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## The Shifting Sands of Soft Power: Comparing Soft Power Influences on U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East.

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## *Soft Power*

Joseph Nye stated that “soft power,” in his quintessential book by the same name, is attractive power. That is, soft power cannot and does not try to force certain behaviors through coercion or inducement. Instead, it attracts others to the values, culture, and policies of a regime and engenders cooperation with that regime’s agenda (Nye 2004, 6-9). Soft power can be measured through various methods such as public opinion polling or observing the language governments and civilians use to discuss the nation in question. If there is an attraction to that country’s values and agenda, the effectiveness of its soft power can be measured on a case-by-case basis according to the policy actions taken by the attracted government as a result.

According to Nye, there are three broadly defined categories of soft power sources: culture, values, and policy. Though a great deal of overlap exists between the three categories, together they cover the breadth of the sources of attraction a nation and government might possess. Culture deals with the norms and customs of daily life in a country and the image it projects of itself through media and commerce. Values are defined as the relational and moral ideals common throughout society and demonstrated through actions by the general populace and its government. Policy entails the actions and plans laid out by a government. Specifically, Nye uses this category to measure whether or not the goals and ideals represented by those policies are attractive to other countries and make them want to be a partner in those policies (Nye 2004, 9).

The importance attributed to these sources of soft power rests upon a crucial assumption: soft power is real. Nye’s theory of soft power runs counter to traditional ideas about power as the ability to influence others to do what one wants them to do, either by the threat of punishment or the possibility of reward. It is reasonable, then, to question whether soft power is a real source of international power and if attraction to a country’s culture, values, and policies can induce other countries to act favorably towards that nation out of pure benevolence. This paper aims to put these questions on the legitimacy of soft power to the test by examining the relative soft power of two comparable countries. It will first determine if they have developed a degree of attraction to their culture, values, and policies and then whether or not that attraction has translated into real soft power by getting other countries to act favorably as a result.

Israel and Saudi Arabia are actively engaged in generating attraction from the United States government and its people. The overlap of their policy goals, due in part to regional proximity, makes it possible to measure and compare the degree to which that attraction has developed into meaningful soft power by producing desired policy outcomes from the US. Comparing the countries’ policy outcomes, as measured against their respective levels of soft power, will provide valuable

insight into the accuracy and applicability of Nye's theory of soft power. This technique is not a precise science as it relies on subjective interpretation of the degrees of attraction each country has produced and to what extent US foreign policy aligns with the agendas of each country. Nevertheless, a reasonable attempt at objective comparison will be made that should provide unique insights into the question of soft power effectiveness and implications for how Israel and Saudi Arabia should proceed if they wish to improve their soft power influence on the United States.

The State of Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were chosen for this analysis because of their regional proximity, parallels in US relations, and the unique relationship between the two countries that pits them as culturally adversarial despite sharing many similar foreign policy desires. Israel and Saudi Arabia have a tense historical relationship. Saudi Arabia supplied troops to support the invasion of Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and has since refused to normalize relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia has stated that relations will not improve until a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is reached that includes a Palestinian state with pre-1967 territorial boundaries (AFP 2021). Despite this conflict, Israel and Saudi Arabia's interests in regional security have been naturally brought together via their shared archrival, Iran. Iran's proxy fighters throughout the Middle East and its ambition to obtain nuclear warheads threaten both the security and stability of Israel and Saudi Arabia in the region. Furthermore, both nations have gone to great lengths to bolster their relationship with the United States, which acts as a critical military and economic force against any advances made by the Iranian regime.

In building their relationships with the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia have employed different sets of potential soft power assets to win the favor of the American people and, subsequently, US foreign policy decisions that favor their respective and shared interests in the Middle East. This paper will compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of both countries in the three categories of soft power: culture, values, and policy. After this analysis, it will discuss how these soft power qualities affected the policy priorities and actions of former US President Donald Trump and why the country with superior soft power was able to win more favor in terms of US policy response. Then, it will consider if that soft power can transfer to the new administration under President Joe Biden, who frequently contrasts himself with his predecessor, or if the shifting policy priorities between administrations limit the longevity of soft power. Finally, it will consider the implications of this analysis for the ongoing relationship between these three countries and what different outcomes in those relationships and accompanying policies mean for the future study of soft power.

### *Culture*

The first major consideration of soft power is whether or not a country's culture is attractive to the nation it hopes to influence. Although cultural differences are typically considered subjective, there are some reasonably objective ways to measure how others perceive that culture. For example, we can look at existing public opinion polls taken in America that indicate the favorability of Saudi Arabia and Israel by the American populace. We can also see if dollars and feet follow those opinions by estimating how many Americans visit these countries each year and how much business they do with them.

