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Saudi Arabia's Niche Diplomacy: A Middle Power's Strategy for Global Influence

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Abstract: Saudi Arabia has emerged as a key middle power, leveraging niche diplomacy to expand its global influence. This study examines how the Kingdom strategically employs mediation, religious diplomacy, humanitarian aid, energy leadership, and sports diplomacy to shape regional and international dynamics. Unlike great powers, middle powers focus on specialized areas where they hold a comparative advantage, allowing them to exert influence despite material constraints. Saudi Arabia's diplomatic recalibration aligns with its Vision 2030 agenda, prioritizing economic diversification, regional stability, and multi-lateral engagement. Saudi Arabia enhances its geopolitical significance by positioning itself as a mediator in regional conflicts, reinforcing its religious leadership, investing in sports diplomacy, and maintaining energy dominance. This study contributes to understanding middle power strategies in international relations, highlighting Saudi Arabia's role as a stabilizing force in an evolving global order.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; niche diplomacy; middle power; humanitarian aid; renewable energy; culture; health; sports



Academic Editor: Manfred Max Bergman

Received: 27 March 2025

Revised: 6 May 2025

Accepted: 7 May 2025

Published: 11 May 2025

Citation: Chaziza, M.; Lutmar, C. Saudi Arabia's Niche Diplomacy: A Middle Power's Strategy for Global Influence. *World* **2025**, *6*, 65. <https://doi.org/10.3390/world6020065>

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1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), strategically positioned at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, occupies approximately 2.1 million square kilometers, four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula. Bordered by key regional actors and controlling vital maritime routes in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the Kingdom wields significant geopolitical influence [1]. Its status as a dominant regional power is reinforced by its vast energy reserves, holding the world's second-largest proven oil supply, alongside its role as the center of the Arab and Islamic worlds [2]. These factors position Saudi Arabia as a pivotal middle power in the Middle East and global affairs.

A multidimensional and niche-focused approach defines KSA's foreign policy, leveraging its financial, religious, and strategic assets to shape regional and international dynamics. Niche diplomacy allows middle powers to concentrate resources on specialized areas where they can exert influence despite material constraints [3]. Saudi Arabia's diplomatic strategy is centered on mediation, religious and humanitarian aid, energy leadership, and sports diplomacy—where it maintains a comparative advantage. By prioritizing these areas, the Kingdom enhances its global relevance, reinforcing its position as a stabilizing force in a region often marked by crises and volatility.

Middle powers engage in niche diplomacy by leveraging their strengths, forming strategic alliances, and focusing on specialized areas to advance their foreign policy goals [4]. While traditional Middle Eastern middle powers, such as Egypt, have experienced relative

decline, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a key regional actor, employing economic and diplomatic tools to consolidate its influence at subregional and global levels [5].

This paper examines how Saudi Arabia utilizes niche diplomacy to achieve its foreign policy objectives and assesses its broader impact on regional and international politics. It focuses on the role of mediation, religious, humanitarian aid, energy, and sports as key components of the KSA's niche diplomacy strategy. We argue that as a middle power, Saudi Arabia engages in niche diplomacy by leveraging its unique strengths to expand its external influence, helping it gain greater prominence in regional and international politics in the 21st century.

Despite the growing recognition of middle powers in IR theory, scholarship on Middle Eastern middle powers remains limited, as research has traditionally focused on great powers [6–8]. This study addresses this gap by analyzing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy through the lens of niche diplomacy. It explores how middle powers leverage specialized capabilities to enhance their influence, particularly in the evolving global landscape shaped by global rivalry. The study contributes to the broader understanding of middle power strategies and their implications for international diplomacy.

The following section reviews the literature on middle powers and niche diplomacy to evaluate how the concept has evolved in IR scholarship. We then present an analysis of KSA's foreign policy, focusing on niche sectors such as mediation, religious, humanitarian aid, energy, and sports. The final section summarizes the findings and draws theoretical and applied conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework: Middle Power and Niche Diplomacy

The concept of middle powers in international relations (IR) remains ambiguous, as traditional metrics like GDP, population, or land area fail to capture their influence. While middle powers lack the comprehensive strength of great powers, they shape regional environments, moderate global affairs, and resist domination [9–12]. Their influence is often assessed through behavioral or functional roles rather than strict material criteria, making their classification fluid and context-dependent [13]. Middle powers are typically defined by their commitment to multilateralism, peacekeeping, and global stability. They act as mediators, coalition-builders, and international law advocates, balancing self-interest with activism. Unlike great powers, they do not pursue hegemonic ambitions, but focus on defending strategic yet limited interests [14–17].

