

Approaching the Core?

A two-stage analysis of the formulation and implementation of the
Saudi and Kuwaiti visions

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Writing this final paper has been a long and challenging journey. However, it has also been driven by genuine interest in the topic and a deep commitment to the research process, guided by my ambitious plans for future academic and professional pursuits.

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Abstract

This paper examines how semi-peripheral states navigate their position between core and periphery through the lens of World-Systems Analysis (WSA) and use of soft and hard power strategies. WSA conceptualises the global economy as divided into core countries and peripheral countries. The former controls capital and high-value production, and the latter supplies raw materials and low-wage labour. Semi-peripheral states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait occupy an intermediate space: they possess some advanced industries but remain structurally dependent on core powers.

This study focuses on three key strategies these states use to pursue upward mobility: economic diversification, technological-military advancement, and cultural diplomacy. The motivation for comparing Saudi Arabia and Kuwait lies in their visionary roadmaps, Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia and Vision 2035 of Kuwait, through which each government rhetorically constructs goals for achieving core-like influence. To understand how states could shift their position globally, a text analysis of both visions will be conducted to further conduct a process-tracing method to trace the implementation of the objectives.

The findings suggest that Saudi Arabia has advanced more quickly, particularly in economic diversification and technological initiatives underpinned by strong top-down governance, a more hard power approach. Kuwait, in contrast, has placed greater weight on cultural diplomacy and incremental reforms, a more soft power approach. Both trajectories illustrate distinct pathways through which semi-peripheral states attempt to advance and approach becoming a core economy, but they suggest that one aspect, such as strong cultural influence, is not enough to shift a state's position in the global world order.

Key Words: World-Systems Analysis, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, Kuwait, Vision 2035, Soft Power, Hard Power.

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United Nations Department of Field Support (2011). Map over the Middle East.

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1 Introduction

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have launched long-term national visions to transform their economies, reduce reliance on oil, and increase their regional and global influence. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Kuwait's Vision 2035 function as strategic frameworks intended to guide these countries toward progress (Vision2030, 2025a; MoFA, 2025).

This research paper will therefore utilise the World-Systems Analysis (WSA), inspired by Immanuel Wallerstein, who offers a valuable lens for examining how states are situated within the global capitalist system and their categorisation as core, semi-periphery, or periphery, based on their levels of control over capital, production, and innovation (Wallerstein, 1976: 462). The core is characterised as one in control over the capital and production, while the periphery is the exploited. The semi-periphery falls in the middle, being the exploiter and the exploited. (Wallerstein, 2000: 91; Anastasi, 2023: 177). Historically, Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, while economically affluent, have primarily functioned as peripheral suppliers of natural resources, particularly oil (Mohamed Nour, 2013: 15-17). Nevertheless, both countries have actively pursued economic diversification, technological and military advancement, and broader social and cultural reforms as outlined in their respective national visions.

Therefore, this study examines how Saudi Arabia and Kuwait attempt to shift their global positioning by analysing the mentioned aspects. The cultural aspect will not simply be looked at as reforms, but also as a strategy used to reach out and open up to the rest of the world as intended by these visions. This paper, therefore, sees this as a form of cultural diplomacy. To study these different types of strategies and complement WSA, Joseph Nye's concepts of soft and hard power are utilised to analyse each country's different strategies in pursuit of its national vision.

Methodologically, the study first conducts a text analysis of key objectives within the respective visions, focusing on economic diversification beyond oil, technological (including military) advancements, and cultural aspects. This is followed by process tracing from the launch of the visions to the present, evaluating whether and how these goals have been implemented. Together, these methods offer a comparative lens to assess how both states navigate the global world order, as shaped by core-periphery dynamics.

1.1 Aim & Research Questions

While much of the existing research on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which is comprised of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, has centered predominantly on the region's oil-based economic power, this study seeks to move beyond that scope by conducting an in-depth examination of two specific member states: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, whom are similar on many levels: similar in culture, language, and religion, as well as being resource-rich and geographically close. Yet different in other aspects: their political systems, economic aims, strategies to gain influence, and allies. These aspects that reflect their similarities and differences make them interesting to compare. The paper seeks to understand if Saudi Arabia and Kuwait can advance from their current positions in the global world order using the framework of WSA. Why this paper specifically chose to use the framework of WSA is for the reason that the countries of the GCC is a unique part of the Middle East that is evolving economically, and beyond only oil, increasing its influence, business and allies. This is, for instance, seen in how Saudi Arabia is gaining more substantial influence and an even stronger alliance with a hegemonic Western state like the United States. The present changes occurring today in the Gulf region, the Middle East as a whole, and its relations to the Western world sparked an interest in studying this topic in depth. WSA became, therefore, a suitable choice for this research, which will be demonstrated throughout the paper.

To explore this topic, it is important to examine each state's specific strategies to implement these visions. This study focuses on three aspects: (1) economic diversification, (2) technological-military advancement, and (3) cultural diplomacy to transition away from the periphery and achieve core-like characteristics. The reason for focusing specifically on these three aspects is that they are important to what constitutes a strong core power. The WSA framework explores these aspects but on different levels. While Wallerstein focuses more on the economic aspects and the capitalist world, other researchers (e.g. Saredine 2021; Jacob, 2023) emphasise other aspects of the framework, such as the cultural power. Each researcher, after Wallerstein, have had their understanding of WSA as this framework is interesting in the way that it is not identified by Wallerstein as an established theory to test, but rather a perspective to perceive the world (Wallerstein, 2000:24), thus, this paper will further develop on these three factors it identifies with strong background and analysis to why these aspects are important to consider when looking at the development of the two countries of interest.

While there are connections between these three aspects, how each state applies them and the differences in their implementation are central to this study. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia share many similarities but differ in governance and how they execute their national visions, leading to distinct paths of development. This comparison is important because there is little research that looks closely at how these two countries are evolving, both nationally and in their regional and international roles, as they attempt to move beyond the semi-peripheral status.

To complement the WSA, this paper also applies the concepts of soft and hard power, helping to analyse the different strategies Kuwait and Saudi Arabia use to achieve their national goals. Using a both text analysis and process tracing method, it will be concluded with a comparison of the two countries in the attempt to transition away from the periphery.

The following research questions are posed:

- 1. How do Saudi Vision 2030 and Kuwaiti Vision 2035 rhetorically construct their goals for moving from a semi-peripheral position toward a core-like economy in the global world order?*
- 2. And if and how have Saudi Arabia's and Kuwait's implementation of these strategic visionary goals resulted in advancements in the global world order?*

1.2 Delimitation

The study does not predict the long-term success of either country's vision or the long-term outcomes of their policies. Instead, it provides a structured comparison of how their goals and strategies are articulated in their respective visions and how these strategies are implemented, and whether they indicate movement away from the periphery toward a more core role in the global world order in present terms. The data used is primarily limited to the available primary and official data provided by the governments of the two states of interest in this study. However, secondary data will be further utilised to provide a well-grounded analysis. There is, however, a risk of using more secondary data in one part of the analysis, while analysing Kuwait, than the other, due to limited data availability.

It is further important to note that the scope of analysis in the three aspects that will be analysed in this research: economic diversification, technological-military advancement, and cultural diplomacy, will be limited due to the word limit allowed for this academic research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper employs WSA to examine the possible state transition away from the periphery of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. By reviewing existing literature, this paper contextualises WSA within the modern global world order and positions Saudi Arabia and Kuwait within the core, semi-periphery, and periphery structure. This categorisation is necessary to understand where each country stands today and if advancement is occurring. To enrich the analysis, the paper integrates the concepts of soft and hard power to understand what each country's strategies, whether embedded more in soft power or hard power, mean, and how these strategies have been implemented.

2.1 Previous Research

2.1.1 World-Systems Analysis

WSA is often mistakenly understood as a theory, by Wallerstein, which needs to be clarified. Wallerstein himself admits that WSA is a perspective of seeing the world, rather than a theory (Wallerstein, 2000:24). To better understand this, Babones (2015) expands more on this explaining that “theories are necessary. But theories can be wrong. A way of looking at the world can never really be wrong, just more or less useful” (Babones, 2015: 5). Thus, emphasising a perspective is less prone to criticism than a theory.

While multiple theories have emerged from this perspective, five key elements define WSA, according to Babones (2015). First, the integration of societies into larger world-systems significantly impacts both their material conditions and subjective experiences. Second, world-systems, both historical and modern, can be analysed through their economic, political, and cultural structures. Third, since the 1500s, the dominant world-system has been an economically strong force that has largely shaped political and cultural systems. Fourth, alternative world-systems, such as those driven primarily by political power (world-empires) or cultural influence (world-cultures), have existed and may reemerge in the future. Finally, the modern world-economy is structured through a core-periphery hierarchy, where core countries maintain economic and political dominance, semi-peripheral states occupy an intermediate position, and peripheral regions remain structurally disadvantaged (Babones, 2015: 16).

The author argues that “World-systems analysis as such is not a theory, but there has been much theorising from a world-systems perspective, and as a result there are many world-systems theories.” (Babones, 2015: 15), it is therefore not a formal "theory" in the traditional sense (with testable hypotheses and empirical support), but it can be used as an analytical lens for understanding how different types of societies, whether in the core, semi-periphery, and periphery geography, are positioned in the global world order (ibid: 15, 18). With this being said, WSA still has theoretical components as it provides concepts, categories (core, semi-periphery, periphery), and hypotheses about capitalist development, economic dependency, and structural change (Jacob, 2023:9-11, 16-19; Engelmann, 2023:160). Thus, scholars who work with WSA often apply it as a theoretical framework to their empirical research. Nevertheless, this paper intends to see it as a perspective, rather than a theory.

When reviewing the previous research on cases applying Wallerstein's WSA, there is notably a lack of research using this perspective to analyse the Gulf countries' integration into the global economic and political system in a modern and non-Western context. To be clear, this is not to say that non-Western countries were not explored, but as WSA suggests, non-Western countries often fall into the periphery or semi-periphery, rather than the core, which the Western states dominated. This refers to the so-called European expansionism in the sixteenth century (Wallerstein, 1976:461; Jacob, 2023: 127). While this may be true to reality, Wallerstein developed his framework over the years. Three of Wallerstein's key works, published in 1999, 2006, and a collaboration in 2008, focus specifically on Islam and the Middle East, analysing the region through a more modern lens with closer attention to cultural, religious and ideological aspects which within the WSA is not a direct characterisation of periphery or core but are inevitably important aspects to look at when trying to understand if the current capitalist world system could possibly be challenged.

In his 1999 book “Islam, the West and the World”, Wallerstein examines the historical trajectory of “Islamist movements”, exploring their emergence, varying degrees of success, political setbacks, and the pursuit of alternative strategies. He draws parallels between these movements and other types of antisystemic movements, suggesting that the rise of Islamism in peripheral regions follows a recurring historical pattern. Additionally, Wallerstein has critiqued the media's portrayal of so-called Islamic terrorism as the dominant global threat of

the 1990s, particularly following the decline of Soviet Communism (Wallerstein, 1999: 110-113).

Wallerstein has, therefore, problematised the perceiving of Islam as a threat to the established global world order, which he describes as characterised by a “reified pan-Europeanism” (Wallerstein, 2006: 71). This is irrespectively important for the study, as it is studying two nations in the Middle East where Islam is the dominant religion and is inevitably part of the objectives set out in their respective visions. Samman and Al-Zo’by (2008), featuring Wallerstein, contend that Islamic societies should be viewed as part of a shared world with the “West”, interconnected through complex economic and cultural networks. They assert that contemporary Islamic societies are shaped by the global capitalist system and cannot be analysed independently from its influences. The book's authors therefore provide a nuanced and comprehensive depiction of Islamic societies today, strongly challenging the narrative that Islam exists outside of or remains largely unaffected by the modern global world order (Samman and Al-Zo’by, 2008: 6-8).

The historical context is the basis of Wallerstein’s WSA, and despite his work on explaining the racial and problematic narratives of how the “West” perceives the “other”, Wallerstein’s analysis has received criticism from researchers who argued that WSA is Eurocentric in its historical analysis and interpretation of the world order, pointing to its insufficient emphasis of cultural factors (Jacob, 2023:19; Lee, 2010:7). Frank Jacob, editor of the anthology “Wallerstein 2.0: Thinking and Applying World-Systems Theory in the 21st Century” (2023) highlights that “due to an increased interest in globalisation and its accompanying changes and processes, interest in world-systems analysis seems to have gained interest again,” (Jacob, 2023:25) while also highlighting that “it is still far from the scientific mainstream” (ibid.). Therefore, while there is a growing interest in the WSA again, there is still a scarce academic contribution to understanding, testing, and criticising the WSA thoroughly.

