

“The Pandemic Was a Global Exam, and Our Country Came in First”: Autocratic Performance Legitimacy in Saudi Arabia

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Existing scholarship establishes that authoritarian regimes make claims about their legitimacy yet does not tell us what makes these claims effective. This article argues that authoritarian legitimation is more effective when coproduced by the government, media, and progovernment supporters, rather than just being centrally disseminated talking points. This article uses the effective handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Saudi government to demonstrate how this narration translated trust in state capacity into performance legitimacy of the Saudi regime and system of governance. Saudi media figures and progovernment supporters expanded basic government talking points for audiences and discussed successful policies in relation to countries with higher international status (chiefly in the West) and higher state capacity (such as China). This article evaluates statements by the government, original media sources, and more than 90 interviews with Saudi nationalists, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs, while speaking to the relational character of performance legitimation beyond Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

Existing literature has widely documented the fact that authoritarian regimes make discursive claims attempting to boost their legitimacy (Gerschewski 2018; Gill 2011; Tannenberg et al. 2021). These legitimation claims can include appeals to nationalism, religion, ethnic identity, revolutionary legacies, and economic performance, ranging from highly repressive states like North Korea to authoritarian states such as Singapore or China and hybrid regimes such as Turkey or Hungary (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Grauvogel and von Soest 2014; Lorch and Bunk 2017; Morgenbesser 2017). This literature suggests that legitimation claims contribute to the stability of the regimes, complementing other pillars of authoritarian power such as repression and cooptation.


However, we know much less about what makes a particular legitimation claim effective (see Bernhard 1993; Gill 2011). The baseline assumption is that governments disseminate top-down messages about a well-performing economy, revolutionary credentials, or other features of the

regime for a population to internalize and repeat. The implication is that any speech act by the regime that appeals to popular symbols can have a legitimating effect. But as Lisa Wedeen (1999, 9f) points out, these approaches struggle to explain an independent way of identifying culturally resonant values and meaningful symbols with which the regime tries to associate itself in people’s minds. We do not know if a legitimation strategy that merely appeals to values and symbols that already resonate in society is successful.

This article therefore concerns the processes that make authoritarian legitimation claims effective through an exploratory case study of Saudi Arabia’s successful performance legitimation claims about its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 served as an important, global, and much-debated test of state performance in the provision of public goods—in this case, public health. The pandemic lends itself to a comparative perspective because it put to test the same capacities of states (i.e., provision of emergency healthcare, enforcing mobility restrictions, and providing vaccines) at roughly the same time. In light of thriving authoritarian systems across the globe, the effect of the pandemic on authoritarian politics deserves more attention.

Performance per se does not automatically legitimate a regime in the absence of a coherent narrative about how the state succeeded. The empirical record certainly shows that the Saudi government (King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman [hereafter MBS], and the

*Data replication sets are available in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VTC5RZ>

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736 Perspectives on Politics

doi:10.1017/S1537592723002876

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Ministry of Health) attempted to communicate with the population throughout the pandemic. However, official statements were mainly limited to sharing factual updates on infection rates in Saudi Arabia and the world, while reminding the population of the government's efforts to ensure public health and offering an example of global Saudi leadership (continuing to hold the presidency of the G20) during the early phase of the pandemic. But notably, the government did not draw explicit comparisons with other countries, narrating the ways that the Saudi approach was superior to the pandemic responses of other major countries (including allies like the United States).

The main argument of this article is that effective performance legitimization in Saudi Arabia is a coproduction by the government, newspaper op-ed authors and TV anchors, and patriotic progovernment supporters who can credibly develop and amplify narratives to a broader audience via social media. While the government can set broad themes and outline government successes, media entrepreneurs and progovernment supporters serve as key intermediaries in creating a legitimating effect. By drawing explicit comparisons with other countries, such as Western countries (with higher perceived international status) or China (with higher perceived state capacity), the media and the intermediaries offer interpretations that the Saudi state's performance signals a significant achievement by global benchmarks.

This performance legitimization discourse was developed over the course of the pandemic in a piecemeal fashion. While Saudi media balanced between admiration for both the Chinese and the US systems in the early phase of the pandemic, op-ed columnists quickly tipped the balance in favor of the heavy-handed Chinese approach (which mirrored the robust Saudi pandemic response). But by the fall of 2020, a developing narrative stressed a nationalist-infused "Saudi way" as a uniquely successful pandemic response, a discourse coproduced by columnists and patriotic progovernment supporters. This Saudi approach was framed in explicit contrast to the uncompromising Chinese "zero COVID" approach and the "toothless" policies of Western democracies. In this way, intermediaries presented the Saudi political system as better equipped than democracies or any other political system to deal with COVID-19 and major political challenges ahead.

Thus, over the course of the pandemic, the government generated trust in state institutions by implementing a robust pandemic response. Intermediaries then built up this trust into legitimacy of the regime by framing the successful outcome not as a one-off event but as a characteristic outcome of the Saudi system of governance. This in turn presented the Saudi monarchy as the appropriate form of governance for all Saudis: one responsive to the needs of the people and less repressive than the Chinese system, but one that also did not prioritize individual liberties over the collective good as in the West. Hence,

Saudi narratives of legitimization ultimately did not legitimate autocracies as such but rather a distinctively "Saudi" system in contrast to both democratic and other non-democratic systems. From this finding, I further propose that the coproduction and mirroring of centralized legitimization claims within the media and nationalistic (or at least patriotic) segments of the population is not just coincidental but crucial for the process of developing effective legitimization claims.

This article contributes to the literature on performance legitimacy by theorizing the process of legitimization. The idea of "performance legitimacy" can be traced back to the rentier state debate in the 1970s and Huntington's (1991) work on democratization, arguing that populations would accept authoritarian rule so long as the government provided aggregate economic benefits (Bunce 1985; Chaudhry 1997; White 1986). With the so-called "rise of China" in the early 2000s, more nuanced approaches to the study of performance legitimacy focused on the state provision of public goods and satisfaction of citizens' specific needs instead (see Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Gill 2011, 25). This article understands "performance" as the provision of public goods and services and builds on recent literature that has demonstrated counterintuitive authoritarian public goods provision, such as Christopher Carothers's (2022) work on authoritarian anticorruption reform in China (see also Albertus 2015; Tsai 2007).

Still, this article also takes seriously the idea that studying legitimization as a dynamic process requires a conceptualization of state-society relations—how state actions are perceived by (at least some segments of) society and how these perceptions are reinjected into the political system (Przeworski 2022; Stroup and Goode 2023; Wedeen 1999). While existing work has demonstrated the effectiveness of authoritarian public goods provision for maintaining public support (Cassani 2017; Dickson et al. 2016; Duckett and Munro 2022), populations do not simply react to objective displays of state power. Policies that improve people's lives might enhance regime support and entitlement expectations at the same time, creating potential burdens for the future (Campbell 2012; Jones 2017; Lü 2014). I build on Iza Ding's (2020, 525) intervention in emphasizing the process of legitimization through the role of "performative governance," or the "theatrical deployment of language, symbols, and gestures to foster an impression of good governance among citizens." Moving beyond Ding's focus on the merely objective actions of state agencies to form perceptions among citizens and supply-and-demand cycles of public goods provision (von Haldenwang 2017), I demonstrate that various intermediaries translate government talking points for broader audiences. By tracing the development of Saudi COVID-19 policy narratives from statements by the Saudi government, to major Saudi media productions,

and on to statements within more than 90 original interviews with a range of Saudi nationalists (including strongly progovernment citizens), this article demonstrates how Saudi media and social elites have played an important role in Saudi performance legitimation in recent years, significantly enhancing the wider belief in the Saudi regime's capacity to provide public goods.

