

The Reality and Challenges of Saudi Arabia's Quest for Regional Hegemony in the Middle East

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate Saudi Arabia's quest for regional hegemony, including its objectives, initiatives, and difficulties. In other words, the degree to which Saudi Arabia has been successful in establishing itself as the region's dominant power. It is crucial to thoroughly explain Saudi Arabia's psychological and practical justifications for pursuing regional hegemony in this context. To examine the political discourses, reality, narratives, ambitions, and perspectives of Saudi Arabia and compare these with other regional powers in this area, as well as to highlight a number of context-specific constraints on Saudi Arabia's aspirations for regional hegemony, is the goal of the research. In addition, it intends to investigate how external powers such as the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, and Turkey influence Middle Eastern regional dynamics based on their own vested interests. This analysis demonstrates that Saudi Arabia's drive for regional hegemony is mostly restrained by external causes. First, despite its preeminent economic power, the country lacks strong military capabilities to provide a security shield for its friends in this region. Second, the sectarian politics and undiversified economy of the region make it unlikely that secondary nations will receive full public goods. Third, low economic integration, the perception of a common regional threat, the absence of a broad free trade arrangement, the superiority of hard power over soft power, and a lack of mutual trust among regional countries are significantly diminishing the acceptance of Saudi Arabia's hegemonic role in the region. However, Saudi Arabia is deliberately involving regional partners and coalitions in regional growth. The country takes on the main task for reshaping the Middle East's economy and elevating this region to success. If Saudi Arabia is successful in fostering regional integration, offering a security shield, encouraging trust

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building, and collaborating with other states in this region to address shared regional threats, it will have a greater chance than the majority of other states in the region to become the regional hegemon.

Keywords: Hegemony, Regional Hegemony, Iran, Free Trade, Terrorism, Hydrocarbon, Russia-Ukraine War, Arab-China Summit, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS).

1. Introduction

The Middle East is a unique region in which global superpowers have huge strategic and security interests. After the discovery of enormous hydrocarbon reserves, the Middle East's geopolitical and geoeconomic significance increased dramatically. The massive mineral, such as oil and gas, has not only revolutionized the economic capacity of Middle Eastern nations, but it has also provided strong incentives for countries to seek a prominent position in the regional political structure. For example, Saudi Arabia and Iran are two prospective countries that have been attempting regional hegemony over the Middle East region or, more broadly, the entire Arab world. Saudi Arabia has traditionally been the region's most influential economic actor, and its representation in the majority of international forums is greater than that of any other nation in the Middle East. By virtue of its extensive oil trade, Saudi Arabia has forged closer ties with several of the world's most powerful and developed countries. This has afforded it the unique potential to exert diplomatic efforts toward establishing regional integration and to build assertive power projection in order to play a leading role in all Middle Eastern concerns. It is the only Arab nation to hold a seat on the G-20 and the leading member of the GCC and OPEC+ forums. In this backdrop, this study seeks to examine Saudi Arabia's quest for regional hegemony—its motivations, strategies, and constraints.

2. Methodology

This study employs a desk review methodology based on a qualitative research approach. The findings of the papers that have already been published are presented and evaluated during the desk review procedure (Creswell and Clark, 2017). As a result, books, news articles, and academic papers are all included in the discourse analysis for this study. The analytical framework developed by Miriam Prys (2010) for the investigation of the prospective hegemon's perception, perception of other states, provision of public goods, power projection through ideas and normative values, and

extra-regional powers' actions in regional dynamics is used in this paper to examine regional hegemony. During the search process, keywords including "Saudi Arabia and the Middle East", "Regional Hegemony of Saudi Arabia" and "Saudi-Iran Rivalry" were utilised. The in-depth discussion and subsequent analysis only contained the kind of information that were deemed to be valuable; all other information was ignored.

3. Findings

This analysis demonstrates that Saudi Arabia's drive for regional hegemony is mostly restrained by external causes. First, despite its preeminent economic power, the country lacks strong military capabilities to provide a security shield for its friends in this region. Second, the sectarian politics and undiversified economy of the region make it unlikely that secondary nations will receive full public goods. Third, low economic integration, the perception of a common regional threat, the absence of a broad free trade arrangement, the superiority of hard power over soft power, and a lack of mutual trust among regional countries are significantly diminishing the acceptance of Saudi Arabia's hegemonic role in the region. However, Saudi Arabia is deliberately involving regional partners and coalitions in regional growth. The country takes on the main task for reshaping the Middle East's economy and elevating this region to success. If Saudi Arabia is successful in fostering regional integration, offering a security shield, encouraging trust-building, and collaborating with other states in this region to address shared regional threats, it will have a greater chance than the majority of other states in the region to become the regional hegemon.

4. Explaining Hegemony

In international relations (IR), hegemony is a contested concept. Hegemony is derived from the Greek term *hegemonia*, which signifies 'leadership and rule' (Norrlöf, 2015). The concept of hegemony innately lacks a coherent definition, as there is no competent and consistent framework for defining it exactly. The concept of hegemony involves a number of interconnected features that give rise to a diversity of definitions.

In international relations, hegemony denotes the preponderant power of a state in the international system that may shape and direct the conduct of other parties. In other terms, hegemony is the potential of a state to achieve military and economic dominance over other states. Some schools of thought, such as Neo-Gramscianism, tend to include the normative aspect of

power and advocate for the power of ideas and conceptions, which eventually grant a state enormous authority to influence the decisions of other entities within the international system. Therefore, a hegemon possesses coercive and non-coercive means of power in order to become the dominant power in the international system. The hegemony of Sparta in ancient Greece, Great Britain in the nineteenth century, and the contemporary position of the United States in the international system are examples of such hegemonies. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States acquired a unipolar power position in terms of its military and economic capabilities, as well as a uniquely dominant position in the regional and international systems. This establishes the United States as the current global power.

In addition, it is essential to note that the term 'hegemony' refers to the unequal distribution of power among states in the international system. The entire concept of hegemony revolves around the allocation of power capabilities across nations, in which one state attains a dominant power position and can exert influence over other, less powerful governments. In international relations, there is a distinct difference between an imperialist power and a hegemonic power. A hegemon is believed to use influential authority to set laws that benefit its status quo and to influence the preferences of other nations through coercive and non-coercive measures, whereas an imperialist power obtains power by controlling the territory of other states (Norrlof,2015). Hegemony is defined differently by realists, liberals, and critical scholars of international relations. For example, realist scholars such as Robert Gilpin conceptualize a hegemon as possessing overwhelming material might and an advantage over other states, allowing it to exercise leadership or predominance over the international system (Gilpin,1981). The asymmetric material (military and economic) power of a hegemonic state allows it to attain dominance in the international system and to impose "coercion, influence, and control" over other system participants (Ashraf,2020).

