



The weakening of sectarianism in Saudi foreign policy: New paths and new challenges

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Abstract

In the complex political landscape of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has always been under scrutiny. For a long time, sectarianism has played a certain role in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, but in recent years, Saudi Arabia has shown a significant tendency to weaken sectarianism. This transformation is driven by multiple factors, including domestic social stability, economic development needs, as well as regional and international pressures. Saudi Arabia has been actively implementing the weakening of sectarianism through a series of measures such as adjusting its diplomatic philosophy, reforming religious policies, and remodel its international image. However, this process is not without obstacles. Saudi Arabia faces many challenges such as resistance from domestic conservative forces, the complexity of sectarian relations in the region, and the uncertainty of the international political environment. Saudi Arabia's efforts to weaken sectarianism have had extensive and profound impacts on the political landscape of the Middle East and international relations. It has brought new opportunities for regional peace, stability, and cooperation, and also provided a valuable example for handling the relationship between religion and politics globally. An in-depth analysis of Saudi Arabia's policy changes, challenges, and impacts in this process will help us gain a more comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics in the Middle East and the role of religious factors in international relations.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, sectarianism, foreign policy, weakening trend, middle east politics.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia has long been regarded as a significant promoter of sectarianism in the Middle East region, and its foreign policy has been notably influenced by sectarian factors to a certain extent. Since the establishment of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, relying on its religious influence and geopolitical considerations, Saudi Arabia has actively utilized sectarian factors in regional affairs to safeguard its own interests and regional influence. Whether in handling relations with neighboring countries or in regional conflicts and cooperation, sectarian factors have become an important reference for Saudi Arabia's diplomatic decision-making. During this period, Saudi Arabia strengthened the presence of sectarianism in the region by supporting specific sectarian forces and constructing sectarian alliances.

However, with the development of the times and the changes in domestic and international situations, Saudi Arabia has gradually shown a tendency to weaken sectarianism, and this transformation holds profound significance for Saudi Arabia itself, the Middle East region, and even the international political landscape. Entering the 21st century, especially in recent years, with the acceleration of globalization and the increasingly strong calls for peace and stability in the international community, Saudi Arabia also faces the needs of economic transformation and diversified social development domestically. Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia has begun to recognize the numerous drawbacks brought about by excessive reliance on sectarianism, such as intensified regional conflicts and a damaged international image. Saudi Arabia has gradually adjusted its foreign policy, attempting to transcend sectarian boundaries. By promoting regional economic cooperation, facilitating religious dialogue, and other means, it actively integrates into the mainstream of the

international community and seeks sustainable development. This transformation has provided new opportunities for Saudi Arabia to achieve national stability and development in the new era, injected new impetus into peace and cooperation in the Middle East region, and also had a positive exemplary effect on handling the relationship between religion and politics in the international political landscape^[1].

1. Motivations for Saudi Arabia's Weakening of Sectarianism

The weakening of sectarianism in Saudi foreign policy is not an accident, but the result of a combination of factors. Its domestic social stability and development needs, as well as changes in the regional situation and international pressure, constitute the main motivation for this shift, which has profoundly affected the direction of Saudi foreign policy.

1.1 Domestic Requirements for Social Stability and Development

Fostering Social Harmony. Saudi Arabia is home to diverse sectarian groups, including Sunnis and Shiites. The exacerbation of sectarianism in the past has led to increased social tensions. To achieve social harmony and stability within the country and reduce inter-sectarian conflicts, the weakening of sectarianism has become an inevitable choice. This will help create an inclusive and diverse social environment, enhance national cohesion, and provide a favorable internal environment for national development.

Driving Economic Diversification. Saudi Arabia's economy has long been dependent on the oil industry. To achieve sustainable development, the country is actively promoting economic diversification. This process requires attracting various investments, technologies, and talents from both

domestic and international sources. However, an overemphasis on sectarianism may have a repelling effect. Weakening sectarianism can showcase Saudi Arabia's open and inclusive image, boost international confidence in its investment environment, and facilitate the successful implementation of its economic diversification strategy.

1.2 Changes in the Regional Situation and International Pressures

New Demands for Regional Cooperation. The Middle East region faces numerous common challenges, such as economic disparities, terrorist threats, and water shortages. Saudi Arabia has gradually realized that a foreign policy based on sectarian lines is insufficient to effectively address these challenges. Strengthening regional cooperation has become an urgent task ^[2]. By collaborating with neighboring countries and regional powers across sectarian boundaries, it is possible to conform regional resources and jointly promote peace and development in the Middle East.

