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Analysis of the influence of the Islamic religion on international  
relations: study case Saudi Arabia

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**Cuenca – Ecuador**

**2024**

## DEDICATION

To my parents, who with love, gratitude and patience have guided me at every stage, helping me to fulfill each of my goals. Thank you for your unwavering support and for believing in me even in the most difficult of times.

To my sister, who, with her silence and distant view of each event, makes her support and pride felt with a single smile. Your presence, though sometimes quiet, has been a constant source of inspiration and strength to me.

To my grandfather Adonis, who with every little insistence and reminder makes my goals look closer.

Thank you for your wisdom and for always reminding me of the importance of persevering.

To my dear pets, who were by my side at night and early morning, sometimes without sleeping, to complete each job during the race. Their unconditional company and affection gave me comfort and motivation in moments of greatest effort and dedication.

To all of you, I dedicate this thesis with all my heart. Your support and love have been instrumental in my journey to this achievement.

## GRATITUDE

First of all, to my mother Graciela, whose infinite patience and dedication have allowed me to concentrate and move forward in this project. Thank you for your time, your words of encouragement and for always being by my side, giving me the necessary support at all times.

To my father Eddy, despite the physical distance that separates us, his support has been unconditional and constant. Her words of encouragement and confidence in my abilities have driven me to keep going, always reminding me of the importance of persevering and doing my best.

To my sister Tabata, for believing in me when I needed it most. Your words of faith and optimism have been a source of inspiration and strength, reminding me that I am not alone on this journey and that I have your support in every step I take.

I cannot fail to mention my Tutor, Damiano, whose exceptional guidance has been crucial in the realization of this work. Thank you for your wisdom, patience and dedication. Their guidance has been invaluable and has significantly enriched the content and quality of this thesis.

To all of you, my deepest gratitude. This thesis would not have been possible without their love, support and trust

## SUMMARY

The thesis "Analysis of the Influence of the Islamic Religion on International Relations: Case Study Saudi Arabia 2015-2021" examined the influence of the Islamic religion on Saudi Arabia's international relations during the period 2015-2021. The liberalism and realism approaches were explored, and the country's international relations were analyzed in the global context. It was found that the Islamic religion has had a significant impact on the evolution of Saudi Arabia's international relations, determined by historical and political moments and decisions. During the period studied, it was observed that religious interpretation has influenced foreign policy, and that faith and religious identity can affect relations between countries and international actors. Saudi Arabia has played a prominent role in the Middle East and has had considerable influence on global politics, maintaining close relations with the United States and other Western and Eastern countries. However, challenges such as the issue of human rights and the fight against terrorism have also been identified, highlighting the need to address religious and political issues effectively in order to promote peace and stability

**Keywords:** Islamic religion, Saudi Arabia, Foreign policy, Religious identity, Human rights, Terrorism, Religious influence.

## ABSTRACT

The thesis "Analysis of the Influence of Islamic Religion on International Relations: A Case Study of Saudi Arabia 2015-2021" examined the influence of the Islamic religion on Saudi Arabia's international relations during the period 2015-2021. The liberal and realist approaches were explored, and the country's international relations were analyzed in the global context. It was found that the Islamic religion has had a significant impact on the evolution of Saudi Arabia's international relations, determined by historical and political moments and decisions. During the period studied, it was observed that religious interpretation has influenced foreign policy, and that faith and religious identity can affect relations between countries and international actors. Saudi Arabia has played a prominent role in the Middle East region and has had considerable influence on global politics, maintaining close relations with the United States and other Western and Eastern countries. However, challenges have also been identified, such as the issue of human rights and the fight against terrorism, which highlight the need to address religious and political issues more effectively in order to promote peace and stability in the region and the world.

Key words: Islamic religion, Saudi Arabia, Foreign policy, Religious identity, Human rights, Terrorism, Religious influence

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# **Analysis of the influence of the Islamic religion on international relations: study case Saudi Arabia 2015-2021**

## **INTRODUCTION**

International relations are a complex and multifaceted field of study that encompasses a wide range of actors, processes and dynamics. One of the factors that has gained relevance in international politics in recent decades is religion, particularly Islam. This faith represents one of the largest and most widespread religions globally, exerting a significant influence on the politics and society of numerous countries, especially in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, as one of the most prominent countries in the region, is home to two of Islam's holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. The Islamic religion plays a central role in Saudi national identity and foreign policy, the interpretation and application of which have a significant impact on its international relations. This thesis aims to examine the influence of the Islamic religion on Saudi Arabia's international relations during the period 2015-2021, addressing in particular two main approaches: liberalism and realism. In addition, Saudi Arabia's international relations will be analyzed in the context of global politics.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has come under intense scrutiny in recent years because of its intervention in Yemen, its relationship with Iran, and its response to regional security challenges. However, there is a need to better understand the influence of the Islamic religion on its foreign policy and international relations. This research aims to fill this gap in the academic literature through a detailed analysis of this influence during the stipulated period.

Likewise, this thesis will focus on religious identity and its impact on Saudi Arabia's international relations. Religious identity is a crucial factor in the politics and society of this country, the interpretation and application of which have a significant influence on its foreign relations. This study will explore how Saudi Arabia's religious identity has affected its relations with other countries and international actors, as well as its approach to foreign policy. Finally, the challenges and opportunities arising from the influence of the Islamic religion on Saudi Arabia's international relations will be discussed, offering practical recommendations for policymakers and international actors interested in promoting peace and stability in the Middle East and the world at large.

## CHAPTER 1.

Currently, the Middle East and its state have been characterized by the various features they share with the international arena. To that extent, it is the cradle of three important religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam; In addition, it is the seat of great empires in history, having in possession "the second largest proven oil reserves in the world, with around 266.5 billion barrels, representing approximately 16% of the world's oil reserves" (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2021, p. 1).

In addition to this, the Middle East is considered by many sectors to be a representation of revolutionary movements that have profoundly altered their political, social and economic landscape throughout history, which gave rise to struggles for independence, ethnic and religious conflicts, as well as discontent with authoritarian regimes. Therefore, it could be said that:

This has had a profound impact on society and politics around the world, especially in Muslim-majority regions. Sharia, in particular, has been an important factor in the governance of Muslim countries, influencing areas such as legislation, justice, and the daily lives of citizens. (Sheibani et al., 2015, p.)

As a result, these revolutions led to drastic changes in the region's systems of government and socioeconomic dynamics, generating internal and external tensions that contribute to regional instability. As a result, the Middle East is recognized not only for its cultural, religious, and historical richness but also for being an epicenter of revolutionary movements with lasting impact.

In this order of ideas, the present research aimed to examine the Islamic religion and the impact it has on international relations, focusing on Saudi Arabia's international relations and studying the conflicts and treaties that were implemented in search of mutual benefit with its Western (United States) and Eastern (China) allies. as well as with its neighbors in the Persian Gulf. Now, Saudi Arabia is one of the countries that maintains these relations on a legal basis in accordance with what is expressed in the Sunna, the Qur'an, and the Hadith, which differ in relation to the behavior of foreign policy, but maintain the same bases of the Islamic religion.

Therefore, and in a theocratic context, as is the case in analysis, international relations are aspects in constant influence with Islamic legal bases, which can impact the response to the various international phenomena that arise. Taking into account the above, this research aimed



to analyze the influence that the aforementioned religion has had on the evolution of Saudi Arabia's international relations, determined by historical and political moments and decisions. To this end, two main approaches were explored: liberalism and realism, applied to the interpretation of the Islamic religion in the context of international relations. Saudi Arabia's international relations during the period from 2015 to 2021 were then specifically examined. It is important to mention that this country, with its prominent role in the Middle East region and its influence on global politics, offers a relevant case study to understand the complexities of contemporary international relations.