The article also contributes to research on how governments' handling of COVID-19 in turn won or lost them legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens. In some cases, the pandemic appears to have reversed patterns of support for populist parties even while strengthening support for an authoritarian "strong leader" to deal with attendant challenges (Foa et al. 2022). Similarly, research indicates that, in many cases, pandemic lockdowns increased political support for incumbents, trust in government, and satisfaction with democracy (Bol et al. 2021). Additionally, a growing body of literature on "pandemic backsliding" indicates that leaders may have taken advantage of distracted or panicked publics to adopt new illiberal practices that might signal autocratization (Edgell et al. 2021). Still, while China was initially hailed as an example of a draconian but effective response, this reputation unraveled amid the fallout of its uncompromising zero-COVID policy (Yuan 2022). Because this policy ultimately triggered far-reaching demonstrations across China, even a strong state governed by an autocratic regime can get into trouble over mismanaged pandemic policies (Haenle 2022).

The article first discusses some methodological considerations, data sources, and case selection. Subsequently, it turns to the discussion of empirical evidence, showcasing how Saudi Arabia's performative legitimacy discourse was created over the course of the pandemic, and coproduced or at least mirrored by the government, media, and supporters. A final section concludes.

Methods, Sources, and Case Selection

Among a wide variety of autocratic polities (Geddes 2003), Saudi Arabia represents a productive case study for exploratory research on the impact of the pandemic on autocratic policy performance and its perception by some segments of the population. First, the country is in the middle of a substantive reform process led by MBS that—among other things—seeks to enhance the performance of a notoriously inefficient bureaucracy marked by low state capacity (Hertog 2011; Moshashai, Leber, and Savage 2018). Among Saudi political institutions, the Ministry of Health was considered to have been particularly inefficient, even labeled as the "graveyard of ministers" by some op-ed columnists due to the rapid replacement of its bureaucratic leadership (Abu Talib 2015; Al-Ahaidib 2015). This makes healthcare provision in Saudi Arabia a particularly visible case of authoritarian policy performance; political leaders are more likely to invest in

narratives that show successful performance and citizens' reactions are likely to be more pronounced.

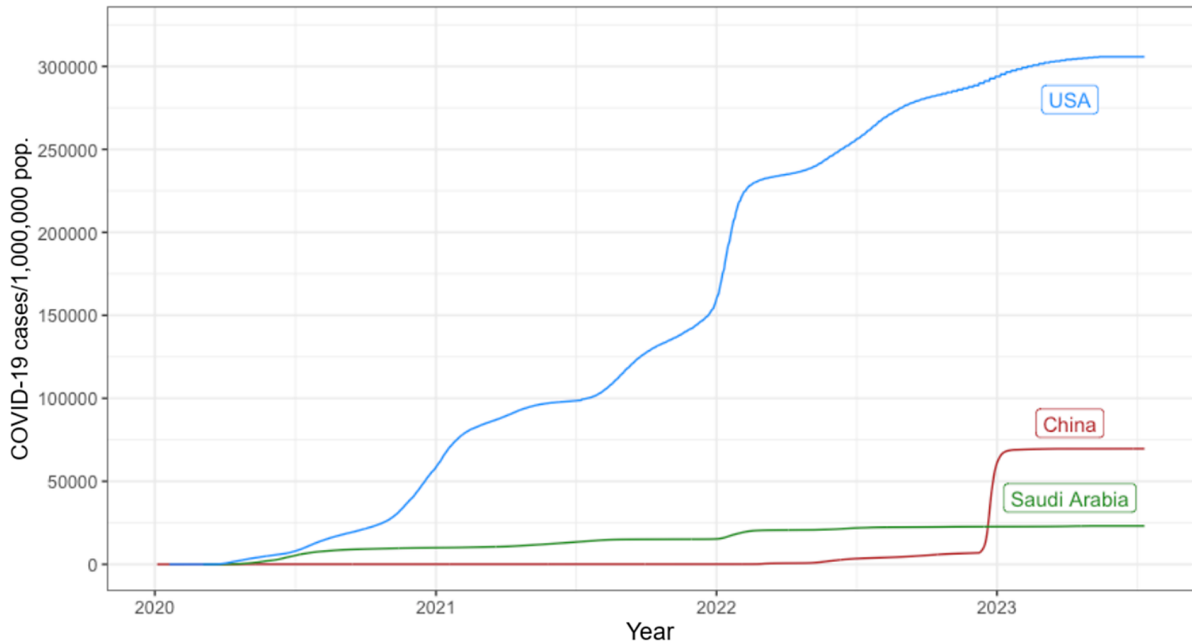
Second, many Saudis are well educated and often follow Western and international media. This permits us to explore the attitudes of Saudis not only toward their own government's policy performance, but in relation to the perceived performance of Western countries that traditionally possess significant soft power in Saudi Arabia, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and to some extent China. This in turn permits us to infer how Saudis think about the legitimacy of their own and other political systems from the consequences of pandemic responses. A decrease in the appeal of Western democracies would arguably complement the empirical phenomenon of successful legitimation, diminishing the appeal of democratic regimes for Saudi citizens.

Third, Saudi Arabia implemented robust and effective policies in response to the pandemic. The World Health Organization (2021; hereafter WHO) stated that "strong governance and intersectoral coordination have led to evidence-based decision making in Saudi Arabia" and acknowledged that free COVID-19 services regardless of residency or citizenship status resulted in "equal access to services for everyone and minimized the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and other vulnerable groups." The measures included significant limitations on international and domestic travel, lockdown, and curfews (lifted by June 2020), and a socially distanced Hajj pilgrimage. By April 2020, the Saudi government introduced the ubiquitous track-and-trace app "Tawakkalna."¹ While the reliability of data provided by nondemocratic states can be questioned—particularly, there is evidence that the Chinese death toll is severely undercounted (Wu, Zifei, and Chingman 2023)—there is sustained evidence that the Saudi response policy resulted in fewer cases and deaths than in other countries (see figures 1 and 2).

Similar to other authoritarian countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Singapore, Saudi Arabia took highly restrictive measures early on to successively ease pandemic measures (at least for those who were vaccinated). Figure 3 demonstrates that Saudi Arabia took more robust measures than even China in the early phase of the pandemic before successively opening up, while China maintained fairly stringent restrictions as part of the zero-COVID policy. For instance, by mid-August 2020, Saudi Arabia lifted restrictions on internal travel while these were still in place for most other countries. This lends support to the Saudi narrative that the Saudi COVID-19 response successfully combined a strong early response with a subsequent easing of restrictions, contrasting with Western countries as well as China.