To gain an immediate sense of Americans' overall views of each country, we can examine recent polling taken by Gallup and YouGov. Gallup surveys Americans' favorability of about twenty to thirty countries each year by asking them to say whether their opinion of a country is "very/mostly favorable" or "very/mostly unfavorable." Israel has placed well in this survey over the past few years, with a mostly or very favorable rating of 71%, 74%, and 74% in 2017, 2018, and 2020, respectively (Newport 2017; Brennan 2018; McCarthy 2020). According to Gallup polling, a nearly three-fourths positive view of Israel held steady over Donald Trump's presidency, which placed it just within the top ten (approximately the top half) of the selected groups of countries polled. By comparison, Saudi Arabia ranked in the lower half each year, receiving "mostly" or "very favorable" scores from 31%, 41%, and 34% in 2017, 2018, and 2020, respectively (Newport 2017; Brennan 2018; McCarthy 2020).

Although informative, these Gallup surveys do not provide a complete picture of Americans' favorability of these two countries as they only surveyed up to two dozen countries. In 2020, YouGov conducted a similar survey that attempted to tabulate Americans' views of 195 different countries around the globe and rank them accordingly. In their study, which calculated the percent of Americans with "a positive view of each country," the favorability of each country appears to be down substantially (around 20+ points), but this also seems to be the case even for Americans' most favorable countries like Canada, suggesting the difference may be caused by different polling practices or skewed sampling. For the purposes of this analysis, though, we are only interested in the relative favorability between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

YouGov ranked Israel as the twenty-fifth most popular country, with 54% of Americans having a favorable opinion of the nation (YouGov 2020a). Saudi Arabia ranked far lower as the 141<sup>st</sup> most popular country, with a mere 19% of Americans saying they have a favorable view of the nation (YouGov 2020b). YouGov also includes the percent of Americans with a negative view of Israel and Saudi Arabia, which stand at 16% and 48%, respectively (Smith 2020). An additional insight of particular interest in the YouGov data was whether political differences in the United States affected the favorability of a country. Israel had the

most significant difference in favorability between Republicans and Democrats in the United States. It was also one of only two countries that Republicans gave a significantly higher favorability rating (the other was the USA, which 95% of Republicans had a favorable view of compared to 68% of Democrats). 69% of Republicans had a favorable view of Israel compared to 36% of Democrats, suggesting that internal US political differences correlate with differing opinions on the State of Israel. This was not the case for Saudi Arabia, which was viewed positively by 17% of Democrats surveyed and 16% of Republicans (Smith 2020).

Altogether, this data reveals that Americans have much more positive views of Israel than Saudi Arabia. Americans are split politically on Israel, with the majority of Republicans viewing the country favorably compared to a minority of Democrats. This suggests that Israel may have a ceiling on its ability to curry favor with Americans so long as Israel's stances on contentious issues like that of Palestinian sovereignty divide Americans. Nevertheless, the Gallup data demonstrate greater overall support for Israel. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, appears to be widely disliked by the breadth of Americans in both surveys.

These favorability ratings appear to correlate with other markers of cultural impact by Israel and Saudi Arabia. According to Statista, the number of Americans visiting Saudi Arabia is declining year-over-year, with the peak of 291,408 American travelers to Saudi Arabia in 2015 dipping down to a low of 159,597 in 2019 (2020 excluded due to COVID-19 travel restrictions) (Lock 2022b). Saudi Arabia sent a similar 160,000 visitors to the US in 2019. Israel's number of US visitors steadily increased over the same period, with the same caveat for 2020. Israel received 408,836 American visitors in 2015 and was up to 450,572 in 2019 (Lock 2022a). Israel also sent a similar 450,000 Israeli visitors to the US in 2019. Israel received nearly three times as many visitors from the United States as Saudi Arabia did in 2019. This is particularly significant given the relative populations of these countries, with Saudi Arabia receiving a third as many visitors despite tripling Israel in size with its 34 million people compared to Israel's 9 million.

Continuing this trend, Israel has also managed to beat out Saudi Arabia in economic terms, despite the drastic difference in population size. In total, Israel's economic trade with the United States in 2019 topped \$47 billion, surpassing Saudi Arabia's \$38.7 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) 2020a, USTR 2020b). The complete picture of trade and soft power skews even more heavily in Israel's favor. Israel managed a net export surplus of \$6.7 billion with the United States compared to Saudi Arabia's \$9.0 billion trade deficit. In summary, Israel is doing more business with the United States than Saudi Arabia, despite having one-third of the population size and half the total GDP, and is also managing to sell more goods and services to Americans than it receives.