Joseph Nye, on the other hand, developed the idea of the hegemon as an entity that is noticeably more powerful than others in a variety of contexts (Nye,1990). According to Keohane, a hegemon is a single dominant power that helps to decrease the 'collective action problem' in the international system as well as articulates the norms upon which other participants in the system interact with one another (Keohane,1984). Gramscianism and other

critical schools take a normative approach to the definition of hegemony. This tradition has it that hegemony consists of an alliance between several different forces, all of which are commanded by a single dominant power (Ashraf,2020). This tradition has a tendency to place a strong emphasis on the significant role that values, norms, and cultures play in the process of establishing hegemony. According to Gramsci, hegemony is the class alliance of a dominant group or ruling class that achieves the consent of the other members of the society to their imposed values, norms, and culture and transforms their vested interests into common values for all to exercise leadership roles in the society. Hegemony is achieved when a dominant group or ruling class obtains the consent of other members of the society to their imposed values, norms, and culture. These values, cultures, and norms are disseminated and established by the ruling class through social institutions such as schools, unions, families, and churches. The ruling class also presents these values, cultures, and norms in such a way that the subordinate class sees the norms as beneficial for society and refrains from opposing the status quo that the ruling class maintains (Ashraf,2020).

There are many different manifestations of the hegemon. In international relations, the two types of hegemons that stand out the most are the altruistic or benign hegemon and the coercive hegemon. A coercive hegemon takes tough actions against anyone who seems to be a “revisionist power” in the system, in contrast to a benign hegemon, which provides public benefits for its followers and countries inside its sphere of influence. It is common practice to refer to a coercive hegemon as a self-interested hegemon that endeavors to protect its preeminent power position in the international system from any potential threats.

For instance, in its role as a benevolent hegemon, the United States has provided public goods to nations such as Japan and other European states in the decades following the conclusion of World War II. In subsequent years, the adoption of these public goods contributed to the economic expansion of those countries. Additionally, China has benefited from the public goods that the United States has provided. Nevertheless, the economic rise of China in recent years has compelled the United States to act as a coercive hegemon in the system for China. This has resulted in a change in the viewpoint of the United States.

4-1 .Theoretical Framework for Regional Hegemony

The debate around regional hegemony continues to revolve mostly around regions and regionalism. In order to have a strong grasp of regional hegemony, one must first investigate what factors give birth to it and how regionalism and regionalism are related to the establishment and growth of a regional hegemon. Only then will one have a solid understanding of regional hegemony.

In most contexts, the term “regional hegemony” refers to a dominant economic and military power that wields a disproportionate amount of influence over the other governments that make up the region. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of how regional hegemons come into being in the sub-system of global politics, one must first have a complete understanding of what a regional system is and how a particular state navigates through the regional system to become a regional hegemon. Only then can one have a deep understanding of how regional hegemons come into existence. The geographical proximity of its members, the continuity of their cultural and socioeconomic contacts, and the interdependence of their economies and security systems are the primary characteristics of a regional system (Raouf,2019). The allocation of power at the regional level is another essential component that plays a role in determining the relationships between the states that are part of the regional system.

In his classic book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” written in 2001, John Mearsheimer does a superb job of articulating the rise and growth of regional hegemony. This book was published in 2001. Mearsheimer stated that states are very susceptible to the underlying intentions of other states and that states are motivated by their own self-interest, which is nothing more than to survive. This is one of the reasons why a regional hegemon can form, according to Mearsheimer. He also stated that for a state to become the dominant power in the world is almost impossible (Mearsheimer and Alterman,2001). As a result, nations work toward the goal of becoming a regional hegemon, which is defined as a regional power that possesses dominant capabilities of material might, and they work to prevent other states from anywhere in the world from imitating them (Mearsheimer and Alterman,2001). The term “offensive realism” is frequently used to refer to his thesis. The United States of America is the most prominent example of a regional hegemon in the modern world (Myers David,1991). Through the adoption of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the United States was able to

establish itself as the dominant power in the region. This ideology makes it easier to forestall future attempts by European countries at annexation, military acquisition, colonization, and other forms of meddling in the affairs of nations located in the western hemisphere. The United States was able to further their political and economic influence throughout both the North and South American continents as a result of the positions taken in their foreign policy, which also helped to encourage more regional integration. At some point in time, the United States of America emerged as the sole preeminent regional power in the western hemisphere. It is also possible to draw parallels between the roles and activities of the regional hegemon and those of the global hegemon. Regional hegemons, on the other hand, can take the form of military, political, or even economic hegemons, whereas global hegemons are almost exclusively limited to either benign or coercive forms. Destradi and Jakobeit (2015) mentioned three common aspects about regional power that are pointed out by several studies. Firstly, a regional power is situated in a particular region. secondly, regional power has preponderance of material power possession that allows it to display the largest power share in the region. Finally, a regional power exerts some sort of influence on that particular region. on the other hand, Buzan and others (2003) followed a structural consideration of region and argues that a regional power is one that seeks to influence regional security complex (RSC) based on the power distribution in the region. other studies tend to define regional power as the dominant state in the power hierarchy of a region (Lemke,2002).

According to Nel and Nolte (2010), regional power consists of a powerful leading state in the region that asserts its leadership role in the region through remarkable power capabilities and is capable of efficiently deploying its power. Burges (2008) found that a regional hegemon tends to promote “consensual hegemony,” in which the regional hegemon exercises influence through the dispersion of certain values and beliefs that ultimately led other smaller states to obey in order to achieve a common objective. This was demonstrated through the study of Brazil’s foreign policy after the Cold War to demonstrate its hegemonic role in South America. However, other literature on international relations has a tendency to argue that the distinctive quality of a regional hegemon is that it very closely overlaps with that of a global hegemon. According to their statements, there are no obvious and distinguishable markers that can be used to distinguish between

a regional hegemon and a global hegemon. Others have also drawn attention to the challenges that a state must overcome in order to achieve its goal of becoming a regional power. For instance, Schirm (2010) observed that in order to become a regional hegemon, a regional authority must first overcome challenges such as establishing uniformed leadership and gaining the cooperative support of regional followers. In a similar vein, Flandes and Wojczewski (2010) underlined the competitive nature of leadership as well as the various tactics that a state can employ in order to become the hegemon of a particular region. In their view, achieving regional hegemon status requires the secondary powers within the region to cooperate with it and mostly acknowledge the legitimacy of their claims. To strengthen its position in the region and advance efforts toward regional integration and institutionalization, a regional hegemon should adhere to the strategy of cooperative hegemony rather than the strategies of unilateral hegemony or empire (Pederson,2002). Because of these different pieces of literature, we now have a better understanding that the study of regional hegemony necessitates the use of a certain framework in order to comprehend the real nature, relationship, and impact of a regional hegemon.