The anthology, therefore, seeks to reignite scholarly engagement with Wallerstein’s work and WSA. Rather than presenting definitive conclusions, it presents the framework’s potential, critically evaluating its applicability across various social sciences’ disciplines. Eventually, Wallerstein 2.0 leaves the reader with new thoughts on how and to what extent WSA can be utilised to understand the present world. This is of particular interest to this study as this paper focuses on certain parts of Saudi Arabia’s and Kuwait’s visions, which not only

become possible and easier to target using WSA but may also serve as a chance to expand the framework of WSA.

Other researchers have tried to develop the framework, introducing new perspectives and concepts, Hinnebusch (2011) uses WSA to explore how imperial powers historically benefited from incorporating the Middle East into the capitalist world-system. This process has led to persistent regional inequalities and resistance movements (Hinnebusch, 2011). This is highly relevant for this study, as it explains why the economically affluent states of the Gulf today are not positioned as core, which will be further explained in section 2.1.2.

Furthermore, other researchers have explored how other non-Western core-like powers exploited the Middle East, which often falls into the periphery or semi-periphery (see 2.1.2). An interesting research by Saredidine (2021), where he applies WSA to examine China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), argues that China is creating a parallel world-system that overlaps with the existing U.S.-led system (Saredidine, 2021:195). The author calls this process “promoting new *modi operandi*” (ibid:184). *Modi operandi*, in this sense, means a method of operating a process or a system, metaphorically used to describe how core countries, especially hegemonic powers, dominate the system and effectively decide how it is operated (ibid.). In the case of the Gulf countries in general, it is interesting to study if they intend to form a new world order, with their visionary goals, whether parallel to the current capitalist world order or replacing it with Arabic and Islamic-dominated culture and order, as opposed to the capitalist liberal order, as touched upon by Wallerstein (1999; 2006).

2.1.2 The Gulf Countries

There is a lack of academic research comparing Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Kuwait's Vision 2035. However, several scholarly works explore these visions within the broader region, involving all of the Gulf countries and in the context of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economic diversification efforts, offering interesting insights for a comparative analysis of the two visions.

Luciani and Moerenhout (2021) examine the economic diversification in the GCC countries by comparing economic performance across the GCC, and the research highlights that these nations have achieved a higher degree of diversification than commonly assumed. However, their progress toward sustainable economic and environmental development remains inconsistent.

Similar to their study, Mirgani (2017) also presents that the GCC states increasingly see long-term reliance on hydrocarbon-based economies as unsustainable. Other researcher predicts that:

...oil reserves are likely to last for a century only for a half of the Gulf countries, namely, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, whereas for the other half, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar, proven reserves are likely to be exhausted within the next two decades. (Mohamed Nour, 2013: 21).

This growing concern has been a key factor in Gulf countries' efforts to explore alternatives to oil and diversify and grow their economy. As part of this strategy, GCC countries have been investing significantly in cultural sectors such as education, sports, and the arts, despite problems that Mirgani (2017) identifies with this state-sponsored one-sided investments in cultural sectors (Mirgani, 2017: 1-5). This shift not only aims to diversify their economies but also aims toward a broader mobility and advancement within the global world order.

Looking closely at Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, several assumptions are made regarding their different progress and advancement. Given Saudi Arabia's long-standing relationship with the United States, its active military presence in Yemen, and its broader regional influence (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 11, 28-33), it can be assumed that the country adopts a strategy more grounded in hard power, which may have contributed to a faster advancement within the global world order. Kuwait, by contrast, appears to rely more heavily on soft power tools, such as diplomacy, cultural branding, and international cooperation (New Kuwait, 2025b: 3), as will be seen during the analysis. However, both states are clearly striving for an advancement away from the periphery, according to their objective visionary goals, despite differences in their strategic approaches. These preliminary assumptions, grounded in previous research, serve as a point of departure for this study, which will be referred back to in the conclusions of this research.

Due to their current economy, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are placed in the semi-periphery when looking at the spectrum of the core to periphery categorisation. Researchers, such as Saraç and Yağlıkara (2022), place Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in different levels of the semi-periphery, where Saudi Arabia is categorised as the "upper semi-periphery" and Kuwait as the "middle semi-periphery". Their research takes an institutional economic approach to compare their institutional quality differences. This is of relevance to this study, which will continue to demonstrate the reasoning behind why these two countries are in the

semi-periphery and whether they are advancing away from their current position and approaching the core.

2.2 Main Theoretical Approach

2.2.1 World-Systems Analysis

“A world-system is not the system of the world, but a system that is a world and that can be, most often has been, located in an area less than the entire globe” (Wallerstein, 2004:98). Immanuel Wallerstein, the Marxist sociologist, presented his World-Systems Analysis as a way to analyse the global economic system and its unjust structure in which the world is divided into a core and a periphery. While Marx himself did not explicitly integrate an international dimension into his theory of capitalism, scholars influenced by his work have sought to apply his ideas to international relations, such as Wallerstein.

Wallerstein argues that the modern world economy emerged during the “long sixteenth century” with the expansion of European capitalism, which created a global system characterised by economic and political inequalities (Wallerstein, 1976:461). Within this system, the global capitalist system was structured around initially two interrelated zones: the core and the periphery. However, as will be explained, a third zone is needed in order to maintain order in the global system. The third zone is the intermediate, the semi-periphery, in which it is both the exploiter and the exploited. Core activities are typically high-profit and skill-intensive, such as advanced technological manufacturing, whereas peripheral activities are characterised by low-skill labour and limited surplus gains (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982: 13-15; Anastasi, 2023: 176-177). The semi-periphery, on the other hand, serves as an intermediary between the core and the periphery, exhibiting characteristics of both. Semi-peripheral nations engage in industrial production and have some technological advancements but still rely on low-wage labour and resource extraction (Wallerstein, 2000:86-88; Anastasi, 2023: 177-179, 188). Semi-peripheral states also play a key role in stabilising the capitalist world system. These nations act as buffers, preventing direct conflict between the core and periphery by maintaining a level of economic and political stability and representing a status which peripheries want to be and might be able to become (Wallerstein: 2000: 89; Jacob, 2023:143-146). However, advancing from being a periphery to a core directly would be difficult. Generally, the framework of exploiting the periphery draws from dependency theory, which highlights the structural inequalities inherited from colonialism,

where newly independent developing countries remain economically subordinate to former colonial powers (Halperin, 2018).

However, Wallerstein does not strictly categorise states in one of these categories. In other words, he does not place one state strictly as a periphery and one always as a core. Instead, Wallerstein's WSA focuses on the fluidity of economic activities that exist within and across states. The states' position in the global world order is shaped by the concentration of these different types of economic processes. Countries with a higher presence of core-like activities tend to be more powerful, both domestically and in relation to other states, while those characterised by more of a peripheral and poorer economy often remain economically dependent and politically weaker. As Hopkins and Wallerstein (1982: 13) note, powerful states are able to foster and maintain core dominance, whereas weaker states, either due to internal fragmentation or external pressures, become sites for peripheral production that will eventually benefit the core. This process, referred to as peripheralisation, reinforces asymmetries in wealth and power (ibid.). In order to understand why and how certain core states maintain their influential and powerful position, factors like technological-military advancement as well as cultural diplomacy influence are as important as economic factors, and therefore, an integral part of this study.

While WSA traditionally exemplifies with a North-South dynamic, increasing attention has been given to South-South economic asymmetries that replicate similar patterns of peripheralisation (see Sarriddine, 2021). The Gulf states, in this case Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, exemplify this dynamic in their economic and labour relationships with South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Within this relationship, the Gulf functions as a semi-peripheral zone, wealthy in capital but dependent on foreign core economies and not as advanced as core states in e.g. technology, however, they also depend and utilise low-skilled labor, often from the mentioned peripheral countries (Yalcin, 2015: 7, 13-14; Willoughby, 2006: 226-227).

This labour-based peripheralisation reflects Wallerstein's notion that peripheral regions specialise in low-profit, low-skill economic functions (Wallerstein, 2004: 28-30). South Asian labourers in the Gulf are often engaged in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and low-wage services - activities that generate value for Gulf economies, as discussed above. However, despite the economic gains from benefiting from cheap labour, the lack of advanced and knowledge-based economies results in slow, if any, high advancement that

would eventually compete with core economies. This is visible today in the case of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, as will be discussed in the analysis. Both these countries aim to develop their economy to attract “global talents” (Vision2030, 2025a) and become a “knowledge economy” (KNDP, 2025: 163), thus realising the obstacles with high dependence on and utilisation of low-skilled labour.

WSA also considers historical patterns and long-term economic changes. Wallerstein argues that capitalism, while dominant today, is not eternal. Over time, systemic contradictions, such as overproduction, new ideologies with new rising powers/economies, and rising inequality, may lead to the emergence of a new economic system (Wallerstein, 2004: 67-75; 78-83). It could also be explained simply as the interest of a country to expand its economy or create a parallel system, as Saredidine (2021) argues in his paper exploring China’s peripheralisation of the Middle East region and the potential of creating a parallel system in which Chinese values and ideas have a strong influence.

Applying this perspective to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, both nations aim in their respective visions to diversify their economies and reduce dependency on oil, signalling aspirations to shift their positions within the global world order. However, structural limitations remain, and implementation differs, which will be explored in the analysis. Understanding their different strategies and trajectories within the framework provides deeper insight into their economic and political state.

2.2.2 The Concepts of Soft and Hard Power

In using soft and hard power, which was coined by Joseph Nye (1990), as a complementary to the analytical lens to the WSA, this paper will explore these three areas of national strategies in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia: economic diversification, technological-military advancement, and cultural diplomacy, to understand what they reflect. In other words, what kind of power (hard or soft power) do these goals reflect and how these goals and strategies are conducted.

As explored by Nye, culture and ideology influence are often forms of soft power, for the reason that it is the attraction or the influence that results in achieving the desired result, rather than compelling the result by force, threat or payment (Nye, 2004 5-6; Nye, 2008a: 107-108). Therefore, cultural diplomacy will be seen as part of the soft power projection as it intends to capture how culture is framed and if it is used as a part of diplomacy to reach out to

the rest of the world. Several initiatives by Saudi Arabia, for instance, reflect the soft power of the cultural and social reforms they have made. For instance, Saudi Arabia's promotion and inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated fields highlights positive reforms by the country as part of a public diplomacy (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 19-20).

In the same way, is it possible to see Kuwait use soft power measures to gain more relevance and power in the region and advance on the international level. Kuwait has attempted to position itself as a diplomatic actor in the region, often described as semi-democratic (Luciani, 2021:26) and one that is adhering to international standards, as described by the Kuwaiti government itself (MoFA, 2025). In practice, it can be challenging to identify what policies or statements are meant to reflect a soft power, and this will therefore be operationalised in section 3.2 to pinpoint how this paper aims to identify the soft power in the visions.

However, that soft power alone may not be enough for a country to achieve the desired effects and may therefore resort to coercion or threats, usually taking the form of the hard power use of economic or military means (Nye, 2004: 128-129, 146). Hard power measures can also be undertaken as a form of deterrence against future threats or disadvantages (ibid:26). One example of economic power is the two nations' oil reserves. The economic power of the oil reserves could mean being able to influence the global world order through coercion and payment. As an example, Saudi Aramco, which is a majority state-owned oil company in Saudi Arabia and one of the world's largest oil producers (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 4; Aramco, 2025), could effectively influence the oil price worldwide.

Technological advancement, however, could be seen as both a soft and hard power strategy. On the one hand, it could mean the strategy to develop a country into a knowledge-based economy, with higher technological manufacturing. On the other hand, it could include military technological advancement, which is an important aspect of this study. The core's economic dominance strategy is reinforced by its military and political power, which serves both to protect its economic interests from external threats and to facilitate the continued extraction of economic gains from peripheral regions (Wallerstein 2000:89-91; Shapiro, 2023: 54). Military would therefore fall under the domain of hard power as it enhances a state's coercive capabilities.

