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**SECURITY STRATEGY OF SAUDI ARABIA AS A REGIONAL POWER IN THE UNIPOLAR SYSTEM (2010-2020)**

TEK KUTUPLU SİSTEMDE BİR BÖLGESEL GÜÇ OLARAK SUUDİ ARABİSTAN'IN GÜVENLİK POLİTİKASI (2010-2020)

ПОЛИТИКА БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ САУДОВСКОЙ АРАВИИ КАК РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ ДЕРЖАВЫ В ОДНОПОЛЯРНОЙ СИСТЕМЕ (2010-2020)

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**ABSTRACT**

When the security policies of Saudi Arabia between 2000-2010 and 2010-2020 are examined, it can be seen that although there is no change in the internal threats to the Saudi Arabian Regime, there has been a change and transformation in its external threats. Therefore, although the internal threats are the same, in the alliance relations it has formed to balance the internal threats with the interrelated external threats, the interrelated external threats and the main threat have changed. In this case, it shows us that state behavior and alliance relations are constantly re-established as instant security measures. Threats, which are also seen as the dynamic structure of the international system, and the change in alliance relations necessitate a multifaceted approach for regional powers. This is also due to the features of Saudi Arabia such as the monarchical state structure, the competing allegiances of the people, and the fact that it is a rentier state. For societies where the security of the regime is more important and prioritized than the security of the state due to internal threats, it should have multi-layered factors to ensure their security, because of their local characteristics. For Saudi Arabia, these factors consist of internal threats, an external threat interrelated with an internal threat, and regional and global threats. This situation gives rise to the omni-balancing strategy, which means that Saudi Arabia forms alliances with foreign powers interrelated to its internal threats and balances internal and external threats with each other. In cases where omni-balancing is not possible, various reforms, social assistance and cooperation initiatives come into play.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, regional power, security strategy, omni-balancing strategy, internal and external threats.

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**ÖZ**

Suudi Arabistan'ın 2000-2010 yılları ve 2010-2020 yılları arasındaki güvenlik politikaları incelendiğinde Suudi Arabistan'ın Rejim'inin güvenliği noktasında iç tehditlerinde herhangi bir değişiklik olmamasına rağmen dış tehditlerinde değişim ve dönüşüm yaşandığı görülmektedir. Dolayısıyla iç tehditleri ilişkili dış tehditle dengelemek için sergilediği ittifak ilişkilerinde iç tehditleri aynı olmasına rağmen ilişkili dış tehditler ve ana tehdit değişikliğe uğramıştır. Bu durumda bize devlet davranışlarının ve ittifak ilişkilerinin anlık güvenlik tedbirleri olarak sürekli yeniden kurulduğunu göstermektedir. Uluslararası sistemin dinamik yapısı olarak da görülen tehditler ve ittifak ilişkilerindeki değişim bölgesel güçler için çok yönlü bir yaklaşımı gerekli kılmaktadır. Bu durum Suudi Arabistan'ın devlet yapısının monarşik olması, halkın devlet dışında rakip bağlılıklara sahip oluşu ve ekonomik özelliklerinin rantiyer devlet oluşu gibi özelliklerinden de kaynaklanmaktadır. İç tehditlerle rejimin güvenliğinin devletin güvenliğinden daha önemli ve öncelikli görüldüğü toplumlar için yerel özelliklerinin de buna müsait oluşundan dolayı güvenliklerini sağlamak için çok katmanlı etkenlere sahip olması gerekmektedir. Suudi Arabistan için bu etkenler iç tehditlerden, iç tehditle ilişkili bir dış tehditten, bölgesel ve küresel tehditlerden oluşmaktadır. Bu durumda Suudi Arabistan'ın iç tehditleri ile ilişkili dış güçlerle ittifak yapmasına, iç ve dış tehdidi birbiriyle dengelemesini ifade eden çift dengeleme stratejisini doğurmaktadır. Çift dengelemenin mümkün olmadığı durumlarda da çeşitli reformlar, sosyal yardımlar ve iş birliği girişimleri devreye girmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suudi Arabistan, bölgesel güç, güvenlik stratejisi, çift dengeleme stratejisi, iç ve dış tehditler.

**АННОТАЦИЯ**

Если проанализировать политику безопасности Саудовской Аравии в период с 2000 по 2010 годы и с 2010 по 2020 годы, можно увидеть, что, хотя нет никаких изменений во внутренних угрозах, касающихся безопасности саудовского режима, произошли изменения и трансформация его внешних угроз. Таким образом, при союзнических отношениях для уравновешивания внешней угрозы Саудовская Аравия устанавливая альянсы, пытается сбалансировать внутренние угрозы с соответствующей внешней угрозой, Это показывает, что поведение государства и союзнические отношения постоянно устанавливаются как мгновенные меры безопасности. Угрозы и изменения в союзнических отношениях, которые также рассматриваются как динамическая структура международной системы, требуют многогранного подхода со стороны региональных держав. Поскольку как Саудовской Аравия является государством-рантье, такая ситуация также обусловлена исходя из разных характеристик, таких как её монархическая государственная структура и общество, имеющие конкурирующую лояльность за пределами государства, а также её экономическое положение. Общество, где внутренние угрозы и безопасность режима считаются более важными и приоритетными, чем безопасность государства, должны иметь многоуровневые факторы обеспечения своей безопасности, поскольку местные особенности являются подходящими для этого. Для Саудовской Аравии эти факторы исходят из внутренних угроз, связанные с внешней и региональными и глобальными угрозами. В тех случаях, когда двойное балансирование невозможно, в игру вступают различные инициативы по реформированию, социальной помощи и сотрудничества.