In this particular setting, this research makes use of Miriam Prys's conceptualization of the constituent aspects of regional hegemony. She (2010) has utilized constitutive elements for the purpose of researching regional hegemons. These elements include the regional hegemon's perception of itself, perceptions of other states, the ability to provide public goods, long-term power projection, and relationships with other smaller actions at the sub-systemic and systemic levels.

5. Regional Role of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays a significant role in the different affairs of the region. Concerns voiced by Saudi Arabia over a variety of regional issues are, in some ways, given more weight than those voiced by other regional powers in the Middle East, such as Iran and Egypt. Egypt is often seen as the most influential power in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area prior to the emergence of Saudi's dominant role in the region. The growing significance of geoeconomics over geopolitics has been a blessing for Saudi Arabia, allowing it to assume significant control over the affairs of the Gulf (Najafi and Others,2023). Riyadh has amassed a considerable amount of political power in the affairs of the region. It is a crucial stakeholder in the discussion of critical issues in the region,

including the peace process between Israel and Palestine, the crisis in Syria, the civil war in Yemen, and the political crises in Lebanon and Iraq (Jin, 2022). In addition, the financial aid provided by Saudi Arabia is a significant factor in the maintenance of political order in a number of African and Asian nations, including Jordan, Sudan, and Egypt (Jin,2022). A significant number of Arab nations in the region now rely on the country as a primary source of remittances and investments flowing into the region (Lagarde, 2012). However, there is also widespread criticism of Saudi Arabia's politically strong role in regional affairs, which many people feel is losing some of its influence in certain sectors. For example, the Kingdom has had less success in preventing Iran's influence in post-Saddam Iraq, gaining a strategic advantage in Lebanon against Hezbollah, and preventing Hamas from engaging in illicit activities that broadly undermine regional peace and order. All of these goals have been less successfully accomplished (Gause III,2011). Saudi Arabia's economic prospects for regional economic fortification are excellent. Its vast oil market and the vision of de facto leader Mohammad Bin Salman, also known as MBS, to open up new business opportunities such as tourism, a trade center, and the creation of the Middle East as the "New Europe" make a compelling case for assuming a leadership role in boosting the economies of the Middle East (Arab News,2018). In fact, Saudi Arabia is heavily involved in the majority of the region's complex problems. Saudi Arabia is of particular importance to the foreign policy perceptions of other Middle Eastern nations, on both the economic and political fronts. Saudi Arabia's strategic alliance with the United States has allowed it to become more assertive in regional affairs. In addition to China, South Korea, Russia, and Japan, Saudi Arabia has close ties with additional regional allies such as India, China and South Korea. Very few nations in the Middle East have as close a strategic relationship with the aforementioned nations as Saudi Arabia. After the three-day visit of Xi Jinping to Riyadh, during which the highest-level Arab-China talks in recorded history were held, strategic relations with China have become comprehensive in recent times (Miller,2022). Saudi Arabia maintains its leadership in the Middle East by utilizing these strategic advantages. Though Saudi Arabia had long exerted political and economic influence in the area, the level to which this was the case—including taking the initiative and mobilising significant resources—reflected a sense of strategic urgency. Activism can also seem like adventurism.

5-1. Saudi Arabia's Material Power in its Various Forms

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) ascent to the center of a robust regional power position is supported by its solid economic strengths and vibrant global involvement and alliances. In the whole Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia possesses unrivaled and unparalleled material might. The country is endowed with vast and abundant mineral resources. The nation's petroleum and oil reserves comprise 17% of the world's proven oil reserves and 22% of the overall oil reserves (OPEC,2022; Sawe,2019). With the current daily production of 10.2 million barrels, the oil reserves are so abundant that they can sustain the nation for the next eighty years. Oil production and exports are the country's primary economic drivers. Recent increases in non-oil revenues are a direct result of massive macroeconomic reforms initiated under 'Vision 2030.' (Mati and Rehman,2022). According to the World Atlas, the kingdom is also endowed with a variety of other natural resources, including excellent quality gold, copper, silver, iron, zinc, aluminum, chromium, lead, tungsten, and tin (Sawe,2019). It also shows that the kingdom ranks third in terms of natural resources worth \$34.4 trillion, behind only the United States and Russia. Natural gas is also abundant in the kingdom. It has the sixth largest proven natural gas reserve in the world, at 240 trillion dollars (Sawe,2019). This abundant natural gas is mostly used for energy production to meet domestic demand, thereby contributing to the nation's energy security. Saudi Arabia has approximately 600 gold deposit sites, the most important of which is Mahd-Ad-Dahab (Sawe,2019).

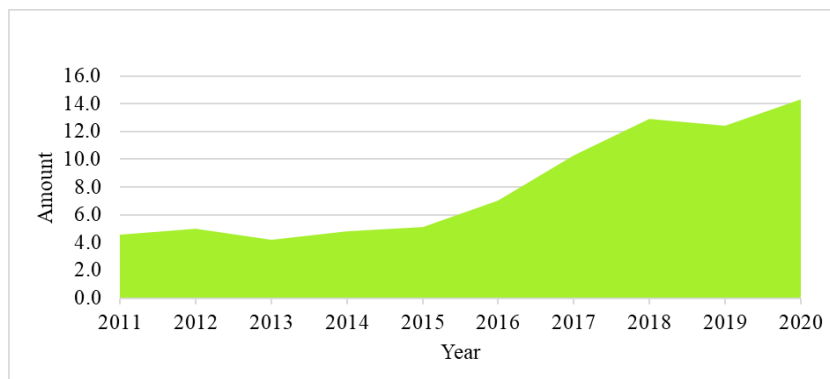


Figure (1): Saudi Arabia's Annual Gold Production between 2011 to 2020.
(Source: Puri-Mirza,2022)

Figure (1) demonstrates a positive trend in gold production in Saudi Arabia since 2014 that is unprecedented in the Middle East.

