



Foreign policy behavior of sectarian-rentier states: The case of Saudi

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Abstract

This article aims to present a foreign policy analysis of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East within the framework of sectarian and rentier state theories. Saudi Arabia has a rentier state structure with rich oil reserves and uses these revenues to ensure domestic stability and finance its foreign policies. At the same time, it exhibits a sectarian state model that aims to increase its regional influence by placing its religious identity and sectarian ideology at the centre of its foreign policies. Analysing how these two different state models come together to influence Saudi Arabia's foreign policy preferences is important for understanding the country's domestic political dynamics and foreign policy objectives. The aim of the article is to analyse Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour within the framework of rentier and sectarian state theories and to reveal the economic and ideological motivations of these policies. Accordingly, it examines how Saudi Arabia is positioned as an actor at the regional and global level and how the rentier state structure interacts with sectarian ideology. This study aims to evaluate Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which is usually discussed from an economic or ideological perspective in the existing literature, with a more holistic approach. The methodology used in the research is a comparative case study based on a qualitative data analysis. Primary and secondary data sources were used to understand Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour, and official documents, academic articles and theoretical approaches in the literature were examined in detail. Content analysis and comparative analysis techniques were applied to reveal the effects of rentier and sectarian state elements on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. These analyses allow us to understand the economic and ideological elements behind Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions. The findings of the paper show how the rentier state structure uses its economic power to finance sectarian policies and how these two elements work together to shape both Saudi Arabia's domestic and foreign policy.

Keywords: Rentier economy, Rentier state, Sectarian state, Foreign policy, Sectarian foreign policy, Political economy, Saudi Arabia, Middle East

Introduction

In 21st-century international relations, understanding the foreign policy behavior of states is of great importance for unraveling global and regional power dynamics. In this context, the Middle East stands out as an important region in world politics. The foreign policy preferences of Middle Eastern states are influenced by a complex combination of historical, cultural, religious, and economic factors. In particular, some states in the region actively use rentier economics and sectarianism in shaping their foreign policies. Rentier states are states that survive and sustain both their economic and political structures largely on rents from external sources (e.g. oil and gas revenues). Such states are prone to authoritarian forms of governance in order to sustain their domestic and foreign policies. Sectarian states, on the other hand, shape their foreign policies around sectarian identities and religious ideologies. Saudi Arabia is an important example of where these two

state models intersect. Saudi Arabia has a rentier state structure with vast oil reserves and uses these revenues to ensure domestic stability and finance its foreign policies. It also seeks to increase its regional influence by placing its religious identity and sectarian ideology at the center of its foreign policy. Shifting between these two different state models, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices affect the balance of power in the region and have important repercussions on regional (and sometimes global) politics. This dual nature of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy offers a critical space for understanding both the country's domestic political dynamics and its foreign policy objectives.

An analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior requires an understanding of the underlying economic and ideological factors behind this behavior. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices are complicated by the fact that it is both a rentier state with an economic structure that finances foreign policy and a sectarian state that uses religious and sectarian identities in its foreign policy. For instance,

Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, its policies towards Bahrain, and its strategic position against Iran show the interaction and intertwining of these two state models. This makes it imperative to consider both economic and ideological factors to analyze Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior. This article aims to explore this complex relationship and interaction in depth.

The main purpose of this article is to analyze Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior within the framework of rentier state theory and sectarian state theory. This analysis aims to reveal the economic and ideological motivations behind Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and to assess the regional and global implications of these behaviors. Saudi Arabia claims to be positioned as an important actor at the global level with an economy based on oil revenues and its role as the guardian of Islam. Therefore, understanding Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions is crucial for understanding not only the dynamics of the Middle East but also global energy markets and the balance of power in international relations.

Moreover, by revealing how rentier and sectarian state elements interact in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, this study aims to provide new perspectives on the relationship between internal and external factors that influence states' foreign policy decisions.

In this context, the findings of the study will provide new and original contributions to the international relations literature on the foreign policy behavior of rentier and sectarian states.

In order to understand the factors shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, this study addresses the following key research questions:

- To what extent are rentier state elements determining Saudi Arabia's foreign policy strategies?
- How does sectarian state ideology affect Saudi Arabia's regional and global relations?
- How does the interaction between rentier state and sectarian state elements guide Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions?
- How do Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviors overlap with rentier and sectarian

state theories, and at what points do they go beyond these theories?

This article uses two main theoretical frameworks to analyze Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior: Rentier State Theory and Sectarian State Theory.

- **The rentier state theory** argues that states sustain their economies and political structures largely through revenues from external sources (e.g. oil and natural gas). According to this theory, rentier states use rent revenues to secure social support and maintain their authoritarian rule. In the case of Saudi Arabia, oil revenues both provide domestic economic stability and finance foreign policy operations.
- **Sectarian state theory** argues that states shape their foreign policies around sectarian identities and religious ideologies. By adopting policies that favor sectarian affiliations, sectarian states use their sectarian groups as a tool in foreign policy. Saudi Arabia adopts a sectarian foreign policy through its policy of spreading Wahhabi Islam and defending Sunni leadership against Shia Iran.

These theoretical frameworks provide an appropriate basis for understanding and analyzing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior. Both theories provide various tools to help explain Saudi Arabia's economic and ideological motivations in foreign policy.

Existing literature has generally analyzed Saudi Arabia's foreign policy from the perspective of either the rentier state or the sectarian state. However, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on the interactions between these two approaches. For instance, many studies in the literature analyze Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions solely in terms of economic factors or sectarian dynamics and provide limited information on how these factors interact with each other. This article aims to fill this gap and assess both the economic and ideological elements of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy together.

In this framework, the article will make an innovative contribution to the literature by analyzing the interaction of rentier state and sectarian state theories in the case of Saudi Arabia. This perspective can be extended to understand not only Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior but also the foreign policy choices of other similar states.

This article consists of seven main sections. The first section includes an introduction and presents the general purpose, significance, theoretical framework and research questions of the study. The second section details the existing theoretical frameworks in the literature and studies on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior. Chapter three explains the methodology of the study in detail and introduces the methods of data collection and analysis. Chapter four examines the impact of Saudi Arabia's rentier state structure on foreign policy. Chapter five analyzes the concept of a sectarian state and its place in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy

decisions. The sixth chapter discusses the findings and presents the general framework of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior. The final chapter evaluates the overall results of the study and provides recommendations for future research.

Review of Literature

There are different studies in the literature on the extent to which rentier economic structure and sectarianism influence the determination of foreign policy preferences. In this section, some of the related studies will be emphasized. In addition, the information and findings of these studies are presented in two different tables. In the first table, the studies on the foreign policy behavior of rentier states are mentioned and the country that the study focuses on and the findings obtained are presented. In the second table, the studies on the effects of sectarianism on foreign policy are mentioned and the country of focus of the study and the findings obtained are presented.