**Ключевые слова:** Саудовская Аравия, региональная держава, стратегия безопасности, стратегия двойного балансирования, внутренние и внешние угрозы.

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### Introduction

In our study, the security strategies of Saudi Arabia as a regional power in the unipolar system between 2010 and 2020 is discussed. These strategies are examined in terms of global, regional and internal threats, and the state behavior of Saudi Arabia is analyzed. In the said period, the change in the regional policies of the superpower caused different actors to stand out in the region. While the structure of the system was unipolar, the structure of the region has become multipolar. For Saudi Arabia, the existing global threat in its region has left its place to many regional threats, and with the effect of the Arab Spring, internal threats have become even more important for the security of the regime. For this reason, Saudi Arabia's security strategy between 2010 and 2020 is examined on the basis of global, regional and internal threats. While the regional policies of the superpower are important in determining the main threat of Saudi Arabia, it is necessary to examine what kind of threats exist to the security of the regime due to its local characteristics to determine its primary threat.

When Saudi Arabia's 2010-2020 foreign policies are analyzed, it can be seen that the Riyadh Government adopted a bilateral regional policy. Sometimes it takes a position as a mediator, such as stabilizing the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco and supporting the army in Egypt, it can adopt aggressive policies with military interventions and support the Yemeni administration and the opposition forces in Syria against Iran, which aims to be the dominant power in the Middle East Region. With the onset of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia has tended to ally with interrelated external threats in order to combat internal threats like Shiites, liberals, reformists, and the Muslim Brotherhood. It has tried to omni-balance by establishing various alliances with Egypt against the internal threat of the Shiites, the external threats, Yemen, Bahrain and even Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood, and also allied with the USA against the threats posed by the reformists. Forming various alliance relations with the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar in order to prevent and balance Iran in the Middle East was also the method of ensuring its security in the foreign policy adopted in this period (Ataman, Demir, 2011: 196-202).

**Table 1. Perceived Threats and Implemented Policies by Saudi Arabia**

<b>Threats and Combating Methods of Saudi Arabia (2010-2020)</b>			
<b>Internal Threats</b>	<b>External Threats</b>	<b>Interrelated Threats</b>	<b>Alliance Strategy</b>
Muslim Brotherhood Shiites Reformists	Iran	Egyptian-Muslim Brotherhood Yemen Bahrain Syria	Alliance with Egypt Support to Bahrain Intervention in the Yemeni Civil War Military support to the Syrian opposition

**Table 2. Factors affecting the Security Strategy of the Regional Power in the Unipolar System (2010-2020)**

<b>Structure of the System</b>	Unipolar
<b>Regional Policies of Superpower</b>	Passive Engagement Strategy
<b>Regional Power's Foreign Policy Options</b>	Mediator-Aggressor-Threat Balance
<b>The Most Important Threat to Regional Power (Internal)</b>	Shiites, Muslim Brotherhood, Sahwa, Terrorist-related groups, Liberal Reformists
<b>The Main Threat to Regional Power (External)</b>	Iran
<b>The Alliance Option of Regional Power</b>	Omni-Balancing - Various alliances established with states interrelated with their internal threats in the region

**1. GLOBAL THREATS TO SAUDI ARABIA**

During the Obama Administration, which is called the passive engagement period, America tried to maintain its leadership role, tried to adapt to the strategic competition in Asia and to develop partnership when necessary. Therefore, it has been selective in its defense strategy. Because established partnerships and regional policies require large amounts of resources and defense expenditures. In line with the defense strategy determined during the Obama administration, certain regional priorities were detailed and partnerships were heavily emphasized (Hoffman, 2016: 42-43). During the Obama administration, the US grand strategy did not adopt any deep engagement policy for the Middle East Region, and Iran quickly strengthened its hand in the absence of this dominant power in the region. After the sanctions on Iran were lifted with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) during the Obama administration, international isolation and economic sanctions were terminated. In this way, Iran did not encounter any military or internal difficulties, which allowed it to expand its sphere of influence in Iraq (a Shiite government) and Yemen (through the Houthis). In addition, Iran had the opportunity to gain control in Lebanon (through Hezbollah), take an active role in Syria, undermine Sunni regimes in the region such as those in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and support Hamas and Islamic Jihad in their wars against Israel (Ya’alon, 2017).

The first year of the US Trump Administration was characterized by the absence of clear policy guidelines for the Middle East. As a matter of fact, in the election campaign, although Trump has frequently stated that the US intervention should be limited in various regions, political scientists have frequently expressed in this process that the US Administration has no choice but to act as the "world police" in order to protect American interests (The Straits Times, 2018). (Because every dominant power deficiency in the Middle East is filled by elements against American interests. The United States has repeatedly intervened in the region with objectives such as confronting the spread of Iranian hegemony in the region, continuing to fight the Islamic State, and trying to stabilize Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Libya. The passive interventions of the USA in the region have forced the development of new strategies to deal with the radical elements in the region and to protect the national interests of the USA. By establishing alliances with regional powers to

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develop effective strategies against these elements, it both strengthened its regional allies and created a new field of struggle (Ya'alon, 2017).

