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth, the International Islamic Relief Organization, and the Muslim World League were established by Saudi Arabia in the 1970s. To implement a significant portion of the Kingdom's diplomatic initiatives, these institutions operate offices in West African countries: Nigeria, Senegal, Togo, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Gambia, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin (Bellion-Jourdan, 2001).

Soft power diplomatic approach

Soft power diplomacy is a crucial aspect of understanding state actions. Hard power has given way to new forms of influence, driven by the diversity and evolution of factors in international relations. The rise of soft power resources enables states to implement effective foreign policies that achieve their goals, even when certain hard power elements are diminished or absent. When traditional diplomacy falls short, governments may resort to soft power, including international aid, investment, and cultural exchange initiatives. Like other nations worldwide, the Kingdom has increased its influence in West African countries through the application of soft power.

Religious diplomacy

The rapid growth of Islam in West Africa demonstrates that intrinsic religiosity is a prevalent phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa (Miran, 2016; Pehlivan, 2023). The Saudi government has launched significant religious initiatives, primarily involving the construction of religious facilities, particularly mosques, as part of a socialization program in the region. Fifteen of the 120 mosques built by the Muslim World League between 1976 and 1981 were located in West Africa: two in Togo, two in Côte d'Ivoire, five in Mali, four in Senegal, and one in Ghana (Khemiri, 2022). To promote the Islamic religious vision in the public affairs of the nations in the region, the Kingdom relies on establishing Arab religious schools capable of discussing diverse religious practices and models. In addition to fostering close relationships with its allies, imams, and preachers who have established

themselves as community leaders, the Kingdom also provides direct financial support to affiliated Islamic organizations that have a vision within the societies of the nations in the region. Shortly after gaining independence, a country like Nigeria embraced a religious perspective.

The Saudi kingdom provided financial support to the Sokoto Caliphate. When Ahmadu Bello, whose great-grandfather was also the Caliph of Sokoto, was appointed as the Sarkauna of Sokoto, a local government area in Taraba State, during the 1950s and 1960s, ties were strengthened. He even held the position of vice president of the Muslim World League. His associate, Abubakar Gumi, acted as a liaison for Nigerian Muslims and the Saudi religious establishment due to his Arabic skills and connections in Saudi Arabia. The funds he received from Dar al-Ifta, one of the most prominent religious organizations in the monarchy, solidified his relationships (Aïda Ammour, 2018). In response to the Christian missionary movements prevalent in the region, religious diplomacy was developed. It aided in the dissemination and transmission of Islamic principles and inspired non-Muslims to convert to Islam on the grounds that it offers an alternative to the Western model of development (Salih, 2002, p. 9). Saudi Arabia combined preaching with social and even humanitarian activities under the banner of "preaching and guidance" in an effort to enhance the effectiveness of religious diplomacy. In March 1988, the Supreme Islamic Council for Preaching and Assistance was established in Cairo following the Islamic Preaching Conference. The council serves as a unique instrument of Saudi "religious diplomacy," operating throughout West Africa under the auspices of the World Muslim League.

Educational diplomacy

Saudi Arabia and West African nations began educational diplomacy in the 1960s and 1970s. Many regional leaders established connections with Arab-Islamic countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, which contributed significantly to school development. It also covered teachers' salaries and provided scholarships to students in West Africa. However, the Kingdom has consistently allowed for diplomatic maneuvering to promote specific religious, cultural, and geopolitical ideas, even though some educational institutions generally followed the official curriculum of their host nations. This approach has enhanced Saudi religious influence in West African societies over time and fostered strong relationships between the Kingdom, its West African allies, and imams and preachers who have become respected opinion leaders in their communities. Compared to 2,447 students in 2009, Saudi Arabia welcomed 15,016 African students in 2014, primarily from Nigeria, Mauritania, and Mali. The number of African American

students enrolled in Saudi universities rose from 13,786 in 2015 to 12,728 in 2016, then surpassed 16,000 in 2017 (Khemiri, 2022). The majority of students from the region attend the Islamic University of Medina. The training of clerics, preachers, and Islamic leaders in West Africa is crucial because they have sway over established groups that may be enlisted to further Saudi influence.