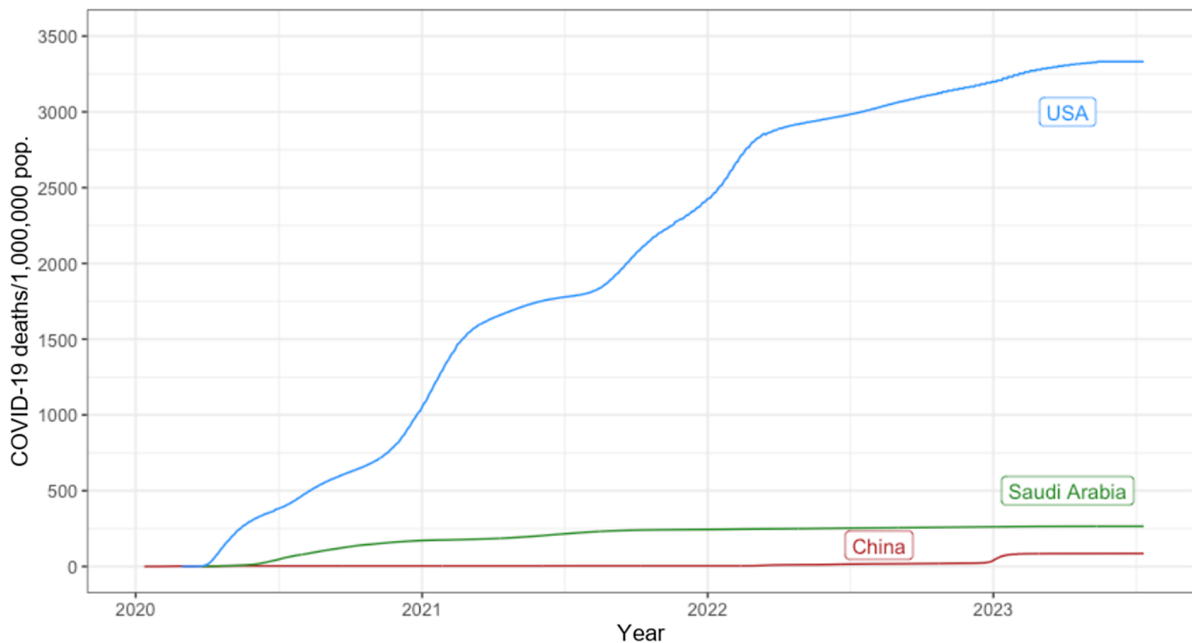
This "third way" also argues for the importance of studying cases of consolidated authoritarian rule beyond China. While the Chinese case is dominant in the study of

Figure 1
Cumulative Confirmed COVID-19 Cases for Selected Countries



Source: WHO (n.d.), downloaded via Our World in Data (n.d.).

Figure 2
Cumulative Confirmed COVID-19 Deaths for Select Countries

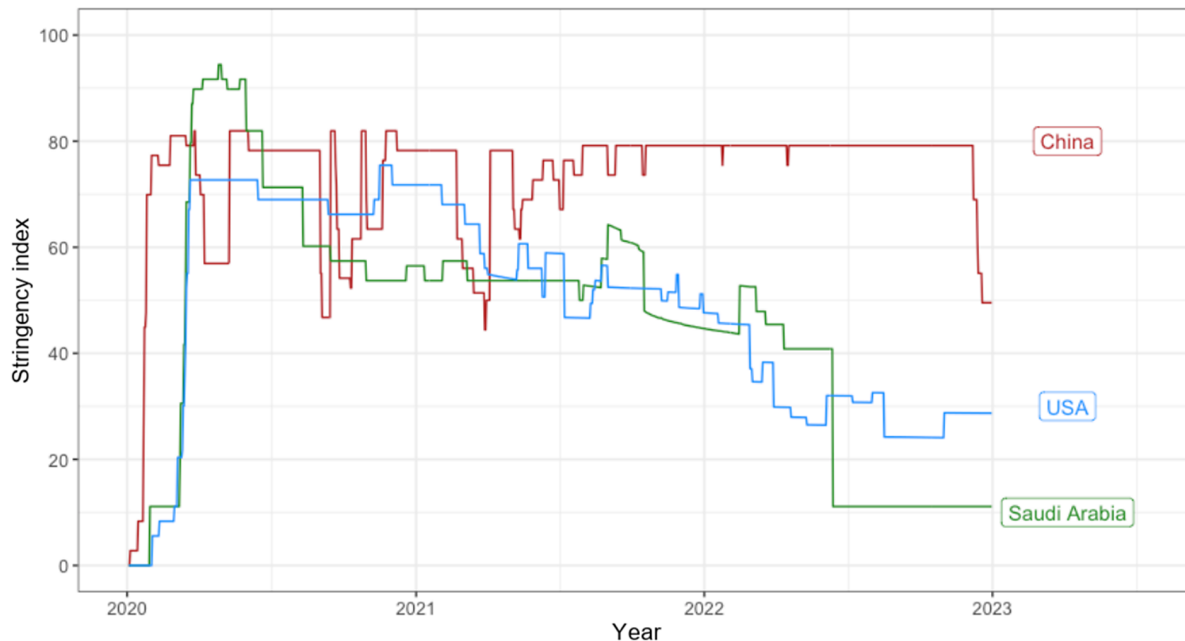


Source: WHO (n.d.), downloaded via Our World in Data (n.d.).

authoritarianism, China's high state capacity and the distinct institutional configuration of the Communist Party does not necessarily map onto the experiences of

other authoritarian regimes (Dimitrov 2014; Tannenber et al. 2021). Focusing on Saudi Arabia points to the variation among institutional configurations and state

Figure 3
Stringency Index for Measures to Curb the Pandemic for Select Countries



Note: The index is based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest response).
Source: WHO (n.d.), downloaded via Our World in Data (n.d.).

capacity available to various authoritarian regimes, albeit with the potential to generalize beyond the Saudi case itself. Studies of pandemic responses in Singapore (a durable electoral autocracy) and the UAE (a federated monarchy smaller in size than Saudi Arabia) follow a similar trajectory: a robust first response that eased over time (Abdou 2021; Alsuwaidi et al. 2021). Findings from the Saudi case stand to generate baseline expectations for how policy measures are discursively justified and narrated in the UAE, Singapore, and beyond, and propose China and Western states as key benchmark countries as well (subject to testing in future research).

Data Sources

This article highlights the joint importance of substantive policy achievements (does the policy lend itself to a compelling legitimization claim?), state-directed talking points to draw attention to these achievements (do political leaders make legitimization claims based on the policy?), and the role of intermediary groups in further developing narratives of legitimization and propagating them throughout society (how does the legitimization narrative justify ruling elites’ hold on power?). Methodologically, I therefore distinguish between general speech acts by the government (that may be intended to create a legitimization effect) and legitimization narratives that

ultimately gain currency within society, creating political capital for the regime beyond the immediate policy success. In doing so, I draw on previously untapped sources in Arabic pertaining to the government, the media, and a patriotic social elite.