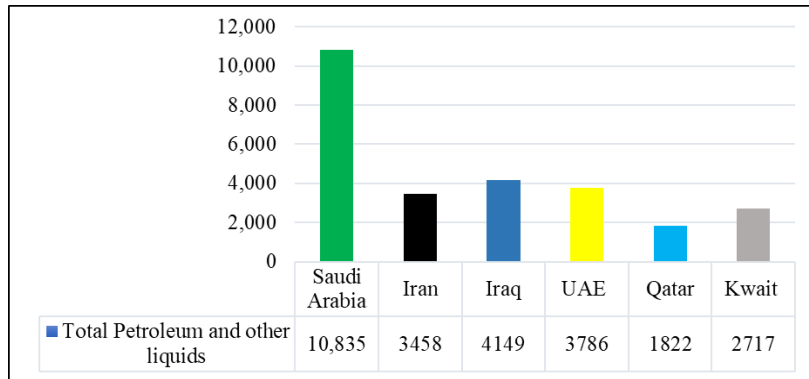


Figure (2): Total Petroleum and other Liquids Production (Mb/d) by Countries in 2024

(Source: US Energy Information Administration,2024)

Figure (2) indicates that Saudi Arabia is the leading producer of petroleum and other liquids in the Middle Eastern region. This number is significantly greater than any other nation in the region. It also implies that the country is financially stronger than any other region in the region.

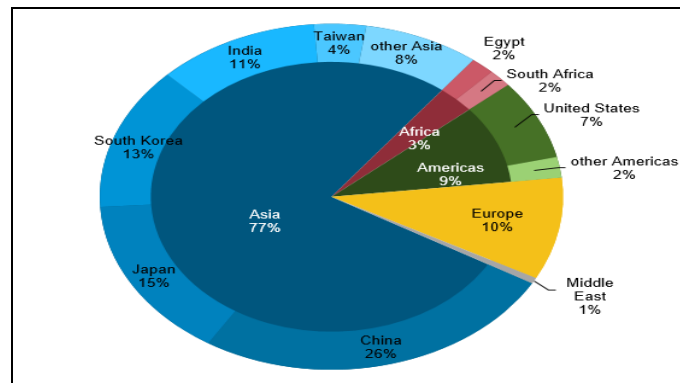


Figure (3): Saudi Arabia's Crude Oil Exports by Region and Country, 2024

(Source: Adopted from US Energy Information Administration,2024)

Figure (3) indicates that Saudi Arabia has a substantial trading market in Asia, especially with China. The nation is the world's largest energy security partner for major economies.

Saudi Arabia has the most powerful economy in the Middle East. In terms of GDP, it is the eighteenth-largest country worldwide. According to the World Bank, the kingdom's GDP reached an all-time high of \$833.54 billion in 2024 and is forecast to expand by 7% in 2025. (World Bank, 2024). It is also the greatest oil producer among OPEC nations and the second-largest total petroleum liquid producer after the United States (US Energy Information Administration, 2024). In addition, the country has enjoyed a substantial trade surplus in recent decades. The Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated the surplus as the global price of oil has risen substantially. In September of 2024, the country's trade surplus was SAR 64.6 billion, compared to SAR 47.9 billion in September of the previous year (Trending Economics, 2024). Its principal export destinations are China, India, and South Korea, while its principal import destinations are China, the United States, and the UAE (Trending Economics, 2024).

The kingdom's remarkable military forces and weaponry make it one of the world's most formidable military powers. According to the Global Firepower Index, Saudi Arabia's military strength ranks twenty-first out of 142 countries (Global Firepower, 2024). The estimated overall number of Saudi Arabian forces is 350,000, while the number of active personnel is 225,000 (Global Firepower, 2024). In addition, the nation possesses powerful military aircraft, fighter planes, interceptors, helicopters, tanker fleets, tanks, towed artillery, rocket projectors, frigates, patrol vessels, and mine warfare equipment (Global Firepower, 2024). Its military aircraft account for 20% of the Middle East's recently enhanced 46% air power (Hoyle, 2024). In 2022, the nation spent \$76.7 billion to modernize its military. According to the aforementioned data, Saudi Arabia possesses substantial material resources to impose its hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East. However, because the concept of power is relative, measuring Saudi Arabia's material might alone will leave us with an incomplete picture in this regard.

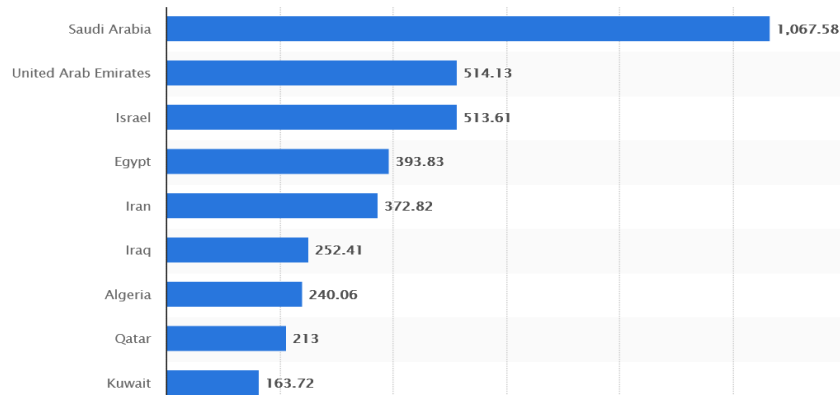


Figure (4): GDP of MENA Region by Country – 2023 (In Billion U.S. Dollars)
 (Source: Author’s Construction based on O’Neill,2025)

Figures (4) and (5) illustrate that Saudi Arabia is the dominant force in the MENA region in terms of GDP and active military troops, and the country continues to lead in terms of military expenditures. Recent research reveals that Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are the three nations with the most influential economies and militaries in the region.