In practice, countries could use a combination of both soft and hard power strategies - referred to as "smart power" - to maximise their benefits to produce effective foreign policy (Nye, 2023:63). For example, a nation might utilise its economic influence as a hard power to gain an advantage in a deal, while also enforcing culture, ideology or nation branding as a form of diplomacy to foster alliances or gain popularity. Together, these strategies contribute to a state's overall power projection, enabling it to navigate and exert influence within the global world order. These power dynamics align well with Wallerstein's characterisation of core economies, in which he incorporates Gramsci's understanding of culture and ideology, explaining that states, mostly core hegemonic states, achieve dominance not only economically, politically, and financially over other major powers, but also through exercising military and cultural leadership (Wallerstein 2004: 94; Wallerstein, 2000:91).

2.2.3 Synthesis of Two Theoretical Traditions

While WSA, as developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, is grounded in a neo-Marxist tradition that emphasises structural inequalities and the division of labour between core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral states, Joseph Nye adopts a neo-liberal perspective, focusing on agency, institutional cooperation, and power dynamics in international relations. Although these frameworks stem from different theoretical traditions, they can be used in a complementary manner to understand how states maintain or shift their positions within the global world order.

WSA primarily focuses on systemic constraints and historical structures of exploitation, offering a macro-level explanation for why certain states remain dominant while others are structurally disadvantaged (Chase-Dunn and Babones, 2006). WSA, therefore, as a perspective, softly touches upon how these states exercise their power and how strategies are used and executed. Nye's concept of hard and soft power allows for a deeper exploration of how states actively exercise influence, not just through military or economic coercion, but also through attraction and persuasion - the soft power characteristics.

The now decades old debate on the neo-neo synthesis attempts to bridge the gap between the neo-realist and neo-liberalist frameworks (Keohane, 1984; Nye, 1988; Baldwin, 1993), where several scholars have attempted to synthesise marxist and liberal theoretical traditions by exploring their complementarities across different thematic areas (see Kandiyali, 2013; Reiman, 2015; Haworth, 2022), who conducted individual work and area of research

however, whom collectively demonstrate that despite foundational differences, Marxism and liberalism can be brought into productive dialogue, producing hybrid frameworks that enhance explanatory and normative insights across disciplines.

Therefore, it clarifies that the idea of synthesising two different schools of thought is not new and could be explored in newer debates. By integrating Nye's concepts of power with WSA, one can analyse how states achieve certain goals and what kind of powers they reflect. This combination reveals not only why certain power structures persist but also how they are used, maintained, and legitimised.

3 Research Design & Methodology

This section outlines the choice of methods, definitions, and background of the case studies. It lays a solid foundation for the research throughout the analysis. Through a combination of qualitative text analysis and process tracing, the study examines how the three aspects of concern are articulated in the official visions (Vision 2030 and Vision 2035) and how they are translated into action. This methodological approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the ways in which semi-peripheral states strategically navigate structural constraints while attempting to advance their status and influence within the global world order.

3.1 Choice of Method

This study adopts a two-pronged methodological approach to examine the strategies through which Saudi Arabia and Kuwait attempt to advance away from the periphery and toward a core status. The first part of the analysis focuses on the strategies, goals and objectives articulated in their respective national visions. This is approached through a qualitative text analysis.

The second part of the study shifts focus from strategy formulation to actual implementation. Here, a process-tracing methodology is employed to examine how the objectives outlined in the national visions have been operationalised in practice. This involves looking at key policy developments, GDP reports, documented institutional reforms, and projects, assessing the extent to which the objectives articulated in the visions have been implemented.

When comparing the two cases, it is important to note that comparative studies have disciplinary differences. Still, it is in general suitable when comparing two or more cases, in which it is intended to explain not only an element in one case in comparison to the other, but why it is so (Cocq and Szekely, 2021:49). The combined use of text analysis and process-tracing thus allows for a comprehensive understanding of both discursive and material dimensions of state behavior within the WSA, and in this case - Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. To further understand how these two states have implemented their respective objectives or intend to implement them, it is important to understand the hard and soft power approaches, in order to eventually draw the conclusion on which strategies seem more effective.

3.1.1 Qualitative Text Analysis

The qualitative text analysis allows for a systematic and interpretive approach to understanding how these documents - the visions and the state policy documents - construct meaning and reflect on broader geopolitical strategies. By analyzing the language, themes, and narratives presented in the visions, the method identifies how each state articulates its use of soft and hard power, and how these elements relate to their aspirations toward becoming a core or core-like economy. Unlike quantitative content analysis, which focuses on counting word frequencies or categories, qualitative text analysis enables a deeper exploration of the texts (Bengtsson, 2016:8-10, 13). However, it is important to note that a risk of bias, or what some researchers call “unavoided subjectivity” (Shelton and Kücüksu, 2021:25) may occur. For instance, certain words may not be explicitly labeled as “cultural”, or in my case “cultural diplomacy”, but instead conveyed through terms that imply such processes. This will however be defined and operationalized before the analysis to provide transparency for the way of thought and research design.

It is also important to note that some parts will be more analysed and documented than others, for the reason of data availability, and the quantity as well as quality of the official documents of the visions that are published.

3.1.2 Process Tracing

The second method will be a process tracing of a limited time period from when the visions were launched until the present time, looking at the same aspects mentioned above but analysing their implementation. Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 was launched in 2016, and Kuwait’s Vision 2035 in 2017. Therefore, Saudi Arabia’s time period study will be from 2016 to 2025, while Kuwait's will be from 2017 to 2025. Process tracing is used by social scientists usually as a qualitative within-case data analysis to identify causal mechanisms, which is defined as the causal interactions and processes through which influence, information, or effects are transmitted from one stage to another across time and space, thus investigating variables (Rietveld and Gürkan, 2021:219).

In this case, process tracing is employed to investigate the implementation of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and Kuwait’s Vision 2035, particularly in the three areas mentioned throughout this paper: (1) economic diversification, (2) technological-military advancement, and (3) cultural diplomacy. The study considers the use of hard power strategies applicable to any of

the economic and technological dimensions used by the two states, whether it is used alone or combined with soft power, as they contain forms of coercion, threat or payment (Nye, 2004, 128-129, 146). Cultural aspects are only seen as soft power projection, as it is more of a form of attraction or influence as part of diplomacy (Nye, 2023:65; 2008: 107-108). These processes will be this study's independent variables. The dependent variable is defined as the states' transition within the world systems of periphery, semi-periphery and core. The variables will be further defined and operationalised in section 3.2.

It is important to reiterate that, the same as for the part where text analysis is used, the implementation that will be conducted as part of the process tracing will not cover all years from 2016-2025 and 2017-2025 respectively. The reason for this is the lack of available data.

3.2 Conceptualisation and Operationalisation

The concepts may vary in definition and operationalisation depending on the researcher, highlighting once again the risk of bias in qualitative text analysis. This is also a risk when conducting the process tracing. Therefore, for the transparency of this study, an operationalisation of the concepts will be explained to set the foundation for the analysis and provide an insight into the reason behind the choices made in conducting this research. This research will conceptualise those terms according to previous research and Wallerstein's use of the concepts of this paper. How this study views a core state and why the three aspects, economic, technological-military and cultural are important and chosen to be the center of this research is based primarily on Wallerstein's definition of core hegemonic states, whom he sees has "...economic, political, and financial superiority over other strong states, and therefore has both military and cultural leadership as well. Hegemonic powers define the rules of the game" (Wallerstein, 2004: 94).

3.2.1 State Mobility within the Global World Order

This study's dependent variable is state mobility within the global world order. According to WSA, states occupy different positions within the global world order, namely, the core, semi-periphery, and periphery, based on their roles in the international division of labour. To reiterate, a state's position is not static; rather, it is subject to change over time, reflecting shifts in political strategy, economic structure, and global integration. In this context, state transition refers to the extent to which a state demonstrates movement toward acquiring the structural and strategic features associated with core status. These include the ability to

extract surplus from other regions, dominate in high-tech and military-industrial production, and export culturally influential norms and ideologies, as Wallerstein mentions in his definition of hegemonic core states (2004:94).

To operationalise this dependent variable and study the status and mobility of the two cases of concern, this study draws on their visions, Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia and Vision 2035 of Kuwait, and further researches their implementation through the three aspects mentioned.

3.2.2 Economic Diversification

Economic diversification in this study refers to the United Nations' (UN) definition, "the process of shifting an economy away from a single income source toward multiple sources from a growing range of sectors and markets" (UNFCCC, 2025). In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, there is a slight shift from a narrow reliance on resource-based sectors, particularly oil and gas, to a more diverse economy; however, it is not necessarily sustainable (Beutel, 2021:100), which will be discussed in the analysis. Wallerstein (2000:89-91, 217) emphasises that core economic processes, characterised by advanced technology and high value-added production, are typically concentrated in a few dominant states. In contrast, peripheral economies remain dependent on low-skill and low-profit activities. For semi-peripheral states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, pursuing economic diversification is part of an effort to develop a more knowledge-based economy and to reduce systemic dependency (see Vision2030, 2025a; KNDP, 2025: 163). A critical component of a transformation or mobility from the periphery to the core is surplus extraction. In Wallerstein's framework, surplus extraction is the process through which core states capture a disproportionate share of the economic surplus generated within the global division of labour (Wallerstein, 1976: 462). Core economies achieve this by deploying advanced technology and leveraging favourable trade terms that allow them to secure high profit margins and reinvest surplus capital (Wallerstein, 2004: 81).

Further, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait offer a useful lens into how semi-peripheral states interact with both core and peripheral economies. While their visions are aimed at diversification and progress, their continued reliance on South Asian migrant labour suggests an embeddedness in peripheral economic processes. This positions them in an intermediary role: states seeking to achieve and develop core-like economies while simultaneously engaging in practices that

sustain peripheral dependency in other regions. This duality is central to understanding why they are considered semi-periphery; they become both the exploited and the exploiters.

Although Saudi Arabia articulates ambitions to develop knowledge-based economies, their continued reliance on labour-importing models and low-wage service sectors suggests that peripheral processes remain structurally embedded in its economy. For example, major development projects like the Saudi project “NEOM” or Kuwait’s “Silk City” feature a large number of migrant guest workers. However, nationalisation initiatives such as Saudisation (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 7-8) or Kuwaitisation (ANDP, 2019) can be interpreted as attempts by semi-peripheral states to escape the structural constraints of peripheral economic practices. By reducing dependence on low-skilled migrant labour and promoting mostly domestic, but high-skilled, employment, these policies aim to advance and become more of a knowledge and high-skilled economy, which aligns with core economy characteristics.

Economic diversification, therefore, serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it enhances hard power by strengthening economic infrastructure and resource mobilisation, and potentially used for coercion or threat when becoming an economic power and not only vulnerable to structural dependency on oil which is not sustainable (Mohamed Nour, 2013: 21). On the other hand, the narrative of modernisation and global competitiveness embedded in diversification efforts contributes to soft power by enhancing the country’s international image, therefore, when conducting the analysis, this will be studied from a both soft and hard power perspective.

To operationalise this economic diversification and its progress, it would be necessary to look at the relevant policy initiatives and implementations aimed at promoting non-oil sectors (e.g., tourism, technology, renewable energy, logistics) in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, by looking at how much is spent and according to their GDP, depending on data availability. Further, based on the data, compare this progress of diversification to the objectives set out in the visions. This will be looked at utilising different databases, including the Global Economic Diversification Index (EDI). It is important to note that the EDI is supported by the Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government (*by the United Arab Emirates*), which is important to highlight as it could raise questions of how independent and objective the database is. However, the database has utilised consultations from global experts, not concentrated only in the Middle East or the Gulf region, including experts from international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This database aims to rank

countries based on their level of economic diversification using multi-dimensional facets of economic diversification.

However, to reiterate, it is important to conduct an objective study. For this reason, it will be complemented by other sources, based, once again, on data availability, such as policy documents on economic diversification and reports from international organisations such as the World Bank Group.

3.2.3 Technological Advancement

In Wallerstein's framework, core states are distinguished not only by diversified economies and surplus extraction but also by their advanced technological and military-industrial capacities. These capabilities allow core states to secure and maintain their positions in the global system by investing in innovative production processes and sustaining a military power that both protects their economic interests and projects influence globally (Wallerstein, 2004: 79-81; Wallerstein, 1976: 468). Military-industrial advancements function as critical infrastructure in core states, reinforcing the state's capacity to extract and secure surplus. Advanced technologies, therefore, foster higher productivity and innovation, which enables the state to enforce favourable terms of trade and protect strategic assets. In contrast, peripheral and, to some extent, semi-peripheral states often lack these capabilities (Shapiro, 2023: 54; Wallerstein, 1976: 462), which contributes to their structural vulnerabilities. Therefore, the military is an important aspect to consider when studying countries' technological advancement, as it asserts whether and how strong a state could be in the global world order.

For Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, these indicators will be firstly studied in the text analysis of their policy documents (primarily Vision 2030 and Vision 2035), but also the official numbers presented by the governments themselves, in complementary with international data sources and databases such as the World Bank's Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI), which assesses the maturity and performance of national statistical systems for 186 countries in five key areas in data, those are: Data use, Data Service, Data Products, Data Sources, Data Infrastructure (Worldbank, 2025). Another database that will be used is on military expenditure from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

In sum, with sustained technological innovation and military modernisation, states can overcome the inherent limitations of peripheral and semi-peripheral positions (Wallerstein,

2004: 79-81). This framework, therefore, provides a foundation for comparing how Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are investing in these areas as part of their broader strategies for global repositioning, which will be considered from both a soft and hard power perspective.

3.2.4 Cultural Diplomacy

The role of cultural production in reinforcing core status has been increasingly recognised in WSA-related academic research (e.g., Jacob, 2023). For this reason, this study will focus on cultural diplomacy, which, unlike hard power, primarily contributes to soft power by shaping perceptions and values (Nye, 2004: 40-42). When cultural narratives are effectively communicated, they contribute to a state's positive image and serve as a non-coercive means of exerting international influence. Wallerstein (2004: 86, 94) explores how the spread and internalisation of a dominant culture can serve to consolidate core power. It could also be a way to create a new system, with new cultural spheres. Wallerstein explores the traditional dichotomy between Islam and the West, which is often portrayed as an unbridgeable divide, but which overlooks the deep historical relations and the contemporary interconnections between these cultures (Wallerstein, 1999: 110-113; Samman and Al-Zo'by, 2008: 6-8). Therefore, this perspective implies that cultural development in states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait could be understood not only as an internal transformation but also as part of a broader and potential reconfiguration of the global world order.

Expanding on this, cultural diplomacy may also be an aspect in which states try to create a parallel system to the already established one, as explored by Sariaeddine (2021). Why this study specifically discusses "diplomacy" in relation to culture is for the reason that cultural and social reforms not only are to transform and modernise the society, but used as a way to reach out to the rest of the world, influence and utilised as a form of a public diplomacy (see Van Veen and Sons, 2024:19). Cultural influence is therefore measured in terms of attractiveness and persuasion.

Starting with conducting a text analysis of Vision 2030 and Vision 2035 to identify explicit cultural objectives aimed at for instance liberalising and modernising cultural sectors, investing in cultural projects and promoting international cultural exchanges. Further, measuring changes in legislation or government spending dedicated to cultural projects, events and investments in tourism.

3.3 Selection of Cases

The reason for the choice of the two cases is twofold. Firstly, more attention is drawn to the the Middle Eastern region with a particular focus on the GCC states, particularly members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, mainly a focus on oil (as previously discussed), and arms, which is seen as an emerging trend amongst Middle eastern countries (Hussain and Tartir, 2025). This makes it interesting to see whether this region is growing and gaining more influence and relevance globally, and not only oil-related. For this reason, WSA allows an in-depth analysis, particularly with regard to their potential for structural mobility beyond the periphery or semi-periphery positions.

Secondly, the two Gulf countries are in many ways similar in culture, language, and resources. Yet they differ in historical legacy, geographical size, political aims, political systems and different political challenges and allies (see section 3.3.1 and 3.3.2). This makes it interesting to specifically compare the two cases, to explore how their similarities and differences reflect on their strategies and, to some extent, whether those similarities and differences play a role in affecting the rhetoric and implementation of the two visions they have set respectively.

3.3.1 Background: Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 as a unified nation-state under the rule of King Abdulaziz Al Saud, emerging from a long history of tribal alliances and rivalries (Al-Rasheed, 2010). The discovery of oil in the late 1930s rapidly transformed Saudi Arabia in the national, regional and global arena, which over the ensuing decades became one of the world's foremost oil exporters, which significantly reshaped its economic, social, and political structures (Lacey, 2009; Hertog, 2020).

Moving forward, Saudi Arabia is still a monarch-rule but which have often been described as undergoing a state-led modernisation in recent years and since the launch of Vision 2030, aimed at diversifying the economy, redefining Saudi modern identity, and expanding the range of lifestyle opportunities available to its citizens, all while maintaining the consolidated rule of the Al Saud family (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 1-3; Vision2030, 2025d). Vision 2030 builds on earlier reform attempts that yielded mixed outcomes, which raises the question of why Vision 2030 would be different from earlier attempts to transform Saudi Arabia. Vision

2030 has stronger and more ambitious aims articulated, and now, under the leadership of MBS, it has a more centralised executive authority with a clear strategic vision. This top-down rule is identified to be one of the reasons to rapid transformation (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 1). Although the ambition behind Vision 2030 is considerable and many of its measures appear feasible in the short term, critics have pointed to areas such as insufficient attention to climate change mitigation and a lack of comprehensive strategies for promoting regional stability - issues expected to be addressed in subsequent frameworks, such as Vision 2040 (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 2-5; Vision2030, 2025d).

3.3.2 Background: Kuwait

Kuwait, a small yet economically significant state in the Arab Gulf, gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1961. As oil was discovered, the nation was marked by a rapid transformation which placed Kuwait as a wealthy country in the region. This transformation, following the oil revenues, enabled the state to invest in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, despite regional conflicts and especially the Gulf War of 1991 (Office of the Historian, 2025; Alotaibi and Morales, 2024: 6-10).

Scholars have noted that Kuwait's political system diverges from the typical autocratic models prevalent in the Gulf. Kuwait is often described and presented as a monarchy with semi-democratic institutions (Luciani, 2021:26; Kinninmont, 2012:2). Despite the royal family's central and authoritative role, which has the authority to appoint the prime minister, Kuwait has maintained an elected parliament that represents a broad spectrum of interests. The robust electoral process, marked by the presence of a political opposition that is permitted *limited* critique of the monarchy, has led to Kuwait being called by some researchers as more liberalised, such as Al Rumaihi (1994) who called it an "oasis of liberalism" in the region. Kuwait has still, to some extent, occupied this position of being semi-democratic in the past few years. Freedom House's annual evaluations have classified Kuwait and, alongside Lebanon, as one of the few countries in the Middle East with a "partly free" status regarding political rights (Freedom House, 2021). Researchers have also identified that processes of transformation and implementation of new policies are slower in Kuwait due to its semi-democratic political system (Cengiz and Kozhanov, 2025:130), reflecting a level of bureaucracy.

However, this semi-democratic characteristic of Kuwait appears to be significantly problematic at certain points in its political development. The current ruling Emir, Sheikh Meshal Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, suspended the parliament after a political gridlock in March 2024, which resulted in critics arguing that this damages Kuwait's image of being called a semi-democratic country (Schaer, 2024). Kuwait's political system might therefore be shifting, toward the worse, which raises concerns over the future viability of its semi-democratic institutions.

In 2017, Kuwait launched Vision 2035, officially titled "New Kuwait", which is the country's long-term development plan aimed at transforming Kuwait into a regional financial and commercial hub by the year 2035. The vision seeks to reduce the state's reliance on oil revenues by diversifying the economy and encouraging the growth of the private sector. It outlines strategic goals across seven pillars, including a diversified and sustainable economy, effective government administration, modern infrastructure, and a vibrant private sector. Vision 2035 also aims to invest more in education, innovation, and institutional reform to improve competitiveness and align Kuwait with global economic trends. The vision, therefore, reflects a broad ambition to reposition Kuwait within the global system as a modern, resilient, and outward-looking economy (MoFA, 2025; KNDP, 2025).

3.4 Selection of Material

This study will employ both primary and secondary data, with a focus on the national visions of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as the foundation of the first part of the analysis, which will conduct a text analysis of the visions. To complement this, the second part of the analysis will incorporate policy documents from both governments as well as reports from external organisations and databases to look at primarily figures over their economic diversification, development and technological-military advancement, which are easier to look at within concrete database numbers than cultural diplomacy.

It is important to note, however, the availability of sources that concern Kuwait in comparison to Saudi Arabia. Kuwait has produced fewer policy documents and has attracted less scholarly attention, making it inherently more challenging - and simultaneously more interesting - to analyse its Vision 2035 and implementation. To address this scarcity, the research will supplement official state publications with secondary sources, including research papers. Moreover, while Saudi Vision 2030 documentation is widely available in

English, Kuwait's equivalent materials are, to a greater extent, published primarily in Arabic. For example, there is more detailed information available on Kuwait's national development plan in Arabic than English, which is limited in scope (see New Kuwait, 2025a). Therefore, a few selected Arabic documents will be translated and subjected to text analysis. This approach may risk bias as translations are not made professionally. However, to mitigate these challenges, this study will maintain full transparency regarding the specific sources used in interpreting Kuwait's policy rhetoric and implementation.

4 Analysis

The division of the global world economy into different zones, core, semi-periphery and periphery, reflects an inherently unequal system, but it also reflects the reality of the global economy according to WSA. Core states develop and become wealthy by extracting the economic surplus generated by peripheral states. This extraction means that, rather than retaining and investing the economic gains produced by their own resources, peripheral states see most of that surplus transferred to the core. As a result, while core states continue to grow and modernise, peripheral states remain underdeveloped and lack resources for economic progress (Wallerstein, 2000:94; Jacob, 2023:17). To consolidate this power of being a core economy, core states utilise economic gains, technological, and to some extent military advancement, as well as cultural influence (Wallerstein, 2000:90-94; Jacob, 2023: 19, 140).

4.1 Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 was launched in 2016, which is a strategic initiative that seeks to modernise the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as mentioned, by accelerating its socioeconomic development. The vision builds on Saudi Arabia's long-standing initiatives - dating back to the 1970s - to reduce dependence on oil revenues. Unlike earlier development plans, Vision 2030 explicitly embraces socio-religious and cultural reforms, targeting changes in areas such as nationalism, identity and religion. It also differs from its predecessors in its governance structure: the Crown Prince, MBS, and his inner circle have centralised decision-making authority. MBS is also the chairman of the Public Investment Fund (PIF), which finances all projects that lead to the realisation of Vision 2030 (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 4-5; Vision2030, 2025d).

4.1.1 Economic Diversification

Text Analysis of the Vision

Saudi Arabia intends to diversify its economy in various sectors. As defined, economic diversification is the attempt to shift an economy away from one major income source to multiple sources, during a certain period of time, with the aim of promoting growth (UNFCCC, 2025). One of the vision's biggest objectives is to support the growth of the private sector, especially in the non-oil sector. However, this imposes a few challenges for

Saudi Arabia, one of which is the private sector's dependence on the oil-dominated public sector. The private sector is represented by one-third of all employment, one-third of which is highly dependent on the oil-dominated sector (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 22-23). In order to tackle this challenge, the state launched several programs aimed at growing different sectors that are not oil-dependent. As an example, a National Industrial Development and Logistics Program was launched in 2019, which, according to the vision, "is transforming the Kingdom into a leading global player in the energy, mining, logistics and industry sectors" (Vision2030, 2025b).

However, growth of sectors that are not oil-dependent and privatisation still requires simultaneous improvements in rule of law, quality of education and improving skills, which is overall a process usually measured over decades according to Van Veen and Sons (2024:23). The improvement of skills and job creation for Saudis is one of the main objectives in the vision. Vision 2030 states: "...job creation for all Saudis by leveraging our unique location and potential, attracting top talent, and increasing global investment" (Vision2030, 2025a). Why this Saudisation plan and job creation for Saudis are important is that Saudi Arabia wants to focus less on using low-skilled labour and more on evolving its economy towards a high-skilled and high-level labour and production. Further, Saudi Arabia's goal is also to improve education and attract brain gain to Saudi Arabia, in which they state: "In the year 2030, we aim to have at least five Saudi universities among the top 200 universities in international rankings" (Vision2030, 2025e:40).

What is interesting here is that the vision itself explicitly acknowledge that the future is not only for the young people of Saudi Arabia, the Saudis themselves, but for creating a nation that attracts the "best global talent" (Vision2030, 2025a), the best global talent does therefore not necessarily mean only ethnically Saudi, but what is best of the best in the global talents. The country is therefore aiming to have a booming diversified economy with Saudis and global talents, to Saudis and to the world, to increase what was mentioned above - "global investment" (ibid.). It is important to explain this point of view further through WSA.