For examples of government discourses, the article examines relevant speeches by King Salman, MBS, and the Ministry of Health, such as regular press conferences by the ministry’s spokesperson Mohammed Abdulaali. For media sources, I examine both popular television shows and written media content. For examples of television coverage, I focus on episodes from the popular show *MBC in a Week (MBC Fi Osbo)* that has aired twice weekly, on Friday and Saturday, from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. starting in 2010; the seasons aired since 2020 are accessible through the Saudi streaming platform Shahid. Particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown, many Saudi families watched the TV show together; I therefore assume that it enjoyed significant influence on social and political opinions in the country.² I collected 20 episodes between January 2020 and December 2021 that included a substantial segment devoted to discussion of the pandemic (for the analysis of TV channels in the Arab Gulf states, see Cherribi 2017). Second, I analyze relevant op-ed articles from major Saudi newspapers. Many newspaper op-eds are widely read online as there are no paywalls, and shared through omnipresent social media. The main newspapers

under consideration are *Okaz*, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Riyadh*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Eqtisadiyah*, and *Al-Jazirah*, as well as the English-language newspaper, *Arab News*. This article is only concerned with opinion articles about the pandemic, published between January 2020 and December 2021.³ While media sources should be understood as reflecting views and opinions broadly in line with the Saudi government, individual writers retain some agency and leeway to narrate particular policies and their implications for Saudi Arabia's standing in the world. Although space for Saudi political expression has shrunk considerably since King Salman and MBS came to power in 2015, findings from other studies of authoritarian media suggest that content is much less centrally controlled than we might assume (Gleditsch et al. 2022; Leber 2020; Walters 2016), facilitating government efforts to communicate with the population. Hence, while op-ed authors are not fully independent from government control, we still observe striking discrepancies between official government talking points and the arguments presented within media columns, indicating that political leaders are willing to tolerate at least the *impression* of media agency.

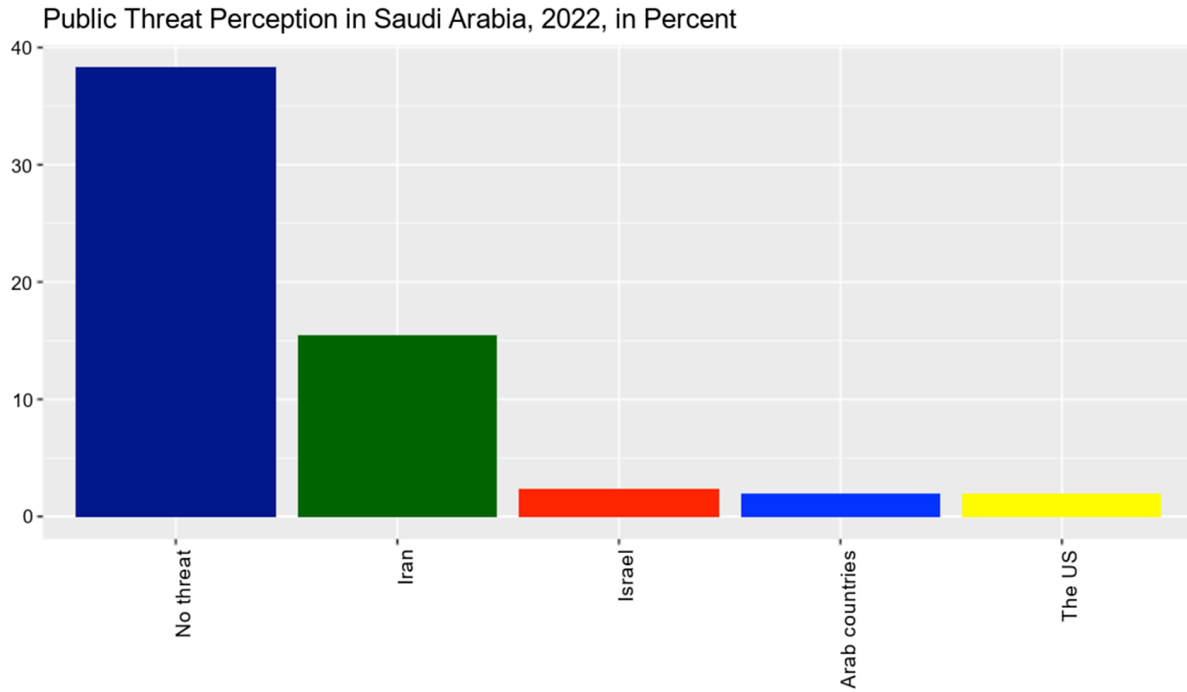
To incorporate voices pertaining to a social elite in closer contact with popular attitudes, I draw on more than 90 interviews that I conducted across the kingdom between November 2021 and April 2022—that is, at a time when the Saudi pandemic regulations had been significantly reduced. I supplement these perspectives with polling data that offer an indication of public perceptions of the pandemic response policies earlier in 2021 and in 2020. Some 50 of these interview partners were mobilized, progovernment nationalists active on Twitter. These nationalist activists gave no indication that they were close to the state and did not claim to represent or enjoy connections to any political or media institution. I therefore do not consider them part of the political elite, but rather a broadly defined social elite: Saudis with at least some intellectual or public ambition and on average higher education levels, but who express progovernment narratives in everyday language while integrating their personal experiences into legitimating claims. Social media affords many of these individuals an influential intermediary role, where they can narrate what the pandemic and the response policies mean to an audience of followers. At the same time, they are a nationalist movement that cuts through cultural and socioeconomic status, including students, those holding blue- and white-collar jobs, and Saudis with or without notable tribal connections. The remaining 40 interview partners are journalists and intellectuals with a broadly defined interest in Saudi national identity. While journalists and intellectuals arguably belong to a cultural elite, they are functionally distinct from regime insiders. None of the interview partners claimed to formally work for the state, receive state salaries, or directly materially benefit from the regime's continuation; many claimed the opposite. The interviews were

conducted in-person in Saudi Arabia and in some cases via WhatsApp or social media direct messages if the interviewee preferred to do so. While my interview sample has a bias concerning gender and geography toward a male population based in the capital city Riyadh, I also interviewed 20 Saudi women as well as individuals from cities across the country.

These social elites hold views distinct from the Saudi masses in a few measurable aspects. In terms of foreign policy views, interview partners felt higher threat perceptions, especially toward Iran. In interviews, threats to Saudi Arabia were mentioned in approximately 70% of the interviews (particularly among mobilized nationalists, their sympathizers, and progovernment intellectuals), while the recent Arab Opinion Index survey found that in Saudi society only some 15% consider Iran a threat (Arab Center Washington DC 2023; see figure 4). In fact, almost 40% of the survey respondents did not perceive any threat to Saudi Arabia at all, did not know (14.8%), or declined to answer (24.9%). This stands in stark contrast to the Saudi nationalists on Twitter who deem it necessary to constantly defend the kingdom as a standing online army. Second, and more importantly, some 25% of Saudis surveyed in the Arab Opinion Index consider Saudi society unprepared for democracy, outnumbered by Saudis who disagree by a small margin, while missing values (23%), “declined to answer” (6.3%), and “do not know” (18.2%) make up the remainder (see figure 5). The vast majority of interview partners, on the other hand—both mobilized nationalists and otherwise—questioned whether democracy was the appropriate form of governance for Saudi Arabia (approximately 80%). As a mobilized nationalist put it: “Democracy is a Western construct. It fits extremely well in the West but not in Saudi Arabia with its values, heritage, history. We have our own ways to manage our affairs. We're not antidemocratic but it does not fit in our established culture” (Interviewee 1). Other interview partners even accused the West of a double standard: “The West thinks democracy is the way every country should follow, but is the US a real democracy or [is it] just the richest media figure that rules? Why leave our values in the name of freedom?” (Interviewee 2). Still, while we can infer that interview partners are overall more nationalistic, hawkish, and antidemocratic than the mean, polling data indicate that their views resonate with at least some segments of society. My sample is therefore a useful basis for highlighting dominant narratives in the country and showcasing how nationalist narratives travel from mobilized nationalist progovernment supporters to less committed (but patriotic) individuals (Gerschewski 2018).