Scholars categorize middle powers through three lenses: functional, where influence shifts based on issue-specific leadership; behavioral, emphasizing diplomatic activism and global citizenship; and hierarchical, which ranks states by institutional influence [12,14,16,18–20]. A key strategy for middle powers is niche diplomacy, where they concentrate on specialized areas to maximize their impact. This involves leveraging unique strengths, such as resources, geographic positioning, or expertise, to influence targeted global issues [3,21,22].

Niche diplomacy is effective when states meet three criteria: (1) offering specialized, high-demand expertise, (2) sustaining long-term engagement and networks, and (3) securing formal recognition through institutional roles. Middle powers amplify their influence beyond their material constraints by acting as coalition-builders, bridge-builders, and norm-setters [23]. This strategic focus requires sustained investment, adaptability, and alignment with both national interests and global priorities [3].

In the Middle East, IR scholarships traditionally focused on great powers, overlooking the role of regional middle powers [24–34]. This study fills that gap by analyzing their behavior through the lens of niche diplomacy. Diplomacy is crucial in determining how middle powers leverage their resources and position themselves in global af-

fairs. Understanding their diplomatic strategies offers insights into their evolving role in international relations.

3. KSA's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the 21st century is fundamentally anchored in the strategic imperative to preserve the monarchy, secure national sovereignty, and ensure regional stability. However, it has evolved substantially in both orientation and execution, shaped by a combination of internal reform imperatives and shifting geopolitical dynamics [35–37]. Foreign policy is no longer a discrete arena of statecraft, but is now intricately interwoven with the Kingdom's broader modernization agenda, most notably, the Vision 2030 initiative. Since its launch in 2016, Vision 2030 has served as a domestic transformation blueprint and a foreign policy compass, guiding Saudi Arabia's global engagement to support economic diversification, reduce geopolitical risk, and elevate the Kingdom's global stature [38].

A significant pivot has occurred in the Kingdom's foreign policy posture, marked by a departure from the aggressive, interventionist approach of the early 2010s and exemplified by the military campaign in Yemen and the diplomatic rift with Qatar, toward a more pragmatic, diplomacy-driven, and economically oriented strategy. This recalibration, spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, reflects a recognition of the changing regional and international landscape and the Kingdom's own evolving needs. The emphasis has shifted from military projection to economic diplomacy, conflict mediation, and soft power projection. Saudi Arabia increasingly presents itself as a hub for tourism, international investment, and global events, aligning its external behavior with the image of a modernizing, globally integrated state [39]. Under bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has embraced a multi-alignment strategy, leveraging ties across diverse power centers, including the US, China, Russia, and India, to maximize strategic autonomy and minimize reliance on any single actor. This strategic hedging reflects concerns about the perceived waning of US security commitments in the region and the emergence of a multipolar international order. It also signals a maturing foreign policy doctrine that recognizes the limits of military intervention and the advantages of economic interdependence.

Several structural and situational factors have influenced Saudi Arabia's foreign policy recalibration. The perceived decline in US security commitments and the broader shifts in global power dynamics have prompted the Kingdom to adopt a hedging strategy, balancing relations with multiple global powers. At the same time, the disillusionment following prolonged and inconclusive conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq underscored the costs of interventionism. The Arab Spring exposed vulnerabilities to internal dissent and external subversion [35,36]. Moreover, escalating tensions with Iran and fluctuating oil revenues highlighted the need for regional de-escalation and economic resilience. These realities have reinforced a shift toward diplomacy, conflict management, and regional rapprochement. This is evident in Saudi Arabia's normalization of ties with Qatar, rapprochement with Iran via Chinese mediation, and a cautious, but deliberate re-engagement in regional multilateral forums.

Vision 2030 has reoriented the Kingdom's foreign policy priorities by positioning economic stability and diversification as national security imperatives. Thus, foreign policy is increasingly tasked with facilitating trade, attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), and creating partnerships supporting emerging sectors such as tourism, renewable energy, and technology. Economic diplomacy has become a central engagement pillar, particularly with major Asian economies such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea. The Kingdom's participation or motivations to join the multilateral institutions, including the G20, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), further illustrate its commitment to

expanding strategic latitude and playing a more active role in shaping global economic and security norms [40,41].

Several key principles guide KSA's foreign policy. First, the Kingdom has prioritized diplomatic engagement and regional reconciliation, working to resolve disputes with former adversaries such as Iran and Qatar [42]. Second, economic diplomacy has become a central pillar, with Saudi Arabia strengthening trade and investment ties with China, India, Japan, and South Korea [43]. Third, geopolitical balancing has emerged as a core strategy, enabling Saudi Arabia to maintain strong relationships with traditional Western allies while expanding cooperation with Russia, China, and other global actors and expressing interest in joining multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) [42].