Later in Trump's presidency, the JCPOA pointed to a deeper understanding and a change in policy regarding the threat posed by the Iranian Regime to the Middle East and global stability. The US administration classified the Sunni Arab regimes and the Iranian Regime as the primary threat in the Middle East and did not see Iran as a contributor to regional stability. Therefore, it defines it as the main problem, not as a part of the solution as the Obama Administration does (The Guardian, 2018). However, in order to deal with Iran and achieve the goal defined by President Trump in his speeches, the Administration has refrained from reintroducing the nuclear deal. In addition, the USA put pressure on the Iranian Regime, forcing it to choose between continuing its nuclear weapons policies or surviving. Instead of putting pressure on Iran by uniting the parties, the agreement caused friction between the US and its five partners (England, France, Russia, China and Germany). These countries have found it appropriate to reopen the JCPOA. Because it has been already possible to apply heavy pressure against the Iranian Regime due to its violation of the Security Council's human rights resolutions such as the proliferation of weapons, terrorism, missile projects and the execution and arrest of opponents of the Regime. At the same time, the Trump Administration has carried out studies to more closely monitor the Iran Nuclear Project. These efforts consist of various investments in intelligence and alliances to prevent Iran from reaching military nuclear capability (Ya'alon, 2017).

The shift of the US grand strategy to the Indo-Pacific affects Saudi Arabia the most among the regional powers. There are large numbers of US troops in Saudi Arabia who provide vital support for Riyadh to maintain the balance of power with Tehran in the region. The absence of the United States in the Middle East region within the scope of its strategic plan weakens Saudi Arabia's position against its rival Iran. At the same time, the Kingdom has been heavily affected by the withdrawal of US troops supporting Saudi Arabia, as it was also in direct military conflict with the Iranian-backed Houthi militias in Yemen. The most obvious reason for this situation can be considered as the lack of qualification of the Saudi Arabian army and Iran's attempt to fill every power gap caused by the absence of the USA. Every change of administration in the USA and the change of the USA's grand strategies in the region always concerns Saudi Arabia. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) disputes have also weakened Riyadh's position in the region and this caused some changes in its foreign policies. Thus, Saudi Arabia had to reconsider and reshape its relations with Qatar and Turkey, and even with the Tehran government. Therefore, the US's decision to change its regional policies and withdraw from the region, as in the scope of its grand strategy, affected Riyadh's foreign policy strategy and resulted in the Kingdom's maintaining the balance of power with Iran by cooperating with regional actors to maintain its influence in the region (Doost, 2021).

### **2. REGIONAL THREATS TO SAUDI ARABIA**

Three different targets stand out in the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. First; It has adopted an anti-Iranian policy in Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain in order to limit Iran's goals in the region, and has adopted a policy that is the opposite of the groups supported by Iran. While this policy has been sometimes in the form of military intervention like in Bahrain, sometimes in the form of supporting the government against the Houthis supported by Iran, like in Yemen, and sometimes by supporting anti-regime groups like in Syria. The main threat to the Saudi Regime has been Iran, and the main purpose was to develop alliance relations and omni-balance with Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, which were the internal threats that posed a serious threat to the security of the regime between 2010-2020,

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and the interrelated external threats against the Shiites. During this period, Saudi Arabia took an aggressive stance in its domestic and foreign policy. Another internal threat, the Muslim Brotherhood, was suppressed by the internal threat and the interrelated external power by forming various alliance relations with Egypt as an external threat related to the military takeover in Egypt. In this process, it was seen that the alliance relations formed alone were not enough to suppress internal threats. In this case, social assistance and reforms were utilized. Thus, internal threats were mitigated and a omni-balancing strategy was implemented.

During the Arab Spring, Iran's support to the Houthis in Yemen, the administration supported by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the leadership of the Shiite Administration in Iraq put Saudi Arabia in a very difficult situation in terms of its security in the Middle East Region (Oktav, 2019). This caused it to take an increasingly aggressive stance in regional politics. American-based reports reveal that Saudi Arabia spent a total of 60 billion dollars and 200 million dollars per day between 2015 and 2018 in the Yemeni Civil War (Street, 2019 and Iran Press, 2019). Saudi Arabia's Yemen policy is to balance the Shiites, which it sees as an internal threat, and to prevent Iran's attempt to fill the power gap in the region. In general terms, when the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is examined, there is an ongoing secret conflict. In this conflict, Iranian intelligence usually uses the traditional way of fighting Saudi Arabia, while Saudi Arabia generally fights against Iran by taking powerful states such as the USA and Israel on its side or by forming alliances with other states in the Middle East. As a result, the Saudi leadership, still fearful of direct confrontation with Iran, has taken action since 2005 to thwart Iran's real or perceived gains in the region. The mutual showdowns between these two countries in the fields of de facto, economic and cyber security can also be defined as "uninterrupted engagement" and "forward defense" strategy (Siber Bültlen, 2019).