This means the majority of commerce between Israel and the United States involves Israeli products and cultural influence going to America, where it can

further impact Americans' view of Israel as they consume its products. This is a significant advantage when building soft power as it allows a nation's economy to naturally influence the other country beyond what the government's policies can do alone. Unlike Israel, oil makes up more than 90% of Saudi Arabia's goods exported to the US. While fuel costs are a politically significant issue, it seems unlikely that individual Americans will know where the gas put in their car is coming from, making oil a relatively low impact export good on soft power formation. Israel, in comparison, sells a much more diverse range of products to the United States (USTR 2020a).

By these metrics, Israel's cultural influence on the United States dominates that of Saudi Arabia. Israel bests Saudi Arabia, a larger country by size and population, in terms of goods and people exchanged between itself and the United States annually. Trading products and exposing citizens to each other's country is vital for gaining soft power with a specific country. Future studies into this issue could look at breaking these metrics down further to understand who is coming and going from each country (e.g., businesspeople, tourists, exchange students) and to what extent the country is exporting the most influential goods and services (e.g., film, music, and cultural food).

### *Values*

A nation's values can be written or unwritten, institutional or cultural, held in high esteem or left unspoken. This makes it more difficult, and certainly more subjective, to evaluate the influence of a nation's values than its culture as statistical metrics are less available and less reliable. Still, knowing the relative favorability of Israel and Saudi Arabia in the United States can provide a basis for estimating how Americans perceive these countries' values. It also points to some of the key differences between how Americans are attracted to or repelled by the values espoused and demonstrated by Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The first apparent issue, and likely one of the major deciding factors for Americans, is that Israel is a parliamentary democracy, and Saudi Arabia is a hereditary monarchy. Although not parliamentary, the history of the United States' attraction to and promotion of democracy abroad is long and storied. So too is the aversion Americans have towards authoritarian governments and monarchies. Further compounding this negative view of Saudi values is the restrictive, oppressive nature of the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia has been widely criticized for systematically suppressing dissent within the country, including jailing activists for long periods for criticizing government practices (Human Rights Watch 2021b). It does not tolerate public worship of faiths outside its primary Islamic views and openly discriminates against religious minorities and those engaging in sexual practices deemed to be contrary

to Islamic Law. International criticism of the Saudi government intensified as a result of its role in the execution of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 (BBC News 2021). Israel, in contrast, boasts religious freedom for its religious minorities, including Christians, Muslims, and Druze, to publicly worship according to their traditions. The LGBTQ community receives open approval from the Israeli government, as demonstrated by the annual international “Pride” parade, which garnered a quarter-million attendees in 2019, the largest of its kind anywhere in the Middle East (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019).

Despite the stark difference in the relative openness of the two countries, critics of Israel argue that the nation’s claims of freedom and opportunity do not extend to everyone, depending on where they live. Over 4.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank territory and Gaza Strip where governance is split between partial autonomous rule and partial Israeli military and civilian rule. Palestinians seek full autonomy, but disagreements with the Israeli government over issues like control of East Jerusalem have prevented a final “two-state” solution from ever being implemented, despite multiple proposals over decades. Human rights organizations have criticized Israel for the living conditions inside Palestine and the implementation of strict travel and import/export bans on Palestinians living in Gaza (Human Rights Watch 2021a).

What some call an illegal occupation constituting human rights abuses, Israel contends is a necessary precaution taken for the self-defense and preservation of its citizens who are targeted by Hamas extremists in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Herein lies the political split in the United States over Israel’s favorability (compared to the politically universal negative views of Saudi Arabia). Although Israel enjoys majority support from Americans, it is not evenly distributed. Republicans widely maintain positive views of Israel, whereas the majority of Democrats do not, and the dividing issue appears to be questions over the rights of Palestinians. A 2018 Pew Research poll showed that Republicans and Democrats are more divided on the Issue of Palestine than ever before. Both parties were roughly equally sympathetic to Israel and Palestine in 1978. Republican sympathy with Israel on the matter has grown to 79%, and Democrat sympathy has fallen to only 27% (Pew Research Center 2018).