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the 21st century is driven by a strategic effort to navigate a complex global landscape while advancing its ambitious domestic reform agenda, Vision 2030. The Kingdom aims to balance its historical security ties with the US, its growing economic partnerships with China and other powers, and its pursuit of greater regional influence in a multipolar world. KSA aims to secure its national interests and support its ambitious domestic transformation by pursuing strategic multi-alignment, economic diversification, and diplomatic mediation [44,45]. While Vision 2030 serves as a catalyst, Saudi behavior is equally shaped by existential imperatives: preserving regime security, resisting external influence, and asserting its leadership role within the Arab and Islamic worlds. This explains its concurrent pursuit of de-escalation, multi-alignment, and sovereign assertiveness. What has changed is the method of pursuing these objectives. Rather than relying primarily on coercive means or ideological alignment, Riyadh now employs niche diplomacy, defined by selective engagement, strategic mediation, and symbolic leadership initiatives, to position itself as a responsible, forward-looking actor in an unstable region. Saudi-led summits, regional dialogues, and mediation efforts, such as its role in talks related to Sudan or hosting Arab–China summits, illustrate this evolving diplomatic toolkit.

Saudi Arabia's niche diplomacy is a deliberate strategy to support its geopolitical ambitions and Vision 2030's goal of transforming the Kingdom into a diversified, globally integrated state. This approach complements Vision 2030's objective to transition the Kingdom from an oil-reliant monarchy to a globally integrated state. By cultivating ties with China, Russia, and other emerging powers, Riyadh reduces its dependence on traditional Western allies, increasing its strategic flexibility and autonomy [46,47]. Its selective involvement in regional conflicts and normalization initiatives, notably with Iran, reflects a pragmatic bid for regional leadership and stability aligned with national security and economic modernization priorities. Moreover, Saudi-led summits and mediation efforts bolster its soft power, enabling it to influence regional norms and project global relevance without heavy material commitments. This approach allows Saudi Arabia to maneuver amid shifting global power dynamics, mainly as the US reduces its engagement in the Middle East.

The success of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy shift will depend on its ability to navigate regional tensions, manage complex global relationships, and align its diplomatic strategy with domestic economic reforms. As the Kingdom seeks to position itself as a key international player, it must carefully balance competing interests while ensuring long-term stability and economic growth [35,48]. By pursuing a pragmatic, multidimensional, and niche-focused approach, Saudi Arabia aims to strengthen its global influence while securing its national and financial priorities in an increasingly multipolar world.

In sum, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in the 21st century reflects a calculated transition from ideological conservatism and military adventurism to pragmatic, interest-driven diplo-

macy. This evolution aligns with the broader logic of Vision 2030: transforming the Kingdom into a diversified, resilient, and strategically autonomous power. By pursuing multi-alignment, deepening economic diplomacy, and deploying niche diplomatic tools, Saudi Arabia aims to consolidate its position as a pivotal actor in regional affairs and the global order while ensuring the stability and prosperity necessary for its internal transformation.

4. Saudi Arabia Niche Diplomacy

Saudi Arabia has been actively pursuing a form of niche diplomacy that leverages its unique position in the Middle East and the global stage. This approach encompasses sports diplomacy, humanitarian aid, religious influence, conflict mediation, financial power, and energy dominance to shape regional dynamics and global interactions. Through this multifaceted niche diplomacy, Saudi Arabia is navigating the evolving landscape of international geopolitics, aiming to safeguard its interests and elevate its global reputation. This multidimensional effort aligns seamlessly with the Kingdom's Vision 2030, which focuses on economic diversification and strengthening ties with the international community. The following sections elaborate on key aspects of Saudi Arabia's niche diplomacy.

4.1. Mediation

In recent years, KSA has adopted a more proactive approach to diplomacy, transitioning from a confrontational and interventionist foreign policy to one centered on mediation and conflict resolution. This recalibration has enhanced its standing as a prominent middle power, reinforcing its role as a stabilizing force in an increasingly multipolar world. By leveraging its strategic location and perceived neutrality in certain conflicts, KSA has positioned itself as a key diplomatic broker, prioritizing pragmatic engagement over confrontation [39].

This shift is exemplified by KSA's decision to disengage from military intervention in Yemen and its landmark 2023 rapprochement with Iran, brokered by China, which restored diplomatic ties after years of hostility [49]. The Kingdom seeks to promote regional stability by embracing mediation while bolstering its global influence. Rather than asserting regional dominance through military interventions, KSA is carving out niche diplomatic avenues to exert leadership, capitalizing on the shifting dynamics of global power distribution. This diplomatic approach is less about challenging the international order and more about identifying key spaces where Saudi Arabia can exert influence while balancing pragmatism with national interests [36].