International Expectations and Pressures. The international community generally advocates for peaceful, cooperative, and inclusive international relations. Saudi Arabia's sectarian foreign policy has faced question and criticism. To improve its international image and integrate into the mainstream of the international community, Saudi Arabia needs to adapt to international trends, weaken sectarianism, and actively participate in international affairs with a more positive attitude. This will enable the country to assume international responsibilities and avoid diplomatic isolation due to sectarian conflicts.

2. Measures Taken by Saudi Arabia to Weaken Sectarianism

On the basis of these motivations, Saudi Arabia has actively taken a series of measures to weaken the influence of sectarianism in its foreign policy. These measures cover a wide range of aspects, including the adjustment of diplomatic concepts, the reform of religious policy and the remodeling of the international image, with the aim of fundamentally changing the image and role of Saudi Arabia in the international arena.

2.1 Adjustment of Diplomatic Philosophy

Promoting the Concept of Multilateral Cooperation. Saudi Arabia has begun to advocate the concept of multilateral cooperation in its diplomacy, emphasizing the importance of common interests over sectarian differences in international relations. In its interactions with other countries, it actively seeks cooperation opportunities in various fields such as economy, culture, and technology, downplaying the influence of religious sectarian factors on bilateral or multilateral relations. This promotes the establishment of equal, mutually beneficial, and win-win partnerships.

Actively Participating in Regional Peace Initiatives. Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative to participate in regional peace initiatives, such as promoting the Middle East peace process and alleviating regional tensions. By working together with countries of different sectarian backgrounds, it contributes to resolving regional conflicts, demonstrating its commitment to regional peace and stability and changing its previous image as a sectarian conflict instigator.

2.2 Reform of Religious Policies

Promoting Religious Moderation. Saudi Arabia has promoted the process of religious moderation in the country, encouraging religious figures to advocate a moderate and tolerant interpretation of religion. It has curbed the spread of extremist ideas, prevented religion from being used by extremist forces to foment sectarian rivalry, guided the public to develop a rational and tolerant view of religion, and reduced the number of sectarian conflicts resulting from religious fanaticism.

Expanding Religious and Cultural Exchanges. Saudi Arabia is actively expanding religious and cultural exchange activities with other countries and regions to enhance mutual understanding and respect between different religions and sects. By organizing religious dialogue conferences, cultural exhibitions, and other events and inviting international religious leaders and scholars to participate, it promotes the coexistence of diverse religious cultures and breaks down sectarian barriers.

2.3 Reshaping of International Image

Strengthening Public Diplomacy. Saudi Arabia has intensified its public diplomacy efforts, using various media channels and cultural exchange activities to showcase its rich cultural heritage, modernization achievements, and inclusive and open social landscape to the international community ^[3]. Through international media platforms, it tells the story of Saudi Arabia's development and spreads positive messages, aiming to change the stereotypical perception of the country and project a moderate and modern national image.

Enhancing the Image of International Cooperation. In international affairs, Saudi Arabia actively participates in the global governance system and engages in extensive cooperation with international organizations and other countries. It plays an active role in areas such as climate change mitigation, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian assistance, demonstrating its responsibility as a major power through practical actions. This helps shed the negative image associated with its previous sectarian foreign policy.

3. Challenges Faced by Saudi Arabia in Weakening Sectarianism

Although Saudi Arabia has made many efforts to weaken sectarianism, the process has not been smooth. The resistance of conservative forces within Saudi Arabia, the complexity of sectarian relations in the region and the uncertainty of the international political environment has all posed serious challenges to it and have become obstacles on the road to the transformation of Saudi foreign policy.

3.1 Resistance from Domestic Conservative Forces

Some conservative forces in Saudi Arabia have long relied on sectarianism to safeguard their own interests and status, and may be resistant to policies that weaken sectarianism. They have a certain degree of influence in the religious and political spheres and may hinder the reform process in various ways, such as adhering to traditional conservative views on the interpretation of religious doctrines and opposing reconciliation and cooperation with other sects, such as the Shiites.

3.2 Complexity of Sectarian Relations in the Region

Sectarian relations in the Middle East are intricate and complex, and long-standing sectarian conflicts and rivalries have created deep historical grievances and mistrust among States. Although Saudi Arabia has attempted to weaken sectarianism, other countries or regional forces may still use the sectarian factor as a political tool and continue to stir up sectarian disputes, thereby affecting the effectiveness of Saudi foreign policy adjustments and possibly even plunging Saudi Arabia into a passive situation in regional affairs.