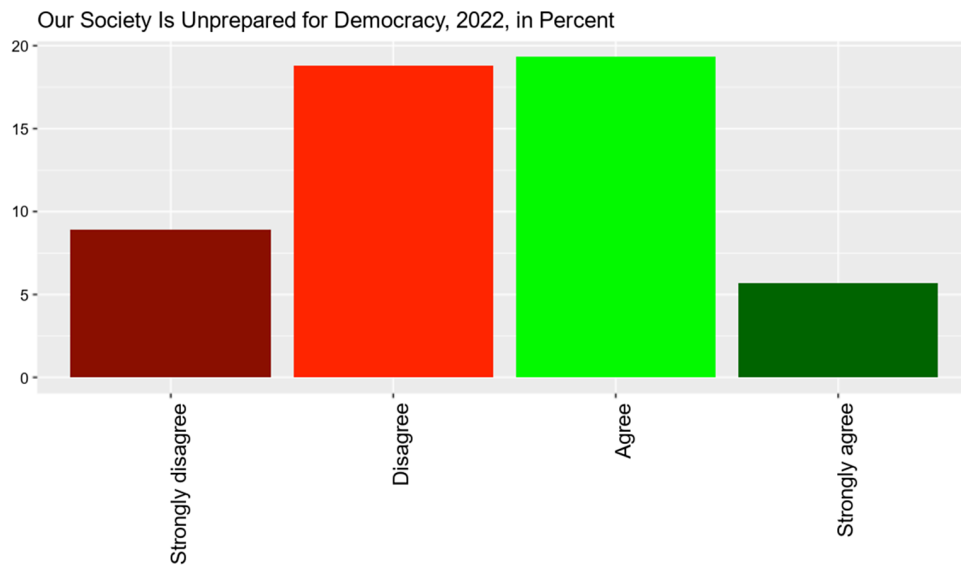
I consider in-depth interviews the most productive way to capture how far legitimation claims resonate with some segments of the population. While survey research is widely considered the gold standard for capturing popular reception of legitimation claims, surveillance and self-

Figure 4
“Which Country Do You Consider the Most Threatening to Your Home Country?”



Source: Arab Opinion Index 2022, question 710_2.

Figure 5
“Please Express Your Level of Agreement or Disagreement: Our Society Is Unprepared for Democracy.”



Source: Arab Opinion Index 2022, question 405_5.

ensorship put tight limits on survey research in Saudi Arabia, as in most autocracies (as the large number of missing values and refusals to respond in the public

opinion polls indicate). Surveillance and self-censorship also pose a challenge to conducting interviews—or any empirical data collection about authoritarian legitimation,

for that matter—and raise significant questions about the reliability of the data. While there is no perfect way to resolve this, I took two steps to mitigate the impact. First, my work has a strong ethnographic sensibility to establish contacts, meet interview partners repeatedly, and spend several hours gaining a better understanding of my interview partners' opinions, views, and values (Pader 2014; Stroup and Goode 2023; Wedeen 2010). I established relationships over weeks and sometimes months, drawing on the support of local interlocutors where useful or necessary. This enabled me to conduct interviews in the interviewees' safe spaces—such as preferred environments, homes, or cars—that minimize threats of surveillance.

Second, interview partners did voice opinions critical of the government on several instances, indicating that they did not just celebrate the government by default but elected to support some aspects of the government's performance record. Indeed, several of the mobilized interview partners have a history of speaking out against government ministers on Twitter, such as in criticizing the lack of government protections for Saudis perceived as facing unfair competition and fraud in the labor market, to denouncing support for the Palestinian cause in terms that go far beyond the current ambiguous position of the Saudi government. Contradicting official positions lends a degree of credibility to their interview statements. A study focusing on Saudis living abroad as well as migrant workers in the country might find diverging results, however.

Discussion

The Early Phase: A Balancing Act

In the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, the Saudi government set the tone for the early pandemic response, reminding all citizens and residents that everyone was responsible for curbing the spread of the virus (Al-Rabiah and Al-Jadaan 2020). King Salman (2020) gave a speech in which he stressed the need for global cooperation to develop a vaccine, international solidarity, and firm measures at various levels to curb the spread of the virus. But this official discourse did not discuss developments in other countries. One reason for this may have been Saudi Arabia's holding of the G20 presidency at the time, which lent itself to leveraging political leadership on the global level. Notably, in a portrait hanging behind the king while he read his speech, the traditional Saudi headgear (the *shimagh*) is worn in a way that signaled tough times ahead but also confidence to overcome it. Thus, the government's communication was similar to other countries, stressing the need for international cooperation and explaining the seriousness of the virus to the population. Further, the Saudi government operated with a proactive communications strategy, holding daily press conferences on the infection rates in the country. While the interview

partners did not discuss the press conferences, the proactive information policy might well have contributed to facilitating acceptance among the Saudi population for the measures.

In contrast, Saudi media continued the narration of Saudi politics in a previously known fashion, balancing between support for its most important ally, the United States, particularly during the Trump administration, and admiration of the “Chinese model” of governance (Leber 2020). Opinion columnist Abdulrahman Al-Rashed (2020a) credited the Chinese government for their strict response with the caveat that China had initially “prioritized their political reputation over the safety of their citizens” in the attempt to repress the spreading of the news about the virus rather than the virus itself. And while some articles bought into conspiracy theories that China deliberately developed the virus, this was not widespread. A Saudi nationalist Twitter activist (Interviewee 3) explained that “some Saudis blame China for COVID [but] others say ‘no.’ If you blame China for COVID you have to blame Saudi for the other COVID that happened in 2012 [referring to MERS].” Early conspiracy theories in Saudi Arabia played out in a different fashion, framing COVID-19 as “Qatifi”—referring to a city in the Eastern province that has a history of violent uprisings—after one of the first cases in kingdom was recorded when religious travelers brought the virus from Iran, construing it as national treason (Interviewee 4).

But with increasing case numbers in parts of Europe and the US by March 2020, some elite commentators began to more closely associate Saudi Arabia with the Chinese approach. The Chinese were deemed to be “taking the strongest and most severe measures” while the “European school was based on awareness first and waiting second” (Al-Dossary 2020; MBC 2020b; Okaz 2020b). The democratic system was associated with inaction and paralysis in contrast to China's approach: “The iron fist of the Chinese ruling party was the remedy, and the world is learning from it. Democracy no longer has a place. [...]”⁴ The democratic countries, which have not yet taken such measures, have now become hotbeds for the disease” (Al Abbas 2020). But contrasting with these antidemocratic polemics, some op-ed articles presented more nuanced arguments. Mohammed Kamal (2020), the Director of Arab Research and Studies and a professor of political science at Cairo University in Egypt, agreed that China—in contrast to the US—did present an effective management to the world. But he did not spin this out into a battle of governance forms: “A number of major issues raised by the spread of the epidemic, also related to China and the United States, will not be resolved soon, and will continue to be debated for years to come, including questions related to the best way to deal with the [COVID-19] crisis, is it authoritarian regimes or

democracy?” It is unlikely that we would read this opinion in Saudi media at any later stage of the pandemic.