KSA's diplomatic recalibration aligns with its broader Vision 2030 initiative, which emphasizes economic transformation and regional stability as prerequisites for modernization. The Kingdom's "zero problems with neighbors" strategy underscores the recognition that sustainable economic growth requires a stable geopolitical environment. This approach is not a retreat, but a calculated move to consolidate its leadership in the Arab world while adapting to evolving international power structures [36].

Saudi Arabia's role as a mediator has been underscored by its hosting of numerous high-profile summits, including the Ministerial Confab Summit, the Arab-Islamic Summit, the 32nd Arab League Summit, the GCC–Central Asia (C5) Summit, the Saudi–African Summit, the Saudi–Caribbean (CARICOM) Summit, and the GCC–ASEAN Summit [50]. These engagements highlight KSA's commitment to a balanced foreign policy, fostering regional and global partnerships while maintaining strategic autonomy. Rather than aligning strictly with any power bloc, the Kingdom has adopted a nuanced niche diplomatic approach that reinforces its credibility as a neutral actor capable of bridging divides [39,51].

KSA's involvement in the Ukraine conflict further demonstrates its engagement in global mediation. As part of its diplomatic outreach, the Kingdom positioned itself as a neu-

tral facilitator, hosting high-level negotiations, including the US–Russia talks on Ukraine in February 2025, to structure future diplomatic engagement [52]. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has reinforced its commitment through substantial humanitarian and economic assistance to Ukraine, including a USD 100 million humanitarian aid package and a USD 300 million oil derivatives grant [53]. These efforts and its role in facilitating prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine reinforce the Kingdom’s ambition to shape international mediation dynamics and solidify its role as a global diplomatic broker [54–56].

KSA has played a central role in resolving long-standing disputes in the Middle East, including the Qatar diplomatic crisis. Initially leading efforts to isolate Qatar in 2017, Saudi Arabia later spearheaded reconciliation, restoring diplomatic relations and reaffirming its leadership within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This shift reflects a broader strategy of reshaping regional alliances while fostering cooperative frameworks among GCC members [57].

KSA’s mediation efforts have also been pivotal in addressing conflicts in Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. In Sudan, KSA has emerged as a key mediator in the ongoing civil conflict, hosting multiple peace talks in Jeddah to broker ceasefire agreements between warring factions. Its involvement is driven by strategic interests, particularly its investments in the Red Sea region and broader regional stability concerns [40,58,59]. In Yemen, after years of military engagement, KSA shifted toward diplomatic negotiations with the Houthis, acknowledging their control over key territories and facilitating peace talks aimed at achieving a long-term settlement [39,60].

KSA’s mediation diplomacy is also evident in its approach to Syria. Once a staunch opponent of the Assad regime, Saudi Arabia has played a leading role in restoring Syria’s diplomatic ties with the Arab world. Despite US opposition, the Kingdom facilitated Syria’s reintegration into the Arab League and engaged in economic discussions with Damascus, highlighting its strategic prioritization of regional stability in the Middle East’s evolving geopolitical landscape [61,62].

In response to the Gaza crisis, KSA has intensified its diplomatic efforts, advocating for an immediate ceasefire, Israeli withdrawal, and humanitarian access. By championing the Palestinian cause and hosting key diplomatic summits, the Kingdom reinforces its long-standing position as a central actor in resolving the Arab–Israeli conflict [63]. The Kingdom’s role in convening Arab and Islamic states to unify their stance on Gaza underscores its ambition to shape regional diplomacy and influence global discourse on the crisis [64].

Additionally, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a potential mediator between the US and Iran, which could significantly enhance its diplomatic stature. Reports indicate that KSA is open to facilitating discussions between Washington and Tehran, potentially bridging long-standing tensions. However, given the historical distrust between the two nations, this remains largely a strategic signaling effort rather than an immediate diplomatic breakthrough [65].

By prioritizing mediation diplomacy over confrontation, Saudi Arabia seeks to reduce regional tensions, create a stable environment for economic transformation, and bolster its international reputation and influence. While challenges remain, the Kingdom’s mediation efforts have shaped regional and global stability. Its niche diplomacy underscores a strategic vision of positioning itself as an independent and influential global player. KSA also seeks to reinforce its position as the leading power in the Arab world and a significant actor in international diplomacy. Though its mediation efforts have sometimes resulted in temporary ceasefires rather than lasting peace agreements, Saudi Arabia’s proactive diplomatic strategy signals its ambition to extend its influence beyond the Middle East

and establish itself as a key player in the evolving global order and a confident middle power [51].