Among the policies, adopted during the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia took a determined stance regarding its neighbor Bahrain. Military intervention was inevitable for Saudi Arabia and many Gulf states after the protests spiraled out of control and the rule of the House of the Caliph, which had a close alliance with Saudi Arabia, was jeopardized. Because the Arab Spring demonstrations in Bahrain were just one wave of a protest movement that originated largely from the country's Shiite majority. Even before 2011, the Bahraini administration had backed the Saudi administration in order not to make too many reforms, and above all it was trying to prevent the emergence of a constitutional monarchy there (Colombo, 2012). Located twenty miles off the east coast of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain was strategically important to Riyadh for economic, sectarian and geopolitical reasons. Because Bahrain is adjacent to the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, which has a quarter of the world's proven oil resources. Any unrest there had the potential to spread throughout the Kingdom and create chaos in global oil markets. The eastern province is also home to the majority of Saudi Arabia's Shia population, which equates to about 15% of the total population of Saudi Arabia and 30% of the eastern province's population. A radicalized and uneasy Bahrain with a Shiite population of around 70 percent could mobilize opposition groups in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, in which case it would pose a serious external threat to the security of the Regime. An unstable Bahrain could hasten Iranian initiatives. A more visible Iranian presence in Bahrain would have confronted Tehran directly on the Saudi Arabian border (Karaağaçlı, 2011).

The popular uprisings against the regime, which started in Syria on March 15, 2011, still continue after Saudi Arabia supported anti-Regime movements such as Turkey and Qatar in 2012, and also with Russia and Iran supporting the regime. Saudi Arabia has been closely interested in who will rule Syria, because a Shiite administration in Syria that is pro-Iranian

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would strengthen Iran's dominance in the region and thus pose a threat to the security of the Saudi Regime (Aras, Falk, 2015:325). However, the Riyadh administration could not provide significant support to the opposition in Syria due to the thought that the US would intervene in Syria and fears about Iran's reaction in financing and arming the rebels. Until November 2012, Saudi Arabia has gradually expanded its support for the rebels in southern Syria via Jordan (Amos, 2012).

While Saudi Arabia tried to prevent the revolution from spreading to the monarchies with its support to Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Morocco, it also tried to bring the army and parts of the old regime to power in Egypt. Considering the generals as the only possible guarantors of stability, the Saudis supported the Egyptian military coup of July 2013. But it took more than two years for Riyadh to take a firm stand on the side of the counter-revolution. The most important reason for the support given to the military coup for Saudi Arabia was the stability of the state, seeing that the policies of President Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood created an increasing polarization in Egyptian society, and endangered the stability of the region. In terms of the security of the Regime, the ideological idea of Islam that the Muslim Brotherhood had and spread rapidly was also seen as dangerous for Saudi Arabia. Finally, Riyadh also worried that Tehran could use the turmoil in Egypt to expand its influence there (Torabi, 2012:109 and Steinberg, 2014:17).

The second goal of Saudi Arabia in ensuring its security was to support the allied monarchies in the region and to limit the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the transforming states in the region. The Saudi leadership openly endorsed the July 2013 military coup against Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi and pursued this policy increasingly aggressively, declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in March 2014 (Telci, Rakipoğlu, 2018:157-160). Saudi Arabia's reaction to the Muslim Brotherhood stems from the advance of the Brotherhood Movement. The Muslim Brotherhood is seen as a serious internal threat because it is a cadre that voices radical rhetoric against the Saudi Regime and is supported by those who are against the regime. The support it has given to monarchies such as Bahrain and Oman, especially Egypt, is due to the fact that it has a serious internal threat against its monarchy. Thus, it balanced its internal threat with an interrelated external threat and appeased both internal and external threat.

The third goal of Saudi Arabia is to strengthen its ties with its allies in the region and to adopt policies that ensures energy security in the region. In this context, Saudi Arabia tried to increase its influence in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and decided to provide various social and economic aids for the monarchy states to easily suppress democratization movements within the country. Although this decision had a significant impact on Bahrain, it did not have a significant impact on Oman (Reuters, 2011). Being aware of the fact that the alliance relations have made many contributions to it to protect its Regime, Saudi Arabia aimed to become a regional power against the power gaps that Iran was trying to fill, to strengthen itself and the alliance relations. As a result, all the policies adopted were to form external alliances that would balance and mitigate the internal threat while there were so many internal threats to the regime.

### **3. INTERNAL THREATS TO SAUDI ARABIA**

#### **3.1. Liberal Reformists and Shiites**

With the spring of 2011, the demands of the people of Saudi Arabia increased with the reform movements. There were different demands among the reformers in the country. The groups whose living conditions were below the standards demanded improvement of their economic conditions, Shiites demanded the elimination of their economic, cultural and political grievances, and women demanded new reforms regarding the rights granted to

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women. In the face of these demands, Saudi Arabia took action very quickly against the democratization movements of its own Regime and announced that it would provide social aids to please its people. It has also increased security measures against protests at potential meeting locations and in areas that have traditionally caused constant unrest and it opposed any cooperation between liberal reformers and Shiites. These measures taken by the Saudi Arabian rulers were enough to stop the riots that broke out in March 2011 (Ataman, Demir, 2011:188-190). The Saudi administration responded to the first riots with arrests, increased security force presence, and various warnings to the public. King Abdullah made direct and indirect payments to the people and relieved his citizens economically. He promised to spend \$130 billion to address problems such as widespread unemployment and housing shortages. While stabilizing the west and center of the country after this process, the Shiites living in the eastern provinces were not satisfied due to the excessive pressure of the Saudi Administration. This made Saudi rulers nervous (Gavin, 2011:30).