WSA means that core and semi-peripheral states exploit peripheral states mostly through resource extraction and low-skilled labour and production (Sariieddine, 2021: 195; Jacob, 2023:26-27). The process of surplus extraction therefore explains how wealth is accumulated through unequal exchange between states, particularly by transferring value from lower-paid labor and raw materials in peripheral states to higher-value activities in core states

(Wallerstein, 2004: 28). However, being largely dependent on low-skilled labor could also risk being trapped in the periphery. This is because heavy reliance on an economy built around low-skilled, low-wage labour often fails to develop the human capital and technological capabilities needed for advanced manufacturing or services. Further, it becomes a risk of a mismatch between available skills and the demands of knowledge-intensive industries (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 22-24).

In the context of Saudi Arabia, the state is actively seeking to reverse this pattern by internalising surplus through national investment and retaining more value within its own borders. In the vision, it is stated that: “Located at the crossroads of three continents, we are leveraging our unique position to become a major hub for international trade and forming new partnerships to grow our economy and supporting our domestic companies in increasing exports” (Vision2030, 2025a).

Wallerstein argues that historically, core states today, like the United States and Germany, advanced away from the periphery and became core as a result of mercantilism, which is the idea to expand your economy focusing more on exporting than importing. This became a tool for semi-peripheral countries working toward becoming a core economy (Wallerstein, 2000:96).

This is visible in Saudi Arabia's vision, which aims to increase exports and support domestic companies and so-called mega projects. In order to achieve this, the PIF is an important part of the vision. Being resource-rich, Saudi Arabia largely finances its own projects with the PIF. The PIF has, therefore, become Saudi Arabia's main diversification tool: “PIF is evolving into a primary driver of Saudi economic growth. We have doubled its scope and we will continue with steady steps towards realizing its Vision 2030 objectives.” (Statement by MBS, PIF, 2025a).

The PIF accordingly transformed from a passive holding fund into a global sovereign investor and mega-project financier with hundreds of billions into domestic Vision 2030 projects. For example, PIF directly funds NEOM and the Red Sea projects (PIF, 2025b), which aim to increase tourism to not only restricted to religious tourism to Mecca (Van Veen and Sons, 2024: 19, 22).

Saudi Arabia acknowledges the power of its geopolitical position, in which they are “located at the crossroads of three continents” (Vision2030, 2025a) and aim to become a leading

economy through the development of their business and the creation of competitive markets: “to become a leading global economy, we are improving our business environment, restructuring our economic cities, creating special zones, and deregulating the energy market to make it more competitive.” (Vision2030, 2025a)

Economic diversification directly bolsters Saudi Arabia’s capacity to project influence. By expanding beyond hydrocarbons into high-value sectors, as mentioned, tourism, mining, telecom and advanced manufacturing of technologies, Saudi Arabia increases its fiscal revenues and industrial base, which in turn fund regional projects and geostrategic partnerships (Vision2030, 2025a). Further, the aim to “...generate one million jobs and comprise 10% of Saudi Arabia’s GDP” (Vision2030, 2021: 67) by 2030 reflect the ambitious plan of aggressively working toward economically diversifying the country.

Implementation 2016-2025

A Saudi budget report from 2020 presents that the years of 2016-2019 have seen a spike in growth in non-oil sectors (KPMG, 2019: 16). Between 2016 and 2019, nominal GDP - which is the non-inflation adjusted total value of the final production of goods and services produced within a country during a specific period - rose from SAR 2,419 billion in 2016 to SAR 2,811 billion in 2019, marking as the report shows an increase of 16%. Real GDP, which is inflation-adjusted, shows that growth accelerated to 2.4% in 2018 and another 0.4% in 2019. This growth reflects a spike in non-oil activity, which is an outcome of diversification initiatives. Total government revenues increased from SAR 520 billion in 2016 to SAR 917 billion in 2019 (ibid.). On the external side, total exports increased from SAR 688 billion in 2016 to SAR 1,066 billion in 2019, driven largely by oil exports (which rose from SAR 511 billion to SAR 830 billion over the same period) (ibid.).

Overall, the 2016–2019 period saw Saudi Arabia move into moderate expansion financially (ibid.). Saudi Arabia’s vision to improve the different sectors, that is including both private and public, has reportedly enhanced its standing in the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business report, climbing 30 positions to 62nd globally with a score of 71.6 out of 100, in 2019 (Worldbank, 2019), which according to the report is an improvement.

According to EDI, real non-oil GDP expanded by 2.5% in the first half of 2019 relative to the same period in 2018, driven largely by more commercial activity and the advancement of large-scale infrastructure projects. The non-oil private sector spiked in growth by 2.9%, and

the non-oil public sector grew by 1.8% during this period. In the second quarter of 2019, real non-oil GDP grew by 2.9%, which accounts for 58% of overall GDP. Medium- and long-term goals suggest that non-oil activities will be the main engine of Saudi Arabia's economic expansion; however, they are dependent on the sustained implementation of the Vision 2030 objectives (EDI, 2023: 67).

According to EDI, the numbers from previous years, particularly 2020-2021, 2022 and 2023, show a great spike in the economy in Saudi Arabia, despite post-COVID difficulties. The EDI database made reports of these years comparing the development of countries comprising three subcomponents: output, trade and revenue (EDI, 2023: 23). The United States, China and Germany, as core states, are marked as highly developed and economically diverse economies (EDI, 2023: 13, 24), for comparison. In 2020, real GDP contracted by about 3-4% (as oil prices collapsed and COVID-19 hit), whereas the non-oil sector held up better (Reuters, 2020). Reportedly, Saudi Arabia, as of 2021, exited the lowest 10 ranked nations in diversification in the previous decade. The reason for the lowest EDI-ranked countries is that they are highly dependent on natural resources (EDI, 2023: 21, 24).

The transformation of Saudi Arabia is clearly visible in 2021, where the new policy reforms have led to improvement regarding trade and revenue (ibid.). Saudi Arabia's focus on advancing non-oil sectors is clearly seen through its expansion in tourism, transport/logistics, and most importantly, tech sectors (EDI, 2023: 67). Saudi Arabia is also opening up to the world, aiming to develop its local skills. It is reported that in 2022, approximately 50,000 students from Saudi Arabia travelled abroad for studies (Ahmed, 2024). This number dropped 50% from the number of students going abroad in 2019, as a result of COVID-19, yet it still aligns well with the Saudi Vision 2030 (ibid.).

For the year 2022, Saudi Arabia is seen as a unique case out of the low-ranked nations that are often limited by geography challenges, allies or being landlocked. These factors are challenging for countries to grow, but are not impossible. It is reported that Saudi Arabia has made significant improvements in its diversification, yet it still remained in the bottom 25th percentile in 2022 in the economic diversification index. This, however, does not mean failure; rather, it demonstrates that despite strict policies to realise the vision by 2030, sustainable diversification takes time (EDI, 2024: 24).

As of 2023, however, the report shows that there has been a significant jump for Saudi Arabia. In comparison to 2000, the report shows that Saudi Arabia has gone up 30 ranks,

exceeding many countries (EDI, 2025: 16). This is acknowledged by researchers too who mean that only a decade ago, Saudi Arabia was among the bottom 30 countries in economic diversity and growth, while now is seen to be making significant improvements in trade and revenue diversification (Moreau and Aligishiev, 2024: 27), despite the mentioned challenges. This is interesting to focus on as the strategies attempted by Saudi Arabia show that they are unpredictably growing their economy fast, however, sustainable diversification plans and economic growth takes time. With this being said, in 2023, it is reported that “...Saudi Arabia were among the leading global exporters and importers in commercial services trade” (EDI, 2025: 76).

As for tourism, in 2023 Saudi Arabia welcomed over 104 million visitors, which contains about 77 million domestic and 27.4 million international, (Hammond, 2024) reflecting the highest number of tourists and a fast advancement in the tourist sector. Therefore, the efforts to grow the various sectors are continuing. According to the PIF (2025a), the fund now manages assets exceeding \$900 billion, with strategic investments in sectors such as technology, tourism, and clean energy. This demonstrates an effort to shift from being a site of surplus extraction to a state that controls and reinvests its own surplus. This aligns with the notion that core-like states retain a greater share of economic surplus and use it to expand their productive capacity and global influence (Wallerstein, 2004: 31).

Soft and Hard Power Projection

As previously mentioned, hard power derives from a state’s material capabilities - its economic size, military strength, and resource mobilisation - whereas soft power stems from the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and ideologies (Nye, 2004: 5-6). While Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 leverages both aspects, there is more of a hard power language used in the vision. In order to further explore this, it is important to look at the aspects analysed. The term “leading global economy” and the acknowledgement of being a regional power, “located at the crossroads of three continents,” is central to the understanding of using a more hard power rhetoric and strategy. It could be assumed that it reflects more a hard power approach, as it aims to become a leading economic power. Being a strong and “leading” economy that could have control over three continents reflects its power to influence by coercion. Looking at the implementation, Saudi Arabia is moving fast in order to realise its vision and reach this economic diversification that will put it among the leading economies.

Furthermore, the vision also states that increasing exports is one of the priorities, which is also seen to be increasing according to EDI, for the year 2023. Drawing back to WSA, it is seen that the present core states benefited from mercantilism, which Saudi Arabia wants to achieve. Being able to maximise one's own exports and minimise the need to import goods into the country is a control that Saudi Arabia wants to achieve to transform the country into an economy that is more independent in its own resources. This is also visible in how Saudi Arabia predominantly finances its own projects through the PIF.

Nevertheless, Vision 2030's emphasis on knowledge exchange, Saudisation, and the attraction of "the best global talent" functions as a form of soft power. By offering scholarships abroad, establishing world-class universities aiming to be among the top 200 and creating opportunities for repatriated graduates to assume leadership roles in emerging industries, Saudi Arabia crafts an image of a modernising, forward-looking society, characterised often as a soft power strategy (Nye, 2004: 11-12). This narrative of transformation enhances Saudi Arabia's appeal to international investors and "global talents." Therefore, the vision of economic reforms could be seen as an instrument of attraction, persuading foreign firms and individuals to engage with Saudi markets on favourable terms.

Thus, economic diversification under Vision 2030 serves a dual function: it strengthens Saudi Arabia's hard power by enlarging its economy, advancing forward in a fast pace to become one of the leading economies, as well as coming forward as an open and modernising society who aim to develop education, create jobs for its citizens and diversifying away from oil and aiming towards sustainable economy, which from this point of view could arguably mean projecting both hard and soft power. Thereby increasing the smart power influence (Nye, 2023:66).

4.1.2 Technological-Military Advancement

Text Analysis of the Vision

Vision 2030 significantly prioritises the advancement of technology and acknowledges its importance in economically diversifying the economy, shifting away from reliance on oil-dependent sectors. Furthermore, the importance of developing and advancing the defence industries is also mentioned several times in the vision, partly seen as an opportunity for job creation. For example, a statement from Crown Prince MBS in the vision stated: "We plan to

manufacture half of our military needs within the Kingdom to create more job opportunities for citizens and keep more resources in our country” (Vision2030, 2025f).

Likewise, Vision 2030 programs emphasise localising advanced manufacturing: “In the manufacturing sector, we will work towards localizing renewable energy and industrial equipment sectors... In technology, we will increase our investments in, and lead, the digital economy” (Vision2030, 2025e: 44).

The investments in non-oil sectors are a central focus for Saudi Arabia, as analysed in the previous section. Their aim is to leverage a competitive advantage, meaning focusing on what they make best and most effectively (Montevirgen, 2025), and aiming to become “a global logistics hub with high efficiency, quality and speed” (Vision2030, 2025b). This is an effort to promote the growth of the industrial infrastructure and part of this “newly launched Strategy for Industry is enabling Saudi Arabia to secure global supply chains and export high-tech products to the world” (ibid.). This is further emphasised through programs branded as “Made in Saudi” to enhance local production and be the start of what is called the “Industrial Revolution”, harnessing new, sharp technologies (ibid.). This is particularly important to focus on as it is an extension of the programs on economic diversification, but also a way for the society to advance, according to WSA (Wallerstein, 2000:96; Jacob, 2023:140).