4.2. Religion

Saudi Arabia's unique position as the birthplace of Islam and custodian of its holiest sites has indeed been a cornerstone of its foreign policy since the Kingdom's establishment. This religious status has allowed Saudi Arabia to wield significant influence across the Muslim world and beyond, using religious doctrine as both a guiding principle and a strategic instrument in international relations [66,67]. Vision 2030 underscores Saudi Arabia's role in the Islamic world, reaffirming its ambition to consolidate leadership among Arab and Muslim-majority countries [34,68].

Historically, KSA's religious diplomacy has evolved significantly, transitioning from an ideology-driven approach to a more strategic niche, a state-controlled tool of influence [34]. The Kingdom's religious influence was rooted in its export of Wahhabism, financial support to Islamic institutions, religious education, leadership in Islamic organizations, and control over the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage industry [68]. Nevertheless, global scrutiny, security concerns, and regional rivalries have necessitated a recalibration of this approach. Under Vision 2030, the Kingdom has sought to balance its Islamic legitimacy with economic and geopolitical pragmatism, emphasizing religious tourism, regulated funding, and interfaith engagement. KSA has effectively employed its unique religious role as a form of niche diplomacy, enabling it to expand geopolitical influence and maintain leadership in the Muslim world.

One of the niche methods through which KSA has projected religious diplomacy is through extensive investment in mosque construction, Islamic centers, and educational institutions worldwide. By funding religious scholars and preachers, the Kingdom has ensured the dissemination of Wahhabite interpretations of Islam and reinforced its ideological footprint while countering rival religious and political narratives, particularly those backed by Iran and Turkey. This strategy reflects a niche cultural initiative and a calculated effort to sustain ideological hegemony and bolster political alliances [68,69].

Financial support for Islamic organizations and charities has reinforced Saudi Arabia's religious niche diplomacy. By funding various Sunni Muslim organizations, the Kingdom has solidified its role as the guardian of Sunni Islam and strengthened its position in global politics. This financial leverage has allowed KSA to maintain close ties with Muslim communities worldwide, reinforcing its role as the guardian of Sunni Islam and reinforcing its influence across Africa, Asia, and Europe [70].

Hajj and Umrah diplomacy have further enhanced KSA's religious and geopolitical standing. As the host of Islam's most significant pilgrimage sites, the Kingdom controls the annual influx of millions of Muslims to Mecca and Medina. This authority provides Riyadh with a strategic diplomatic tool, allowing it to regulate pilgrimage quotas and offer preferential treatment to allied nations. The use of pilgrimage access as a niche diplomatic instrument has been particularly evident in Saudi engagement with politically sensitive regions, where controlling access to the Hajj has been leveraged to cultivate alliances or exert pressure on adversarial states [34,68].

Institutionally, Saudi Arabia consolidates its religious leadership through organizations such as the Muslim World League (MWL), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center. The OIC and its subsidiaries, including the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), headquartered in Jeddah and Makkah, respectively, were established in 1969 and serve as a key diplomatic arena where Saudi Arabia exerts significant influence over the global Muslim agenda [71,72]. By leading the OIC, the Kingdom has sought to position itself as the primary voice of the Muslim

community, countering competing narratives, particularly from Iran, which promotes a Shi'a-centric vision of Islamic governance. This institutional dominance reinforces Saudi Arabia's authority in shaping international Islamic discourse [68].

Beyond the Middle East, Saudi Arabia's religious influence extends globally, mainly through investments in religious schools (madrasas) and scholarship programs for students from Muslim-majority countries. These students, often educated in Saudi universities, return to their home countries and assume leadership roles in religious and political spheres, further extending the Kingdom's ideological reach [66,73]. Additionally, Saudi-backed charities such as the Muslim World League have played a critical role in humanitarian aid and disaster relief efforts, bolstering the Kingdom's image and influence as a benefactor of the global Muslim community [68].

4.3. Sports

KSA has strategically embraced sports as a key niche instrument for nation branding, power consolidation, and global influence. With substantial sports infrastructure investments, the Kingdom seeks to establish itself as a premier destination for major sporting events. However, as a latecomer compared to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Saudi Arabia faces challenges in reshaping its international image through sports. Despite this, it has made rapid progress, narrowed the gap, and emerged as an increasingly influential player in global sports. Through high-profile sponsorships, acquisitions of European football clubs, and hosting international sporting events, KSA is leveraging sports as both a geopolitical tool and an economic lever to extend its influence beyond its borders [74].

The Kingdom's niche sports diplomacy is multifaceted, involving hosting high-profile events, acquiring ownership stakes in international football clubs, and financing new sports leagues. Key initiatives backed by the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) include the 2021 acquisition of Newcastle United and the 2022 launch of the LIV Golf Tour [75,76]. With USD 925 billion in assets in 2023, the PIF has invested USD 51 billion in sports properties since 2016, reflecting the Kingdom's strategic use of sports to bolster its global influence [77].