In February 2011, movements similar to the uprising model in Tunisia and Egypt started in Saudi Arabia. Activists voiced demands in the streets of Riyadh for a democratically elected parliament, an independent judiciary and the release of all political prisoners. In addition, various campaigns titled "People want to overthrow the Regime" were organized on social media (Dünya Bülteni, 2011). Seeing this as a serious threat to the regime, the Saudi rulers announced on the second day through the representatives of the Ministry of Interior that all protests were banned and that the security forces would prevent any demonstration. The announcement was broadcast on all Saudi channels (Aljazeera, 2011a). Then, the country's most respected religious institution, the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, declared that "any revolt against the state leader is against Islam." (Aljazeera, 2011b). In order to increase the security measures, the Ministry of Interior has appointed many new soldiers (Fisk, 2011). With these measures, possible riots were prevented. In this process, those who made any attempt or made a statement to threaten the security of the regime were arrested in a short time. Afterwards, while there were not many uprisings across the country, there were attempts to pose a threat to the regime in the Shiite settlements in the east of the country from time to time (Moghadam, 2017).

In general, the Saudi government's attitude towards the administration, members of the Dynasty and new ideas has become more harsh compared to previous periods. This process and the attitude of the administration affected the groups and individuals most affected by the Muslim Brotherhood. At the beginning of 2014, the Ministry of Interior of Saudi Arabia included the Muslim Brotherhood on the list of terrorist organizations. (Sınmaz, 2019). This attitude was considered as a message to its own citizens and to the sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood around the world. Afterwards, although no terrorist attacks were attributed, the Saudi Arabian government banned the Islamic Ummah Party, which represents the liberal Salafists, on the grounds that the political parties were not Islamic, and the party leaders were arrested. Because the Umma Party represented a group that synthesizes Salafi ideas and Islam and was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, it was popularly supported, especially in Kuwait and many Gulf countries. The party aimed to end the governments in the Gulf countries by peaceful means, to prevent the division of the region into small states, and to reduce the influence of America in the region. (Human Right Watch, 2011). The party's charter included general articles such as the implementation of Islamic values in domestic and foreign policies, the election of the parliament, the separation of powers and some democratic reforms in social life. In addition, the members of the party generally consisted of the intelligentsia of Saudi Arabia, university professors, educated clergy, businessmen and especially young people (The party's founding document and party member list were accessible on the party website until 2014, but after the closure of the party, access to the

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website was also blocked). Considering both the dominant thoughts in the establishment of the Party and the members of the Party, it became inevitable for Saudi Arabia to define the Ummah Party as a threat to the continuation of the regime and to eliminate it from being a threat.

The reason why Saudi Arabia saw the Arab Spring as a threat and saw itself in danger was the frequent demonstrations of the Shiites in the eastern provinces. While the west and center of the country remained calm in general, the problem in the eastern provinces became more chronic with the Arab Spring. In addition, the Shiites in Bahrain demonstrating against the ruling council and the thought that Iran affected both the Shiites in Bahrain and the Shiites in the eastern provinces worried the Riyadh Administration. For this reason, the Saudi Regime accused Iran of inciting the Shiites in the region against its country at every opportunity. Most of the Shiites, who make up 15% of the population of Saudi Arabia, live in the eastern province, where they represent about half of the population. The "Shiite issue" is of particular strategic importance for the security of Saudi Arabia's Regime, as this region is also home to the oil industry and all the country's major oil fields. This caused Saudi Arabia to exert various political, economic and cultural pressures against the Shiites in the region, and these pressures caused the Shiite youth to become more militant and the social segregation to deepen. It is possible to say that the effect of Wahhabism, which is the religious-political identity on which the country was built, has the biggest share among the reasons. When we consider the religious teachings in which Wahhabism does not define Shiites as Muslims, the political distinction becomes even deeper (Steinberg, 2011).

Saudi Arabia's intervention in the Shiites in the eastern provinces and in the uprisings in Bahrain was also due to the Shiites' belief that they held sectarian beliefs loyal to Iran and were guided by Iran, rather than their political actions (Matthiesen, 2009). But with the Arab Spring, its attitude towards the Shiites in the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia also changed, promising them to improve their living conditions. This attitude of the Saudi Regime kept the eastern provinces calm for a while, but after the security forces arrested Taufiq al-Amir and some protesters during the protests, the discontent among the Shiites started to flare up again (Arabian Business, 2011). Following this, Saudi Arabia accused Iran of supporting Shiite protests in Bahrain, Lebanon and in its country and of disrupting "national security and stability" (Matthiesen, 2012:650). Saudi Arabia reacted much more harshly to its citizens, with anti-monarchy rhetoric in the demonstrations in the eastern provinces. First of all, in 2012, the Ministry of Interior announced a list of 23 Shiite protest leaders and issued an arrest warrant for them. In addition, the Saudi Regime urged Shiites to make a choice between Iran and prominent Shiite scholars regarding their allegiance to Saudi Arabia. As a result, armed conflicts continued in the region (al-Haqbani, 2013).