Additionally, it was analyzed how the Islamic religion has influenced international relations during this same period. To that extent, the impact of religious interpretations on foreign policy was taken as a starting point, up to the discussion of how faith and religious identity can affect relations between countries and international actors. From this research exploration, the conclusions were raised in order to highlight the main trends and dynamics identified in the study of international relations from the perspective of Islamic theory, practice and religion.

### Theory of International Relations

This section focused on exploring Islam as a religion that has significantly influenced the history and politics of the Middle East. In this regard, it is known that, from its birth in Mecca, to its global expansion:

Islam has had a profound impact on society and politics around the world, especially in Muslim-majority regions. Sharia, in particular, has been an important factor in the governance of Muslim countries, influencing areas such as legislation, justice, and the daily lives of citizens. (Sheibani et al, 2015, p.)

Thus, and through a deeper understanding of Islamic religion and politics, it is possible to fully appreciate the unique dynamics that drive international relations in this region.

### **1.1 Islamic religion**

Islam is the second largest religion in the world after Christianity, with around 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide (Pont, 2019). Although its roots are ancient:

Scholars often place the origin of Islam in the seventh century, making it the youngest among the world's major religions. Islam began in Mecca, in present-day Saudi Arabia,

during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, and today, this faith is experiencing rapid global expansion. (Esposito, 2010, p. 1)

On this point, it was considered pertinent to mention the Prophet Muhammad, who was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 570 AD. Muslims believe that he was the last prophet sent by God to reveal his faith to mankind. According to Islamic literature and tradition, an angel named Gabriel visited Muhammad in 610 AD. While meditating in a cave, who ordered him to recite the words of Allah. Muslims believe that Muhammad continued to receive revelations from Allah for the rest of his life. In accordance with the above, the literature indicates that, from the year 613, approximately, Muhammad began to preach throughout Mecca the messages he received, in which he taught that there was no other God but Allah and, therefore, Muslims should dedicate their lives to this God (Martínez, 2019).

In 622, Muhammad migrated from Mecca to Medina along with his followers in an event known as the Hijra, which marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. After about seven years, Muhammad and his followers returned to Mecca and conquered the region, where he continued to preach until his death in 632. (Brown, 2016, p. 15)

However, after Muhammad's death, Islam began to spread rapidly under a series of leaders known as caliphs, who became Muhammad's successors. This new system of leadership, led by a Muslim ruler, became known as the caliphate (Sheibani et al, 2015). As a result, a new system of leadership was formed, led by a Muslim ruler who became known as the caliphate:

The first four caliphs, including Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali, led Arab Muslims in conquering vast regions in the Middle East, such as Syria, Palestine, Iran, and Iraq, as well as the expansion of Islam into Europe, Africa, and Asia. (Esposito, 2003, p 27.)

When Umar was assassinated six years after he was appointed caliph, Uthman took office, but he was also assassinated. Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was selected as the next caliph. During the reign of the first four caliphs, Arab Muslims expanded their influence through a series of territorial conquests, which included expansion into regions such as Syria, Palestine, Iran, and Iraq, as well as the spread of Islam to areas of Europe, Africa, and Asia (Sheibani et al, 2015):

The caliphate system endured for centuries and eventually morphed into the Ottoman Empire, which ruled vast areas in the Middle East from about 1517 until 1917, when the end of World War I marked the collapse of Ottoman rule. (p 32.)

On the other hand, when Muhammad died, there was a debate about who should be chosen to replace him as leader, which produced a schism in Islam and with which two great branches emerged: the Sunnis and the Shiites. As for the Sunnis, they currently constitute almost 90% of Muslims worldwide, and they are the ones who accept that the first four caliphs were the true successors of Muhammad. For their part, Shia Muslims only consider Caliph Ali and his descendants to be the true successors of Muhammad, thus denying the legitimacy of the first three caliphs. Shia Muslims arguably have a considerable presence in Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Morales, 2019). However, there are other, smaller Muslim denominations, including:

- Wahhabi.
- Alaouite.
- Nation of Islam.
- Kharijites

Likewise, within Islam five basic principles of the Islamic faith can be highlighted, which consist of professing the individual's faith, praying five times a day, giving *zakat* or giving a certain portion of one's wealth, fasting during Ramadan and making a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

For example, in countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and India, the call to prayer can be heard through loudspeakers mounted on minarets, where the sacred text is recited by professionals to evoke piety in listeners. It should be noted that Muslims pray in the direction of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Inside the mosques there is a prayer niche, a hole in the wall, also known as the *mihrab*, which indicates the direction of Mecca. For many Muslims, the practice of prayer helps to experience God in an intimate way (Garduño, 2020).

## **1.2 The Political Perspective of Islam**

Sharia, understood as the body of Islamic law, is divided into primary and secondary sources, which exert a profound influence on all aspects of governance in Muslim countries. These primary sources include the Qur'an, which is considered to be the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the Sunna, which comprises the actions and teachings of the prophet recorded in texts known as the Hadith. Indeed, in this legal system there is no separation between the state and religion, because Islam is the system that regulates all aspects of a person's life, including individual rights and obligations both to Allah and to society.

As a result, these countries adopted varying degrees of law enforcement in accordance with the political trend of the country; To this extent, the legal school is permeated by the principles of this religious system, which determines decisions of a public and private nature. As a guide, Islam radiates into all aspects of Muslims' daily lives, including politics. For example, in the sacred documents of the religion, such as the Koran, it is considered the highest law and constitution of the countries that profess it, such is the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In that sense, Sharia or Islamic law for Muslims announces how to live. In addition to regulating aspects of believers' lives, it delimits religious rituals such as the beginning of the hajj or pilgrimage, determines daily actions such as prayers at specific times. Likewise, this law configures the political aspects and perspectives, the figures of authority, economic, by emphasizing the principle of charity and life between husband and wife.

According to the above, these laws are rules for the believers of Islam, which, through the introduction of the rules into society, allow all inhabitants to know what to do and how to behave in accordance with social conventions. In this order of ideas, Islam is the legal system, because it is based on the various sources to establish its elementary principles. For example, the Qur'an mentions the following:

"O you who believe! Obey Allah, obey the Messenger and those of you who have authority and knowledge. And if you disagree about a matter, refer it to the judgment of Allah and the Messenger, if you believe in Allah and the Day of Judgment, for it is the preferable and the right way."

Qur'an, Surah (4:59)

This phrase highlights the sources of law on which Islamic law is based, by highlighting obedience to Allah, the messenger and the acts forbidden by Muhammad, as well as decision-making for judges or ulema, who have reached a consensus on a fact linked to the words of Allah (Hurtado, 2019).

Additionally, within the Qur'an there are 90 verses that speak specifically about the aspects of the law, while the rest of Islamic law is shaped through analogies based on the human efforts they make thanks to the religious head of the state and the judges who codified the rules according to the cases that are not described in the Qur'an. the Sunnah or the Hadith.

Over time, the Sharia has adapted in relation to the lack of literal explanations within these documents, such as the actions or processes to be implemented in the new practices that arise within the community, which allows for new interpretations by the Muslim population.

With regard to the principles of Sharia, the literature shows that these were developed between the seventh and tenth centuries, and which have been maintained to the present day, such as the principle of equity, justice and individual rights, which mainly includes freedom (Kamali, 2015).