Beyond individual investments, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a dominant player in the global sports ecosystem. The Saudi Pro League has attracted high-profile players like Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar Jr., [78], while partnerships with European football associations have secured hosting rights for events like the 2023 Spanish Super Cup [79]. Additionally, Saudi investors, often linked to the royal family, have expanded their ownership in clubs across England, Spain, France, Belgium, India, and the UAE, further solidifying the Kingdom's growing international sports presence [80,81].

Saudi Arabia's commitment extends beyond football. A 15-year partnership with Formula 1 saw the Kingdom host its first Grand Prix in Jeddah in 2021, with the deal reportedly worth up to USD 65 million per year. This is complemented by state-owned Aramco's sponsorship agreement with F1, valued at over USD 40 million annually. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has collaborated with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) since 2014, hosting marquee pay-per-view events such as the WWE Crown Jewel. The Kingdom has also invested in professional golf circuits, including the men's Asian Tour and Ladies European Tour, hosting annual events since 2019 and 2020 [82].

Although much of KSA's sports investment has focused on lower-tier ventures, its successful bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup and plans to allocate tens of billions of dollars toward World Cup-related projects underscore its aspiration to establish itself as a dominant geopolitical force at the intersection of Asia, Africa, and Europe [83]. Mega-events serve as a vehicle for international prestige, complementing the Kingdom's economic and political influence. This aligns with broader global trends of multipolarity, transnational capital flows, and shifting power dynamics in international relations [77].

Among Saudi Arabia's most visible and strategically significant sports investments is LIV Golf, a direct competitor to the PGA Tour. LIV Golf has attracted high-profile players from the PGA Tour with record-breaking signing bonuses and unprecedented prize money of up to USD 4 million per event. Alongside the Newcastle United acquisition, LIV Golf represents one of the Kingdom's highest-profile ventures into sports niche diplomacy. These initiatives, often called "trophy assets," prioritize geopolitical influence and reputational enhancement over profitability, capturing significant global attention from mainstream and sports media [84,85].

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's sports niche diplomacy is a key pillar of Vision 2030, the Kingdom's ambitious strategy to diversify its economy and reduce dependence on oil. Recognizing the volatility of oil prices and the finite nature of reserves, GCC states, including Saudi Arabia, are increasingly investing in international sports, tourism, and other non-hydrocarbon sectors to ensure long-term economic sustainability. Sporting events act as financial assets and strategic tools, enhancing the Kingdom's global branding as "open for business" while attracting foreign investment and boosting tourism. This approach strengthens economic resilience and positions KSA as a major player in the global sports and entertainment industries [86].

At the heart of Vision 2030 lie three central objectives: solidifying Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Arab and Islamic worlds, transforming the nation into a global investment powerhouse, and leveraging its strategic geographic location to serve as a commercial bridge connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Sports are integral to this transformation, with significant investments in domestic infrastructure and international sports properties forming a key component of the Kingdom's broader economic diversification strategy. By emphasizing the creation of a "vibrant society," KSA is positioning itself as a leading destination for global sports events and tourism, enhancing its appeal to international visitors and investors [84,85].

Several high-profile projects underscore KSA's vision for sports-led economic transformation. Neom, a futuristic megacity stretching 26,500 km along the Red Sea coast, is a USD 500 billion initiative that includes Trojena, a sports resort set to host the 2029 Asian Winter Games [87]. Adjacent to Neom, the Red Sea Project, a luxury tourism destination spanning 28,000 km, integrates sports and adventure tourism into its offerings. Meanwhile, Qiddiya, a USD 500 million entertainment and sports hub near Riyadh, targets young and affluent Saudis, promoting health, well-being, and lifestyle improvements [86]. One of the stadiums planned for the 2034 FIFA World Cup will be situated 350 m above ground in Neom, while another, named for Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is designed to sit atop a 200 m cliff as part of the Qiddiya City project. Located 45 km from Riyadh, Qiddiya aims to become a global entertainment, gaming, and sports hub [88]. These projects drive economic diversification and position Saudi Arabia as a dominant force in global sports tourism and event hosting.

The Kingdom has also made substantial strides in the gaming and e-sports industry, a global market valued at over USD 300 billion. In 2020, the PIF acquired Japanese gaming company SNK and invested USD 3 billion in major gaming corporations. By 2022, a PIF-backed entity acquired Sweden-based ESL Gaming for USD 1.05 billion and e-sports tournament organizer FACEIT for USD 500 million, merging the two companies. Shortly after, KSA launched a billion-dollar initiative to develop its digital entertainment sector, including infrastructure for gaming studios and esports arenas. Projections indicate that Saudi gaming and e-sports consumption could reach USD 6.8 billion in the coming years, reflecting its growing influence in this rapidly expanding industry [89,90].