Generally speaking, the Saudi Regime wanted to prevent any alliance between (Sunni) liberal and Shiite opposition that could threaten the continuity of the regime. In this context, it claimed at every opportunity that these uprisings threatened the security of Saudi Arabia, using Iran's influence on the Shiite demonstrators as an excuse. This claim of the regime showed Iran as the main source of the increasing religious polarization in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia. (Khatib, Lust (ed.), 2014:317-318). As can be seen, Saudi Arabia's internal threats to the security of the Regime are closely related to its local characteristics. It can be thought that the competing allegiances of the people, the monarchical state structure and the rentier economic model are closely related to the internal threats to Saudi Arabia. This leads it to find solutions for its internal threats before the external threats.

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF SAUDI ARABIA'S ALLIANCE RELATIONS AND BALANCING POLICIES IN THE FACE OF THREATS (2010-2020)**

After the USA started to produce shale gas (Blackwill, O' Sullivan, 2014:1-2) and the instability in the Middle East no longer poses a threat to its security, the USA changed its security policies from the Middle East Region to the Asia-Pacific Region after 2011. According to the article titled "America's Pacific Century" published by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Foreign Policy magazine, she stated that "the future of politics will be determined not in Afghanistan or Iraq, but in Asia and the USA is at the very center of this process" and gave the signal of the US foreign policy that will change (Clinton, 2011). According to the Obama Administration, which is known as the "Pivot to Asia Doctrine", the Middle East countries, which are already struggling with their own country's security due to the Arab Spring process, no longer pose a security threat, but the rapidly growing China poses a multi-faceted threat both in the political, military and economic fields. China is a threat to the global and regional interests of the USA (Huafei, 2013). In the Arab Spring, the USA also interpreted the process as a democratization movement and supported the popular movements. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, had hesitations about whether the USA would support them in case of any threat after the US's passive engagement strategy in this process (Westphal, Everhaus, Steinberg, 2014).

The Middle East was faced with a constant atmosphere of insecurity due to terrorist acts and the atmosphere was created by the unstable governments of the states. The insecurity of the region, on the other hand, endangered the stability of the region, while threatening the security of both energy resources and economies on a global and regional scale. On the basis of the very easy spread of terrorism in the region, the French and British mandate administrations built on artificial borders in the region after the First World War, the increasing Jews in the Palestinian lands and the established State of Israel, the decreasing influence and statelessness of the Palestinians in the region, the United States' opposition to every Muslim movement in the region, extensive concessions given to Israel, political-military support, exacerbated and used sectarian differences, the energy resources of the region and the existence of global powers that need them (Bozarlan, 2011:47-60, 343-350). In addition, when the local characteristics of the countries in question are added to these effects, both internal and external threats are constantly on the agenda regarding the security of the regimes in the region. The monarchical state structures of the countries in the region, the existence of competing allegiances and the characteristics of being a rentier state constantly confront them with internal threats. This puts internal threats against the security of the regime in an important place and gives them priority.

The most important issue threatening the Saudi Regime in the said period was the radicalization movements as a result of the conflicts in the region during the Arab Spring that started in 2011, and the threat of which states would fill the power gaps in the states whose administration was vacated in the region. The change in the balance of power, which is a something that we frequently encounter in the history of international relations, the further strengthening of a state or the fear that the possibility of getting stronger on other states has resulted in states increasing their power and forming new alliances. During the Arab Spring, the collapse of both pro-Western and pro-Saudi Arabian governments such as Egypt and Tunisia, and the arrival of a new cadre, and the increasing influence of Iran in Syria and Yemen endangered the security of the Saudi Regime in the region. Iran proved its presence and influence in the region with the partnership it established in the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars and the cadres it supported. Iran, which penetrated all areas of states that were powerful before the Arab Spring, such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria, and lost their power with the Arab Spring, again jeopardized the security of the Saudi Regime and therefore the continuity of

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the regime (Gause, 2014:18-19). In addition to Iran, which aims to besiege the country with the Shia crescent, aiming to have a presence in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Egypt in the Middle East, Qatar, Turkey, an Egyptian state under the control of the Muslim Brotherhood pose another threat also the Saudi Regime with its marginal policies and creating an alternative Sunni axis (Steinberg, 2014:6-8).

With the popular movements in the Arab Spring, many pro-Saudi administrations in the region changed hands, and Iran tried to fill the gap in the region, and this threatened the security policies of Saudi Arabia. In this process, with a Machiavellian stance, the Saudi Arabian leader implemented realpolitik practices in order to protect and maintain the security of the Regime, taking into account the changing power balances. The important thing for the regime has been the survival of the Saudi Regime and the implementation of the practices that ensures it. When the regime feels in danger, it gains the legitimacy to carry out many practices, and for this reason, it usually attempts to show this power by increasing power. Saudi Arabia has chosen to intervene directly in Bahrain and Yemen as a method of dealing with the threats it faces. It also made diplomatic and economic interventions to turn the revolutionary movements in the region in its favor, (Acar, 2018:147) and most importantly, it formed alliances with interrelated external threats to balance and appease its internal threats.