When religion was beginning, schools of thought were created that had different perspectives of Sharia, varying according to the idea of scholars knowledgeable about the law and the ulema, who proposed new theories that derived from the interpretation of the Qur'an and the social and tribal traditions of the time. In this sense, it was stated that these different ways of interpreting the regulations had a normalization due to these figures within the community.

Since the dawn of Islam, Sharia has been the subject of various interpretations by Islamic jurists. The different schools of legal thought, known as madhhabs, have developed over the centuries a rich variety of perspectives on Islamic law. These doctrinal divergences are based on the interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, as well as on the social and tribal traditions of each era. The ulema, as learned figures in religious matters, have played a fundamental role in the normalization of these different ways of interpreting regulations, contributing to the evolution of Sharia throughout history. (Cordero, 2018. p. 347)

According to Onuf, in 1998, the ulema were participatory agents who had different perspectives that were established as valid, so they were assumed in a society that professed and accepted the accounting repetition of discourses within society. This translated into rules and schools of thought of the religion that governs today. Therefore, the Qur'an for Muslims is considered the direct word of Allah, which was sent to earth verbally and angelically to Muhammad, the transcription of which lasted 23 years, from its annunciation on Mount Hira.

On the other hand, hadiths are the narrations described directly by Muhammad to his close followers, having the same authority as the Qur'an. As far as the Qur'an is concerned, it is divided into suras (chapters) and verses, which define the good and bad actions that believers must follow, which is assumed to be the basis of community practices and the institutions created to ensure their proper functioning (García, 2020).

However, the latter was not written in chronological order, but was collected and written over 23 years, so Muhammad changed the order of some recitations in order to create new units, so it is not known for sure what was the historical period where the verses were announced. Over

the years it has been interpreted in different ways by believers, leading to a state or tribal struggle to establish the proper interpretation.

It should be noted that the interpretation of the Qur'an is presented according to the factors that believers estimate when they analyze the text, whether they are interests, geographical location, level of culture, economic level and educational level, as well as the levels of faith that are attributed to the reading of this book, where Allah is considered as the maximum figure, followed by the human being as authority and servant to enforce the laws.

This statement is explained on numerous occasions, but it does not define who will be the authority or what will be the way of governing, as well as the behavior of the communities in the presence of an unjust governing figure. Therefore, countries that follow the teachings of Allah should follow these ways fully, ensuring the implementation of the moral and ethical. However, this has considerable repercussions on the economic success or failure of the general population (de Michelis, 2018).

### **1.3 International relations**

International relations, as a discipline, emerged after the First World War, a time when European intellectuals reflected on the causes and consequences of war. Many of these authors had a historical orientation; however, there were intellectuals such as F.H. Hinsley, David Wight, and Edward H. Carr who argued that the notion of international society that had long been maintained in the major European powers had been disrupted over the course of the twentieth century, which can be regarded as the basic cause of war.

However, the discipline of international relations became a reality thanks to the Americans, who contributed to overcoming the idealism and isolationism that characterized the United States during the early part of the twentieth century, a period during which the United States began to produce works that became the classics of the genre on international relations during the 1940s and 1950s (Lagar and Porcelli, 2022).

Realism and internationalism, meanwhile, became the dominant models of American thought in relation to international affairs in the 1940s. To that extent, area studies occupied an important place in the study of international relations in order to provide a broader definition. The study of international relations covered not only interstate relations, but also everything that occurred outside the U.S. In general, Americans dominated the field of international relations in the 1950s, as most intellectual currents found scholarly representation through the

writings produced in this country. At the same time, the U.S. prospered in the new way of analyzing international relations within the framework of behavioral sciences and in a new area of study that was attached to the study of the discipline in question.

In this regard, it could be noted that American dominance is reflected around the world with American publications such as *Foreign Affairs* (1922) and *World Politics* (1948); journals that represent the policy-oriented establishment and the academic establishment, respectively (Gilpin, 2001).

On the other hand, international relations can be considered a vague and widely used term, which has two main meanings:

First, it refers to the interactions that take place between states and other state actors across borders. In this sense, the term is similar to 'international politics'. However, international relations is also used to refer to a broader field of study than international politics. This field of study includes the examination of relations between states, but also encompasses the study of international organizations, transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations, and social movements. (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013. p. 3)

In accordance with the above, international politics is seen as a subfield within the concept of international relations, the term of which was first introduced in 1789 by Jeremy Bentham in the book *Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Additionally, it can be assumed that international relations is a separate field from academic research, different from other social sciences such as economics, law, sociology, among others. However, this second meaning originated in 1919 with the establishment of the first chair on the campus of Aberystwyth University in Wales. Since its origins in the wake of the First World War, several theoretical perspectives have been developed to identify and explain what the recurring patterns of international relations are, especially the causes of war and the preconditions for peace (Blinder, 2021).

In practice, the terms 'international politics' and 'international relations' are often used interchangeably. Both refer to the study of relations between states and other actors in the international system. However, there are some important distinctions between the two terms. International politics focuses on the activities and objectives of states, while international relations takes a broader perspective that encompasses a wider range of

actors and processes, such as international organizations, transnational corporations, and social movements. (Baylis et al., 2019, p.)

In addition, international politics can be considered as "a subdiscipline of political science, while international relations is considered a more interdisciplinary field of study that incorporates knowledge from history, economics, sociology, and other disciplines" (Baylis et al., 2019, p.).

However, and without taxonomically estimating these distinctions, the overlap between the two terms remains considerable, so that "many scholars work in both areas and, to that extent, there is a large body of literature that can be classified as pertaining to both international politics and international relations" (Baylis & Smith, 2019, p.).

Therefore, international relations is a discipline of study that focuses on the strategic interaction between countries within the framework of an international system, whose system is characterized by anarchy, which means that there is no world government that can regulate the behavior of states (Jackson and Sorensen, 2013). However, there are three main approaches to international relations: realism, neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism.

Realism holds that states are the main actors in the international system and that they are constantly competing for power. As for the realists, they consider that the anarchy of the international system leads to insecurity and conflict. On the other hand, neoliberal institutionalism argues that international institutions can help states cooperate with each other. In this sense, neoliberal institutionalists believe that the anarchy of the international system can be overcome through the creation of institutions that provide States with incentives to cooperate. Finally, constructivism holds that ideas and norms play an important role in shaping the behavior of states. Therefore, supporters of this approach argue that the anarchy of the international system does not inevitably lead to conflict, since ideas and norms can help states cooperate with each other (Jackson and Sorensen, 2013).

On this, it is important to note that unit-centered theories include culture and cognition, as well as political institutions and interest group theories, where cooperation and conflict between states revolves around the interaction of each country's internal policies, refracted through culture, institutions, and interest group preferences. Therefore, culture and cognition can be sources of conflict and distorted evaluations. To that extent, some current debates include the analysis of international civil society as transnational organizations or forces, as well as the role of law and legalized dispute resolution mechanisms, such as globalization in the economy



and culture, and the formation of new entities, is like the European Union and the breakdown of national units in a peaceful way. such as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and with violence such as civil wars (Tah Ayala, 2018).

In this order of ideas, international relations deal with the beginning of history, where there were relationships between tribes, cities, states and kingdoms, even in ancient times. Incidental references to themes of war and peace can be found in religious texts. Similarly, in the literature of antiquity there is mostly a pacifist approach. Thus, ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians, Sumerians, Assyrians, Indians, Chinese, Greeks, and Romani developed a distinct code of interstate conduct and a pattern of international relations.

However, international relations in the ancient world were incidental, sporadic, and limited in nature. Most of them were not global in nature, but exclusively regional, so they were not considered international relations in the true sense of the term. However, the bases for the evolution that we have today are considered, which are described as parochial and occasional interstate relations (Tiusabá et al. 2019).