Given this information, it seems that Americans generally view Saudi Arabia unfavorably on account of its expressed values. In contrast, they are largely favorable towards Israel, with a strong exception from many left-leaning Americans who view Israel’s role in the Palestinian conflict negatively. As it is unlikely that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman will be relinquishing power anytime soon, Saudi Arabia’s only opportunity to improve its soft power in the US from a values standpoint is to improve its human rights record and its treatment of minorities in its country.

For Israel, having captured substantial support from those who take its side in the Palestinian conflict, the only potential room for growth lies in finding a solution to the issue of Palestinian sovereignty acceptable to the American political left. Of course, such a solution will continue to evade them, despite attempts made alongside the Trump administration as recent as 2020, so long as the two sides maintain irreconcilable differences over what they want from the two-state deal. Alternatively, it is possible, though unlikely, that Israel could persuade its detractors over time that it has upheld its end by proposing multiple solutions, which have all been rejected by Palestinian leadership without any serious dialogue.

### *Policy*

Policy is Nye's third and final soft power metric to be considered. The way a nation conducts its foreign policy, and the agenda it publicly pursues, affects how citizens of other countries view the morality and legitimacy of a nation. There is a remarkable similarity between views on Israel and Saudi Arabia in this instance. Both are military allies to the United States in the region, and all three nations' governments view the Iranian regime as a common adversary. In general, both nations benefit from Americans' animosity toward Iran. In recent polls, Iran is frequently the most disliked country by Americans, competing only with North Korea for the bottom spot (McCarthy 2020).

Looking specifically at the question of Iran's quest to be a nuclear power, Americans' perceptions are particularly unfavorable. In 2013, Pew Research showed that the majority of Americans supported the use of military force to prevent Iran from acquiring weapons (64%), and the vast majority (93%) opposed Iran developing nuclear weapons (Stokes 2013). The same questions were also posed to Israeli citizens due to Israel's stated "Begin Doctrine" that calls for preemptive strikes against nuclear capabilities possessed by adversaries. In the poll, Israeli citizens answered almost identically to Americans to the prior two questions (68% and 96%, respectively). However, they were much more concerned about the threat of Iran's nuclear program (85%) than Americans (54%) (Stokes 2013). Additionally, a minority of Americans held negative views of Iran (42%) compared to the majority of Israelis (75%) (Stokes 2013).

While Americans share a similar, though not as dire, view of Iran's nuclear threat, that does not mean every action taken by Israel against Iran will be seen positively. Recent incidents in the past few years, including the assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist, have drawn both admiration and sharp criticism within the United States. While Americans adamantly oppose Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, doing so through diplomatic agreements rather than executions is likely more palatable to those who do not share the same sense of urgency as Israeli citizens.

Saudi Arabia faces complex foreign policy challenges of its own, including a unique aspect of the regional power struggle with Iran. Saudi Arabia leads a multi-nation coalition backing the Yemeni government in a brutal internal war against Iran-backed Houthi rebels. According to monitoring by the United Nations, more than 230,000 deaths in Yemen have been attributed to the war (United Nations 2020). As the war continues to rage on and reports of severe human rights abuses pour in, support has waned globally. In the United States, citizens polled in 2018 by YouGov showed that of those with an opinion on the war in Yemen (many were unaware of the war altogether), 75% opposed future US weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and wanted to see the United States withdraw its support for the war. Though uneven, there was bipartisan support for this position as 89% of liberals and 54% of conservatives surveyed opposed continued arms sales, and 98% of liberals and 63% of conservatives supported withdrawing US support to the Saudi coalition (International Rescue Committee 2018).

In each issue affecting Israel and Saudi Arabia, there is strong American sentiment against Iran and its influence throughout the region. Yet, that anti-Iran sentiment does not perfectly translate into pro-Israeli or Saudi support. There is hesitancy to support violent covert operations by Israel against Iran's nuclear program and an even more decisive rejection of Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, regardless of Iran's involvement. This may not seem entirely rational or consistent as a matter of foreign policy, but because soft power is largely influenced by public perception, the target nation's public opinions ultimately decide what is considered just or unjust.

### *Payoff*

Up to this point, the only results of Israel and Saudi Arabia's soft power in America that have been discussed are public perception and favorability. It has been shown that Israel possesses a far greater level of public attraction in the US than Saudi Arabia on account of differences in culture and values. However, Israel has failed to maximize either of these categories due to a contingency of Americans who have a negative view of Israel due to Israel's actions in the longstanding Palestinian conflict. While both countries are favored over Iran in the region due to Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, support is split when it comes to direct violent conflict.