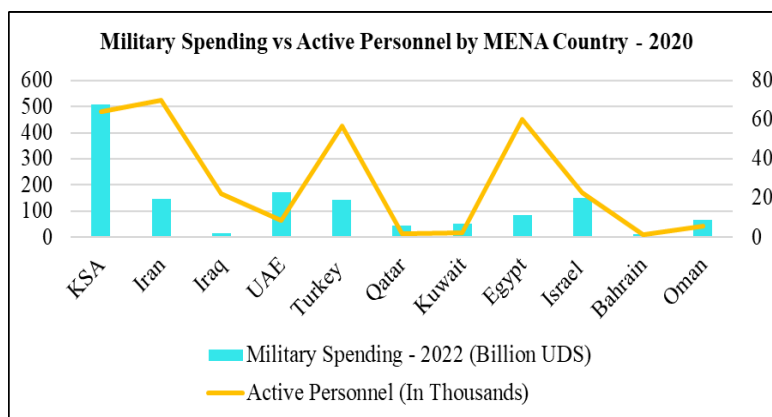


Figure (5): Military Spending Vs Active Personnel by MENA Country - 2020
 (Source: Author’s construction based on World Population Review,2024)

5-1-1. Perception

Any state that desires regional hegemony must pay close attention to how it is perceived to play a hegemonic role within the context of the region. In this respect, “perception” refers to the awareness that exists among the

decision-makers of Saudi Arabia regarding the idea of taking the leadership role in the region. It is inextricably linked to the way in which the leaders and decision-makers of the country think about their role in the region, the way in which they identify their place in the global and regional power hierarchy, and the way in which they hope to see their position in the future within the structure of global and regional politics. The perception of Saudi Arabia's regional hegemony can take two forms: it can be how the country itself sees its position in the region and it can be how other countries within the region see Saudi Arabia's role, or in certain cases, how they oppose its hegemonic ambitions.

5-1-1-1. Internal Perception

On the national level, Saudi Arabia strives to strike a healthy balance between the political stability of the country and the security of the region (Hartmann,2016). The nation has, for a very long time, been acting as though it is the leader of the Arab world (Hartmann,2016). Due to the country's recent emergence as a modern Saudi Arabia, it is attempting to define its role in the region as that of a hegemon, despite the fact that its neighbors have a substantial amount of distrust over its intentions (Gause, 2014). The nation has been particularly conscious of the importance of preserving internal stability by suppressing any uprisings that might be inspired by the Arab Spring. The nation frequently makes use of its extensive oil trade, Islamic traditions, and custodianship of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in order to preserve this level of stability within its own internal affairs (Ennis and Momani,2013). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is of the belief that it bears a greater responsibility to serve as a consensus-builder in the Arab world on a wide range of issues, including the coordination of policies, promotion of development, and economic integration (Kamrava,2011). In addition, the authorities of Saudi Arabia believe that their country should take the initiative to find solutions to the various problems that are having a negative impact on the peace and stability of the area. It works under the assumption that the country can compensate for the insecurity that smaller states in the region experience as a result of the regional security complex.

5-1-1-2. Perception of other Regional States

Regional politics in the Middle East are distinct from those in the vast majority of the world. This region lacks key components necessary for a robust regional system. Some of the most effective instances of regionalism

may be found in the European Union and ASEAN, where cooperation and soft power are extensively utilized to strengthen regional ties among states. In contrast, Middle Eastern politics are dominated by conflict and hard power politics (Beck,2014:1-20). In addition, this region's nations have become incapable of utilizing regional resources to achieve regional development as a whole (Beck,2014:1-20).

Understanding the prospects of Saudi Arabia's hegemonic role in the region requires a thorough understanding of the perceptions of neighboring and other regional states. Even though there is a consensus among political elites about domestic views, there is a great deal of variation when it comes to understanding the perception of other regional governments. One explanation is that many nations regard Saudi Arabia's hegemonic ambitions favorably, but other nations tend to be extremely wary of or actively oppose Riyadh's ambitions.

For instance, Iran has been striving for dominance in the Middle Eastern region for a very long time. This goal of Iran stands in stark contrast to Saudi Arabia's long-term objective of establishing itself as the preeminent power in the Middle East area. In addition to their fundamental ideological differences, Iran and Saudi Arabia have a great deal of political disagreement in the region (Reisinezhad,2023). It is becoming a significant source of concern for Saudi Arabia as Iran positions itself as the guardian of Shiites in the area. The more aggressive stance that Iran takes toward Shia-led supremacy is counterproductive to Saudi Arabia's Sunni-led dominance. In fact, the Saudi leadership views the new type of state system, values, and narratives that Iran has developed since the 1979 revolution as posing a threat to Saudi Arabia's regional and domestic stability. Iran and Saudi Arabia have grown further apart over the past few years as a direct result of a string of political developments across the region, most notably in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt. Saudi Arabia's fight in Yemen against the Houthi rebels in order to prevent a perceived influence from Iran appears to be an expensive risk today, despite the fact that it has supplied active assistance throughout the course of the previous four years (Marcus,2019). In a similar manner, Iran obtains a strategic edge in Lebanon, where a pro-Shia terrorist group known as Hezbollah controls a significant percentage of the political affairs of the country. On the other hand, Iran's purported nuclear program and the pro-Iranian regime in Iraq are successfully

undercutting Saudi Arabia's ambitions to become the regional hegemon in the Arab world to a greater extent.

Moreover, Iran's suspected support for ballistic missiles by the Houthi rebel group, which is accused of conducting drone and missile assaults on Saudi Arabia's Aramco liquified gas plant and oil tankers in March 2022, has significantly eroded bilateral confidence in recent years. Moreover, Iran's aggressive behavior in the strategic straits of the Gulf region poses a significant threat to Saudi Arabia's oil exports and international trade.

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia epitomizes the realist struggle for regional dominance. Both states view each other as existential threats, engaging in a series of proxy conflicts to shape the regional order in their favor. From the Syrian Civil War to the conflict in Yemen, Iran and Saudi Arabia have supported opposing factions to expand their influence. The realist perspective highlights the zero-sum nature of this rivalry, where gains by one side are perceived as losses for the other. This competition is further fueled by sectarian divisions, but at its core, it is a geopolitical struggle for primacy in the Middle East. The 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) was a pivotal moment in this competition, as it momentarily reduced Iran's international isolation, prompting concerns among Gulf states about a shift in the regional balance of power. Saudi Arabia and its allies responded by deepening their security cooperation with the U.S. and pursuing their own regional initiatives to counter Iranian influence.

In this competition for regional hegemony, Turkey is another capable competitor. As a NATO member and the gateway between Europe and Asia, Turkey assumes a role of responsibility in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's primary concern is the Turkish model of multiparty democracy and Islam. Saudi Arabia's military might is much inferior to that of Turkey. In 2017, when the Saudi-led coalition harshly imposed an embargo on Qatar, Turkey stepped forward voluntarily and provided major assistance to Doha. Saudi Arabia appears to have major concerns regarding Turkey's assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Saudi Arabia condemned the Muslim Brotherhood for its support of Iraq against the Gulf Sheikdoms during the first Gulf War, as well as for politicizing Wahhabism and encouraging extremism in the Saudi brand of Islam (Ottaway,2012). Egypt, the UAE, and Kuwait are important allies of the Saudi leadership. These nations have forged a solid collaboration with the Saudi government, which has provided them with a variety of benefits. Israel, on the other hand, works closely with

Saudi Arabia, particularly concerning Iran. Iran is viewed by Israel as a fatal threat. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia vehemently rejected the P5+1 agreement with Iran and urged for the lowering of Iran's uranium capacity and nuclear program as a means of achieving peace and stability in the region. Tehran and Riyadh compete in many issues related to the Gulf, encompassing disagreements over geopolitics, oil prices, engagement with non-state actors, and even the region's nomenclature, in an often-recurrent passionate discussion over the terms 'Arab' or 'Persian' Gulf (Cerioli, 2018). Therefore, the preceding debate demonstrates that Saudi Arabia's hegemonic ambitions would inevitably face opposition from a number of regional state and non-state players.