In contrast to the commentators, at least some segments of Saudi society did not support the heavy-handed approach in the early phase of the pandemic: “A few criticized the lockdown in the beginning, [with its] paternalistic treatment. The older generation would not criticize public health measures, [but] the younger generation is more critical” (Interviewee 5). This did not translate into any meaningful action or mobilization, however, because “complaining wasn’t as harsh as elsewhere in the world and the government took advantage of that” to implement the measures (Interviewee 6). This is an important baseline to document how the opinion that the Saudi government anticipated the situation correctly and implemented harsh measures, even though they were unpopular among at least some segments of society, formed and spread in society over the course of the pandemic.

We observe initial, cautious attempts to present the Saudi policy approach as superior by spring 2020: “Courageous, calculated decisions are decisive in serious crises. [...] And we should not forget that Saudi Arabia, when it rushed early to announce strict decisions to confront the epidemic, raised eyebrows at the time, and then it turned out to be correct” (Al-Rashed 2020b). It was not only bold decision making but also a robust healthcare system that were sources of pride: “The healthcare systems in Japan, South Korea, Germany, and [Saudi Arabia] succeeded in preventing the spread of this infectious disease” (Alriyadh 2020). In the same vein, the TV show *MBC in a Week* (MBC 2020c) proudly aired a video statement by the US ambassador to Saudi Arabia recommending that US citizens shelter in place in the kingdom rather than leave the country because food supply and medical services were reliable. Thus, in this early stage of the pandemic, the columnists took pride in matching the abilities of countries with higher international status and those assumed to have higher state capacity than Saudi Arabia.

The Intermediate Phase: Nationalist Infusion for Confidence on the Global Stage

Successively, the media discourse on the Saudi approach to COVID-19 became more assertive and by summer 2020—having comfortably avoided a meltdown of the Saudi healthcare system—it had grown more confident about the “Saudi way.” It may have contributed to the growing Saudi confidence that the number of cases declined in August 2020 for the first time (MBC 2020d). This included, for instance, proudly reporting on praise by the WHO for organizing the Hajj pilgrimage in compliance with effective healthcare measures in August 2020 (Okaz 2020a), which underlined that Saudi Arabia was “prioritizing the public interest and saving lives” (Al-Sulaiman 2020b). Confident voices even suggested that

Saudi universities should have been part of “the race to invent a vaccine or treatment” for the virus (Al-Sulaiman 2020c).

With growing self-awareness of the successful COVID-19 campaign at home, the framing of the global pandemic shifted, too. When European countries faced increasing numbers of infections in late summer 2020, Saudi media widely discussed and criticized it (MBC 2020e). Celebrating the Saudi success story included reporting on and highlighting the weakness of underperforming responses in other countries, particularly Western democracies. A Saudi nationalist interview partner succinctly summarized this newly developed nationalist confidence: “The pandemic was a global exam and our country came in first, passing with the highest grade” (Interviewee 7). Clearly, the framing of the pandemic as a global exam is better equipped to emphasize the national success story and to integrate it into the omnipresent nationalist discourses in the country as it implies a global competitiveness, more than a mere sense of “we’re in it together” (Vogus et al. 2022). These comparisons with Western democracies are therefore expressions of a newly built confidence in the capacity of the Saudi state that had become the source of the regime’s performance legitimacy.

The Consolidation Phase: The “Saudi Way” to Glory

In the second half of 2020 and early 2021—when the Delta variant spread in the UK and subsequently in other countries—the Saudi government continued its communication strategy of explaining the measures they had taken to maintain the safety of Saudi citizens and residents while increasingly emphasizing its international leadership (Al Arabiya 2020a; Al Arabiya 2020b). In contrast, the Saudi media discourse had become more assertive, blaming the “world’s governments and the international health organizations’ performances” for having caused confusion among the populations (Al-Sulaiman 2020a). The Saudi Crown Prince was credited with having made Saudi Arabia “the best in the world regarding the recovery from the virus,” and having made “the world copy the Saudi method to deal with the pandemic” (Qarub 2020). The criticism of ineffective Western pandemic responses peaked in spring 2021 as the TV show *MBC in a Week* pulled no punches against Western countries across several episodes. There are two possible explanations for the timing. First, the COVID-19 situation objectively worsened in Europe and the US as the Delta variant brought havoc to wide parts of the world. However, the UK, for instance, went into a lockdown over several months and attacking the British government for its failures in the past would be crying over spilt milk. Second, it may have had to do with Joe Biden’s election campaign to become US president in November 2020 and the expectation that Saudi–US relations would deteriorate given Biden’s harsh campaign rhetoric toward Saudi Arabia (Emmons, Chávez, and Lacy

2019). We should at least entertain the idea that poor US–Saudi relations contributed to tougher reporting and campaigns in the Saudi media. But regardless of the driving factors, it is not surprising that Saudi elite commentators took the chance to criticize Western governments for their poor handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Assuming that the audience of such criticism is the Saudi population rather than any Western government, it was a golden opportunity to present their system as outperforming Western benchmark countries.

This raises the question of how the Saudi COVID-19 response was perceived and framed beyond the government and media. Existing survey data and my interviews indicate that at least some segments of Saudi society were impressed with the COVID-19 response policy. In polls that were conducted throughout the pandemic, Saudi Arabia only ranks second to China with regard to the greatest increase in public trust in the provision of healthcare between October 2018 and October 2020, jumping by 21 points to 67% (IPSOS 2020). In the same vein, by November 2020, Saudi citizens were among the most optimistic globally that the virus had been contained and soon would be over (69%), only second to Malaysia. Most benchmarking countries were polling in low double-digit numbers at the time, such as the US (27%), France (21%), Japan (19%), or the UK (17%) (Bricker 2020). Notably, Saudi Arabia also polled among the highest scores in expectations that healthcare provisions would further improve in the future, an increase by 10 points between 2018 and 2020 (IPSOS 2020). This supports my argument that the policies not only generated trust in the state addressing this specific crisis but also translated into performance legitimacy for the regime and its ability to solve future challenges. And while the pollsters acknowledge a bias in their sample toward urban and more connected areas of Saudi Arabia, it is notable that Saudi citizens seem to hold some of the most positive views of healthcare provision across the globe. It indicates that the approach by the government was popular among at least some segments of society. It also shows that the process of crafting an effective performance legitimization requires a policy response that resonates with and responds to the experiences of the population, rather than being a merely propagandistic, discursive product that is disconnected from empirical realities.

The confidence in the Saudi approach also built the groundwork for extensive critiques of other countries. This holds true for mobilized, nationalist supporters of the government, but also across constituencies that I interviewed, ranging from doctors in the north of the country to high-school teachers in the south and intellectuals across the kingdom. The disdain for the COVID-19 responses in Western democracies was voiced on two levels. First, interview partners denounced Western

individualism as an impediment to an effective pandemic response and used it as justification for authoritarianism. Second, they celebrated that Saudi state capacity outperformed that of Western countries.