With the Renaissance and the Reformation, international relations took on a new character. To that extent, and after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, statehood became an ideal unit of humanity, with territorial sovereignty and the nation-state emerging as a basic political unit and an effective actor in international relations. For this reason, sovereign states were aware of their independence, but they were also aware of the reality of interdependence in the modern world (Baylis & Smith, 2019).

Consequently, modern international relations began to grow within the situations of independence and interdependence, separation and closeness, individuality and reciprocity, nationalism and internationalism, and continued to develop as a process of cooperation and conflict. Consequently, there was a multiple increase in the wants and needs of the different countries after the Industrial Revolution, where relations were considered to be a considerable improvement in transport and communications. Therefore, trade, transit, and transactions between nations were put on the agenda. The scientific and technological revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries brought nations even closer together. Indeed, all these developments made international relations more regular, more comprehensive, more valuable day by day (Pereda, 2019).

The relations between Islam and the West have been complex and varied throughout history. There have been periods of cooperation and conflict, of cultural and religious

exchange, and of political antagonism. At present, the view of Islam in international relations is subject to debate. Some argue that Islam is a force incompatible with democracy and Western values, while others argue that peaceful and fruitful coexistence between Islam and other religions and cultures is possible. (Esposito, 2029. p. 345)

In summary, the influence of Islam on its domestic and foreign policy is evident, especially on issues such as the application of Sharia and the promotion of Wahhabism. Between the period of 2015 to 2021, Saudi Arabia, as one of the main Islamic countries in the Middle East, has been at the center of international relations due to its role as a religious leader and oil producer. Internationally, the country has played a crucial role in regional stability and has been a major player in issues such as the war in Yemen and tensions with Iran.

## CHAPTER 2

This chapter focused on Saudi Arabia's international relations during a period from 2015 to 2021. In this sense, the country's role in the Middle East region and its influence on global politics were analyzed. To this end, the recent history of this nation and its political system were briefly described, in order to highlight the influence of the Islamic religion in decision-making.

The main objectives and strategies of Saudi foreign policy during the study period were also analyzed, including its participation in regional conflicts and its relationship with the main world powers.

This was followed by an examination of Saudi Arabia's relations with some key countries, including the United States, China, Iran and its Persian Gulf neighbours. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's participation in international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Group of Twenty (G20) and the Arab League was examined. Finally, the main challenges facing Saudi Arabia on the international stage were discussed, as well as the prospects for its international relations in the future.

### 2.1 Historical and political context

Al Mamlaka Al Arabiya Al Saudia is the official name of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a monarchical country located in the Arabian Peninsula, with an area of 2,150,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Since this territory was established as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on September 23, 1932, the Koran and Sharia were determined as the highest law and constitution, applied to all its decisions and settlers in an orthodox way. Therefore, it was constituted that the nation should fulfill to the letter the words of Allah and Muhammad: "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic State. The religion of the kingdom is Islam, its constitution is the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet" (Article 1 of the Constitution of Saudi Arabia). In this sense, all judicial decisions are made based on the provisions of the Sharia and primary and secondary sources, as well as the Basic Law of Governance, in which certain principles of everyday appearance are presented. It is also important to note that the Al Saud royal family has ruled Saudi Arabia since its founding in 1932, so it has full control over the government, the economy, and religion. Currently, King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud is the country's head of state and monarch. However, the Al Saud family has been questioned for its human rights

record and authoritarian style of government. However, the family has also been praised for its role in modernizing Saudi Arabia and for its leadership in the Middle East region. The family's goal is to unify the Arabian Peninsula under a single government, restore security and stability, and establish justice and equality for all (Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

On the other hand, the ulema have an important role in the interpretation and application of Sharia law in national laws, according to the perspective they use in the country's legal affairs. In addition, Shi'ism and Sunnism differ in the importance they give to the sources of Sharia; that is, Sunnism generally regards the Qur'an and Sunnah as the most important sources of Sharia. On the other hand, Shi'ism, despite considering the same sources, also attaches great importance to the traditions of the Shiite imams who are the religious leaders of the Shiite branch of Islam. So these traditions are considered a source of interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Within Saudi Arabia, the dominant school is Hanbali, a school applied by judges, who base their decisions on the principles established in the Koran, in a literal and orthodox way (de Olazábal & Martínez, 2021).

## **2.2 Foreign policy**

During the 2015-2021 period, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy was characterized by a search for regional stability, counterbalancing Iran's influence, strengthening its relations with the United States, and diversifying its economic relations. In this sense, this country has seen itself as a guarantor of security in the Middle East, intervening militarily in conflicts such as the civil war in Yemen and the fight against the Islamic State. According to former Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir during his speech at the Munich Security Conference: "Saudi Arabia has a historic role in promoting peace and security in the region." In contrast, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has historically strengthened the idea of countering Iran's influence, since it considers it a threat to its regional security. The reasons range from religious differences to regional ambitions. In this area, one of the biggest concerns for Saudi Arabia, especially after the nuclear deal signed in 2015, is that Iran's nuclear program could be for military purposes. Similarly, Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of supporting extremist groups such as Hezbollah, a group called terrorist by the international community, as well as the Houthis, a military group that exercises control in northern Yemen (Lindstaedt, 2024). As a consequence, this has contributed to the escalation of tensions in the region.

In this way, Saudi Arabia has led a coalition of Sunni Arab countries to contain its expansion: "We will not allow Iran to dominate the region," Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in

an interview with *Time* magazine in 2018. This statement therefore reflects Saudi Arabia's concern about Iran's regional ambitions. It is important to note that the accusation that Iran supports extremist groups is considered controversial. To that extent, this country denies these accusations and considers them as opposition propaganda (Smith, 2018). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been a strategic ally of the United States, because they share common interests, such as fighting terrorism and improving regional security, and have cooperated closely against extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

In that regard, Saudi Arabia has been an important partner in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and has provided financial and logistical support to the US-led coalition against the Islamic State. In contrast, there are also tensions between these two countries; for example, on the issue of human rights, the United States has questioned Saudi Arabia (Roths, 2021). Similarly, Saudi Arabia's involvement in the civil war in Yemen has been criticized by the U.S. state, which has signaled a ceasefire and a political solution to the conflict (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021). Despite the challenges and tensions, the Saudi-U.S. relationship remains an important strategic alliance for both countries. Equally, cooperation between the two countries is essential for the security and stability of the Middle East. In this sense, former President Donald Trump mentioned during the Gulf Cooperation Council in Saudi Arabia the following: "as a representative of the Americans, he sent a message of friendship, hope and love."

### **2.3 Economy and international trade**

On the economic stage, Saudi Arabia has sought to diversify its economy and reduce its dependence on oil. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was the one who promoted this initiative, known as Vision 2030, in 2016, leading to the signing of trade agreements with China, Russia and the European Union. Through this project, it sought to increase trade and investment in sectors such as manufacturing, tourism, technology, and renewable energy: "The goal of Vision 2030 is to create a more diversified and sustainable economy for Saudi Arabia" (Vision 2030 Forum, n.d., p. ). In addition to this, the Saudi government has also implemented a series of economic reforms to improve the business climate and attract foreign investment, which include the expansion of new sectors, as well as the simplification of bureaucratic procedures: "We will expand the variety of digital services to reduce delays and eliminate tedious bureaucracy" (Vision 2030 Forum, n.d., p.).

In short, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy during this period was marked by regional activism, a firm stance vis-à-vis Iran, a strategic relationship with the United States, and a focus on economic diversification.