5-1-2. Provision of Public Goods

Understanding a region's hegemon is crucially dependent on the provision of public goods it offers for the secondary states in the region. Typically, it refers to supplying commodities or services to other states with unfettered access in order to make the economy more stable and productive. According to the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), a militarily and economically dominant state is responsible for promoting free trade, providing defense support, establishing global trade standards, preserving the exchange rate framework of currencies, and working toward macroeconomic policy coordination (Raouf, 2019). Thus, a hegemon provides free riding to secondary states, whereby the latter enjoy free riding, have the opportunity to advance their economic development, and continue to support the hegemon's established global order. This is how, under the hegemony of the United States, Japan and other European nations flourished economically following World War II. However, regional hegemons may not provide as extensive a range of public goods as global hegemons. A regional hegemon may be required in this regard to provide business potential, regional financial and political stability, comprehensive security through enhanced military capability, regional integration through shared identity, beliefs, and culture, and effective mechanisms for regional conflict resolution (Raouf, 2019). This paper explores Saudi Arabia's position in the race to provide public goods in terms of economic stability, security, infrastructure development, trade regime, and the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East.

In terms of the economy, the nation is the most important player in both the GCC and the OPEC+ forum. It also has the largest GDP in the area. Because of its important role in the GCC forum, Saudi Arabia contributes to the consolidation of regional institutions and offers financial support to the nations that are geographically adjacent to it. Through the provision of a wide variety of business prospects in its domestic market, Saudi Arabia contributes to the advancement of regional economic integration. These commercial opportunities are open to all GCC countries. For example, a GCC nation can open a bank account for the purpose of establishing a business or company in Saudi Arabia within three months and with primary assets valued at 35,040 US dollars, whereas it takes a much longer amount of time and a greater amount of initial capital for a foreign company to open a business at the same time (Zamora,2022). In addition, all countries that are members of the GCC have the ability to begin operations in numerous areas of the economy by imitating the way that business is conducted in Saudi Arabia. This is something that is not permitted for enterprises that are based in other countries. Companies from GCC countries do not have to pay the 20% corporation tax that is levied in Saudi Arabia, although companies from other countries do have to pay this tax. They are solely liable for the Zakat tax, which is 2.5 percent of total business and 5 percent on all items, and it is the same for everyone regardless of their nationality (Zamora, 2022).

In terms of regional security, Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role. Over the past few decades, Saudi Arabia has established itself as a powerful state, not only on the Arabian Peninsula but throughout the entire Arab world. Saudi Arabia's recent defense spending increases and emphasis on a strong military shed light on the country's potential role as a Middle East security provider, despite the fact that its military capabilities are inferior to those of its regional rival Iran. Iran has superior military strength, but its isolation from the major regional economic and security arrangements significantly undermines its aspirational role as a Middle Eastern security provider. Moreover, it remains discouraging that other Sunni-dominated Middle Eastern nations accept Iran's leadership as the region's provider of security. To this day, Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in ensuring navigational freedom and maritime law, to the substantial benefit of other regional nations such as the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, and Oman.

In terms of establishing trade regime and infrastructural development, Saudi Arabia has been in the toper position till today. Due to the fact that it is the only Arab nation to hold a seat in the G20, Saudi Arabia has a unique perspective on the matter of regional financial settlement. As the nation takes steps to diversify its economy through the ambitious project known as “Vision 2030,” the country is now indicating that its economic prospects will be favorable in the near future. The implementation of this mega-plan could have significant repercussions for the economy of the region especially for setting up free trade regime and fostering infrastructural development. Since it is stated that “Vision 2030” will bring about a transition from an economy dependent on hydrocarbons to one that is more diversified, the prospects of employment, business, tourism, infrastructural development, and cultural development would be of substantial benefit to the expansion of the regional economy.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s aim to turn the economies of the Middle East into a “New Europe” reflects the nation’s rising intent to address the region’s economic difficulties and create collective progress. If this strategy is properly implemented, Saudi Arabia will be able to support greater regional economic integration and infrastructure development throughout the Middle East. Therefore, it will entice other Middle Eastern nations to join or follow the Saudi-led economic bloc in the region.

In terms of conflict resolution, Saudi Arabia plays a relatively small role. The country’s increased involvement in many conflicts hinders its capacity to provide conflict resolution. In 2017, the wars in Syria and Yemen and the unprecedented imposition of a blockade on Qatar have proven to be detrimental to achieving a significant role in Middle Eastern conflict settlement. Likewise, Saudi Arabia has been frequently accused of committing grave violations of human rights, encouraging sectarianism, and conducting proxy wars in the region. This aspect of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy significantly diminishes the trust and confidence of other states to accept Saudi Arabia’s leadership position in conflict settlement.

5-1-3. Power Projection Using Beliefs and Principles

Saudi Arabia’s aspiration to become a regional hegemon is also influenced by its regional geopolitical principles and views. With extreme caution, the nation creates normative norms and concepts with short-term goals of domestic transformation and a long-term focus on achieving a more favorable position in regional hierarchy. Other states’ regional attitudes are

continuously shaped by the selective and innovative ideas of the Saudi administration. In 2016, the nation established a strategic blueprint often known as “Vision 2030.” This ambitious vision seeks to bring about qualitative changes in the country’s economic sectors as well as various social reforms. In contrast to the past, the Saudi government is now supporting private enterprise and investment in several sectors of the economy, which are available to both domestic and foreign enterprises (Jan. 2018). Through this program, the Saudi government likely seeks to demonstrate its adaptability in the economic sector by encouraging private investment and showing its commitment to joint regional growth. Beginning in 2017, women will be permitted to drive their own automobiles; theaters and stadiums will be opened; and the government will make significant efforts to combat corruption and promote good governance at all levels. This indicates that Saudi Arabia is now more open, progressive, and accessible for conducting business with the rest of the globe (Jan,2018).