Table 1. Summary of related studies on foreign policy behaviour of rentier states

Study	Country	Key variables	Findings
Jenkins et al (2011)	Middle East and North Africa	Rentier state, rentier, international rents, state rents, international Dependence	Rentier states receive significant revenues from foreign sources such as oil exports, foreign aid, remittances and tourism, and these sources of income constitute important sources of finance for the survival of authoritarian regimes.
Pehlivan (2023)	Saudia Arabia	Regional power, state behaviour, internal threat, omnibalancing	As a regional power, Saudi Arabia prioritizes regime security over state and public security due to its monarchical structure and rentier economy.
Qasem (2016)	Saudia Arabia	Rentier state, multiple balancing, rentier economy	The country's strategy of "multiple balancing" by forging alliances with foreign powers to counterbalance internal threats with external threats emerges as a necessary choice given Saudi Arabia's competing loyalties and rentier state characteristics.
Baumann (2019)	Saudia Arabia	Rentier state, Eurocentrism	The formation and continuity of the Saudi state has been influenced by international factors, and this interaction has necessitated the rentier economy. Recent economic reforms under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman represent the latest chapter in this ongoing process of international engagement and transformation of the Saudi rentier state.
Aliyev (2023)	Iran	Rentier state, political	What distinguishes the Islamic Republic of Iran,

		economy and ideological motivation	which has regional ambitions and does not hesitate to engage in military conflicts in many regions in line with its geopolitical interests, from other rentier states rich in oil and natural resources is the motivation of the current ruling class to spread its ideological doctrine in the geographies it sees in its sphere of influence.
Kuru (2002)	Turkmenistan	Rentier state, foreign policy, and natural resources	The rentier state model appears to have explanatory power in both Turkmenistan's domestic and foreign policy. Moreover, the rentier state structure shapes Turkmenistan's perspectives on regional integration in Central Asia and promotes neutrality status.

The concept of rentierism, or rentier state theory, has been influential in analyzing the politics and foreign policy of the Gulf states of the Middle East. Rentier states generate significant revenues from foreign sources such as oil exports, foreign aid, remittances and tourism, and these sources of income constitute important sources of finance for the survival of authoritarian regimes (Jenkins et al., 2011). The foreign policy behavior of sectarian and rentier states in the Middle East is shaped by the complex interplay of authoritarianism and economic factors. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar effectively use sectarianism and rentier economics to maintain domestic control while pursuing ambitious regional policies (Watkins, 2020). By promoting sectarian differences, the foreign policy behavior of the Gulf rentier actors is seen to trigger regional tension and conflict (Potter, 2013). As a rentier state, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behavior is shaped by both internal and external factors. As a regional power, Saudi Arabia prioritizes regime security over state and public security due to its monarchical structure and rentier economy. It is argued that the country applies a “multiple balancing” strategy by forming alliances with foreign

powers to balance internal threats with external threats (Bülbül Pehlivan, 2023). This approach is argued to be necessary due to Saudi Arabia's competing loyalties and rentier state characteristics (Qasem, 2016). It is argued that the formation and continuity of the Saudi state was influenced by international factors, including the colonial era and the post-WWII American-dominated global economy, and that this interaction necessitated the rent economy. Baumann argues that recent economic reforms under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman represent the latest chapter in this ongoing process of international engagement and transformation of the Saudi rentier state (Baumann, 2019). Saudi Arabia's sectarian ideology, backed by a rent economy, plays an important role in maintaining authoritarianism and blocking intended political reforms (Freer, 2019). The country has taken ambitious steps to counter Iranian influence, such as intervening in Bahrain, launching airstrikes in Yemen, and supporting rebel groups in Syria. In addition, Saudi Arabia has also sought to attract Israel as a potential ally against Iran. The Kingdom's foreign policy continues to be shaped by its strategic location, vast oil resources, and religious significance (Nuruzzaman, 2019).

Table 2. Summary of related studies on foreign policy behaviour of sectarian states

Study	Country	Key variables	Findings
Watkins (2020)	Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar	Identity politics, Arap Uprisings, sectarianism, omnibalancing	Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar effectively use sectarianism to maintain internal control while pursuing ambitious regional policies.
Potter (2013)	Gulf States	Sectarianism, identity politics, ruling strategy	The foreign policy behavior of the Gulf's rent-seeking actors, which encourages sectarian differences, has triggered regional tension and

			conflict.
Freer (2019)	Saudia Arabia	Sectarianism, authoritarianism and rentierism	Saudi Arabia's sectarian ideology, backed by a rent economy, plays an important role in perpetuating authoritarianism and blocking intended political reforms.
Hashemi et al (2017)	Middle East	Sectarianization, ancient sectarian hatreds and authoritarian politics	Although the foreign policy of countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia is rooted in self-interest, this political preference incorporates religious elements and increasingly supports Sunni and Shia armed groups in the region. This approach balances ecumenism and sectarianism by adapting to different political contexts.
Tinas et al (2018)	Lebanon	Sectarian Identity and sectarianism	The absence of a coherent foreign policy stance in a weak state results in sectarian actors becoming the dominant actors in determining foreign policy choices.
Karimifard (2021)	Lebanon	Sectarianism , foreign policy fragile state and identity politics	With sectarianism overriding national identity in Lebanon The process of forming a fragile state has accelerated and this has affected the foreign policy orientation. Therefore, sectarian interests were taken into account in the foreign policy-making process instead of national interests.

Recent research challenges the notion of “ancient sectarian hatred” driving Middle Eastern conflicts, emphasizing instead the role of sectarianism in foreign policy as a strategic tool for regime survival and legitimacy. Although the foreign policy of countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia is rooted in self-interest, this political choice incorporates religious elements and increasingly supports Sunni and Shia armed groups in the region. This approach balances ecumenism and sectarianism by adapting to different political contexts (Hashemi et al, 2017). In this sense, Saudi Arabia is a convincing example of how sectarianism sustains the dynamics of authoritarianism, especially when it is supported by a rentier political economy. The presence of

multiple sects and hydrocarbon wealth allows regimes like Saudi Arabia to use divide-and-rule tactics to maintain control. It also enables the funding of media and educational institutions to maintain authoritarianism, especially when authoritarian dynamics are supported by a rentier political economy. Despite the authoritarian and rentier dynamics, the Saudi government has at times sought to include the Shia minority in the system, at least to some extent, depending on the political economy and

the relative influence of Shia and Sunni

Islamists (Freer, 2019). In the absence of a coherent foreign policy stance in a weak state, it is argued that the role of sectarian identity in defining self and others becomes central to understanding the foreign policy preferences of sectarian actors (Tinas et al, 2006). The most important thing that distinguishes the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has regional ambitions and does not hesitate to engage in military conflicts in many regions in line with its geopolitical interests, from other rentier states rich in oil and natural resources is the motivation of the current ruling class to spread its ideological doctrine in the geographies it sees in its sphere of influence (Aliyev, 2023). The rentier state model has an explanatory power in both Turkmenistan's domestic politics and foreign policy. It is also concluded that the rentier state structure has shaped Turkmenistan's perspective toward regional integration in Central Asia and encouraged neutrality status (Kuru, 2002). Karimifard argues that in Lebanon, with the dominance of sectarianism over national identity, the process of forming a fragile state has accelerated, which in turn affects foreign policy orientation. Therefore, it is emphasized that sectarian interest is taken into account instead of national interest in the

foreign policy making process (Karimifard, 2021).