3.3 Uncertainty of the International Political Environment

The current international political landscape is in the midst of profound changes, with the intertwining of factors such as the game of the major Powers and geopolitical competition. In the process of weakening sectarianism, Saudi Arabia may face different attitudes and policy influences from external powers^[4]. While some major powers may support Saudi Arabia's reform efforts, others may, out of their own interests, utilize regional sectarian conflicts to check and balance Saudi Arabia or other Middle Eastern countries, bringing uncertainty to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy transition.

4. Impacts of Saudi Arabia's Weakening of Sectarianism

Saudi Arabia's efforts to weaken sectarianism, despite the many challenges it faces, have had and will continue to have a broad and far-reaching impact. These impacts are not only reflected in the political landscape of the Middle East region, which has contributed to the reshaping of regional peace, stability and cooperation patterns, but also play a positive role in international relations, bringing new opportunities and room for development for Saudi Arabia itself and the international community.

4.1 Impact on the Political Landscape of the Middle East Region

Promoting Regional Peace and Stability. The weakening of sectarianism in Saudi Arabia will help ease the long-standing sectarian tensions in the Middle East and reduce the frequency and intensity of sectarian conflicts. It will create conditions conducive to broader cooperation among regional countries, promote the development of the Middle East region in the direction of peace and stability, and enhance the political stability of the region as a whole.

Reshaping the Regional Cooperation Model. The previous model of regional cooperation based on sectarian divisions will gradually be broken down, and the new model of cooperation will focus more on common interests and pluralistic factors. Cooperation between Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries will be more flexible and pragmatic, and is expected to lead to the formation of a more inclusive and open pattern of cooperation in the entire region, and to promote regional economic integration and the enhancement of political mutual trust.

4.2 Impact on International Relations

Improving Relations with Major Powers. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy adjustments to weaken sectarianism will improve its image in the international arena and help strengthen its relations with major powers. Cooperation with

traditional allies, such as the United States and European countries, will be deepened, while also providing an opportunity to expand areas of cooperation with emerging powers, such as China and Russia, to enhance Saudi Arabia's influence and voice in international affairs.

Providing an Example for Resolving International Religious Conflicts. Saudi Arabia's efforts and practices in weakening sectarianism can provide useful lessons for other countries facing similar religious or sectarian problems^[5]. Globally, religious conflicts remain one of the major factors affecting the stability of international relations, and the Saudi experience can help to promote greater attention by the international community to religious tolerance and harmony and contribute positively to the resolution of international religious conflicts.

Conclusion

The weakening of sectarianism in Saudi foreign policy is a strategic shift of far-reaching significance, motivated by domestic development needs and changes in the international environment. Saudi Arabia has long relied on the oil industry and has a single economic structure; in order to achieve sustainable development and promote economic diversification and transformation, it needs to attract global resources, and the weakening of sectarianism will help create a favorable external environment. At the same time, the international community's advocacy of peace and cooperation, as well as the prominence of common regional challenges, have prompted Saudi Arabia to re-examine its diplomatic strategy.

Through a series of measures, Saudi Arabia has actively promoted change in its diplomatic philosophy, religious policy and international image, but this process has faced many challenges. It has advocated pluralism and cooperation in its foreign policy, promoted moderation and exchange in its religious policy, and strengthened public diplomacy in its international image, but domestic conservative forces have resisted for fear of losing their interests, regional sectarian conflicts have accumulated, and geopolitical games among major powers have made the international environment complex and volatile.

The weakening of sectarianism in Saudi Arabia has had a positive impact on the political landscape of the Middle East region and on international relations, bringing new opportunities for regional peace and stability and cooperative development. Trust between countries in the region is expected to increase and areas of cooperation to expand, creating conditions for the resolution of long-standing conflicts; at the international level, Saudi Arabia's relations with various countries have improved, increasing its participation and influence in global affairs.

Looking ahead, Saudi Arabia should strengthen its determination to weaken sectarianism, continue to push forward domestic reforms and enhance communication and collaboration with the international community. Saudi Arabia needs to deepen reforms in education, culture and other areas to cultivate an inclusive and pluralistic social soil, and actively participate in international multilateral mechanisms to share experience and resources. The international community should also give Saudi Arabia more understanding and support to jointly address regional and global challenges and build a more harmonious and inclusive world. All countries should respect Saudi Arabia's efforts and cooperate in counter-terrorism and economic

development, believing that, with the concerted efforts of all parties, Saudi Arabia will be able to continue to achieve new results on the path of weakening sectarianism and make greater contributions to peace and development in the Middle East region and the world at large.

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