On the other side, Saudi Arabia is spreading normative ideals strategically across the area in order to achieve collective growth in the Middle East. Over the past few years, the nation has increased its public expenditures and digitalized numerous economic sectors while taking appropriate safety precautions. This indicates that Saudi Arabia has dramatically shifted from pursuing a closed economy to a regionally open economy. In 2018, Crown Prince MBS and the leaders of Lebanon and Bahrain predicted that the Middle East would become a new Europe in the next few decades (Al-Zayani and Habtour,2018). This indicates that Saudi Arabia is attempting to achieve its long-term aims through effective power projection by utilizing its economic and diplomatic tools. Saudi Arabia is uncompromising in its defense of its national security. Saudi Arabia, along with Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and prohibited it from using their air, land, and sea commerce routes in 2017 after realizing that Qatar’s support for terrorism undermined their strategic security interests in the Middle East. This boycott is an indication of Saudi Arabia’s diplomatic aggressiveness in the Middle East. Again, Saudi military assertiveness can be seen in the kingdom’s active participation in the Yemen war, where it is battling to limit Iranian influence in the region. Controlling Yemen is strategically crucial for Saudi Arabia due to its proximity to the Ban-Al-Mandeb strait, which is the only waterway Saudi Arabia can utilize to continue delivering energy to the east. Both Iran and

Saudi Arabia rely significantly on this waterway, and whoever controls Yemen will have tremendous sway over this channel (Jan.2018).

6. External Players' Influence on Regional Dynamics

The Middle East is a part of the planet that can be said to be quite exceptional. In addition to the region's strategic location, the politics of the Middle East are characterized by the trade of hydrocarbons such as oil and gas, religious conservatism, harsh militarization, the prominence of hard power over soft power, mistrust among neighbors, terrorism, ideological rivalries, sectarianism, dictatorship, and the violation of human rights, among other factors. These problems at the regional level not only make it harder for countries in the region to work together, but they also make it possible for countries outside of the region to take advantage of the complicated nature of politics in the region. This region holds certain essential components of world politics and economy that encourage participation or at least some type of impact from external states throughout the world. This section evaluates the impact of external powers on the regional dynamics of the Middle East in light of the policy orientations and strategic objectives of the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, and Turkey.

In order to protect both its domestic and its international strategic interests, the United States, for instance, has kept up a long-standing cooperation with a number of countries in the Middle East, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Israel. The immense oil and gas resources of this region are of the utmost importance for the United States to continue to maintain a stable economy and, more generally, to preserve its leading role in the global arena. Aside from the oil market, the United States is highly involved in the politics of the Middle East in order to protect Israel's sovereignty, which it identifies as essential to its interests in the region. Consistently, the United States obstructs United Nations Security Council resolutions condemning Israel for its frequent massacres in Palestine. In addition, it is providing substantial financial assistance to bolster Israel's defense capabilities and conducting joint-military exercises, research projects, and strategic discussions to thwart any possible challenges to Israel's interests (Department of State,2024). Over time, Israel has become the fulcrum of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East the Middle East in order to protect Israel's sovereignty, which it identifies as essential to its interests in the region. Consistently, the United States obstructs United Nations Security Council resolutions condemning

Israel for its frequent massacres in Palestine. In addition, it is providing substantial financial assistance to bolster Israel's defense capabilities and conducting joint-military exercises, research projects, and strategic discussions to thwart any possible challenges to Israel's interests (Department of State,2024). Over time, Israel has become the fulcrum of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. In Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Palestine, ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Hamas have committed acts of terrorism. Through this operation, the United States has participated aggressively in the Middle Eastern power dynamics. Another important feature of the United States' active involvement in the Middle East is ensuring the safety of its regional friends and like-minded partners from the hostile threats of other states. For example, the United States has provided Saudi Arabia and other neighboring states with a security umbrella against the aggressive terrorist and nuclear threat posed by Iran. Through its numerous military outposts, as depicted in Figure (6), the United States is also securing the critical waterways surrounding its allies and partner nations to ensure the continued flow of oil and gas. In this way, the United States is having a lasting impact on the politics and economies of the Middle East, which is anticipated to continue in the long run.



Figure (6): US Military Bases Across the Middle East.
(Source: Author's construction based on American Security Project,2021)

Similar to the United States, the European Union has identical interests in the Middle East. The EU's involvement in this region has mostly centered

on the hydrocarbon market and the peace process in Palestine. After the Arab Spring and the sequence of wars in Syria and Yemen, however, the situation has shifted dramatically. Immigrants from the violent battlegrounds of the Middle East have caused Europe to experience unparalleled difficulties. Middle Eastern terrorism is an additional issue for Europe. Europe has been actively involved in the regional politics of the Middle East in recent years, where de-escalation of war, trust building, and striking a favorable agreement over Iran's nuclear program are the top priorities (Barnes-Dacey,2022). In addition, European nations are the market leaders for arms sales in the Middle East, and they view this region as strategically vital to their arms trade. Significant armament suppliers to the Middle East include the United Kingdom, France, Russia, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In the continuing battles in the Middle East, the vast majority of their armaments are used to commit atrocities. Saudi Arabia and Qatar raised their imports of armaments by 61% and 361% between 2016 and 2024, respectively (Al Jazeera,2024). In addition, three Middle Eastern nations, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, were not among the top ten importers of guns over the same period (Al Jazeera,2024). This indicates that Europe holds a significant position in the Middle East's regional dynamics.

On the other hand, Russia has economic, political, and strategic interests in the Middle East. Russia's help in Syria allowed former Assad's government to stay in power. Russia helped Assad halt the rebellion by giving him diplomatic and military support at the UN. Now, Russia provides shelter to Assad after being overthrown from power. Russia's main interests in the Middle East are its only naval base outside the former Soviet Union, which is in Syria, its large arms market, and its relationship with the OPEC+ forum. Russia's active support for the regimes in Iran and Syria is also a way to protect its global reputation in the region (Malinkin and Quenoy, 2022). Major pro-Russian governments and allies have been overthrown because of the Arab Spring. This has cut Russia's arms trade and political influence in the region by a lot. Recently, the war between Russia and Ukraine has opened up new ways for Russia to work with the OPEC+ forum, which is led by Saudi Arabia, to keep its economy going in the face of harsh US sanctions.