Method of Study

1. Design of the Study

This study adopts a *comparative case study approach* to understand Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour. Since Saudi Arabia is a state characterised as both a “rentier state” and a “sectarian state”, it was chosen to analyze how these two different concepts shape its foreign policy behaviour. Case study analysis aims to reveal the motivations and influences behind Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decision-making processes. This design allows the research to conduct an in-depth investigation and understand the unique aspects of Saudi Arabia's behaviour within the framework of rentier state and sectarian state theories.

2. Data sources: The research utilizes both primary and secondary data sources:

Primary data sources: Official Saudi Arabian government statements, foreign policy declarations, reports of international organizations such as the UN and the World Bank, and Saudi foreign policy documents. In addition, documents and strategy reports published by regional organizations (e.g., the Gulf Cooperation Council, OPEC) were also examined. This data was used to directly understand Saudi Arabia's foreign policy strategies and economic policies.

Secondary data sources: Academic articles, books, previous research studies, and information from existing literature on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. In particular, in-depth analysis of studies on rentier state theory (e.g. Hossein Mahdavy, Hazem Beblawi, Giacomo Luciani) and sectarian state theory (e.g. Nader Hashemi, Danny Postel) was conducted. These theories provided the basic framework for understanding Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices.

3. Data collection method: Data were collected through a systematic literature review and document analysis:

- **Literature review:** Existing research and theories on the foreign policy behaviour of rentier and sectarian states were reviewed.

This review was conducted to understand the factors that influence Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and how these factors interact. In this process, relevant articles and books were collected using academic databases (e.g. JSTOR, Web of Science, Google Scholar).

- **Document analysis:** National and international documents, official statements, policy papers and reports of international organizations on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy were analyzed. This method of analysis provided an in-depth understanding of the economic and ideological elements shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. In particular, the focus was on economic reform programs and religion-based diplomatic initiatives that have shaped Saudi Arabia's regional and international strategies.

4. Data analysis methods: The data analysis methods used in the study are as follows:

- **Qualitative analysis techniques:** Content analysis and comparative analysis techniques were used to understand the key motivations and strategic objectives behind Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour. Content analysis involves examining the language and narratives used in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy documents and government statements. This reveals how rentier and sectarian state elements are integrated into foreign policy. Comparative analysis analyzes how Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour is similar or different from that of other rentier and sectarian states.
- **Statistical analysis:** Using Saudi Arabia's economic indicators (e.g. oil revenues, GDP ratios, foreign aid amounts), the relationships between foreign policy behaviour and economic structures were examined. For this purpose, correlation and regression analyses were conducted using statistical software such as SPSS.

5. Reliability and validity: Several strategies were followed to increase the reliability and validity of the study:

- **Use of multiple sources (triangulation):** Consistency of the information obtained by using both primary and secondary data sources was ensured. Data from different sources were compared and cross-checked.
- **Grounding in the theoretical framework:** The research is firmly grounded in the theories of rentier state and sectarian state. This theoretical framework provides a systematic approach to analyzing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour.
- **Methodological transparency:** The methods of data collection and analysis used are clearly stated and how these processes were carried out is detailed. This increases the replicability and credibility of the study.

6. Ethical considerations: This research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. It should be emphasized that all data and information used were obtained from open sources.

7. Limitations of the study: This study has some limitations:

- **Data access and restrictions:** In an authoritarian state such as Saudi Arabia, access to some primary data may be limited. This can narrow the scope of the information obtained.
- **Limitations of the theoretical scope:** While rentier state and sectarian state theories are important tools for understanding Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, they may be insufficient to explain all foreign policy behaviour. For instance, Saudi Arabia's strategic decisions in response to changing regional and international dynamics may create unique situations that these theories do not foresee.
- **Time and geographical scope:** The research focuses on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour in a specific time period. Therefore, the findings may not be

generalizable to other periods or different geographical contexts.

Results and Discussion

1. An analysis on the rentier state concept: the case of Saudi Arabia

Hossein Mahdavy coined the term “rentier state” in the 1970s to explain the economic, political and social consequences of the exploitation of state revenues by a dominant group and its constituents. Mahdavy, who attributes the conditions for the formation of a rentier state to the export of the natural resources within its borders to foreign markets and the absorption of the income obtained from this export by the dominant group and its components, argues that there is no independent economic enterprise and a healthy taxation system in such political organisations. All segments of society can benefit from this commercial interaction, which results from the sale of the country's natural resources to foreign markets, increasing welfare and income. Mahdavy argues that in such a political organisation model where there are no autonomous economic enterprises and taxation mechanisms, it is difficult for the existing social segments to claim any economic, political and social rights against the state, and in such an environment, civil society, which has an important place in the emancipation process, cannot develop. Thus, Mahdavy emphasises that in the absence of independent economic enterprise, a healthy tax system and civil society, a Western-type state and society cannot exist. Mahdavy argues that in such societies, a “random” state apparatus emerges as a result of political regimes distributing state revenues among producers as they wish and in line with their own interests. In this case, the free society will be replaced by docile subjects and the liberal economic state system will be replaced by a rentier state system.¹

Another author who studied and contributed to the concept of rentier state in the 1980s is Jacques Delacroix. Jacques Delacroix, who focused on why a rentier state system emerged in these societies

¹ Mahdavy, H. (1970). The patterns and problems of economic development in rentier states: the case of Iran. *Studies in the economic history of the Middle East*, 428, 67.

instead of a Western-type state system, brought a new definition to the rentier state model and used the definition of “*distributive state*”. Arguing that there is no class exploitation in the classical sense in the oil-rich authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, Delacroix argues that the most important reason for the effectiveness of the bureaucratic structure in such countries is the high level of representative powers within the state. Emphasising that the structural conditions in oil-rich countries force the societies in these geographies to accept the existence of the rentier state, Delacroix, like Mahdavy, states that for this reason, no civil society structure can claim any rights to the regimes.²