Although both nations were able to translate their soft power into policy successes during the Trump administration, they face a sharp decline in foreign policy support from the Biden administration. This will appear starker for Israel as attempts are made to arrange a new nuclear deal between Iran and the US, but that decline should not be mistaken for abandonment. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia's already low American support will dip a little lower, but Israel's support from the

United States and the current administration will remain comparatively very high, giving Israel a decisive edge over Saudi Arabia in the region.

Throughout the Trump administration, Israel enjoyed some of the highest levels of access and policy success it has ever seen from the United States. President Trump fulfilled the long-awaited promise to move the United States' Israeli Embassy to Jerusalem and he also removed the United States from the JCPOA nuclear agreement with Iran. In addition to these major policy wins for Israel, the Trump administration helped broker the historic Abraham Accords, which established normalized relations between Israel and former adversaries in the region, most notably the United Arab Emirates. These peace deals were achieved without requiring Israel to acquiesce to a version of the two-state solution with Palestine that had thus far never been seen as acceptable to Israel. This all occurred contrary to the wishes of Saudi Arabia, who to this day states they will not normalize relations with Israel until their favored two-state solution has been implemented. However, they have publicly stated they hope to see this normalization occur. There is evidence of secret meetings held between their respective heads of state, potentially discussing this and Iranian issues (AFP 2021).

Although the Trump administration placed pressure on this Saudi position through the Abraham Accords, demonstrating Israel's favorability over Saudi Arabia when the two were in conflict, the Trump administration did continue to vigorously support the Saudi coalition in Yemen through arms sales, despite misgivings about the war by many Americans. In short, both countries were able to leverage their respective soft power to induce American assistance on issues that are primarily important to the immediate needs and interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia rather than the United States itself. Between the two, Israel came out on top.

What remains to be seen now is what degree of soft power these two countries will retain with the Democratic Biden administration and to what degree it can be leveraged. The Democratic base that elected President Biden has far more negative feelings towards Israel and Saudi Arabia on account of issues in Palestine and Yemen than did the previous Republican base under President Trump. To the chagrin of both nations, the Biden administration is seeking to rejoin an agreement with Iran similar to the 2015 JCPOA that will lift severe economic sanctions placed on the Iranian regime in return for certain limitations on Iran's nuclear program. The Biden administration believes this will be a better way to manage Iran and prevent them from acquiring a nuclear weapon than the status quo.

Although Israel has expressed its extreme displeasure at this development, and talks between Israel and the United States about the details of the potential new agreement are underway, this is not an indication that the United States no longer values Israel as a critical ally (Magid 2021b). On the contrary, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem to express the United States' "ironclad" enduring commitment to Israel

and its security in the region (Garamone 2021). Netanyahu expressed that he finds comfort in the shared values and beliefs between the two countries, and remarked that he admired Secretary Austin's private comments suggesting that the United States and Israel are closer than allies, they are "family" (United States Department of Defense 2021).

Endearing language aside, the United States and Israel are nevertheless at odds over the Iran nuclear deal. Outside of these remarks, Israel has stated that it will not be bound by the international agreement, in which it is not a participant. Israel's Ambassador to the US said that Israel reserves its right to defend itself from any imminent Iranian threats (TOI Staff 2021).

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, finds itself in deeper water with the United States. In addition to the US negotiations with Iran, President Biden has withdrawn all US support for the Saudi coalition in Yemen (Knickmeyer 2021). Left without its strongest partner and facing a potentially sanction-free Iran, Saudi Arabia initiated the previously unthinkable and entered into negotiations with Iran to end the war in Yemen. Though the initial talks failed to resolve the conflict, they marked the first time the two countries had held any diplomatic relations since 2016, further demonstrating how desperate the situation appears to be for Saudi Arabia (Hasan 2021). It remains possible, though unclear, if the US will insist that Iran makes concessions as a part of the new nuclear deal in a show of indirect support for Saudi Arabia.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and the Biden administration appear stable but diminished. In an attempt to appear positive, the Crown Prince stated that Saudi Arabia and the Biden administration agree on "90% of issues of mutual concern," but disagree on the unspecified remaining 10% (ILH Staff and AP 2021). President Biden, in contrast, stated that "things are going to change" in the US relationship with Saudi Arabia, and the US State Department has said that they will only assist Saudi's interest in normalizing ties with Israel and achieving peace in Yemen if they correct their human rights record (Magid 2021a). Under the Biden administration, Israel's soft power appears secure, albeit weakened. Saudi Arabia's soft power may just be running out.

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