China, however, has strategic ties with the Middle East. China's stance on the Middle East is largely economic and primarily centered on oil and gas

imports and exports of heavy machinery, technology, and medical equipment. Regarding the political issues of the Middle East, China is seeking a balanced stance with regional rivals, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran (Moonakal,2022). Both countries constitute China's primary source of oil, which is crucial to its ability to continue its industrial activity and preserve its economic superpower status. An accord reestablishing diplomatic relations after years of animosity was signed on March 10, 2023 by Saudi national security adviser Musaid bin Muhammad Al-Aiban and Iranian security official Ali Shamkhani. China served as a mediator in this reunion, which is a sign of its expanding geopolitical stake in the region.

In contrast, Turkey is actively involved in Middle Eastern regional politics. The Kurdish separatist movements in Syria, Iraq, and Iran are Turkey's biggest problem in the Middle East. Turkey has always denied the concerns of Kurds residing on its territory and has conducted frequent attacks against civilian and military facilities. Since 2016, Turkey has conducted three incursions in northeast Syria and Iraq in an effort to curb the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Holleis,2022). Thirteen people were killed as a result of a terrorist incident in Istanbul. The Turkish air force launched "Operation Claw Soward" on November 20, 2022, against Kurdish insurgents in Syria (Holleis,2022). After the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish woman named Jina Masha Amini on September 16, 2022, Iran and Turkey collaborate in repressing Kurdish people, whom Iran holds responsible for fueling the continuing movement in Iran (Holleis,2022). In 2017, however, when a Saudi-led coalition imposed an embargo against Qatar, Turkey gave immediate aid. In addition, the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the suspected affinity of Crown Prince Salam have strained relations between Ankara and Riyadh (Cook,2022). However, things are changing as a result of President Erdogan's visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2022, which reopened the flow of Turkish goods into the Saudi market and Saudi investments in Ankara (Cook,2022).

7. Limitations on Saudi Arabia's Regional Policy

Saudi Arabia's attempts to establish dominance in the region are severely hampered by a variety of issues. Politics at all levels— national and local— have an impact on them. The growing influence of outside nations in this region's political arena further restricts Saudi Arabia's strategic options to establish itself as the hegemon. In the Middle East, sectarianism fuels regional division. This aspect not only exacerbates the Shia-Sunni divide,

but it also undermines the Saudi model of regional integration. Saudi Arabia's participation in multiple ongoing wars in the Middle East undermines its ability to act responsibly in the region. Saudi Arabia's four-year-long war in Yemen appears to be an expensive gamble with slim chances of success. If Saudi Arabia is unable to achieve significant gains in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's regional prestige will undoubtedly suffer. This will further erode Saudi Arabia's position of leadership in the Middle East. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has a poor track record of successfully resolving various regional conflicts. In contrast, the nation played a leading role in 2017 in economically and diplomatically punishing Qatar alongside its regional allies. Possibilities of gaining the trust and confidence of other regional states in order for them to collaborate with Saudi Arabia are diminished by this kind of attitude. Additionally, the Middle East-Palestine dispute, ethnic conflicts, and terrorism are all issues that the US is making very little progress in resolving. Therefore, it can be stated that Saudi Arabia's regional strategies to become a regional hegemon are being impeded by a number of factors that will need to be addressed by the country's authority in order to achieve success in the future.

8. Analysis

The traits of regional hegemons in the Middle East are different from those of global hegemons. The Middle East has seen a fight among several states for hegemonic dominance. However, the Middle Eastern hegemonic race can be identified by a number of distinctive traits. First, no country in this region is superior from an economic and military standpoint. Second, there aren't enough possibilities to provide secondary states rides for free. Third, it is still unclear whether the secondary states will accept hegemonic leadership in the region. Fourth, there is a growing lack of confidence and trust among the states in this region. Fifth, this region still relies heavily on hard power and has historically offered fewer opportunities to use soft power to address many regional issues. Sixth, this region is more unstable and less suited to the formation of long-term peace and stability due to the presence of sectarian politics, conflict, and terrorism. Seventh, domestic political demands regularly clash with efforts to repair friendly ties with neighbors, especially those with Saudi Arabia and Iran. As a result, the majority of countries have yet to find a solution to the issue of collective action or come to an agreement to work together in a number of pressing crises that are impeding regional economic integration. Due to the

undiversified and oil and gas-dominated market, the progress of economic integration is gradual. There is no reliable and effective economic framework that Middle Eastern countries may use to cooperate and attain economic growth as a whole. In addition to these factors, there is a substantial technological development gap in this region, which undermines regional economic progress.

Saudi Arabia must have superior economic and military power to establish hegemony in the Middle East. The country's economic prowess currently outweighs its military might. It will be interesting to see how militarily strong the administration develops over the coming years, despite the fact that it has only recently started to increase its defense budget. Additionally, it significantly depends on the oil market for its economic domination, which has experienced changes recently as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic and the ongoing economic downturn. Most of Saudi Arabia's foreign trade earnings currently come from selling oil on the world market. The severe global economic crisis makes the Saudi Arabian economy vulnerable as a result. In fact, while Iran, possessing all the ingredients of a complex and developed economic and social system, requires reform, Saudi Arabia, with a one-dimensional economy and unsustainable expectations from its citizenry, requires a re-forming of its economy and national expectations (Harr,2020).

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, from a realist perspective, Saudi Arabia's pursuit of regional hegemony is a calculated response to the security dilemma posed by Iran and other regional actors as discussed above. The Kingdom continues to expand its military capabilities, leverage economic strength, and engage in strategic alliances to consolidate its influence. However, challenges such as regional instability, economic diversification hurdles, and shifting global alliances may impact Saudi Arabia's hegemonic trajectory. While recent diplomatic overtures, such as the China-brokered Saudi-Iran rapprochement, indicate a temporary de-escalation, the fundamental geopolitical competition between Riyadh and Tehran remains unresolved. Saudi Arabia's future as a regional hegemon will depend on its ability to balance power, sustain economic growth, and navigate the complexities of Middle Eastern geopolitics in an increasingly multipolar world. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's economic dominance lacks a solid foundation due to the lack of diversity in other economic areas. This shows that the nation cannot maintain its

position as the only regional hegemon in the Middle East in the near future. However, Saudi Arabia consciously involves regional alliances and allies in regional development. It takes on the primary responsibility for revamping the Middle East's economy and turning this area into the new Europe. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has a greater chance of becoming the regional hegemon than the majority of other states in this region if it succeeds in promoting regional integration, providing a security shield, fostering trust-building, and cooperating with other states in this region to address common regional threats.

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11. Conflict of Interest Declaration

I hereby declare on behalf of all authors that none of us have any conflict of interest in regard to the submitted manuscript.

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