## **2.4 Bilateral relations**

Although the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States has been one of the most strategic for both parties, it was considered appropriate to expose the relations that the former had with China, Iran and the countries of the Persian Gulf. On the Chinese side, Saudi Arabia has strengthened its relations with this country in recent years. According to the Economic Complexity Observatory (OEC), China is Saudi Arabia's main buyer of oil. With this same country, relations on security have been presented during this period in the same way:

In this line of security-seeking, China with whom Riyadh has been sustainably improving its relations in recent years. For this reason, China has described Saudi Arabia as a "major partner" for the Gulf and the Middle East, which shows the harmony between Beijing and Riyadh. As a sign of this fluid cooperation, the first military exercises between the two states were held in the Chinese city of Chengdu last October. Without a doubt, a sign of the desire of both parties to deepen their relationship. (Priego, 2017 p. 1)

In accordance with the above, there are the international treaties to which these countries have committed:

The treaties between China and Saudi Arabia have strengthened their bilateral relationship, especially in areas such as energy, infrastructure and technology. According to the Royal Institute of International Affairs, economic ties between China and Saudi Arabia have deepened in recent years, with significant agreements in the energy and infrastructure sector. (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2023, p. 1)

Below are some of these treaties:

## **2.5 Saudi-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Treaty**

Saudi Arabia and China have strengthened their ties through the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement, signed in 2016. This agreement covers a wide range of areas of cooperation, including the economy, trade, energy and security. To that extent, both

countries are committed to promoting joint development and regional stability, as well as increasing cooperation on infrastructure and energy projects. According to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang, "this treaty marks a milestone in bilateral relations and lays a solid foundation for closer cooperation in the future" (Xinhua, 2016, para. 1).

## **2.6 Saudi-China Energy Cooperation Treaty**

In the energy field, Saudi Arabia and China have signed an Energy Cooperation Treaty to strengthen their collaboration in the energy sector. Therefore, this treaty includes agreements on the joint exploration of energy resources, the development of energy infrastructure, and cooperation in clean energy technologies. On this, Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih stated that "this treaty represents an important step towards a strong and beneficial energy partnership for both nations" (Saudi Press Agency, 2018, p. 1).

Similarly, one of the most prominent milestones in this relationship was the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Saudi Aramco and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) for cooperation in petrochemical and refining projects (Saudi Aramco, 2021). It could be pointed out that it contributed significantly to the economic and technological development of both countries. Therefore, this partnership is expected to boost job creation, technology transfer, and diversification of the economies of Saudi Arabia and China. In the words of CNPC Chairman Zhang Jianhua, "this memorandum of understanding marks the beginning of a strategic collaboration that will benefit both sides and strengthen China-Saudi energy cooperation" (Saudi Aramco, 2020, para. 1). Consequently, it was determined that relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and China have undergone a remarkable strengthening in recent years, especially in areas such as energy, infrastructure and technology. In that sense, China emerged as the main buyer of Saudi oil, so both countries have worked closely together on security issues, as evidenced by the recent joint military exercises held in Chengdu.

Therefore, this increase in bilateral cooperation is reflected in the international treaties signed between the two nations, which have further consolidated their economic and strategic relationship. In this regard, the Royal Institute of International Affairs noted that economic ties between China and Saudi Arabia have deepened significantly, underlining the two sides' mutual commitment to strengthening their partnership and collaboration in various fields.

## 2.7 Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen

Unlike their relations with China, Saudi Arabia and Iran are regional rivals. Both countries support different factions in the region's conflicts and compete for influence in the Muslim world. In the first instance, there is the military intervention of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Yemen; therefore, to understand the implication it is essential to understand the geographical importance of Arabia Felix, the Latin name for Yemen. Therefore, Bab al-Mandab, the maritime strait that separates Asia from Africa through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, has always been "a crucial union for world trade". Consequently, almost all trade between the European Union, China, Japan, India and the rest of Arabia passes through the strait" (Shay, 2018, p. 1).

As a neo-rentier state, Saudi Arabia relies on allied control of ports along Yemen's western coast, to ensure the safe passage of its oil and natural gas. Its shores are therefore considered to be of vital importance to the lasting success of Riyadh's economy. To that extent, having an ally here ensures dynamic and safe sea routes, through a channel of pertinent importance to Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia's state oil company. On the other hand, within Yemen's internal framework in 2014:

The Houthi movement, allied with Abdullah Saleh, who had been president of the country until the outbreak of the uprisings in the Arab world, staged a coup d'état, taking the capital and practically occupying the western strip of the country from north to south. This forced President Abd Mansour al-Hadi to resign in March 2015, where he barely managed to flee the country and seek help from his main ally, Saudi Arabia, with the aim of confronting the Houthis and regaining government power. (Iguualada. 2017, p. 4)

In that sense, what began as an internal armed conflict quickly became an armed confrontation in which several regional governments have intervened, arguing their fight against terrorism. In this regard, it should be noted that the Houthi movement, since its appearance in Yemen, has dominated new territories, mainly since the outbreak of the uprisings in the Arab world, which favours its expansion in the face of the power vacuum created after the resignation of former President Saleh.

Support for Ansar Allah, the official name by which the Houthis are known, is "mainly in the alliance with the forces that have remained loyal to former President Saleh, as he was really the strategist who opened the gates of the capital to the Houthis". "In addition



to the members of different confederated tribes and the sectors of the population dissatisfied with decades of corrupt governments that did nothing to combat social inequalities or apply policies to end growing poverty" (Blecua, 2015, p. 1)

However, it is estimated that this support is not enough to achieve power. Therefore, the aid they receive from Iran was directly pointed out, which they accuse of trying to expand its presence in Yemen. As a result, these accusations regarding Iran have been partially denied by the Houthi leaders, who claim that they do receive humanitarian aid, but not military support (Nieto, 2015).

According to Human Rights Watch (2020), "the Saudi-led coalition has carried out indiscriminate airstrikes and blocked the delivery of humanitarian aid, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen" (para. 1). In line with the above, it could be said that this intervention has been the subject of multiple calls for action by the international community, with the aim of ending human rights abuses in Yemen and seeking a political solution to the conflict (United Nations Security Council, 2019).

In any case, this is just one example of the decades-long intervention in the Middle East with regard to the Sunni-Shia conflict by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, it is a geopolitical issue because of the preponderance in the region. In this way, the intervention of Yemen by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is understandable, since it not only responds to territorial convenience, but also to the interests of international trade.

## **2.8 International organizations**

Saudi Arabia is a member of several international organizations such as the UN, OPEC, and the G20. In these organizations, this country promotes its national and regional interests and participates in the resolution of international conflicts. In the first instance, he has participated in UN peacekeeping missions and has contributed financially to UN operations. Saudi Arabia's immersion in the UN has therefore been criticized for its human rights record, especially with regard to freedom of expression and women's rights: "Saudi Arabia's participation in the UN is complex and controversial. While it has contributed to international peace and security, its human rights record is a cause for concern" (Krieg. 2020, para. 1).

According to a report by the Brookings Institution, Saudi Arabia's participation in the UN has been a topic of debate because of its human rights record. While the country contributes to international peace and security through its participation in peacekeeping missions and its

financial support in UN operations, its internal management of human rights is constantly criticized (Riedel, 2019). Saudi Arabia's abstention from signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 reflected its position on the primacy of Islamic values in policymaking and law. Although the UDHR established universal principles of human dignity, freedom and justice, Saudi Arabia's rejection was based on its strict adherence to Islamic law, Sharia, as the basis of its legal and moral system. This legal system, derived from the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, dictates specific rules on social, political, and legal matters that guide the lives of Muslims. According to the Saudi interpretation of Islam, some principles of the UDHR could conflict with Islamic laws and the country's cultural values, which led to its decision to refrain from signing the document in 1948 (Al-Shanqiti, 2018).