Drawing back to the military industry, according to SIPRI, Saudi Arabia stands seventh in the world in military spending (SIPRI, 2025a). However, only 2% of this spending is local within the country (Vision2030, 2025e: 48). In the vision it is stated that the target is to localise 20% of defence and military industry by 2025 (Vision2030, 2025b), with the aim to reach a 50% localisation by the year of 2030 (Vision2030, 2025e: 48).

Several factors are motivating this push toward localisation. Once again, the main objective is to diversify the national economy away from oil dependence, reduce reliance on foreign imports, and advance skills and the level of education (PWC, 2025). The reason for this becomes, therefore, not only job creation for the Saudis and the development of skills and complex industries, but also to: “build an integrated national network of services and supporting industries that will improve our self-sufficiency and strengthen our defense exports, both regionally and internationally” (Vision2030, 2025e: 48).

Looking at language, the spending on higher technology in the military is often used in the words of “defence”. This is particularly important in the context of WSA. Initially technological and military advancement is not what drives an economy to become core, but it is a reason for states to secure and legitimise their status or use it as a way to gain more influence (Wallerstein, 2000:89-91; Shapiro, 2023: 54). Therefore, one of the factors that have made the system politically stable over a very long time are not only economic power, but also technological and military power which is often dominated by an elite (Wallerstein, 1979: 22-23).

Implementation 2016-2025

The investments in technology and military as defence have been very clearly a focus of the government. Comparing these past few years to how it was between 2016, when the vision first launched, and 2023, when the change is starting to be visible, there has been a development. Looking at the years from 2019 to 2020, Saudi Arabia's official budget presented that the government allocated SAR 182 billion to military spending, which comprises 17.8% of the year 2020's total budget. This places them as part of the advancing nations and top in military spending (KPMG, 2019: 11; SIPRI, 2025a). According to the Saudi Budget Report (2019), it is suggested that this is expected to grow due to the establishment of a new national security strategy and investments in defence as well as localisation efforts (KPMG, 2019: 11).

As a semi-peripheral state, Saudi Arabia's ambitious localisation targets, which aim for 50% localisation of military industry by 2030, contrast with core states that already produce the majority of their own arms. The localisation rate in Saudi military industries was only about 19.35% at the end of 2023 (GAMI, 2025), but this still represents a significant development compared to a decade ago (ibid). By comparison, the US', which is considered a core economy, defence sectors already achieve near-total self-sufficiency in military industries and in exporting arms (SIPRI, 2025d). While Saudi Arabia was one of the biggest importers of US arms, it has reportedly decreased by 41% from 2015-19 to 2020-24 (ibid.).

For the year of 2025, the total expenditures for the military is SAR 272 billion and for security and regional administration SAR 121 billion, out of SAR 1,285 billion (MoF, 2025). Saudi Arabia acknowledges by itself that the defence spending has expanded over the years, from SAR 254 billion in 2023, to SAR 259 billion in 2024 (ibid).

Saudi Arabia is not only seen advancing militarily, but also generally in high-tech civilian manufacturing. Vision 2030's industrial policy seeks to expand sectors like renewables, advanced materials, and digital infrastructure, areas where core states have been leading. Looking at it from the World Bank Group's Statistical Performance Indicators (SPI), it shows that across the five pillars of study for maturity and performance in data use, data service - such as 5G connections, data infrastructure, data sources and data products, also the facilitation of dialogue between users and producers, it is shown that Saudi Arabia lands in the 4th Quintile, out of 5 Quintiles, that is one step lower than the top performing countries such as the United States (Worldbank, 2025). It is further reported that Saudi Arabia is investing a significant amount of money in data centres as a part of the diversification process, as well as in technological advancements. Reportedly, Saudi Arabia attracted USD 10bn in investments from Amazon and other tech companies to build data centres (EDI, 2023: 59).

Hard Power Projection

This is particularly interesting to analyse, as this paper made assumptions that Saudi Arabia, in general, aims to become a strong leading nation, drawing on its current position in the global world order, military activity and its strong alliances like the United States. It therefore suggests that Saudi Arabia adopts a strategy more grounded in hard power, which may have contributed to a more accelerated advancement. This claim is supported by their advancement in technology, including localisation of the military industry as articulated in the vision, and a bigger allocation to military and defence in budget reports over the years, as seen in the implementation.

Advancing technologically with a focus on military spending is a way, even if it is for the purpose of defence, to maintain your strong position with force, if so required, which is accordingly hard power in definition. Hard power refers to the ability of a state to coerce or induce others into action through force, payments, or threats, largely relying on tangible capabilities such as military force, economic might, and technological dominance (Nye, 2008b: 40). In the case of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the substantial investment in localisation strategy is not simply about defence; it could also mean an assertive effort to secure strategic autonomy, enhance deterrence, and position Saudi Arabia as a regional hegemon with real coercive capabilities without excessive dependence on foreign suppliers.

From the perspective of WSA, hard power, especially in the form of military capacity, is an important asset to core states. Core states not only control financial and productive capital but also tend to dominate the arms trade and possess the technological infrastructure necessary for cutting-edge military development, this development in turn creates security for core states, a security that assures, at least for a period of time, that the system remains or becomes more privileged to them. Saudi Arabia's ambition to develop indigenous military production aligns with its desire to move upward in the global hierarchy. The WSA framework emphasises that in order to avoid dependency and remain secure in a capitalist world economy, semi-peripheral states must invest in sectors that allow for both economic extraction and geopolitical leverage. Military industrial development offers just that, an industry capable of creating value, extracting surplus, and defending national interests (Wallerstein 2000:89-91; Shapiro, 2023: 54). In this regard, military technology, grounded in hard power, becomes a tool for maintaining sovereignty against core power intervention.

Therefore, technological and military advancement in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030 reflects a conscious strategy to convert economic wealth into coercive capacity, secure strategic assets, and shape regional, possibly even international, actions. When complemented by its soft power initiatives, which will be discussed in the next section, this hard power foundation enhances Saudi Arabia's current status in the global world order.

4.1.3 Cultural Diplomacy

Text Analysis of the Vision

Culture is another important factor to maintain a strong position globally; it is, as previously discussed in the methodology, seen as important as economic, technological and political power (Wallerstein, 2004: 94). For a hegemonic power, cultural and ideological power is utilised effectively and it eventually translates into how they manage to integrate peripheries in the system it has built and define the rules of the game, or as discussed in the previous research, the creation of a "modi operandi" Sarriddine (2021:184).

Cultural diplomacy promotes one's own culture through soft power, and Saudi Arabia does so in a very specific and clear way, where they emphasise Islamic and Arabic culture as an integrated part of all parts of the vision. Launching Saudi Arabia to the world as it is, the vision makes it clear that it is proudly a modern Islamic Arab nation.

Vision 2030 understands the importance of building a strong, happy, and fulfilling society as the foundation for economic prosperity, which is why we focus on creating strong roots that embrace modern Islam, national pride, Saudi heritage, and culture, while also providing world-class entertainment options, sustainable living, and efficient health and social care systems. (Vision2030, 2025c)

Drawing back to Wallerstein (2006:71) and Samman and Al-Zo'by (2008: 6-8), the narrative of Islam as antithetical to Western values is increasingly being challenged, Saudi Arabia is investing in cultural projects that aim to foster a more hybrid or integrated identity, one that incorporates global modernity while sticking to fundamental elements of their Islamic heritage. At the same time, this could be seen as a way to challenge the current system, not only to be integrated within it. Arguably, an established global world order, such as the capitalist system in the definitions of WSA, could be challenged by another emerging system, as what happened in the so-called “long sixteenth century” which was characterised by the expansion of European capitalism (Wallerstein, 1976: 461; Jacob, 2023:39). Other researchers such as Saredine (2021: 194-195) investigated China, which is described as a non-Western emerging hegemon, and its expansion and peripheralisation of the MENA region, creating a parallel system to the Western dominating one. In other words, this could also be seen as an attempt to possibly create an Islamic Arabic parallel system to the European/Western capitalist one.

The focus is, however, not only the general Islamic Arabic identity, but rather also the unique and “creative” Saudi identity. As part of the vision, the Ministry of Culture writes that: “Saudi creatives, the jewel of our cultural sphere. We will develop an environment which supports and nurtures creativity, in addition to opening doors for new forms of expression. Saudi culture will remain an essential part of our lives.” (MoC, 2019: 3). They further state that the Saudi culture is important to showcase to the world: “Saudi culture stands on solid ground with Saudi creatives across various cultural sectors. We’re proud of our rich cultural environment with extraordinary potential whose talent transcends the borders of our country to reach the world.” (ibid).

This is highly relevant to economic diversification, as they state:

promoting culture as a way of life, enabling culture to contribute to economic growth and creating opportunities for global cultural exchange. A flourishing cultural sector will have an impact beyond its remit. It will strengthen national identity, benefit the

economy and improve the quality of life of those in the Kingdom. It will promote social cohesion, health and happiness. Employment opportunities will increase as a result. Culture will also help to forge stronger links with countries around the world. (MoC, 2019: 12).

Referring to the Saudisation concept, Saudi Arabia aims to reduce unemployment among its nationals. This is taking form in the term they use which is “Nitaqat”, and Nitaqat is the officially introduced labor nationalisation program by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development of Saudi Arabia (MHRSD, 2025) which will less utilise low-skilled labour and focus more on high-skilled, preferably from the own nation but also welcoming to get "global talents" (Vision2030, 2025c). This is a highly relevant and interesting aspect to look at in the question of promoting one's culture and the cultural diplomacy of presenting oneself as a growing, evolving and developing country.

Implementation 2016-2025

It is important to start with the idea that Saudi Arabia, in its vision, wants to leverage the image of being a modern Islamic Arab nation. This has taken form in a few ways since the launch of the vision. One policy received relatively significant attention, which is the curtailing of the powers of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or the so-called “morality police” in 2016 (Van Veen and Sons, 2024:4). This reflects and strengthens the idea that the nation is modernising and taking strategic steps for the realisation of the cultural reforms presented in the vision.

Further, the establishment of the Ministry of Culture in 2018 and the launch of eleven specialised cultural commissions reflect an institutionalisation of culture as a strategic resource. This aligns with Saudi Arabia’s broader ambition to reposition itself globally, not only economically, but also culturally, as a modern yet authentically Islamic Arab state (HBR, 2024). The Ministry reports that “The Kingdom has already been represented at international events such as the Cannes Film Festival and the Venice Biennale. We will continue to showcase our country’s cultural mission on a global stage.” (MoC, 2019: 10), meaning that they have begun to be more open and more represented in the international arena. Furthermore, they also report a 109% increase in cultural tourism from 2019 to 2022, with an approximate number of 18 million tourist trips in 2022 intended towards cultural activities (HBR, 2024).

Adding to Saudi Arabia's increasingly embrace of cultural heritage and the leverage of it to the rest of the world, as part of its Vision 2030 reforms, positioning culture not merely as domestic development but also a way to open up to the world, "opening its doors" as stated as the objectives of the Ministry of Culture (2019: 3). Initiatives such as the launch of cultural seasons like Riyadh Season (Bridge, 2020) for not only leveraging Saudi culture, but also for a "cultural exchange", which is further emphasised in efforts to preserve and promote UNESCO-listed heritage sites (like Al-Ula and Diriyah) (UNGEGN, 2025) all serve the function of showcasing Saudi Arabia's historical depth, artistic output, and openness to the world. These measures are designed to reshape the international image of the country from one associated with conservatism and oil dependence to one associated with creativity, innovation, and modernity.

Soft Power Projection

Nye asserts that power in the international system is determined not only by "whose army wins" but increasingly by "whose story wins" (Nye, 2023: 66). This deliberate promotion of culture corresponds with WSA, as culture, in this context, could result in enhancing a state's legitimacy and status in the global world order, despite critiques that a country could receive, such as an active military presence. Saudi Arabia's investments in creative industries are, for example, part of this broader strategy.

Moreover, by constructing a cultural identity that foregrounds Islamic heritage while actively engaging with global cultural markets, Saudi Arabia combines what is considered tradition and modernity. According to WSA, challenges to hegemonic norms often emerge from actors in the semi-periphery who seek to reconfigure global hierarchies through ideological as well as material means. Therefore, semi-peripheral states like Saudi Arabia invest in cultural diplomacy, promoting their own country and culture, which is understood as a soft power projection as it operates as a non-coercive, attraction-based form of influence. Soft power is essentially about attracting something rather than forcing it through violence or threats (Nye, 2008b: 30-31), which complements Saudi Arabia's hard power investments in military and technology. At the same time, seen through WSA, it represents an effort to assert cultural independence and relevance within a global world order.