It is in this phase that the relationship between performance legitimacy and nationalism became more pronounced, reflecting the rise of popular nationalism in Saudi Arabia since MBS rose to power in 2015 (Alhusein 2019). Discourses about nationalism and performance appear to be deeply intertwined because performance—similar to previous developmentalist paradigms—requires an audience of the performance that is bound to be the population. After all, performance legitimacy is a justification for the regime’s claim to political power (i.e., over the population). Early on in the pandemic, medical personnel described in public relations videos how they felt supported by the Saudi homeland in fulfilling their tasks (MBC 2020a). The nationalist rhetoric also went beyond celebrating provisions to the Saudi population, in terms of both healthcare and support for Saudi companies (Interviewee 6). It highlighted Saudi support to other countries and claimed Saudi Arabia was putting “humanity first” (MBC 2021; also, Interviewee 9). Boosted nationalist pride due to the successful COVID-19 response traveled beyond the realm of mobilized activists, too: “We used to do things to be more respected in the West. But we don’t do that anymore, now we do it for us” (Interviewee 8). This highlights the empowering nature of nationalism, as well as the rather inward turn of Saudi nationalism and how it cuts off ties that are considered infringements of national sovereignty by means of performance legitimacy. It challenges the power-political and normative influence of Western democracies in the country, questioning if the West lives up to its own rhetoric: “When push comes to shove, the whole talk about cooperation is out of the window and everyone just pursues their interests and national priorities. There is a reassessment... Rhetoric and action did not align in the West. In China, they always align, what you see is what you get” (Interviewee 9). To them, the West was guilty of a double standard, preaching human rights abroad but prioritizing the economy at home, while Saudi Arabia was truly putting humanity first. This showcases how performance legitimization and nationalism can be used to crowd out unwanted cultural influences. It demonstrates how not only the rhetoric about the pandemic but the isolating effect of the pandemic itself fit into the ongoing Saudi nationalist project about maximizing political power at home while pushing back against Western normative influences.

Additionally, the Saudi government conducted the pandemic policy in a top-down fashion without public debate, resembling government policy making in other areas. As a nationalist supporter put it: “None of the big infrastructure projects of the last years would have happened if there was freedom of speech” (Interviewee 10).

The pandemic not only demonstrated and reinforced an increased sense of national belonging in the country and a belief in improved state capacity; it also speaks to the governing style, connecting political obedience to an effective policy response, further cementing the top-down approach.

The Concluding Phase: The Metamorphosis from Trust to Legitimacy

The fourth phase over summer 2021 was driven by a seamless vaccine rollout, easing restrictions and the sense of having overcome the pandemic. The government, however, changed its rhetoric only marginally. In May 2021, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Health pointed out the provision of the vaccine to Saudi citizens and residents free of charge and praised Saudi society’s awareness of the vaccine, while warning against disinformation (Saudi Ministry of Health 2021a). This could be read as implicit criticism of politicized discourses about the vaccines in Western countries. But it also might have been an attempt to encourage the Saudi population to get the vaccine, as the vaccination rate with at least one dose was marginally lower in Saudi Arabia (77.6%) than in the United States (81.8%) and China (92.8%) (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center 2023). When the Omicron variant emerged in November 2021, the Ministry of Health presented the global spread of the virus on a world map, showing that Saudi Arabia was doing better than most other countries. But the ministry’s spokesperson did not denounce the approaches of the United States or China (Saudi Ministry of Health 2021b). This further underlines how the government focused on explaining its policy approach and the international assistance it was providing, as well as reminding Saudi citizens and residents that their support was needed to combat the pandemic. While implicitly voicing criticism of politicized discussions over the effectiveness of the vaccine, the government did not craft the discourses that came to dominate the performance legitimization claims.

In line with the previous sections, this phase shows the gaps between the factual government discourses and the relational narration that columnists and progovernment supporters engaged in. These were not limited to politics but came with a strong cultural undercurrent. Widespread criticism of Western pandemic responses often targeted Western individualism rather than the political systems as such. This cultural critique is mostly a popular grassroots argument that was less prominent in newspaper columns, reflecting how everyday experiences can translate into political discourses in autocracies (Przeworski 2022). The criticism was directed at the (poorly performing) United States, France, the UK, or Germany rather than (well performing) Japan or South Korea: “[Our] leadership can provide public health to the population. In democracies, there is only

personal freedom and [it] failed. Saudi Arabia is among the best countries [in responding to COVID-19]. For us, the lockdown meant more family time. The individualism in the US is not well positioned for providing social security. It is necessary that democracies change, democracies need to govern for general interest instead of individualism” (Interviewees 11–13). The concept of individualism denotes here a society that is overly concerned with individual liberties at the expense of the greater collective good of society, a concept linked to the desire for a strong state: “Freedom of expression creates more animals than human thinking. Consider COVID in the US: Is that freedom? You need a strong state to have freedom!” (Interviewee 4). It is a cultural justification for the limitation of individual liberties to achieve social stability and security, and the vehicle to do so is the Saudi state. Thus, the cultural critique of Western individualism is political after all, and sets the stage for celebrating the superiority of the Saudi political system and its capacity and problem-solving ability.

The “Saudi way” of politics morphs into a growing confidence in the Saudi polity, calling on the Saudi population to cherish their own system, as COVID-19, according to a Saudi nationalist media figure, “made more people believe in our form of government than democratic government” (Interviewee 7). The democratic governance model appears to have lost at least some of its appeal and soft power in the eyes of segments of Saudi society. As a senior Saudi intellectual put it:

In the past, I was an advocate of democracy, but not today anymore because Western democracies are in crisis. China is a dictatorship but more stable and economically more successful than Western democracies. [But] China was never a role model for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is different from China and the US. China is a one-person rule, Saudi Arabia is a kingdom, and the King is the father of a family who wants to improve the life of his family. (Interviewee 14)

Thus, we find the Saudi positioning-game between China and the West resurfacing in this phase, although with a much more confident definition of the Saudi positioning between them. The international comparison of the Saudi experience was not limited to these poles, however, as a female cultural entrepreneur in Jeddah explained:

COVID made clear, I’m really glad to be part of this change and reform, I’m glad to be part of the Vision [referring to the Vision 2030 government program]. In India, they had their religious meetings, but our mosques were closed, even during Ramadan. In the US and some parts of Europe, it was more difficult for people to follow the rules. And I saw these stories [...] Germany had 7–8 lockdowns, we took it strictly and then we were able to open up. Initially, I was jealous of the UK when they were free but when we opened up, they went back into lockdown, Alhamdulillah, we took it very well, we were the strictest country in the lockdown (Australia was insane!). Saudi hit the sweet spot, it felt seamless, first domestic, then international travel [...] it created a sense of unity. You need a sense of leadership and safety when a pandemic hits. (Interviewee 8)

Criticizing Australia's harsh measures as too strict goes beyond what Saudi columnists have been writing. But similar to the critique of Chinese politics, it breaks up the binary between complacent democracies and effective autocracies and thereby presents a more nuanced map of cross-country comparison, celebrating the Saudi response as distinct, beyond a mere competition of political systems. The quotation is illuminating for a second reason. It summarizes how perceptions of the pandemic morphed from skepticism over strict measures for a good part of 2020 to support and gratefulness to the Saudi government later on. The interview partners did not have to mince their words over the disagreement from the past because such statements acknowledged the superior understanding of the Saudi government of the appropriate pandemic policies. The population attests that the strong state knew what was best for the country all along, protecting the citizens best from the pandemic and their own individual fallacies.