In OPEC, "Saudi Arabia is a central player in OPEC and its influence on the global energy market is undeniable" (Young, 2019, p.). Therefore, participation in this organization allows it to have a significant influence on the global energy market, making it a key player within it. In this way, the eastern country plays a fundamental role in stabilizing the global oil market. In another instance, "Saudi Arabia's participation in the G20 allows it to interact with the world's major economies and contribute to the global economic agenda" (Chipman, 2021, p.). Despite the internal and external challenges it faces, Saudi Arabia continues to be a major player on the international stage, promoting its national and regional interests, while addressing concerns and criticisms related to its human rights practices.

## **2.9 Saudi Arabia's role in the Arab League**

This country has played an important role in the Arab League as one of its founding members and regional leaders. According to the Middle East Center for Strategic and Policy Research, "Saudi Arabia has used its influence in the Arab League to promote stability and security in the region, as well as to address issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Syria" (Middle East Strategic and Policy Research Center, 2022, p. 1). In this regard, Saudi Arabia has consistently championed Arab unity and worked closely with other member countries to address the common challenges facing the region. However, its leadership in the Arab League is also subject to criticism, especially with regard to its stance towards the conflict in Yemen and its relationship with extra-regional powers, such as the United States (Jones, 2020). It could be noted that Saudi Arabia has played a significant role in the Arab League, using its influence, as one of its founding members and regional leaders, to promote stability and security in the Middle East. However, the criticism it has received underscores the

challenges Saudi Arabia faces in its role as a regional leader and its quest for greater influence in international affairs.

## **2.10 Relations between Saudi Arabia and the European Union**

Relations between Saudi Arabia and the European Union (EU) have been multifaceted, covering areas such as trade, security and development cooperation. According to the European Institute for Security Studies (EUSOE), "the EU is one of Saudi Arabia's main trading partners, and economic relations between the two sides have strengthened over the years" (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2021, p. 1). However, these relations have also been subject to tensions, especially with regard to human rights and democracy. To that extent, organizations such as Amnesty International repeatedly questioned Saudi Arabia for its record of human rights abuses, including the repression of freedom of expression and the persecution of political dissidents (Amnesty International, 2020). In that vein, relations between Saudi Arabia and the EU are complex and cover a variety of areas, from trade to security and development cooperation. While the EU is one of Saudi Arabia's main trading partners and economic relations between the two sides have strengthened over time, these relations have also faced significant strains, particularly with regard to human rights and democracy.

Thus, organizations like Amnesty International's criticism of Saudi Arabia for its record of human rights abuses, including the crackdown on freedom of expression and the persecution of political dissidents, highlight the challenges faced by both sides in reconciling their economic interests with ethical and moral concerns. In that sense, Saudi Arabia faces several challenges on the international stage, such as instability in the Middle East, competition with Iran, and China's growing influence. Therefore, to meet these challenges, Saudi Arabia will need to continue to diversify its economy, strengthen its relations with its allies, and seek new forms of regional international cooperation. According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (2021), Saudi Arabia faces multiple challenges on the international stage, including instability in the Middle East. To that extent, the region is witnessing protracted conflicts and significant political changes, posing security and stability challenges for this country and its neighbours. In relation to competition with Iran, the Royal Institute for Strategic Studies (2020) stated that tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been a prominent feature of regional politics in the Middle East. As a result, the rivalry between the two countries has manifested itself in conflicts for influence in countries such as Yemen, as well as ideological and religious differences that further complicate relations between the two

regional powers. Regarding China's growing influence, the Foreign Policy Research Center (2019) highlighted that Saudi Arabia is attentive to China's rise as a global power and its increased presence in the Middle East region. As a result, China's growing investment in infrastructure and energy in the region poses challenges and opportunities for Saudi Arabia, which seeks to balance its relations with traditional and emerging powers. To address these challenges, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized the importance of diversifying the country's economy. In this regard, in an official statement, the ministry stressed the need to strengthen relations with traditional allies and seek new forms of regional and international cooperation, in order to ensure security and stability in the Middle East (Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

In line with the above approach, it was determined that the exhaustive analysis of Saudi Arabia's international relations, during the period 2015-2021, revealed the complexity of its role on the global stage. As a key player in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia actively pursues regional stability, countering Iran's influence and strengthening its ties with world powers such as the United States and China. Through its participation in international organizations such as the UN, OPEC and the G20, Saudi Arabia has promoted its national and regional interests, albeit facing criticism for its human rights record.

Likewise, Saudi foreign policy has been marked by a combination of regional activism, strategic relationships, and the pursuit of economic diversification, as evidenced by the Vision 2030 initiative. However, the military intervention in Yemen and tensions with Iran generated controversy and calls for action from the international community.

Similarly, in the economic sphere, Saudi Arabia sought to reduce its dependence on oil through trade agreements with China, Russia and the European Union, as well as internal reforms to improve the business climate and attract foreign investment. Despite internal and external challenges, Saudi Arabia continues to be a major player on the international stage, seeking to balance its national interests with the ethical and moral concerns raised by the international community. Therefore, in order to meet the challenges ahead, Saudi Arabia will need to continue to diversify its economy, by strengthening its relations with traditional allies and establishing new forms of regional and international cooperation.

## CHAPTER 3.

This chapter will be devoted to analyzing how the precepts of Islam and the interpretation of sacred sources, such as the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad), have shaped Saudi Arabia's conduct on the international stage. It will examine how religion has influenced key areas of Saudi foreign policy, including its relations with the United States, China, Iran and other countries in the region, as well as its participation in international organizations.

In addition, the challenges and tensions that have arisen due to the interaction between Islamic principles and the dynamics of contemporary international relations will be explored. This will include an analysis of the application of Sharia in decision-making, the discrepancies between Sunni and Shia schools of Islam, and the influence of religious leaders (ulema) in foreign policy formulation.

### **3.1 Interpretation of Sharia in accordance with Saudi Arabia and extremist groups**

The influence of the Islamic religion has played a crucial role in the evolution of Saudi Arabia's international relations during the period between 2015 and 2021. As a theocratic state, where the Koran and Sharia (Islamic law) underpin governance and decision-making, Saudi Arabia has sought to promote its national and regional interests through a foreign policy strongly influenced by its religious identity (de Olazábal and Martínez, 2021).

The precepts of Islamic law, drawn from the Koran and Sunna, have guided the government's actions in various areas (Hurtado, 2019), from economic cooperation to participation in regional conflicts. The application of Sharia in foreign policy has been fundamental in decision-making and in the approach to international affairs.

The application of Sharia law and the influence of Saudi Arabia's religious leaders in international policy decision-making are key aspects that shape the country's position in the global arena. Sharia exerts a profound impact on Saudi society and government, extending into the international arena, where religious leaders play a prominent role in policymaking.

In line with Al-Shanqiti (2018), religious leaders play a critical role in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, providing guidance on ethical and moral matters. Their perspective on issues such as war, peace and justice influences government decisions and their position in the international community. This influence is evident in the country's stance on regional conflicts, such as the

war in Yemen and tensions with Iran. In this context, Sharia stands as an ethical code for foreign policies, reflecting Islamic values in its approach to international affairs.

However, as will be discussed below, strict application of Sharia law occasionally conflicts with international human rights standards. For example, a rigorous interpretation of Islamic law can restrict the rights of women and minorities, creating tensions with universal human rights standards. Saudi Arabia's ability to reconcile Islamic principles with international human rights expectations in its foreign policy will therefore be examined.