4.2 Kuwait's Vision 2035

On January 30, 2017, Kuwait's Sheikh Sabah Al-Sabah officially launched a long-term strategic framework for national development, Kuwait Vision 2035, commonly referred to as “New Kuwait.” This vision outlines specific objectives aimed at transforming Kuwait into primarily a regional financial and trade hub, while simultaneously enhancing social welfare, institutional reforms, and environmental sustainability (KNDP, 2025: 24; New Kuwait, 2025b: 2). The uniqueness here is that Kuwait often is recognised for its more diplomatic role in the region (New Kuwait, 2025b: 2) or described as a monarchy with semi-democratic institutions (Luciani, 2021: 26). Further, the Vision 2035 in general intends in its language to align local development priorities with international standards and expectations. In this sense, New Kuwait can be seen as both an internal governance reform and a diplomatic instrument.

4.2.1 Economic Diversification

Text Analysis of the Vision

Out of the seven strategic pillars for the country's national development plan is economic diversification one of the pillars, in which the focus is to start diversifying the economy and, just like Saudi Arabia, move away from the dependency on oil exports (New Kuwait, 2025b:2). The objective is therefore short and clear. In order to achieve this goal, Kuwait focuses on two distinguished objectives in its vision, one being privatisation, stating in two different places that they aim to “restore the regional leadership role of Kuwait as a financial and commercial hub, and reviving the pivotal role of the Kuwaiti private sector in the leadership of development” and “engage the private sector into the national economic activity of the country.” (MoFA, 2025). Further, they highlight that their economic development is in alignment with international goals, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) 2030 agenda, “in order to achieve compatibility between the national development plan and the international development vision.” (ibid.). These two strategies suggest that Kuwait has different approaches to reaching its goal. By aligning Kuwait's national planning with the 2030 SDG's, the government seeks to demonstrate its commitment to international cooperation.

Further, an important part of Kuwait's economic diversification plan is job creation for Kuwaitis, or so called, Kuwaitisation, however, often articulated in softer terms. The objective is “focusing on the private sector, it will create more private sector jobs for

Kuwaitis and grow GDP” (ANDP, 2019) and it will also “introduce social and economic empowerment programs and care targeting youth, women, SMEs, and the elderly” (New Kuwait, 2025b: 2).

Kuwait also has ongoing projects to “become more attractive to investors” (MoFA, 2025). This is through, for example, the project of Kuwait’s City of Silk, which is a 250 square kilometres city located in the northern Subiya region in Kuwait. It aims to be a modern and free urban developed place integrating residential, commercial and cultural space and promoting Kuwait’s trade and financial role with the vision of “creating an economic and diplomatic initiative in Kuwait inward-focused property developments across the Middle East” (AUDI, 2025).

Although the creation of significant projects like these is often utilising the low-skilled and cheap labor whom over the years have been explicitly exploited in Kuwait, as for other GCC countries (Alexander, 2025), Kuwait now aims to develop the country for Kuwaitis and by “urbanised” Kuwaitis, while at the same time attracting foreign high-skilled knowledge, and achieve the goal of turning into a “financial and trade hub regionally and internationally” (MoFA, 2025). High-skilled knowledge is of importance to Kuwait and is one of its objectives in the vision. They specifically state that “leverage admissions policies to attract foreign talent and highly-skilled workers. Boost economic growth and aid the transition toward the knowledge economy” (KNDP, 2025: 163). Adding to that, “Attract world-class human capital” (ibid).

Therefore it shows how Kuwait’s vision not only aims to train and qualify the human resources in the country, but to also expand the private sector in order to promote industry growth and encourage competitiveness, especially in international trade. This is mostly regulated by Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA), operating in different economic zones in Kuwait to achieve these objectives. Thus, the goal of working with developing industrial growth also aims to attract global investors (Xiao, 2024).

Implementation 2017-2025

Olver-Ellis (2020) argues that “to implement the reforms promulgated by Vision 2035 would require deep-rooted structural adjustments across the political economy” (Olver-Ellis, 2020: 19). Kuwait faces a range of challenges in developing a “knowledge economy”. Kuwait acknowledges in their National Development Plan for 2020-2025 the challenge of the

“untargeted foreign labor admission that fails to support Kuwait’s transformation into a knowledge economy, given that only 15% of expat workers have tertiary level education” (KNDP, 2025: 163). The small percentage of expat workers with high-level education is therefore an identified obstacle in Kuwait. While Kuwait aims to diversify its economy, and “attract world-class human capital”, it seems like the efforts are in much slower effect.

In 2021, Kuwait was among the lowest ranking of economically diverse countries, which is often compared to other high-income and oil-dependent countries that made faster progress economically, such as Saudi Arabia, UAE or even Mexico, which previously was an oil-export dependent nation (EDI, 2023: 32-33).

For the year of 2022 and 2023, the EDI report establishes that Kuwait as a high-income nation still appears to be in the bottom 30 of the index (EDI, 2024: 24; EDI, 2025: 27). This proves that there is no correlation between high-income countries and a high economic diversification score (EDI, 2024:32; EDI, 2025:39).

Being the slowest in diversification efforts when compared to other GCC countries, despite attempts at economic reforms, could be a result of the governance in Kuwait, which often lacks consensus and slows down the decision-making process. However, through its vision, Kuwait aims to become more attractive for foreign investments. It has been studied that throughout the years, “the business elites enjoy greater freedom and wield more influence over political institutions” than, for instance, Saudi Arabia (Cengiz and Kozhanov, 2025:112). This aligns well with how they want to be framed in the vision and how they seem to attract and allow more freedom over the business sphere.

Soft and Hard Power Projection

By aligning Kuwait’s national planning with international values and goals, such as the UN SDG’s agenda for 2030, the government seeks to demonstrate its commitment to international cooperation. These strategies could be characterized as soft power, as discussed in the introduction, it seeks to both have a socioeconomic national development but also consolidate their position as a diplomatic actor in the region, therefore, focusing on the attractiveness (Nye, 2008b: 30-31) of its unique way of realising its vision.

By positioning itself as a cooperative partner in the global development agenda, Kuwait seeks to attract rather than coerce, which is something that would further benefit them in their efforts to economically diversify, by not only growing the private sector and attempting to

invest in sectors that are non-oil dependent, but also by attracting international collaborations and foreign investors through the rhetoric framing of development in compatibility with international standards. These initiatives enhance Kuwait's attractiveness and legitimacy on the world stage. For Kuwait, while their political system may "slow down" the process of realising the visionary goals, they still aim to reach those goals primarily through attracting rather than coercing in their vision, which consolidates the soft power approach. An example of this soft power attraction method is that actors, whether regional or international, have more freedom over their business in Kuwait, which may result in the attraction of more businesses.

However, this does not conclude that the economic diversification efforts made are only a form of soft power projection. While it certainly is a significant part of how Kuwait rhetorically frames its vision, to attract, they also aim to "restore the regional leadership role of Kuwait as a financial and commercial hub", and in other parts of the vision, stating "financial and trade hub regionally and internationally." Thus, there is an emphasis on "restoring" the leadership regionally, primarily, but with the aim of also becoming a financial hub internationally. The material goals and leadership in gaining this material power reflect a hard power projection (Nye, 2008b:40). However, this does not seem to be fulfilled when looking at the calculation of their success rate in achieving the vision goals of diversifying their economy, despite their wealth.

4.2.2 Technological-Military Advancement

Text Analysis of the Vision

Vision 2035 has the objective to reduce the role of the government and encourage privatisation driven by technological innovation, recognising that this will result in bigger economic growth. Through this knowledge and technological development, the aim is to create "globally competitive high value-added sectors", with keywords mentioned such as "knowledge economy" (Olver-Ellis, 2020:6). The aim is to "increase direct foreign investment by 300% and attract more than 400 million Kuwaiti Dinars to information technology, services, and renewable energy in the short-term medium term" (New Kuwait, 2025b: 2). This further falls under the plan to diversify the economy.

Regarding military and defence advancement, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait has not prioritised advancing its military in its vision for 2035. The focus has been shifted more toward civilian technology, which has been more economic and trade inclined. For instance, one of its initiatives is the “Mawani Thakia”, which intends to:

...expand the use of smart technologies in seaports and sea shipping services in Kuwait. Increased automation will have improve efficiency of import and export processes, better economic competitiveness resulting from streamlined workflows and minimized costs, as well as enhanced environmental performance owing to reduced energy consumption. (KNDP, 2025: 93).

Another initiative is called “Maabar”, which has the target and objective to establish an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Hub, with the support of international ICT providers:

Strong ICT ecosystem is a fundamental ingredient to support the knowledge economy. MAABAR initiative aims to provide the conditions for the country to become a regional hub for ICT services. Central to this initiative is the ease of access to international gateways for Kuwaiti and international ICT providers, and availability of world-class data center facilities. (KNDP, 2025: 93).

The ICT hub effectively means that Kuwait recognises the importance of attracting new business by providing a well-established ICT infrastructure because modern businesses are increasingly relying on ICT (KNDP, 2025: 189). Further, they aim to: “supporting the introduction of the internet of things in Kuwait and to enable the growth of digital and knowledge based industries” (ibid.) and “sharing infrastructure between operators to minimize the quantum of physical infrastructure required” (ibid.). Therefore, aiming to better the infrastructure and data regulations to be able to meet the goal of “knowledge economy”.

Further, part of the government’s expenditure in ICT is “...the strong emphasis on the digital transformation of both public and private sectors, supported by the availability of high-end IT infrastructure in the country coupled with 5G internet speed” (KDIPA, 2022: 4). Kuwait is, therefore, working to both improve its technological maturity and support digital change in both government and private business.

Moving on from the aim to advance and become a digital and knowledge economy, interestingly, defence, military or military-industrial technology, is not mentioned anywhere

in the official documents available for the vision 2035. This effectively translates to, once again, not a priority for the country of Kuwait.

Implementation 2017-2025

Advanced technologies are a characteristic of core economies, who foster higher productivity and innovation and through advanced military and strong economy, they also enforce favorable terms of trade (Shapiro, 2023: 54; Wallerstein, 1976: 462). In the case of Kuwait, this is still seen to not be achieved since the launch of Vision 2035.

To specify, there does not seem to be much reporting on increased foreign direct investment, nor improvement of import and export process efficiency through increased automation. Nevertheless, as part of the goals of bettering the connectivity infrastructure and ICT, it is reported that the Kuwait telecom industry is improving and advancing, as well as expanding, with, for example, 5G service with availability across the country. Reportedly, 99.4% of the homes in Kuwait have internet access, with a 97% coverage of the population with access to a 5G network. This happened through bigger collaborations with multinational technology corporations, such as Huawei, in 2024 (Xiao, 2024).

However, when looking at it the SPI database, which, to reiterate, assess the 5 pillars for maturity and performance in data use, data service - such as 5G connections, data infrastructure, data sources and data products, it is shown that Kuwait lands in the 2nd Quintile, out of 5, which is among the lowest performing, and is one step ahead from being the below 20% of the 186 lowest performing countries (Worldbank, 2025).

Most importantly, military expenditure and advancement in defence technology have not been prioritised, and are not mentioned in the vision. Yet, this is still an important aspect to look at when researching Kuwait's aims to become a leading economy, primarily regionally, but also internationally. There has been less spending on military expenditure when looking at it in numbers expressed in constant 2023 US dollars. This approach ensures a standardised framework, which the SIPRI database uses, for examining long-term trends in military expenditure. By adjusting data to constant U.S. dollars, which are inflation-adjusted, it becomes possible to measure actual changes in defence spending over a specific period. Further, the selection of 2023 as the base year corresponds to the latest available year with comprehensive inflation-adjusted data (SIPRI, 2025b). The numbers in military defence spending differ significantly from Saudi Arabia, which is approximately 10 times less in

spending over the years 2016-2024. Saudi Arabia, in turn, spends approximately 10 times less than the U.S. military defence spending over the same period of years (SIPRI, 2025c). With this being said, the intention is not to compare Kuwait and the United States - as a hegemonic core power according to Wallenstein - in military and defence means, however, this is to give the perspective of Kuwait's priorities and development regarding defence to further draw conclusions on how big of a difference military and technological power makes regarding the status and mobility within the global world order between the periphery and the core.