In the period after the 1980s, authors researching the rentier state have focused on the question of how much the rent system formed in such state structures affects the formation process of political regimes. The continuity of income in rent-based economic structures is argued to be the reason for the durability of these regimes for many years. Giacomo Luciani is one of the authors of this school who analyzed the concept of a rentier state in Arab countries. Luciani used the concept of a “*distributional state*” instead of a rentier state and divided states into two as “*distributional and production states*”. Luciani, who considers the oil-rich Arab countries in the “*distributional state*” category, states that the revenues obtained from oil sales in these states have a direct impact on the formation of political regime types in those countries. Emphasizing that the revenues obtained by states are as important as the revenues they generate, Luciani argues that the relationship between “*revenue and expenditure*” is of vital importance.³

Luciani defines rentier or distributional states as states that derive their general economic revenues from oil and other natural resources. Luciani states that some elements of democracy may be partially visible in such states, but this is not an effective nuance in legitimizing these regimes. Luciani argues that in production states, the revenues generated by the society are based on non-state sources, and unlike distributional states, these countries have an

economic policy based on tax revenues. In his analysis, Luciani places countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain at the centre of the rentier state definition.⁴

Another author, Hazem Beblawi, emphasizes that the main revenues of the state are based on the sale of oil and that all this capital income is managed by a small ruler who holds the state administration in his hands as the definition of “*rentier state*”, has placed Arab states at the centre of his study. Emphasizing that this capital income has nothing to do with production, Beblawi made the most important contribution to the literature with the concept of “*rentier mentality*”. After characterizing the main features of the rentier state, Beblawi states that this type of economy creates a certain mentality - the rentier mentality. Beblawi shows what he means by rentier mentality and what distinguishes it from traditional economic behavior is that it lacks a Western type of work-payback system. Beblawi argues that the determination of the conditions that determine the distribution of income in such states by a small elite prevents the emergence of freedom and civic consciousness, leads to a lack of work ethic and the emergence of accidental wealth. Emphasizing that there is a hierarchical order in such rent-based economic structures and that in such an order, the ruling elite, family members and influential tribes are at the top of this hierarchical structure, Beblawi states that civil society and an inquisitive citizen profile cannot be mentioned in these models of governance, the majority of which are Arab countries.⁵

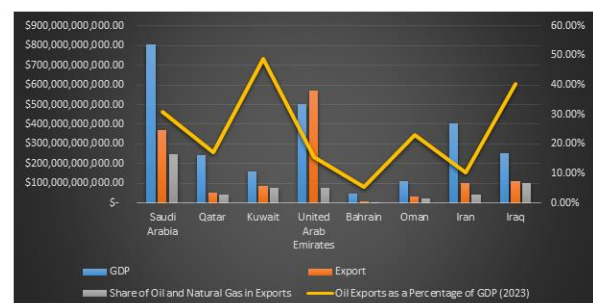


Figure 1. The share of oil and gas in gdp and exports in

² Altunışık, M. B. (2014). Rentier State theory and the Arab uprisings: An appraisal. *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 11(42), 75-91.

³ Beblawi, H., & Luciani, G. (Eds.). (2015). *The rentier state*. Routledge.

⁴ Beblawi, H., & Luciani, G. (Eds.). (2015). *The rentier state*. Routledge.

⁵ Beblawi, H. (2015). The rentier state in the Arab world. In *The Arab State* (pp. 85-98). Routledge.

the Gulf rentier states (2023) Source: International trade center

Referring to the oil-rich Arab countries as the most perfect examples of rentier states, Beblawi states that oil constitutes the most important part of the budget and export revenues of such countries. Beblawi defines such countries as “*multi-layered rentier states*”, placing the richest countries of the Gulf such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab States at the centre of this definition. Beblawi also contributed to the literature with the concept of non-oil-rich “*quasi-rentier states*” and chose Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Yemen as exemplary countries to explain this definition.⁶

Jill Crystal is one of the authors who put forward the argument that oil revenues influence the formation of the form of government. Crystal, using the examples of Kuwait and Qatar to illustrate the impact of oil revenues on the emergence of the new state mechanism, emphasises that in these two countries, as a result of the compromise between the elite classes, the Emirs, who held political power, assumed the role of distributors of state revenues to the society at large.

Like other authors mentioned above, Crystal argues that in return for all this prosperity, there is no political demand for political rights and no tendency to change the political power in the society at large, including the elite class.⁷

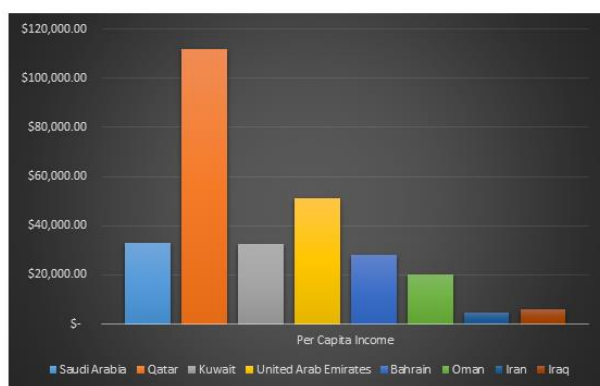


Figure 2. The share of national income per capita in the

⁶ Ibid..

⁷ Crystal, J. (1989). Coalitions in oil monarchies: Kuwait and Qatar. *Comparative politics*, 21(4), 427-443.

Gulf rentier states (2023) Source: International trade center

In his comparative analysis of Iran and Saudi Arabia, Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, one of the third generation of such authors on rentier state theory, emphasised that political freedoms are as important a factor in the development of states as economic freedoms. The most important reason for the failure of the economic liberalisation policies of Iraq and Saudi Arabia in the 1990s was the lack of the same reforms in the field of political liberalisation.⁸

Gwenn Okruhlik, another third-generation rentier state theorist, makes a different contribution to the literature, arguing that unlike the first and second generation authors, prosperity from oil revenues is not sufficient for political stability. Unlike other authors, Okruhlik argues that equal distribution of rents is important, otherwise opposition movements may arise. The author argues that oil revenues should be seen as an important factor that could lead to opposition movements in the event of a possible unequal distribution, rather than being a tool of oppression for the political regimes in control of the country. Therefore, Okruhlik emphasizes that oil revenues can provide significant advantages for the opposition as well as the government.⁹

In conclusion, it is seen that the common idea of all the theorists who have defined the *rentier state* above and who are known as the first (Hossein Mahdavy, Jacques Delacroix) and second (Giacomo Luciani, Hazem Beblawi and Jill Crystal) generation of writers in the literature in this field is that a large part of the budget and export revenues consist of oil sales and the main actor in the distribution of these revenues is the ruling class. In addition, all these authors state that the economies of such states are not production economies in the classical sense, that state revenues are distributed to all segments of society, even if not equally, and that there is welfare, education, health, employment and housing opportunities are provided and political participation and demands cannot be mentioned. Moreover, first and second-generation authors argue that oil sales and subsequent huge

⁸ Chaudhry, K. A. (1994). Economic liberalization and the lineages of the rentier state. *Comparative Politics*, 1-25.