4.4. Energy

Through its production and leadership within OPEC and OPEC+, KSA's dominance in global oil exports grants its unparalleled influence over international oil markets. Even nations that do not directly import Saudi oil are impacted by its energy policies, highlighting the Kingdom's strategic role in global economic dynamics. This centrality in the oil industry is a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's geopolitical power, extending its significance beyond energy markets [2]. Combined with its religious authority as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, the Kingdom leverages its oil wealth to shape foreign relations, exert niche diplomacy, and navigate the evolving landscape of global energy politics.

A central player in the global oil industry, KSA ranks as the world's third-largest crude oil and condensate producer, the top crude oil exporter, and OPEC's leading producer. In 2023, it held 17 percent of global proven crude oil reserves (267.2 billion barrels) and 22 percent of OPEC's reserves, distributed across 85 oil fields with over 1000 producing wells [91]. The state-owned oil giant Saudi Aramco oversees the Kingdom's oil production. It is one of the largest and most profitable companies globally, operating across the upstream, midstream, and downstream segments. KSA produced an average of 13.3 million barrels per day (mbd) in 2023, nearly 12 percent of global output [92]. With over 54.5 percent of confirmed global oil reserves and 39.2 percent of natural gas reserves concentrated in the Gulf region, KSA leads in both proven reserves and production capacity. The Kingdom extracts more oil than its storage capacity, leveraging surplus output to stabilize global markets during crises, further cementing its pivotal role in the energy sector [93].

KSA's leadership within OPEC+ remains central to its global economic influence, balancing financial priorities with geopolitical pressures. As the world's largest crude oil exporter, the Kingdom's decisions directly impact global markets, even for nations not importing oil. During the Russo-Ukrainian war, the US repeatedly pressured the Kingdom to increase oil production to lower international prices, curb inflation, and reduce Russia's oil revenue—a critical funding source for its military operations. However, KSA resisted these calls and strengthened its partnership with Russia through OPEC+ coordination to maintain production cuts and stabilize prices [94,95]. Such decisions demonstrate the Kingdom's niche diplomacy to influence global markets while safeguarding its economic interests, complicating its Vision 2030 ambitions.

Despite diversifying efforts, KSA's economy remains deeply tied to oil, which continues to fund its Vision 2030 reform agenda. While the Kingdom seeks to reduce reliance on hydrocarbons, oil revenues remain critical to political stability and economic transformation, given insufficient foreign investment [96]. Saudi Arabia's climate strategy has evolved from resisting decarbonization to actively shaping global energy discourse, balancing advocacy for fossil fuels with investments in clean energy opportunities. Despite this, KSA remains a dominant energy player, positioning itself as a key climate financier. For instance, its PIF could help close the global climate finance gap, securing geopolitical influence and access to emerging green technologies [97].

The Kingdom invests heavily in renewables, particularly solar power, while controlling global energy markets. Flagship projects like NEOM, the Saudi Green Initiative highlight, and the Middle East Green Initiative's showcase the nation's strategic commitment to sustainability. KSA also engages in climate diplomacy through platforms like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Gulf Cooperation Council for Sustainable Development, leveraging its influence to shape global climate policy. However, with 40 percent of KSA's GDP still tied to oil, the Kingdom continues to hedge its future by developing non-oil sectors and transitioning toward clean energy exports [98]. Aramco's USD 1.5 billion sustainability fund exemplifies this shift, focusing on carbon capture, hydrogen, and net-zero fuels [99]. As the world moves toward clean energy,

KSA's ability to balance fossil fuel dominance with green investments will determine its long-term geopolitical and economic standing.

While KSA's investments in sustainability signal a strategic shift, its role as the world's leading swing oil producer remains a cornerstone of its foreign policy. The Kingdom retains significant leverage in global energy markets by controlling oil supply and pricing, ensuring its continued influence in international politics [100]. This dual-track strategy—maintaining dominance in fossil fuels while aggressively investing in clean energy investments—reflects Saudi Arabia's niche diplomacy approach. It allows the Kingdom to secure its long-term economic influence and geopolitical standing in a world increasingly focused on decarbonization. By balancing its traditional energy strengths with emerging green technologies, Saudi Arabia positions itself to navigate the complexities of the global energy transition while safeguarding its strategic interests in the region and beyond.

