

National Branding in Saudi Arabia: Capacities and New Policies

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Qatar and the United Arab Emirates stand as pioneers in the cultivation of soft power and national branding within the Persian Gulf region. Their leadership recognizes the pivotal role of branding in safeguarding and advancing national interests and security and continues to invest significant efforts in this domain. Recently, Saudi Arabia has also turned its attention towards this sphere, emerging as a unique and somewhat complex case study in terms of branding capacities and policies. Especially since the coming to power of the current king of Saudi Arabia in 2015 and the subsequent power consolidation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Riyadh has embarked on a new trajectory of domestic and foreign policies. Changing Saudi Arabia's image and its national branding is one of those. For this purpose, this paper aims to explore the fundamental question: "What role does national branding play in Saudi Arabia's overarching policies, and how has this evolved during Salman's reign?"

Methodology

This research is theoretically and conceptually grounded in Simon Anholt's six-dimensional conceptual framework for national branding, which encompasses Exports; Governance; Culture; People; Tourism; and Immigration and Investment. Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive-explanatory approach. Utilizing a qualitative method, data has been collected through library research and online resources.

Discussion and Results

Over the past decades, Saudi Arabia has carved out a distinctive international reputation, effectively establishing its national brand on the global and regional stages. This image is primarily shaped by three key facets. Firstly, the nation's substantial capacities and capabilities in oil production and export, with Saudi Aramco leading as the world's largest exporter of this commodity. Secondly, Saudi Arabia's significant religious standing within the Islamic world, which extends its influence globally. Thirdly, its financial and economic aid to various countries, particularly within the Islamic world. This assistance is often manifested in the form of humanitarian or developmental aid. Thus, the triad of traditional elements shaping Saudi Arabia's reputation and national brand, thereby crafting a unique and

distinct image of the country on the international stage, encompasses its oil industry, religious influence, and humanitarian and developmental contributions.

Under the reign of King Salman, Saudi leaders have initiated a mission to reshape the past image, striving to project a new and positive depiction of the nation. While some previous policies have been maintained, significant changes have ushered in a new era for national branding. Central to this is the Vision 2030 document, which serves as the primary framework guiding efforts to effect a fundamental shift in Saudi Arabia's position and global image. The document, aimed at diversifying Saudi Arabia's oil-dependent economy, represents a strategic endeavor to shift the traditional perception of Saudi Arabia as merely an oil-rich country. Its three core tenets - fostering a vibrant society, building a thriving economy, and cultivating an ambitious nation - encapsulate the renewed image that Saudi leaders aspire to project, underscoring their commitment to transformative change.

The Saudis have gradually come to the conclusion that the traditional religious-conservative image and the presentation of Saudi Arabia as an oil country cannot contribute much to the soft power and the country's capacities. For this, the introduction of a new image as a country with a diverse economy, an open and moderate society, and efficient and modern governance, is considered an important part of the efforts of Saudi statesmen. In this context, a variety of strategies have been implemented with the goal of advancing to a new level of national branding. The most significant of these include economic branding, along with the promotion of Saudi Arabia as a nation with a diversified economy; cultural branding and social reforms, aimed at presenting Saudi Arabia as a moderate and non-extremist society; The development of tourism and branding that leverages cultural heritage; Enhancing governance to fortify the national brand; Sports branding; and Urban branding and the creation of new cities. These initiatives are crucial in achieving this objective.

Saudi leaders recognize the necessity of shifting global public opinion towards their country, including through national branding. They are striving to craft a positive, modern, and distinguished image of Saudi Arabia. These efforts involve acknowledging past weaknesses and negative perceptions, while also considering Riyadh's regional competition with smaller neighbors such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. In this context, traditional capacities and structural barriers are also deemed significant. Indeed, the political determination of the Saudis and their efforts to implement new policies and significant innovations are crucial.

Conclusion

Despite some accomplishments and positive outcomes in terms of national branding, there are several challenges that Saudi Arabia faces. These include:

- The absence of a clear definition of branding as a distinct issue in national strategies;
- The continued dominance of oil in Saudi Arabia's economic structure, perpetuating the country's image as an oil-based economy;
- The potential escalation of internal conflicts and divisions due to cultural and social reforms, which could lead to new crises; and
- The increasing political authoritarianism within the Saudi government and the limited participation of civil society in national branding.

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia; National Branding; King Salman; Soft Power; Persian Gulf.*