⁹ Okruhlik, G. (1999). Rentier wealth, unruly law, and the rise of opposition: the political economy of oil states. *Comparative Politics*, 295-315.

revenues in countries with such abundant natural wealth are crucial in shaping forms of governance. Since the 1990s, new approaches to the concept of a rentier state have emerged. These authors, while generally agreeing with the ideas of the first and second generation authors, analyzed the institutional similarities in all rentier states and sought to explain the political differences in these regimes. It is seen that the Gulf countries are generally placed at the centre of all the above definitions of a rentier state. The most important reason for this is that these countries are rich in oil and natural gas, that this wealth is reflected in all segments of the society by the ruling elite of the country with the title of “*distributive function*” and that the economy of the country consists of a distribution economy based on rent, not production. Thus, it has been determined that wealth and prosperity in these countries do not stem from economic liberalization, but from a network of revenues derived from foreign sales. After the above evaluations, it becomes clear that these countries, which lack political liberalization as well as economic liberalization, are open to foreign economic relations, attach importance to foreign direct investments and their political relations with the Western geography are stable and based on mutual interests. Within the scope of all these theoretical definitions, Saudi Arabia, which is at the center of the oil-based rent economy, has an important place in explaining the rentier state theory. The Saudi State, which is characterized as a traditional neo-patrimonial rentier state, has been making important reforms in this sense by opening its rentier economy to globalization. Especially after 2015, the internationalization process of this rentier economy accelerated under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Along with the successful integration of the Saudi rentier economy into the global financial system, this theocratic monarchy has also been making effective foreign policy moves as a regional power. In 2015, with King Salman’s ascension to the throne and Mohammed bin Salman’s appointment as Crown Prince in 2017, the Saudi Kingdom’s struggle for regional influence gained new momentum. Saudi Arabia, led by Mohammed bin Salman, led the anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen and mobilized against Iranian-backed groups. In 2017,

the Saudi regime continued this aggressive foreign policy stance by launching a blockade against Qatar. Having eliminated all his domestic rivals with the ouster of Mohammed bin Nayef, Mohammed bin Salman was accused of the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, which narrowed his room for manoeuvre in the foreign arena and led to a negative image in the international community for a long time.¹⁰

The Saudi Monarchy’s traditionally positive relations with the West have led it to integrate its rentier economy into the global system. If we conceptualize the Saudi state as a neo-patrimonial rentier state, we can see that the royal family is nurturing patronage networks to maintain its authority and rent access as much as possible. In this sense, the portrayal of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman as an “*innovative*” and “*reformist*” leader, especially by some of the British and American media outlets, gives us a clue about the Saudi State’s foreign policy preferences in the near and medium term. The Crown Prince’s impression of himself to Western public opinion seems to be that of a “*globalizer*” who opposes the coalition of “*traditionalists*” who seek to isolate Saudi Arabia from globalization. The granting of driving rights to women, the partial reduction of the powers of religious police and the holding of a number of Western-based international cultural events in Saudi Arabia can be shown as “*globalization*” moves of the country’s rentier economic and political structure.¹¹ These “*revolution from above*” moves led by Mohammed Bin Salman have caused discomfort within the internal balance of power. A significant part of the group at the forefront of these discontents are the Saudi ulema. These disturbances have not been limited to the ulema, but have also led to power conflicts with important businessmen, including some members of the royal family. The most concrete example of this power struggle within the family is the detention of nearly 200 high-profile royals and businessmen, including Prince Walid bin Talal, one of the richest businessmen in the world, at Riyadh’s Ritz Carlton hotel in 2017 as part of a corruption operation. It is assessed that all these developments are part of the moves to pave the way for the Crown Prince as much

¹⁰ Baumann, H. (2019). The transformation of Saudi Arabia’s rentier state and ‘the international’. *Globalizations*, 16(7), 1165-1183.

¹¹ Ibid..

as possible and to transform him into an absolute/single authority.¹² With its rent-seeking economic resources integrated into the global system, Saudi Arabia is trying to reposition itself on the international stage. With a gross domestic product of \$1 trillion, the theocratic monarchy appears to be aiming for an “internationalised” economy that can keep pace with the global energy transition and a foreign policy less dependent on the United States. Since 2017, Saudi policy has been shaped by its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in an effort to increase the kingdom's regional and global influence. In working towards these goals, the Kingdom has increasingly placed itself at the centre of high-stakes diplomacy and mediation efforts and has not hesitated to engage in regional proxy conflicts with traditional rivals such as Iran. Behind many of the royal regime's recent domestic and foreign policy innovations lies the crown prince's “Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030”, launched in 2016. The main goal of “Saudi Vision 2030” is to enable Saudi Arabia to better weather the global transition to clean energy through economic diversification. Aiming primarily to reduce the country's dependence on energy exports, it is also a plan to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and develop public service sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. Riyadh is therefore seeking to significantly expand its non-oil economic activities, aiming to generate alternative sources of income by promoting religious and non-religious tourism. In this context, the Royal government plans to attract foreign residents and capital through mega-projects such as the Neom Line, a linear city of no more than 200 meters in width, 170 km long along the Red Sea coast, to be equipped with renewable energy and accommodate nine million people. Through the Vision 2030 Project, the theocratic monarchy has also set aside an estimated \$700 billion to make unprecedented investments in developing non-oil sectors such as renewable energy, sports and entertainment, and artificial intelligence. As part of all these investments, the Saudi Kingdom aims to develop its professional soccer league, with superstars such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Neymar playing in its league. The country, which hosts international sporting

competitions, is also trying to compete with traditional sports nations by investing billions of dollars in golf, mixed martial arts, athletics and various other sports outside of football.¹³



Figure 3. An Analysis on the sectarian state concept: the case of Saudi Arabia Source: Oxford analytical

Muhammad bin Salman has begun to pursue a foreign policy that places a new emphasis on improving relations, particularly with its neighbors, and on diplomatic initiatives to resolve long-standing conflicts in the Middle East, while pursuing controlled reform moves at home. First of all, Saudi Arabia is seeking to expand its foreign relations to bring in more foreign investment. In this context, Riyadh has been hosting a number of regional and global sessions, notably the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Moreover, the recent visits to Riyadh by leaders such as US President Joe Biden, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida are seen as an important stage in the royal administration's relations with the outside world. The Royal Government, led by the Crown Prince, has displayed a multidimensional foreign policy behaviour aimed at expanding its geostrategic room for manoeuvre. The decision to end the blockade against Qatar in 2021 and the move to normalize relations; the start of negotiations to re-establish relations with Iran in 2023; indirect talks with Houthi rebels to end the kingdom's military intervention in Yemen give clues to the theocratic government's

¹² Kirkpatrick, D. D. (2017). Saudi Arabia arrests 11 princes, including billionaire Alwaleed bin Talal. *The New York Times*, 4.