Humanitarian aid

By providing significant funding, Saudi Arabia maintains a diplomatic and political presence with the people and governments of West Africa. The bilateral ties with Saudi Arabia are the primary source of the millions in cash that West African nations receive annually. This funding supports infrastructural projects, agricultural development initiatives, and development aid. In 1974, Senegal received over \$37 million from Saudi Arabia for the Senegal River Development Program and well drilling. Saudi Arabia contributed \$1 billion to sub-Saharan Africa in 1977 as part of the Arab-African Summit in Cairo to assist in the continent's development. This grant not only helped to curtail the liberal and communist factions but also made a significant contribution to building relationships with West African nations (Khemiri, 2022). On the other hand, the Kingdom relied on loans in the form of development aid. Between 1975 and 1982, several West African nations received loans from the Saudi Social Development Fund, notably Senegal (\$204 million) and Guinea (\$90 million) (Gresh, 1983). When Saudi Arabia recorded a \$20 billion budget surplus in 1975, it allocated \$15 million to the Sahel nations to combat drought. The International Islamic Relief Organization carried out these initiatives through its offices in Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso in the Sahel (Korany, 1979). Additionally, Saudi donations to drought-affected countries in the Sahel increased to \$15 million by the end of October 1975 (Soulié & Champenois, 1977). The Cotonou Coastal Protection Project in Benin received SAR 22.5 million in 2015 from the Saudi Sustainable Development Fund. In November 2021, a \$31 million grant from the Social Fund for Development facilitated the renovation and development of Banjul International Airport, enhancing economic exchange opportunities and improving the standard of living for nearly two million beneficiaries (Saudi Press Agency, 2021). Currently, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief) operates in 38 of the 54 African nations. Nigeria (\$14.5 million between 2008 and 2021) and Senegal (\$2.7 million between 2016 and 2021) are the two main West African recipient nations (KSRelief, 2023).

Economic diplomacy

Saudi Arabia's economy is one of the key pillars supporting its reputation both domestically and globally. The Kingdom wields significant economic influence on the global stage as a major importer of Western technology and one of the largest oil exporters in the world. Due to ongoing profits from recycled oil, it also plays a crucial role in banks, financial institutions, and important international markets. A nation that utilizes its economic advantage to protect and promote its national interests is engaged in economic diplomacy. As the only G20 representative in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia's economic power has become essential to its diplomatic efforts (Li, 2019). Trade between Saudi Arabia and sub-Saharan Africa is minimal, accounting for 1 to 1.5% of Saudi imports and 1% of Saudi exports between 1976 and 1980 (Gresh 1983, p. 62). Approximately \$7 billion, or 52% of the Social Fund for Development (SFD) allocations since 1975, has been directed to Africa. The primary recipients of SFD funds in sub-Saharan Africa are Senegal and Mauritania (Augé, 2018). By utilizing soft sovereign loans or donations to finance projects, Saudi bilateral aid assists West African countries in restructuring their economies or securing project financing, aiding their growth (Khemiri, 2022). The Kingdom demonstrates a keen interest in Africa, evident from its total investments of 49.5 billion riyals over the past decade and the 47 Saudi businesses operating in the region, spanning sectors like consumer goods, business services, financial services, food and beverage, and renewable energy (Saudi Press Agency, 2023).

New Trends in Saudi Relations with West African Countries

Since most West African nations are Muslim, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia heavily relies on them for its cultural, religious, and civilizational needs. They also represent a major battleground in the fight against religious extremism and terrorism. By partnering with the Maghreb nations linked to this region—particularly Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, which is seen as a vital bridge between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as a western gateway to the Sahel—Saudi Arabia can play a significant strategic role in this area. This is particularly important given the need to support the G5 Sahelian nations in their efforts to combat terrorism and establish stable governance. Amid the ongoing actions of major and intermediate powers in the region, a new approach to forging connections with West African nations is beginning to take shape. This new perspective highlights the role of international and regional blocs in protecting Saudi Arabia's security and economic interests. As Saudi Arabia fosters new military and political partnerships that benefit both the Kingdom and the region, it has positioned itself as a key player in this evolving political landscape. The Vision

2030 initiative, unveiled by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2017, is the most significant document aimed at leveraging Saudi Arabia's soft power to attract global attention (Konopka & Strykhotzkyi, 2021).