Especially energy exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran suppressed the protests very quickly. In the face of democratization movements, Saudi Arabia tried to keep its monarchy secure by trying to minimize the effects of this process with its counter-revolutionary policies both in the region and in its own country. Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have used the Islamist organization or its opponents as a tool to implement their own undemocratic methods by making the threat of Islamist organizations and opposition in their countries a securitization strategy in order to protect their regimes against the democratization demands of the people for a long time. These methods have served the strategy and security interests of both authoritarian regimes and Western countries. (Almela, Mayoz, 2016:2-4). After the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia focused its foreign policy and security strategies on preventing the formation of a hegemonic power in the Middle East Region, preventing popular uprisings in the region, and being a hegemonic power over Yemen and the Little Gulf Sheikhs (Acar, 2018:147). The Gulf Region, which has the richest energy resources in the world, should be under Saudi Arabia's own influence and control for the security of the regime. That's why it reacts to all kinds of threats in the region (Patrick, 2011:3-7).

All Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, have to follow the positive and negative relations between Iran and their regional rivals for the security of their energy resources and the continuity of their own regimes. Saudi Arabia and its allies view the Shiite protests in the Saudi eastern provinces and Bahrain not against authoritarian regimes but as an Iranian attempt to overthrow legitimate governments with the help of Shiite Arabs. The Riyadh Government has been adopting an aggressive regional policy by making more radical decisions in its security strategies and foreign policies since 2010, against Iran's attempt to fill every power gap that has emerged in the Middle East Region with the Arab Spring. In addition, the tension between Riyadh, Saudis and Bahraini Shiites since 2011 can be interpreted in this context (Akdogan, 2012:469-471). In conclusion, this shows that the change in Saudi Arabia's security strategy and foreign policy, which gained momentum with the Arab Spring, is a matter of both domestic and foreign policy in ensuring the stability of the Regime.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been a country that has managed to survive the revolutions in which serious changes and transformations have taken place in the Arab

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World, mostly unscathed. The Saudi Ruling Family has taken advantage of its significant historical and religious legitimacy, as well as its oil revenues to provide social support to its citizens and to attract Middle Eastern countries to its side. Thus, the Regime has prevented both the influence of other regimes and the protests in its own country (Akdoğan, 2012:476). Faced with many threats between 2000-2010, 2010-2020, Saudi Arabia's ability to remain a monarchical state in the face of these threats, in other words, to protect the security of the regime, ultimately depends on the omni-balancing alliance relationship it has adopted in the process. Because the real threat to the security of the regime has always been internal threats. In terms of combating internal threats, the strategy that led Saudi Arabia to real success stems from the fact that it has suppressed its current internal threats by forming alliances with external threats. When it is unable to form an alliance with a interrelated external threat or alliances are not sufficient, it postpones internal threats by providing various social benefits, reforms and new rights. In some cases, it suppresses it with direct police interventions and harsh penalties. Postponing and suppressing internal threats and then focusing on the present external threat can be considered an overall security strategy for Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia was already seen as a major regional force in the Middle East prior to the reign of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (Aydin, 2016). Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia adopted a more assertive regional leadership strategy as a result of US policies, including the decision to withdraw from the area (Ekşi, 2017). The distrust of Iranian regional ambitions, which was seen as a significant cause of instability in the region, also had an impact on this change in strategy (Pasha, 2016). The advent of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman signaled a dramatic shift in the balance of power in the area surrounding Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia started pursuing an active and ambitious foreign policy under his direction, which was indicative of a desire for regional hegemony. Alongside this change, Saudi Arabia's policy was reevaluated, which resulted in the development of a more assertive regional leadership approach (Cerioli, 2023). Moreover, Saudi Arabia's strength has come from changing sources over time. The nation's strength has generally been ascribed to oil wealth and cultural influence, but King Salman's personalization of the Saudi monarchy has also influenced the country's regional power dynamics (Gallarotti, Al-Filali, 2012; Richter, 2020). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's efforts to defend the kingdom from regional challenges are indicative of its desire of regional leadership (Kural, Erdem, 2023). Neoclassical realism offers insights into the formation of a resurgent regional power and the pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy, and may be used to examine changes in Saudi Arabia's regional power within the framework of international relations theories (Ehteshami, 2018; Nolte, 2010).

In order to increase its power with a structural realist point of view, Saudi Arabia has tried to create new trade sectors and regional cooperation that will maximize its power in the Middle East Region, by trying not only to gain material power such as purchasing weapons, but also to have various characteristics of power.<sup>1</sup> The structural feature of the international system forces states to pursue power. Just as Saudi Arabia sees its power as a means of defense against attacks, it sees the increase in power of a nuclear-armed country like Iran as a threat to the security of its own regime. This causes Saudi Arabia to be constantly vigilant in the region and to closely follow all kinds of cooperation and change in the region. The ultimate goal of Saudi Arabia is not to increase power, but to ensure its security. For this reason, Saudi Arabia has often seen the USA, which is a global power, as

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<sup>1</sup>For details, see Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030"; <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>

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its political, military and economic partner in regional policies. During the period when the USA was distant from Saudi Arabia in its regional policies, Saudi Arabia adopted policies to strengthen formations such as the Gulf Cooperation Organization in the region, and formed regional alliances with its party countries with various social aids and military interventions.