¹³ Jacobs, A. (2023). Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy. *International Crisis Group*, 14(9), 2023.

foreign policy preferences in the near future.¹⁴ The establishment of a Saudi-led Red Sea Council in 2020, which includes states bordering the basin; the establishment of a dialogue partnership with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2023; initiatives to become a member of BRICS; and mediation moves in conflict zones such as Sudan show how the Kingdom is aiming for a wide-ranging foreign policy strategy in the new era. It is possible to say that one of the important factors underlying the royal administration's preference for a multidimensional foreign policy that includes different actors is Saudi Arabia's fears about the credibility of the United States. In this context, an important part of Saudi Arabia's efforts to break free from its traditional dependence on the United States is to deepen its political and economic ties with rival powers such as Russia and China. Dialogues with Shanghai and BRICS can be seen in this context. Whatever benefits Saudi Arabia may reap from its recalibrated foreign policy (and it will undoubtedly reap some), it will inevitably face obstacles unless the underlying fundamental challenges are addressed.^{15,33}

Although the Saudi administration has tried to resolve disputes with Iran by prioritizing diplomacy, these two countries, which represent different sectarian and ethnic ideologies in the theocratic sense, continue to be in a state of military and ideological conflict in different fields, especially in Yemen. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's positioning of itself as the Gulf's main actor disturbs the United Arab Emirates, which has a significant weight in the region. On the eve of normalization with Israel, the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its spillover into Iran, Lebanon and Syria has narrowed the Crown Prince's room for manoeuvre. Finally, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and Saudi Arabia's human rights record has led the Crown Prince to be viewed unfavourably by many US politicians and civil society actors. All of these factors are seen as impediments to the Kingdom's recent proactive foreign policy behaviour.

2. An Analysis on the sectarian state concept: The case of Saudi Arabia

Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel argue that at the heart of sectarian foreign policy is the manipulation of religious phenomena by authoritarian regimes to maintain their power and increase their legitimacy. They argue that the way to understand a sectarian policy is to focus on political and socio-economic factors. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel define sectarian foreign policy as a process that is shaped by political actors and involves the manipulation of ideological sentiments around identity markers for the realization of political goals. Arguing that geopolitical rivalry triggers sectarian foreign policy, Hashemi and Postel argue that this problem cannot be solved without stopping the rivalry and conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are struggling for influence in different regions.^{16,35}

It is known that sectarian ideology is an important factor in determining the domestic and foreign policies of Middle Eastern countries. Some states in the Middle East, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, use sectarian ideology as a soft power factor and show sectarian reactions in regional conflict areas. The common feature of the sectarian foreign policies of these or similar states is that they try to support and influence groups with the same sectarian sensitivities in the regions they want to expand their sphere of influence in line with their own interests. Iran and Saudi Arabia in particular are considered to pursue a sharply sectarian foreign policy in this sense. Both countries make strong use of the sectarian factor in many regions where they are in competition and conflict to expand their spheres of influence, and they are engaged in a struggle for religious leadership at the same time as the regional competition.¹⁷ Sectarian behaviour in foreign policy plays an important role in deciding how regional alliances, various states and non-state actors in the Middle East will act. Particularly in the last two decades, the politics of sectarianism in the Middle East has been on the rise. The Iraqi civil war unleashed horrific images of sectarian massacres,

¹⁴ Hafezi, P., Abdallah, N., & El Yaakoubi, A. (2023). Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties in talks brokered by China. *Reuters*, March, 11.

¹⁵ Jacobs, A. (2023). Understanding Saudi Arabia's Recalibrated Foreign Policy. *International Crisis Group*, 14(9), 2023.

¹⁶ Hashemi, N., & Postel, D. (2017). Sectarianization: Mapping the new politics of the Middle East. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15(3), 1-13.

¹⁷ Valbjørn, M. (2019). What's so sectarian about sectarian politics? Identity politics and authoritarianism in a new Middle East. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 19(1), 127-149.

exacerbated underlying identity divisions and triggered the formation of armed sectarian militias backed by different regional states. The ensuing civil war in Syria further fueled this development and greatly accelerated the unravelling of sectarian dynamics within the country. The geopolitical rivalry between states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia over regional leadership has further fueled sectarian behaviour in foreign policy and has been one of the reasons why many regions such as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Syria have become centres of proxy wars.¹⁸ In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, regional powers in the Middle East have expanded their support to sectarian groups they perceive as close to them in order to expand their sphere of influence, and the paramilitary organisation model has proliferated in the regions where conflict areas have taken place. At the regional level, it is argued that the post-2011 collapse or weakening of powers such as Egypt and Syria created space for the emergence of new actors such as the UAE and Qatar, in addition to major powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and that the sectarian factor has become an important factor in determining foreign policy behaviour. Moreover, the growing importance of sectarian identities in the post-2011 period has opened a space for regional actors to make foreign policy choices based on sectarian affinities among divided societies in order to realise their geopolitical aspirations. In this context, regional powers have been able to exert influence by developing relations with local actors, while local actors have been able to position themselves in certain ways in search of material and intellectual support from regional actors.¹⁹ The prominence of religion or sect in the structure of states in the Middle East causes religious or sectarian arguments to play a central role in the policies implemented by the regimes. States such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, which strongly apply Islamic and especially sectarian rhetoric in their foreign policies, can have strong geopolitical and ideological influence in different geographies of the world, especially in the Middle East, through identities close to their sectarian ideology. The role of the religious argument within the political organizations of Middle Eastern

states allows the ruling class to use religious discourses as a means of consolidation and mobilisation of the masses in domestic and foreign policy. In this context, when the ideological motivations of local actors in conflict areas and regional powers overlap, the sectarian factor is effectively used on the ground as a complementary element of different foreign policy instruments, especially military and financial support.²⁰ Sectarian foreign policy behaviours are more prominent in the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which reflect the Islamic form of government in their constitutional doctrines and are governed by Sharia law, and in the struggle to expand their spheres of influence in different geographies, compared to other Middle Eastern countries. With the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 post-Arab Spring Syrian civil war, there has been an increase in sectarian-based violence fueled by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In this rivalry, which has risen to the level of proxy wars between the two countries, the sectarian factor has been used as a means to consolidate social groups close to them and mobilize them when necessary. Despite Saudi Arabia's economic and political support for Salafist movements, Iran's support for Shiite groups has led to geopolitical, military and sectarian confrontations between the two countries in different geographies. In this sense, it is possible to say that both countries have built a space for themselves on sectarian lines to strengthen their spheres of influence in foreign policy. Ideological states in the Middle East, which seek to expand their regional sphere of influence, have the skill and experience to blend sectarian ideology with realpolitik and use it in the field. There are two countries that have this skill and experience and are engaged in a political and military struggle to expand their sphere of influence in different areas of the Middle East. One of them is Iran and the other is Saudi Arabia. Both countries, which we can characterize as sectarian ideological states, emphasize ideology and pragmatism in their foreign policy behaviour. In addition to Iran and Saudi Arabia, there are a number of other countries whose constitutional order is based on Sharia rule and where strict Islamic rules