While Sharia provides an ethical basis for foreign policy, it can also pose challenges in terms of human rights and international relations. A key piece of evidence is its position in the Yemen conflict. Since 2015, the kingdom has led an Arab coalition that intervenes militarily in Yemen to support the internationally recognized government and fight the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. From the Saudi perspective, this action is justified in part by the need to protect the Sunni Muslim population and defend national security interests, which is considered a religious duty under Sharia law (Shay, 2018; Igualada, 2017).

In addition to the conflict in Yemen, the influence of Islam has manifested itself in the way Saudi Arabia has addressed issues such as combating international terrorism and promoting regional stability. The kingdom has collaborated with the United States and other Western allies in this area, basing its premise on combating extremism as a fundamental Islamic responsibility (Byman, 2017).

According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Saudi Arabia has been actively engaged in the global fight against terrorism, providing resources and cooperating with the United States and other countries in counterterrorism operations" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020, p. 18). This initiative is part of the Saudi view that Islam condemns extremism and terrorism, considering that Muslims have an obligation to eradicate such threats (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Similarly, Gause (2017) notes that, "the Saudi government has repeatedly emphasized that the fight against terrorism is a religious duty for Muslims, as Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance that absolutely condemns violent extremism" (p. 43). This stance has led Saudi Arabia to participate in international coalitions against groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, arguing that they distort the true precepts of Islam (Riedel, 2019).

### **3.1.1 International**

Along with counterterrorism strategies, Islam's influence is also manifested in Saudi Arabia's efforts to promote regional stability. The country plays a prominent role in organizations such as the Arab League, where it seeks to strengthen unity and cooperation among Muslim nations, in line with the principles of Islamic solidarity and fraternity (Jones, 2020).

According to a report by the Elcano Royal Institute (2021), "Saudi Arabia has used its influence in the Arab League to address regional challenges, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the crisis in Syria, appealing to the identity and cohesion of the Arab-Islamic world" (p. 12). Religion has also played a role in Saudi Arabia's participation in international organizations. In instances such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), it has emphasized the importance of preserving the stability and development of the "Islamic nation" (OPEC, 2019). This shows how the country seeks to promote regional stability and security from a religious perspective.

In this context, the influence of Islam has been reflected in the way Saudi Arabia has approached the fight against international terrorism and the promotion of regional stability. The country has argued that these are essential responsibilities in the Islamic framework, which has motivated its close collaboration with Western allies and its leadership in regional organizations.

However, the implementation of Sharia in Saudi foreign policy has also generated tensions and criticism from the international community. For example, various human rights practices in the country, such as the death penalty, have been questioned by international organizations and non-governmental organizations (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). These challenges highlight the inherent complexity of reconciling Islamic precepts with the norms and expectations of the international community in the field of international relations.

According to a Human Rights Watch report (2020, p. 8) "Saudi Arabia has maintained a troubling record in terms of protecting human rights, including restricting fundamental freedoms, using the death penalty, and persecuting political dissidents." These practices have often been justified on the grounds of Sharia law, which is criticized for contravening international human rights standards.

This is evidenced in cases such as Amnesty International's denunciation of the excessive use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia, noting that "the kingdom remains one of the world's most executed countries, in many cases following trials that do not meet international fair trial

standards" (Amnesty International, 2021, p. 12). These executions are often based on crimes considered "crimes of God" according to the Saudi interpretation of Sharia.

Likewise, organizations such as the UN Commission on Human Rights have criticized the way Saudi Arabia has restricted freedom of expression and association, arguing that these measures violate basic principles of human rights (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2019). These actions have been justified by the Saudi government as necessary to preserve Islamic order and values.

According to Cafiero (2018, p. 23), "The application of Sharia in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has been seen by many international actors as an obstacle to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms" This point of view has generated tensions with countries and organizations that prioritize these principles in their foreign relations.

The implementation of Sharia in Saudi Arabia's international policy poses an ongoing challenge in efforts to reconcile Islamic teachings with international human rights standards. This tension manifests itself in various areas, such as gender equality, freedom of religion, criminal punishments, slavery, capital punishment, minority rights, child marriage, and freedom of expression.

For example, when it comes to gender equality, the Qur'an differentiates between men and women in terms of rights, inheritance, and legal testimony. This approach clashes with the principle of gender equality established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Esposito, 2011). "Men have authority over women, by virtue of the preference that God has given to some over others, and by the goods they spend" (Qur'an 4:34).

Sharia also poses challenges to freedom of religion, as it establishes Islam as the only true religion and promotes the spread of faith, which may be at odds with the Universal Declaration's right to freedom of religion and belief (Hashmi, 2002). "There is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256), but also "Fight those who do not believe in God or the Last Day" (Qur'an 9:5).

In the area of criminal punishment, the Sharia provides for corporal punishment such as amputation, stoning and flogging, which are considered to be cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment according to the Universal Declaration (An-Na'im, 1990). "As for the thief and thief, cut off their hands" (Qur'an 5:38) Similarly, the institution of slavery recognized and regulated by the Qur'an contradicts the prohibition of slavery stipulated in Article 4 of the Universal



Declaration (Muszkat, 2013). "And if any of your slaves asks you for freedom, give it to them if you see any good in them" (Qur'an 24:33)

In addition, Sharia allows capital punishment for certain crimes, such as murder and apostasy, which contradicts the right to life as set out in the Universal Declaration (Amnesty International, 2022). "And do not kill the soul that God has forbidden, except with a just title" (Qur'an 6:151) There are also limitations on the rights of minorities, given that Sharia grants a lower legal status to religious and ethnic minorities, violating the principle of equality and non-discrimination (Brown, 2011). "O you who believe! Do not take Jews and Christians as friends" (Qur'an 5:51)

Child marriage, permitted and regulated by the Qur'an and Sharia, contradicts the protection of children's rights in the Universal Declaration (UNICEF, 2014). "And your slaves who wish to buy their freedom, make a contract to them if you know that they have any good" (Qur'an 24:33). Finally, restrictions on freedom of expression in Sharia law may clash with the right to freedom of expression and of the press (Hashemi, 2013). "Verily, those who slander chaste, careless, and believing women will be cursed in this world and in the next" (Qur'an 24:23).

To bridge this gap between Islamic teachings and international human rights standards, in-depth dialogue and a more progressive interpretation of sacred texts is required. This process also depends on the perspective and interpretation that the Ulemas give to them.

A comparison between the 2004 Arab Charter on Human Rights and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights reveals significant differences, both in terms of scope and cultural context and in the inclusion of specific provisions.

On the one hand, the Arab Charter was drafted by the Arab League and focuses on human rights within the specific context of Arab countries and their culture. On the other hand, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes universal human rights standards applicable to all people throughout the world, regardless of their culture or nationality (Arab League, 2004: United Nations General Assembly, 1948).

Although both charters contain provisions on a wide range of human rights, they may differ in how they address certain rights or in the inclusion of specific provisions. For example, the Arab Charter reflects the specific priorities and concerns of Arab countries, such as the right to self-determination or provisions related to religion.

Article 2 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights states: "All peoples have the right to self-determination and control over their natural wealth and resources, and consequently have the

right freely to determine the form of their political structure and to pursue freely their economic, social and cultural development." (Arab League, 2004). In addition, article 29 states that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion", while article 30 protects freedom of religion and religious belief: "freedom of religion and worship is guaranteed. The State respects all religions and guarantees the freedom to practice them in accordance with customs." Article 31 prohibits religious discrimination, stating that "discrimination between citizens on grounds of religion or belief is prohibited".