After the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia directly intervened in the threat of revolution in Syria and the Shiite uprisings in Yemen. Again in this process, defense and attack aircraft were also used by the Saudi Regime against attempts in Yemen. Attempts to bring together GCC members, such as the Arab NATO and the Arab Army, have been used by Saudi Arabia as a method of forming defensive diplomatic relations against Iran. Initiatives such as providing economic aid to countries such as Oman, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Yemen in order to balance and limit Iran's attempt to fill the vacant administrative gaps in the Middle East Region and to realize anti-revolutionary policies were also on the agenda in this process, and oil revenues were used as a threat balancing policy. They tried to apply political intervention to countries like Qatar with some economic sanctions. Purchased weapons, economic sanctions, financial aid, military power used against the uprisings, and the deterrence method of power through direct interventions were also sufficient in terms of ensuring the security of the regime used by the Saudi administration in the said period.

Since spring 2015, Saudi Arabia has been supporting a state coalition with a military intervention against rebel forces in Yemen. This intervention by Saudi Arabia includes air strikes, ground operations and an air and naval blockade of Yemen. The policy adopted by Saudi Arabia in Yemen has created a state of continuous conflict rather than an intervention focused on getting a quick result. United Nations bodies and non-governmental organizations have accused Saudi Arabia of violating international humanitarian law and widespread and systematic attacks on civilian targets. The conflict in Yemen has claimed tens of thousands of lives and is now considered the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. The war, and especially the blockade, also disrupted the import of food, fuel and medical supplies (Darwich, 2018). The main principle of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Yemen is to ensure that Yemen always remains a divided and weak state. Because Yemen is a neighboring country to Saudi Arabia, its strategic location, potential, and its population supported and protected by Iran poses a serious threat to the Ibn Saud Regime.

It is possible to say that the Saudi Regime has attempted to establish an Arab Army and Arab-Islamic NATO and fill the power gaps in the region and become a regional leader, thus tried to use diplomatic relations and the deterrent effect of power as a method of combating the threat (Echaque, 2014:13-16). It is also thought that Saudi Arabia has adopted sectarian-based foreign policies in line with its economic, military and diplomatic interventions in countries such as Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, where Iran has a presence in the region, and in line with its preventive policies against Iran (Valz, 2016:24-27). The important thing in formed alliances is to ensure that the actors act together against a common threat for their own security. Sharing the costs in the event of a war is also an important reason for the alliances formed. Therefore, while attempting to establish an Arab Army and Arab NATO, Saudi Arabia aimed to act together against a common threat and to intervene together in any attempt by maintaining this unity. However, since the common threat, which is the most important reason for the alliance, is not the same for all GCC member states, this attempt has not reached its goal. While Iran is a threat to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE, Iran is not seen as a primary threat to Oman and Qatar.

Although it is very difficult to say whether Saudi Arabia's changing foreign policy after the Arab Spring focused on defensive or aggressive policies and categorize it in this context, it is possible to say that the Regime's policies have diversified and renewed. It is thought that the Ibn Saud Regime has adopted aggressive policies, based on its direct

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interventions in Bahrain and Yemen and the attack planes it bought, within the scope of its changing policies. It is also possible to say that the Saudi Regime has adopted defensive policies with the defense weapons it has purchased, its diplomatic initiatives and economic interventions and anti-revolutionary policies (Steinberg, 2014:15-21). The Regime's attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring and contrary to the generalization that the Regime adopted a sectarian policy, it is seen that the security of the regime shaped all foreign and security policies. While the regime adopts anti-revolutionary policies in Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen, its efforts to overthrow the current administrations in Syria and Libya invalidate the thesis that Saudi Arabia is anti-revolutionary (Heydemann, Leenders, 2011:647-653).

### CONCLUSION

When the security strategies of 2010-2020 Saudi Arabia are examined, we come across an attempt by Iran to fill every power gap left by the USA's passive engagement strategy with its withdrawal from the region. Regime changes in the region with the Arab Spring reduced the number of pro-Saudi regimes and endangered the stability of the region as it caused sudden changes in the balance of power. In this case, Iran's attempts to fill the power gap in the region, both supported the internal threat and created multiple external threats to Saudi Arabia. For Saudi Arabia, Iran has all four factors that Stephen Walt identified as threats (total strength, geographic proximity, offensive power, and offensive intentions). When these conditions are added to the internal threats of Saudi Arabia and Iran's interrelated external threats, Iran poses serious threats to the security of the regime. The most serious threat for Saudi Arabia in this period is that there are a lot of internal threats and that internal threats are constantly supported by interrelated external threats. For this reason, it has always tried to balance its internal threats with an interrelated external threat, and has formed many alliances for this purpose.

When Saudi Arabia's foreign policy during the Arab Spring is examined, it is seen that it aimed to weaken the forces, regardless of Shiite and Sunni rivals in the region, to protect the status quo in the Middle East Region by supporting pro-Saudi regimes, and to establish security policies by targeting the leadership in the region with the formations it founded and led. The regime adopted a foreign policy that it had never implemented during the Arab Spring process, intervened militarily outside its national borders, made arms deals with countries other than the USA, and tried to create a strong military Arab-Islamic Consensus by taking Egypt and Pakistan on its side against revisionist country policies. As a result, Saudi Arabia faced the demands of radical transformation in favor of the Shiite population both in the region and in the country. The regime's general security strategy, on the other hand, can be considered as maximizing its power against Iran, which is the main threat, by using the method of pacifying and suppressing internal threats by allying with external threats interrelated to existing internal threats in the process. When it could not form an alliance with an external threat related to internal threats, tried to keep the regime safe with social aids, various reforms and cooperation.

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