Soft and Hard Power Projection

Military is a hard power projection, as it is the power to influence through coercion (Nye, 2023: 63). However, the absence of military advancement in the Vision 2035 reflects to some extent a soft power projection in the form that it is trying to attract and maintain its picture of being a forward-looking and stable country that promotes advancement through cooperation and free business spheres rather than coercion and payment. While there is still a budget allocated to the military industry (however small) (SIPRI, 2025c), it still creates the image that the military industry is not the priority for the future of Kuwait.

In the vision, technological advancement aims to develop the country into a “knowledge economy”. However, when looking at the implementation of the vision, it does not seem to be as advanced as the level characterised in other core or even semi-peripheral states, as shown in the SPI database. Rather, it reflects the reality that Kuwait is attempting to reach the level of maturity in technology seen in most developed countries. Looking at it from a soft and hard power perspective, it is difficult to align the rhetoric used in the vision and the implementation of it, or lack thereof, to hard power. Kuwait here does not seem to be using technological advancement as force, nor rhetorically reflecting it as such. It is, once again, using attraction to attract businesses by developing their own economy and providing a mature infrastructure, such as the ICT.

Therefore, a soft power approach is reflected in the sense that Kuwait wants to project a positive image of the country. This brings advantages in everything from increasing the likelihood that people with a positive view of a country will trade with it, perhaps through businesses, to gaining their support on issues or defending the country's interests abroad. A country's brand can be compared to a company's brand (Nye, 2008a:29). Thus, even if the technological advancement is not going as fast as it is planned for the vision, it is still projecting a form of power that may be a reason for positive outcomes, even if it takes time.

4.2.3 Cultural Diplomacy

Text Analysis of the Vision

Cultural diplomacy and creating a positive image of one's own culture and heritage is a continuation of the attempt to advance away from the periphery in the global world order. As for the case of Saudi Arabia, for Kuwait it is important to "preserve the values of the Arab-Islamic identity" (MoFA, 2025). However, this Kuwaiti identity not only emphasises its Arab Islamic identity, but the Kuwaiti government also leverages other ideas to be part of its unique identity when compared to other GCC states. There is an increased attention to political participation and freedoms in Kuwait's rhetoric, which is mentioned several times in its vision and objectives for 2035. As an example, one of the objectives of the vision is: "restructuring the government apparatus to create a responsive and agile government that promotes integrity and transparency, supports the private sector and digital transformation, enhances performance, and meets the needs of citizens" (Translated, New Kuwait, 2025c). The emphasis on integrity and transparency, being one of the aims of the vision, confirms rather the image Kuwait is creating or the image it wants to be perceived as. To some extent, it continues to confirm the idea that it is a semi-democratic monarchy.

Kuwait's approach, therefore, positions itself as a responsible and progressive actor in the international community. "Global positioning" is mentioned as one of the seven pillars of the National Development Plan of the Vision; however, it has not been developed further, which makes it difficult to understand the meaning of. Therefore, it depends on what other global references they have made to understand its meaning. In another document, it is mentioned that the country's short-to-medium term objectives is to "build on the country's globally-leading humanitarian record regionally and globally" (New Kuwait, 2025b: 2). Further, "enhance Kuwait's regional and global presence in spheres such as diplomacy, trade, culture, and philanthropy" (New Kuwait, 2025b: 3). The reason this "global positioning" is discussed under cultural diplomacy is because Kuwait intends to reflect the aims to be known for their diplomatic and humanitarian role regionally and globally, which raises further questions if this in fact is a true aim and if it is working toward making this unique Kuwaiti identity popular.

Implementation 2017-2025

Following the launch of New Kuwait in January 2017, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information initiated a series of projects promoting the Kuwaiti Arab Islamic culture, with the aim of boosting the economy. Since the launch of the vision, and increasingly, Kuwait is organising several events and festivals in Kuwait City that aim to draw attention to culture, heritage, music, and seminars about Kuwait, such as the “The Heritage Village of Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah” (Kuwait Government Online, 2025). However, there is a lack of reporting on how many tourists these festivals attract as well as the success rate of these events to “enhance Kuwait’s regional and global presence in spheres such as diplomacy, trade, culture, and philanthropy”, yet it is ambitiously working towards that goal with the amount of festivals and events the government holds annually.

Vision 2035’s strategic pillar of “Global Positioning” explicitly references Kuwait’s ambition to amplify its humanitarian and diplomatic record. To this end, Kuwait set an internal target to “strengthen the role and efforts of the State of Kuwait in the field of human rights”, aiming for full compliance by 2035. Official governmental statistics report a 99% achievement rate as of 2024. The success rate include: (1) training courses and workshops, in addition to holding seminars and specialised events in the field of human rights, annually, in Kuwait, and (2) the publication of awareness and educational materials aimed at highlighting the role of Kuwait in the field of human rights and to promote awareness and education on human rights issues (New Kuwait, 2025d). However, this high percentage (99%) of success rate cannot be verified with other sources outside of the Kuwaiti government itself, which results in uncertain conclusions on that part.

From a WSA standpoint, Kuwait’s cultural diplomacy can be viewed as an effort by a semi-peripheral state to assert cultural autonomy within a global hierarchy dominated by core powers. This strategy not only enhances Kuwait’s attractiveness but also complements its economic and diplomatic initiatives, thereby reinforcing its position as a proactive, values-based actor on the international stage.

Soft Power Projection

Kuwait's soft power strategy to preserve its Islamic Arab identity but to adhere to the international standards and values, not least regarding human rights, is reiterated. This soft

power projection helps explain how Kuwait uses diplomacy-oriented culture and good governance rhetoric under Vision 2035 to boost its international influence without force or financial incentives. By blending tradition with modern governance, Kuwait creates an appealing image that may “win the hearts and minds of the mainstream” (Nye, 2023: 66).

Kuwait’s promise to build a responsive, transparent government and its reported 99% progress on human-rights goals send a clear signal to international partners that it takes these issues seriously. However, this may be faced with criticism as there are no other independent sources confirming this number, and in this case, it may just be a continuation of the rhetoric to showcase the modernising and diplomatic image of Kuwait.

Finally, Nye (2023) points out that if soft power is conducted successfully, “it can save a lot on carrots and sticks” (Nye, 2023:63). Cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts, that build long-term relationships as well as Kuwait’s festivals and events that bring its art, history, and ideas to foreign audiences, helping to form lasting ties may succeed. Over time, these connections influence foreign decision-makers and opinion leaders to view Kuwait more favourably. However, as much as this may have positive outcomes, soft power in itself is not always effective if a country wants to maximise its foreign policy gains (ibid).

5 Conclusions

The paper aimed at researching whether Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, through their respective visions, could advance away from the periphery, possibly approaching becoming a core economy, using the World-Systems Analysis, with inspirations mostly drawn from Wallerstein's framework and in combination with the concept of soft and hard power. In order to calculate their advancement, the foundation of the analysis is based on three aspects that are all seen equally important for a strategic state transition within the world systems of the periphery, semi-periphery and core. Those aspects were economic diversification, technological-military advancement and cultural diplomacy. In order to study this, a text analysis was conducted to closely and in detail study those aspects in Saudi Vision 2030 and Kuwaiti Vision 2035, respectively. Thereafter, the analysis moved on to analyse its implementation through a process tracing method. Hence, this paper aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1. How do Saudi Vision 2030 and Kuwaiti Vision 2035 rhetorically construct their goals for moving from a semi-peripheral position toward a core-like influence in the global world order?*
- 2. And if and how have Saudi Arabia's and Kuwait's implementation of these strategic visionary goals resulted in advancements in the global world order?*

At the beginning of the research, a few assumptions were made. It was assumed that Saudi Arabia generally made faster progress and advancement due to its more hard-power-based policies, political system, strong allies such as the United States, military activity, and years of actual regional influence. In contrast, Kuwait was assumed to be slower in advancement due to the soft power approach, which focuses more on being perceived as a diplomatic country, in which international standards are respected. The slower progress could also be explained by a logical explanation - its political system, which is more bureaucratic than Saudi Arabia's top-down and centralised decision-making.

Saudi Arabia's governance and more hard power inclined approach has, therefore, allowed Saudi Arabia to make significant progress toward economic diversification as well as advancing rapidly both technologically but also militarily through its localisation efforts. While they still have not reached the advanced level of core economies such as the United

States, they are advancing fast in the technological-military aspects that, from a WSA perspective, are traditionally reserved for core states seeking to maintain or elevate their status.

WSA's broader argument is that shifts in the global system are possible when dominant ideologies are challenged. A reconfiguration of cultural narratives, where Islamic and Arabic cultural identity is shown as adaptive, innovative, and capable of contributing to modernity seem to be possible in both cases. Cultural diplomacy, therefore, becomes a very interesting part. The findings show that Kuwait is more recognised for its diplomatic and unique culture in the Gulf, while it is still preserving its Arab Islamic identity, just like Saudi Arabia. Kuwait, however, is more inclined to push the narrative of complying with international standards, which reflects more of their soft power projection. However, this demonstrates that identity and cultural expansion are not enough to shift position globally and approach the core.

Kuwait, in all three aspects analysed, seems to leverage the idea of emphasising international alignment. Its vision highlights values such as human rights, international cooperation, and cultural distinction, all of which contribute to a positive global image. However, this important approach does not appear to generate the same pace of economic transformation seen in Saudi Arabia. This was particularly interesting when looking at the Economic Diversity Index (EDI), in which, despite Kuwait's high-income status, it ranks among the bottom 30 in terms of economic diversification in both 2022 and 2023. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is frequently recognised for its rapid progress and implementation of Vision 2030 goals. This suggests that, in fact, there is no correlation between high-income countries and a high economic diversification score, as both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are wealthy, specifically in oil, yet it shows that wealth and high income in itself is not a guarantee to generate an easier transformation to become an economically diverse country. This research, therefore, concludes that it depends on the different strategies a state sets to become more economically diverse.

The same goes for becoming more technologically and militarily advanced, especially with the aim to transform the state to a more core-like economy. While Kuwait aims to develop, it does not focus on, nor prioritise, the hard power aspects needed in WSA. Kuwait does not prioritise the military aspect. Kuwait, therefore, lacks what Nye calls "smart power", which, as discussed, is the combination of both soft and hard power in order to maximise the benefits

through effective foreign policy. In contrast, Saudi Arabia seems to be utilising the smart power more effectively, combining both hard power in economic and military advancement, while at the same time it showcases its modernising society and cultural diplomacy.

The overall findings and results, therefore, suggest that despite the two countries' similarities and both's ambitious construction of core-like goals, Saudi Arabia seems to be progressing faster than Kuwait in its real-time implementation of the strategic visionary goals they have set. Kuwait is rhetorically constructing big goals to advance, but is not meeting those by implementation as fast as Saudi Arabia. This could, however, be explained from different points of view. Firstly, Saudi Arabia's use of a combined hard and soft power projection. Kuwait, however, mostly showcases soft power strategies. Secondly, their differences, such as political aims, political systems and different political challenges and allies, which for Saudi Arabia seem to be more beneficial as it is bigger in land, is placed at the "crossroads of three continents" and has strong allies with bigger political aims, which Kuwait does not claim. Thirdly, Kuwait has set more time to achieve its goals, that is, the year 2035, while Saudi Arabia sets it for 2030. This in itself could be an explanation for why Kuwait is slower in pace. However, this argument is not enough to explain why Kuwait is still among the lowest ranking of economically diverse countries according to EDI reports, and 2nd Quintile in technological maturity, which is one step from risking being among the bottom 20% countries, according to the 2025 World Bank calculations. In both aspects, Saudi Arabia seems to be developing ahead of its deadline.

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia appears to be advancing more rapidly toward core-like status within the global world order, largely due to its effective use of hard power and centralised strategy. Kuwait's soft power strategy, while diplomatically effective, is insufficient on its own to shift its global position. This study demonstrates that the path from periphery to core is not solely about vision but also about power, pace, and the political capacity to implement change.

5.1 Further Research

This research could be expanded further by revisiting the topic once the Vision 2030 and 2035 deadlines are reached, allowing for a more comprehensive evaluation of what was effectively implemented and what remained rhetorical. Future research may also consider how alternative forms of influence, such as AI development, are integrated into these national visions and whether they contribute to redefining what it means to be "core" in the 21st century.

Further, as the global order continues to shift, with renewed geopolitical alignments such as the strengthened U.S.-Saudi relationship during the Trump administration and emerging multipolar influences, analysing how these external power alliances shape internal development strategies would provide valuable insight.

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