4.5. Humanitarian Aid

KSA has emerged as a global leader in humanitarian aid, disbursing over USD 134 billion aid to 172 countries during the period between 1996 and 2025 [101]. Most of this aid has been directed towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which received USD 28.68 billion, accounting for the largest share of KSA's overseas humanitarian and development assistance [102]. This transformation reflects the dynamic interplay of religious roots, geopolitical calculus, and economic ambition. Rooted in Islamic values of compassion and charity, the Kingdom's aid efforts initially focused on fostering solidarity within the Muslim world and enhancing regional influence. Over time, this approach evolved into a more sophisticated niche diplomatic tool, balancing humanitarian impact with strategic objectives. The Kingdom has bolstered its influence and image in the Arab Sunni Islamic world by leveraging humanitarian aid as a form of niche diplomacy [103].

The Kingdom's foreign aid flows are channeled through two organizations: the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), founded in 1974, and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief), established in 2015. The SFD has provided USD 39.39 billion in development aid (1975–2021), focusing on concessional loans for infrastructure projects like transportation and energy and targeting long-term growth in developing nations, particularly those with Muslim-majority populations [103]. KSRelief, with a disbursement of USD 7.3 billion across 106 countries through 3355 projects either directly or through its 211 international, national, and local partners, represents a strategic institutionalization of KSA's humanitarian efforts, significantly expanding its global reach. As a result of these aid efforts, the Kingdom's total charitable contributions over the last five decades have surpassed USD 133.8 billion [104].

KSRelief's focus on crises, conflicts, natural disasters, and health emergencies has made it a cornerstone of the Kingdom's aid diplomacy, fulfilling religious and moral obligations, bolstering its international reputation, and supporting its broader foreign policy objectives. Furthermore, KSA contributes 20 percent of the resources to twelve Islamic institutions, including the Islamic Development Bank, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the Arab Monetary Fund, the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, the OPEC Fund for International Development, and the Arab Gulf Program for United Nations Development Organizations [43,105]. Additionally, the Kingdom has provided loans and financial facilities to UN agencies (e.g., the World Health Organization and UNICEF), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund [104].

Saudi Arabia's foreign aid strategy is driven by three core objectives: forging alliances, countering adversaries, and promoting economic interests. The Kingdom strengthens diplomatic ties and bolsters its global standing by extending aid to nations across the

Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Aid also serves as a geopolitical tool to counter regional rivals, particularly Iran, by isolating hostile regimes and securing Saudi influence [106]. Economically, it aligns with Vision 2030, facilitating market expansion for Saudi businesses and reinforcing global development initiatives. Ultimately, Saudi aid is a niche instrument in enhancing the country's international influence and advancing key foreign policy goals [107].

5. Conclusions

Saudi Arabia's niche diplomacy has been broadly effective in enhancing its international image, diversifying its alliances, and generating soft power. It has evolved into a middle power, leveraging selective influence rather than comprehensive strength. A key dimension of this transformation is the shift from an interventionist to a diplomacy-driven foreign policy. Mediation efforts have rebranded the Kingdom as a stabilizing regional actor, distancing it from its militaristic past. High-profile initiatives—such as hosting the 2034 FIFA World Cup and acquiring global sports franchises—have bolstered its image as a modern, globally engaged state. Religious diplomacy has become more pragmatic, emphasizing regulated funding, interfaith outreach, and soft moderation over the ideological export of Salafism, thereby mitigating international criticism.

Saudi Arabia has also recalibrated and diversified its alliances. It has deepened ties with China (via BRICS and SCO), cooperated with Russia in OPEC+, and expanded partnerships with India, all while maintaining security and economic ties with the US and Europe. Regionally, it has asserted leadership in multilateral forums—hosting summits such as GCC-ASEAN and Arab League–CARICOM—and acted as a mediator in intra-Gulf and broader Middle Eastern conflicts, including the Qatar crisis and negotiations in Syria, Sudan, and Gaza.

Totaling over USD 134 billion in aid to 172 countries in 30 years, Saudi humanitarian aid reinforces its normative appeal in the Global South. Its stewardship of Islamic institutions like the OIC and the Islamic Development Bank enhances religious and ideological influence, particularly in Muslim-majority countries. Saudi Arabia also combines fossil fuel dominance with green transition initiatives (e.g., Neom, the Saudi Green Initiative) to position itself as a key voice in global climate discourse.

KSA continues to navigate global power shifts. Since its launch in 2016, Vision 2030 has served as a domestic transformation blueprint and a foreign policy compass, guiding Saudi Arabia's global engagement to support economic diversification, reduce geopolitical risk, and elevate the Kingdom's global stature [38]. Policy success will depend on its ability to maintain diplomatic flexibility, economic resilience, and strategic partnerships. By embracing a multidimensional and pragmatic niche approach, the Kingdom seeks to position itself as a stabilizing force in an increasingly multipolar world, offering a model for middle powers seeking to maximize influence in a dynamic global landscape.

Author Contributions: Formal analysis, M.C. and C.L.; writing—original draft preparation, M.C. and C.L.; writing—review and editing, M.C. and C.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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