¹⁸ Mabon, S. (2019). Desectarianization: Looking beyond the sectarianization of Middle Eastern politics. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 17(4), 23-35.

¹⁹ Gengler, J. (2020). Sectarianism from the top down or bottom up? Explaining the Middle East's unlikely de-

sectarianization after the Arab Spring. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18(1), 109-113.

²⁰ Neo, R. (2020). Religious securitisation and institutionalised sectarianism in Saudi Arabia. *Critical Studies on Security*, 8(3), 203-222.

are applied. The countries mentioned in Table 3 are known to be Sharia-ruled countries where religious ideology is strongly invoked to maintain domestic political order. What distinguishes Iran and Saudi Arabia from these countries is that sectarian ideology is strongly and aggressively reflected in their foreign policy behaviour. Both countries, which are engaged in regional competition, use sectarian ideology to expand their sphere of influence in the regions they perceive to be within their sphere of influence and spend enormous expenditures, both financially and militarily, to mobilize the masses. In this context, what distinguishes these two countries from other countries that reflect religious ideology in their constitutional order is the effective use of the sectarian factor not only for internal mobilization but also for external mobilization in different geographies.

Table 3. Countries that are constitutionally governed by sharia law.

Country	Law System	Government System
Iran	Sharia Law	Presidential system
Saudi Arabia	Sharia Law	Monarchy
Pakistan	Sharia Law	Parliamentary system
Afghanistan	Sharia Law	Presidential system
Mauritania	Sharia Law	Semi-presidential system
Brunei Darussalam	Sharia Law	Monarchy
Qatar	Sharia Law	Monarchy
Oman	Sharia Law	Monarchy
Yemen	Sharia Law	Presidential system

Source: World population review

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is known to be a regional geopolitical rivalry as well as a sectarian one. The struggle for influence undertaken by both countries in many Middle Eastern regions, especially Yemen, is seen as a reflection of sectarian arguments on foreign policy. This instrumentalization of sectarian ideology for geopolitical purposes by both countries has the theological implications of changing the way Islam is interpreted and generating new religious discourses about the status and legitimacy of a particular

minority or sectarian group.²¹

Saudi Arabia has been transformed by the United States into both the religious ideological and financial source of the resistance in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation, emphasizing Saudi Arabia as the protector of the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina. In particular, the occupation and war in Afghanistan played a pivotal role in the spread of Saudi Arabia's sectarian doctrine to the regions within its sphere of influence. Saudi Arabia's attempts to export its sectarian ideology entered a new phase with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Since then, geo-sectarian rivalry has emerged between the two countries, and the struggle to establish both religious/ideological and political supremacy over the groups close to them in the regions that are assumed to be in a struggle for influence has begun. Thus, a new era was entered in terms of the application of sectarian doctrine in foreign policy.²²

Throughout the 1980s, the opportunity provided by the international conjuncture for the spread of Saudi-led Wahhabism in South Asia allowed the Kingdom to allocate vast funds to these regions. Following the invasion of Afghanistan, Saudi funding of Taliban madrassas on Pakistani soil was one of the key factors behind the success of the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet occupation. In the 1990s, the kingdom expanded the geographical reach of Saudi-led Wahhabism in sub-Saharan Africa with the construction of mosques and increased funding for religious education, and continued to use the sectarian ideology effectively in its foreign policy in different regions. The Saudi regime, along with Iran's strong use of sectarian ideology in its foreign policy, has increased its propaganda activities towards Muslims in the Persian Gulf, the Philippines, Indonesia and Central Asia, North America and Europe. Concerns over the strengthening of Iran's sectarian ideological influence in the same geographies have been one of the main driving motivations behind the Saudi regime's placing sectarian activities in these regions at the centre of its foreign policy.²³

²¹ Haynes, J. (2008). Religion and foreign policy making in the USA, India and Iran: towards a research agenda. *Third World Quarterly*, 29(1), 143-165.

²² Ibid.,

²³ Mandaville, P., & Hamid, S. (2018). *Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

The Saudi regime, through the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Da'wah and Guidance, the Muslim World League, the World Muslim Youth League, the Islamic University of Medina and many other public and private institutions, effectively uses religious ideology as a soft power factor in its foreign policy in different geographies where Muslim populations live, and continues to transfer huge financial resources to these institutions for this purpose. In addition, foundations such as the International Organization for Relief, Welfare and Development, al-Haramain and al-Wakf al-Islami are other institutions that carry out ideological propaganda for the Saudi regime. These and similar institutions have at times been accused by the international community of financing terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and have been banned in some countries. Another factor contributing to the Saudi regime's policy of transnational sectarian ideological expansion is that the Kingdom is seen as a centre of labour attraction for Muslim populations in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and many other regions. Muslims in these regions preferred the Kingdom's territory to work in oil facilities for high wages, providing an important opportunity for the regime to spread its sectarian influence among this labour population.²⁴

The Islamic Republic of Iran is another country that utilizes sectarian ideology as one of the soft power elements in foreign policy, effectively and by deploying armed elements when necessary. The Iranian revolutionary leadership, which adopted Shiism as the official sect of the state and turned it into a constitutional doctrine, has been making a concerted effort to consolidate its "co-religionists" in different geographies in order to strengthen its geopolitical influence.