A crucial factor in this process is the influence of Muslim religious leaders on decision-making in international politics. These leaders, Islamic clerics and scholars, often possess a high degree of moral authority and legitimacy in their societies, allowing them to play a prominent role in foreign policymaking.

For example, in Iran, the ayatollahs and the Supreme Leader have significant value in foreign policy decisions, covering issues such as relations with the West, the nuclear program, and support for armed groups in the region (Mabon, 2013). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, the royal family and religious leaders work closely together to define the country's position on international affairs, such as its confrontation with Iran and its role in the conflict in Yemen (Matthiesen, 2015).

From its regional focus to its participation in multilateral organizations, the kingdom has sought to align its actions with the principles and precepts of Islam. An area in which religion has played a decisive role in Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran, its main regional rival. Given that both countries represent the main branches of Islam, Sunni and Shiite respectively, their dispute for influence and hegemony in the Middle East also takes on a religious dimension (Gause, 2017).

Saudi Arabia has perceived Iran not only as a geopolitical threat, but also as an ideological threat, considering Shi'ism to represent a deviation from "true Islam" (Zaccara, 2019). This perception has led them to become militarily involved in conflicts such as the one in Yemen, arguing the defense of the Sunni population.

On the other hand, Saudi religious identity has influenced its relations with the United States, its main Western ally. Despite sharing strategic interests, such as the fight against terrorism, Saudi Arabia has sought to maintain a certain autonomy and not to align itself completely with Washington's policies, especially when these conflict with Islamic precepts that guide its decision-making (Byman, 2016).

In contrast, religion has played a key role in strengthening ties between Saudi Arabia and China. Despite ideological differences, economic pragmatism and convergence in certain geopolitical interests have led to the development of a strategic partnership. In addition, China's respect for Saudi Arabia's sovereignty and its non-interference in Islamic identity has contributed favorably to the bond (Calabrese, 2018).

Islam's influence has penetrated deeply into various areas of Saudi foreign policy, shaping its relationships with key players such as Iran, the United States, and China, as well as its participation in regional and international organizations. This religious dimension of the kingdom's diplomacy reflects how Islamic principles permeate Saudi Arabia's decision-making and formulation of global strategy.

However, the application of Sharia in Saudi foreign policy has drawn criticism and questioning from the international community, especially in the area of human rights. These tensions underscore the challenges Islamic countries face in reconciling their religious principles with international norms, expectations, and precepts.

### **3.2 Saudi Arabia's role in terrorism**

Interpretations of Islam and its relationship to terrorism are fundamental aspects in the analysis of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. The kingdom maintains that Islam, at its core, promotes peace and tolerance, as King Mohammed Bin Salman puts it when he states that: "Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. Terrorism has nothing to do with Islam." However, there are extremist and deviant interpretations of Islam that have been used to justify acts of violence and terrorism.

According to the teachings of the Grand Mufti (the highest religious and legal authority in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), it is important to distinguish between Islam as a religion and terrorism as a politically motivated action that manipulates religious interpretations for its own ends. Saudi Arabia, as the cradle of Islam and home to important holy sites, has exerted a notable influence on the interpretation and dissemination of religion globally. Through various institutions and mechanisms, he has promoted his own vision of Islam, although it has been questioned as orthodox and rigid. "Saudi Arabia has been a leader in the fight against terrorism, both domestically and internationally.

However, Saudi Arabia has been a leader in the fight against terrorism domestically and internationally. In 2012, it established the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID). "It emphasizes the importance of

interfaith education as a means of fostering understanding and respect between people of different faiths."

"Saudi officials are now vital allies against terrorism. They are playing a leading role in trying to stop funding the Islamic State and the core of Al Qaeda" (Riedel, 2019, p. 1).

Despite these efforts, it has been accused of providing financial or logistical support to extremist groups, thereby contributing to the spread of terrorism. These accusations are based on the country's close historical relationship with some armed non-state actors, as noted by the 9/11 Commission report that identified Saudi nationals as some of al-Qaeda's main funders.

In addition, the report identified that Saudi-funded religious schools propagated an extremist ideology that influenced the radicalism of some of the 9/11 hijackers. In addition, the funding of religious institutions that promote conservative views of Islam has been noted.

It is also important to consider the funding provided by Saudi Arabia and even the United States to the Mujahideen during the fight against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

U.S. aid to the Afghan resistance began at about \$30 million in 1980, surpassing the average of \$20 million a year in aid delivered to Afghanistan over the previous 25 years. Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries matched at least U.S. aid, which rose to about \$50 million in 1981 and 1982. (Carrère, 2018, p. 1)

However, Saudi Arabia categorically denies these accusations and affirms that its commitment against terrorism is genuine and long-standing. "The Saudi government maintains that it has been a key partner in the fight against terrorism and that it has taken strong measures to combat the financing of terrorism" (France24, 2024, para. 1).

"Allegations that Saudi Arabia is funding terrorism are baseless and based on misinformation." The country has implemented domestic reforms to address this problem and has cooperated with international actors in the fight against this scourge. However, these actions have raised concerns in the international community, especially in relation to the mass execution of 81 people on terrorism-related charges.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2022) stated that "The death penalty is incompatible with the fundamental principles of human rights and dignity, the right to life and the prohibition of torture" (p. 1).

The High Commissioner also commented:

I am concerned that Saudi law contains an extremely broad definition of terrorism, including non-violent acts that allegedly "endanger national unity" or "undermine the reputation of the state". This risks criminalizing people exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. (p. 1)

On the other hand, it is crucial to recognize that the issue is complex and cannot be reduced solely to the religion or policies of a single country. Socio-economic, political and historical factors also play a key role in the radicalization of individuals "Terrorism is a complex problem that cannot be attributed solely to the religion or policies of a single country" (United Nations, n.d., p. 1). "Socio-economic, political and historical factors also play a fundamental role in the radicalization of individuals and the emergence of extremist groups" (United Nations, n.d., p. 1).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the influence of the Islamic religion on Saudi Arabia's international relations during the period 2015-2021, exploring two predominant approaches: liberalism and realism. It has been observed that the Islamic religion has a significant impact on the evolution of Saudi foreign relations, influencing crucial moments and decisions. It is emphasized that faith and religious identity can be decisive in relations between countries and international actors.

The kingdom's foreign strategy, based on Islamic principles, has had mixed results. While it has generated effective coalitions against terrorism, it has also created tensions, as in the case of relations with Iran and human rights concerns.

As for the influence of the Islamic religion on Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, it is noted that the country has sought to promote its national and regional interests through a foreign policy based on Islamic principles and values. This strategy has been successful in some cases, such as in the creation of the Islamic military coalition against terrorism, but it has also generated tensions and challenges in others, such as in the relationship with Iran and the issue of human rights.

In terms of the influence of the Islamic religion on international relations in general, it has been found that faith and religious identity can affect relations between countries and international actors, of course is the example of the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Religion is a global phenomenon that can be a source of unity as well as conflict and division. For this reason, it is essential that political leaders consider this dimension in their decisions and promote interreligious dialogue.

It is crucial to recognize that the influence of the Islamic religion on Saudi foreign policy is not static, but subject to change. Political, economic, and social factors can shape its interpretation and application in global politics. Consequently, a multidisciplinary approach is required to fully understand this influence.

In conclusion, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of international relations in the Middle East and the world at large and their impact. The findings are expected to provide tools and strategies for political leaders and international actors to address the challenges involved in promoting peace and stability in the region and the world. However, it is important to continue researching the influence of the Islamic religion on the international relations of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the world in order to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

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