In addition to reforming the economy and government, Vision 2030 emphasizes Saudi Arabia's cultural strength. Given that the Arabian Peninsula is the center of the Arab and Islamic world, the Kingdom possesses significant cultural leverage to strengthen and expand its ties with other countries. Saudi Arabia's soft power will be developed over the next ten years, as outlined in Vision 2030. In particular, Prince Mohammed bin Salman promised to finance and insure \$10 billion in exports, provide an additional \$5 billion in development financing to Africa by 2030, expand the number of Saudi embassies in Africa to over 40, and inject new Saudi investments in various sectors totaling more than \$25 billion (Habtoor & Al-Harthi, 2023). Early in 2018, the Kingdom appointed a new Minister of State for African Affairs to organize Saudi Arabia's diplomatic activities on the continent. Minister Ahmed Abdulaziz Qattan has been visiting the continent frequently since early 2018 and has welcomed numerous African presidents and officials in Riyadh. This reflects the current geographic priorities of Saudi Arabia in Africa, particularly regarding West African nations. To attend a G5 Sahel summit, Minister Qattan traveled to Mauritania. Furthermore, the Saudi Foreign Minister and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman traveled to Algeria in December 2018, where the primary topic of discussion was the Sahelian situation (Augé, 2018). Additionally, Saudi Arabia pledged \$100 million to the multinational force (Anadolu Agency, 2017).

Opportunities and Challenges

Because it provides vital access to both the Atlantic and Mediterranean Oceans, West Africa has always been significant to African geopolitics. Given its geopolitical importance, West African nations are emerging as a central hub on the continent. Consequently, West Africa is a critical region for the long-term strategic objectives of many countries for three reasons: (1) the geostrategic location of the Mediterranean; (2) the value of its energy resources; and (3) the rise of security threats. According to the theory of world systems analysis (Aida Ammour, 2018, p. 13), core nation-states consistently exert hegemonic control over peripheral and semi-peripheral governments and other micro-political systems. This dynamic has characterized West Africa. The colonizing powers, especially France and Britain, implemented hegemonic policies in various forms after the region gained independence from European colonialism, which did not benefit the countries within the region. In seeking the tangible benefits promised by these old allies, new political elites became inclined to distance themselves from these imperialist

practices in favor of new partners such as China, Russia, and Turkey. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is no exception, as its ambitions for collaboration and coordination with new partners present a significant opportunity for both sides to enhance their relationships in various ways.

Along with Saudi Arabia's dominant position in the global economy, politics, and religion, West African nations present a wealth of potential and investment opportunities. Aspirations for collaboration, investment, commerce, and reciprocal economic growth are being met with opportunities through Saudi Vision 2030. While some nations prefer to focus solely on their economic and military strength to increase their foreign influence, integrating both soft and hard power is more effective than relying only on hard power (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll, 2010). Indeed, Saudi Arabia possesses significant soft power due to its economic, religious, and cultural resources. Furthermore, it is among the leading countries providing development and humanitarian aid to the Sahel nations in Africa to promote regional stability. However, it is essential to recognize that Saudi Arabia is not the only player in the region; other nations are also vying for influence, which adds new dimensions to the situation. Countries like India, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates are also seeking to expand their influence to protect and advance their own national interests, while Iran attempts to enhance its power by promoting Shiism. In any case, the assertive diplomatic efforts of some nations could encroach upon the key spheres of influence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The extraordinary circumstances Saudi Arabia is encountering pose a challenge to its influence in the region. There have been numerous recent violent political incidents in West Africa, including military takeovers and civil conflicts. The geopolitical dynamics caused by political crises, disputes, and wars have made it difficult to frame a cohesive foreign policy that encompasses the nations of the region, which are increasingly fragile. Since 2020, there have been two coup attempts and six successful coups in West Africa (Brooke-Holland, 2023). In addition to fostering instability in the region, this situation has created a backdrop for unfavorable foreign interventions that jeopardize Saudi Arabia and other nations seeking to enhance their regional power.

Conclusion

Over the years, Saudi Arabia has established itself through active diplomacy funded by its resources. In the Middle East, it has emerged as a significant geopolitical and strategic player, and in Africa, it has become a notable religious, political, and advocacy force. A new form of open diplomacy has been initiated, fostering a shared sense of belonging to Islam through its institutions. The turbulent political climate

in Africa hindered the formation of international blocs, leading to Saudi Arabia's initial foreign policy toward the continent being characterized by bilateral connections. This dynamic shifted once African nations gained independence and joined political blocs; currently, relations with other nations on the continent are closely tied to these political organizations. The reality of relationships between the Kingdom and countries in the region today is in dire need of realignment, despite the instability of certain blocs, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which faced a rift with the secession of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. To achieve this, it is essential to reassess the current situation in the area, leverage the shared historical heritage, and harness the significant potential of both sides to exploit opportunities that outweigh the challenges.

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