The early aspects of the revolution that emphasized overcoming inequality, injustice and neo-imperialism allowed Khomeini to be perceived as a third-world visionary and to gain support in the developing world. These and other characteristics of the revolution made it popular not only among Shia communities abroad but also in Sunni-dominated geographies such as Nigeria and Indonesia. Hence,

the revolutionary leadership emphasized religious cultural diplomacy from the early years and sectarian cultural diplomacy from the 2000s onwards.^{25,34}

In conclusion, the general characteristic of the countries listed in the table above, which can be characterized as sectarian states, is that the constitutional order of the state is determined according to Islamic principles. However, Iran and Saudi Arabia differ from these countries in terms of their expansionist, interventionist and sectarian foreign policy tendencies. The most important difference is that they have undertaken a mission in this sense by transforming sectarian ideology into one of the determining elements of their foreign policies in the regions they assume to be within their sphere of influence. The transfer of billions of dollars as resources by these countries to different countries for political, military and cultural purposes does not have the same consequences for both countries. Although Saudi Arabia's policy of spreading its ideological doctrine in different geographies contributes to the emergence of fundamentalist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the Kingdom's bilateral relations with the US, the UK and other countries that have an important place in the balance of power allow this or similar negativities to be ignored. However, Iran, which has problems with the international system and has hostile relations with countries that have a significant share in the balance of power, such as the United States, does not have the advantages of the Kingdom. In the regions that Iran defines as the "line of resistance", Hezbollah and similar Shiite organizations that it supports are defined as terrorist organizations and their space to act within the international system is restricted.

Therefore, Shiism and Wahhabism, which Iran and Saudi Arabia present as their most important sources of ideological motivation, have an important share and motivation in terms of both consolidating their domestic public opinion and serving their expansionist goals in their foreign policies.

Findings

By analysing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour within the framework of rentier and sectarian state

²⁴ Al-Rasheed, M. (2011). Sectarianism as counter-revolution: Saudi responses to the Arab Spring. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11(3), 513-526.

²⁵ Mandaville, P., & Hamid, S. (2018). Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy. Brookings.

theories, this research reveals how these two theoretical frameworks work together and complement each other. The findings show how Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is shaped at the intersection of economic resources and sectarian ideologies and how these dynamics determine the country's role in international relations. The research findings can be summarised under the following headings.

1. Rentier state characteristics and foreign policy strategies:

The findings of the study reveal that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy behaviour is significantly shaped by rentier state characteristics. Saudi Arabia has an economy based on oil revenues and uses these revenues to maintain domestic political stability and to finance its strategic foreign policy objectives. In this context, the rentier state theory emphasises that economic resources play a decisive role in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions. By utilising oil revenues, the country gains economic leverage in the international arena and uses this economic power to maintain its relations with the US and Western countries in particular. Saudi Arabia's economic structure, based on oil revenues, also supports the country's efforts to maintain its internal security and political authority and ensures the legitimacy of the regime. Economic independence provides Saudi Arabia with flexibility in foreign policy and helps the country position itself as a strategic actor in the regional and sometimes international arena.

2. Sectarian state behavior:

Sectarian elements play a prominent role in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. By adopting the Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam, Saudi Arabia has developed a sectarian foreign policy strategy. This strategy is used to increase its regional power, especially against a Shiite rival such as Iran. The research reveals that Saudi Arabia's sectarian state behaviour is not only an ideological choice but also functions as an instrument of power in regional and international politics. The military intervention in Yemen, the policies towards Bahrain, the soft power policy towards the Sunni population in different countries of the world, especially in Southeast Asia, and the support for the opposition groups in Syria are concrete examples of Saudi Arabia's sectarian foreign

policy strategy. These examples reflect Saudi Arabia's efforts to position itself as a regional leader and protector of the Sunni Islamic world. Sectarian ideology has become a tool used by Saudi Arabia to increase its geopolitical influence against its regional rivals.

3. The interaction of rentier economy and sectarian elements:

The findings show how rentier state structure and sectarian ideology work together and support each other in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The rentier state structure makes it possible to use sectarian ideology as a tool in foreign policy. The economic power provided by oil revenues enables Saudi Arabia to finance its sectarian policies and supports the implementation of these policies. This situation stands out as one of the main factors guiding Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Saudi Arabia uses its oil revenues to promote its sectarian policies and provides financial support to movements and groups that support the Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam. For instance, the military intervention in Yemen demonstrates Saudi Arabia's endeavour to consolidate its regional power by utilising both its economic resources and its sectarian ideology. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's strategic positions against Iran emphasise the role of sectarian.

4. Regional and global impacts:

The findings of the study also show how Saudi Arabia's rentier and sectarian state characteristics affect the country's position in the international arena. By combining oil revenues and sectarian strategies, Saudi Arabia increases its influence at both regional and global levels. At the regional level, Saudi Arabia has reinforced its sectarian strategies through direct or indirect interventions in internal conflicts in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Lebanon. These interventions are part of Saudi Arabia's efforts to position itself as the leader of other Sunni states in the region by emphasising its Sunni Muslim identity. At the global level, Saudi Arabia maintains strategic partnerships with the United States and Western countries and continues to be an important player in global energy markets by utilising its economic power. These strategies increase Saudi Arabia's influence at both the regional and global levels and expand the country's room for manoeuvre in foreign

policy.

5. Theoretical contributions and new perspectives:

Finally, this study offers new perspectives for understanding the effects of sectarian and rentier state theories on foreign policy behaviour through the case of Saudi Arabia. The findings show that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is a complex structure in which both economic and ideological elements work together. This makes an important contribution to understanding how sectarian and rentier state approaches, which are usually treated separately in the literature, work together and complement each other. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is shaped not only by economic or ideological factors but also by the interaction of these elements. This provides new theoretical approaches and methodological tools for future research that can be extended to understand the foreign policy choices of other similar states.

Conclusion

This study has comprehensively analysed the foreign policy behaviour of sectarian and rentier states through the case of Saudi Arabia. It is shown that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is shaped by both economic and ideological factors. The research findings revealed how the Kingdom's economic structure based on oil revenues and its sectarian ideology built on the Sunni Islamic identity interacted in the country's foreign policy decisions. In the context of rentier state theory, the Saudi Government's oil revenues play a critical role in ensuring the country's economic and political stability and are used to finance foreign policy initiatives. This economic dependence determines the country's scope of action in foreign policy and influences its strategic position in international relations. At the same time, within the scope of the sectarian state theory, it is seen that Saudi Arabia uses the Sunni Islamic identity as a regional power tool and pursues a sectarian foreign policy, especially against rival Shiite states such as Iran. This is considered as a part of its endeavour to expand its regional sphere of influence.

One of the most important findings of the study is how these two models are integrated with each other and how they shape Saudi Arabia's foreign policy.

Saudi Arabia's rentier state structure, combined with sectarian strategies, reveals a structure that aims both to ensure domestic stability and to increase effectiveness in foreign policy. This shows that the country's foreign policy is shaped not only by economic or ideological factors but also by the interaction of these factors.

In conclusion, this research provides a new perspective to understand how sectarian and rentier state theories are embodied through the case of Saudi Arabia and their impact on international relations. Future studies can expand the theoretical approaches and provide a deeper understanding by examining similar applications of these two models in other states.

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