While some articles from earlier phases adopt this line (e.g., Alhamid 2020), it is particular in this fourth phase from summer 2021 onward that both commentators and supporters claim that the Saudi system was superior and more effective in providing public goods for their citizens than any other. They point out that Saudi citizens and residents were fortunate to have access to the vaccine that "is not available to hundreds of millions in other countries" (Al-Sulaiman 2021). The pandemic "changed the perception of the West [in Saudi Arabia]. Our health-care sector held while more developed countries failed. Our vaccination campaign was successful. These were all game changers" (Interviewee 6). The perception of having outperformed powerful Western countries shored up popular support for the Saudi political system: "It gave the rulers a lot of credit, comparing yourself to the rest of the world gives you a clear picture" (Interviewee 15). For many Saudis, the comparative "exam" reading of the pandemic is important for judging the performance of their government:

We're more critical of the West. COVID has—not just in Saudi—turned on the lightbulb on the whole world and showed the gap between rhetoric and reality in terms of value of human life, what priorities are, and capabilities. For the longest time, we were told that we're technologically behind—sure, we import it—but if you invent it and you can't utilize it in the best possible way, you're equally backward. It showed us we're not as far behind as we thought. The systems we use (Tawakkalna, ordering apps, how streamlined the vaccination was!) ... it's crazy to go to the UK or Germany. Even just something stupid like ordering a passport, [we] get it by mail in 2 days [...] You look at the little things ... the US has a huge army, but it doesn't reflect on day-to-day life of ordinary persons. (Interviewee 9; also, MBC 2022)

Many interview partners drew comparisons with the West to express how well they believe the Saudi government performed in contrast. This not only concerns the provision of testing kits and vaccines but also maintaining social order

and safety: "[Saudis] have seen videos of footage of supermarkets in Europe that were empty, it was so scary, and everyone was fighting each other over the goods and the essentials. It was not everywhere in Europe but in some places. But also, the high rate of infections in European countries made Saudis feel better about themselves because they handled the pandemic way better than them" (Interviewee 3). As a doctor in the northern city of Ha'il put it: "I was beyond impressed with the response. It was so much better than the West or China. This would not have been possible 5–6 years ago" (Interviewee 16). With the latter part of the statement, he referred to MBS's reform program to rebuild the socioeconomic setup of the entire country. This entails the improvement of the notoriously low Saudi state capacity. The perception that the reform program was instrumental in preparing the country for the pandemic is important for facilitating acceptance of the reform program and the strict top-down governance style. And as a former bureaucrat proudly pointed out, the "vaccine centers were managed by young Saudis, not foreigners" (Interviewee 17), underscoring the widespread feeling of having curbed the spread of the pandemic by themselves. Some government supporters went as far as to claim that "if there was one gift in the last three years, it was COVID" as it brought "deeper relation with the family [and it showed] it's not a government that restricts people but a patriarch that protects you" (Interviewee 7). Similarly, an interviewee at the Saudi Tourism Agency called the pandemic a blessing in disguise, because the pandemic gave them time to rebuild dysfunctional tourism infrastructure after a brief tourism test run in 2019 when the tourism visa was launched (Interviewee 18). And while most interview partners did not go as far to praise the pandemic in this way, they largely agreed that it showcased how Saudi state capacity had significantly increased. Ironically, among the mobilized nationalists, it caused outrage when a Western observer made a similar observation:

I've also noticed there were some Saudis that were angry... Do you remember G20? There was someone from CNN in Saudi and he was talking about COVID in Saudi. Many institutions tried to stop Saudi from hosting G20 for this special occasion. It's also to promote Saudi Arabia, they don't want us to have it because of "human rights abuses" [*in teasing voice*] and it was funny, but Saudi didn't stop, and no one could stop Saudi. And then the CNN person in Diriyah [the historic capital city] during the summit, he literally said "I'm actually surprised that Saudi handled the pandemic [well]" or something like that. And the way he said it was this Western man supremacy "I'm shocked these A-rabs, these brownies, managed to handle the pandemic. While we, the whites, the civilized, the CIVILIZED West, couldn't." (Interviewee 3)

This section demonstrated how both opinion columnists and patriotic segments of society have come to narrate a nationalist "Saudi way" pandemic response, centered on cultural criticism of individualism and the resulting political impediments of democracy in contrast to a robust

Saudi state with a strong capacity to provide for its citizens. The perception of having outperformed powerful Western countries as well as China in their pandemic response policies arguably shored up support for the Saudi political system among at least some segments in society. In particular, Saudi nationalists and patriots mobilized around the conviction that their country had proven wrong the normative democratic assumption that good governance for the good of the people was tied to electoral processes. Oftentimes, the interview partners went beyond official and media talking points, narrating the “Saudi way” as experiences from their own lives, pushing back against Western discourses about Saudi Arabia, and attesting to the legitimacy of the Saudi system of governance.

Conclusion

The article set out to explain the process that generates effective performance legitimization claims for the Saudi regime. In contrast to the existing literature, the article found that this process involves not just the leadership claiming that the Saudi system of governance is superior in general, but a more relational narrative coproduced with intermediaries. While the government provides successful policies and some discursive themes around them, the newspaper columnists and patriotic supporters make sense of and narrate these policy successes, drawing comparisons to countries with a higher international status and those assumed to have higher state capacity. These discourses developed in a piecemeal fashion over the course of the pandemic, translating trust in state capacity to solve the crisis into a broader sense of the legitimacy of the Saudi system of governance and order of society. Over time, a distinct “Saudi way” of pandemic response emerged that not only celebrated the successful Saudi policies but also served as a vehicle to criticize Western countries for excessive individualism and thereby justify authoritarianism. It reflects a changing attitude toward democracy and legitimacy in Saudi Arabia and ideals for the Saudi state. By means of this performance legitimacy, Western values and democratic sentiments appear to have lost their appeal in the eyes of at least some segments of Saudi society. To them, the “Saudi way” of effective top-down provision without public debates that constrain the government and put checks and balances on the state provides best while being less restrictive than the Chinese approach. This performance legitimization claim is about the appropriateness of the Saudi system of governance for Saudi Arabia rather than legitimating authoritarianism as such. It showcases the importance for the study of legitimization to go beyond immediate state rhetoric to understand legitimating discourses and how far they resonate among at least some segments of society.

Future comparative work might test this proposed framework in other authoritarian countries. Particularly, cases with similar COVID-19 trajectories such as

Singapore and the UAE might showcase these processes as well. We might explore if the pandemic has changed these countries’ positioning in relation to both China and the West, too, and what governance form or policy outcome is deemed particularly Emirati or Singaporean. In general, the comparisons might travel to other global questions of migration or climate change, too. But it is questionable whether these issues have the same effect as the pandemic, because challenges of migration or climate come in local variation and depend on their geographical location and political neighborhood.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Steffen Hertog, Andrew M. Leber, Erin A. Snider, Benjamin R. Y. Tan, the editors, and the anonymous reviewers for their generous and helpful comments which substantially improved the paper.

Notes

- 1 As in other authoritarian countries, the Tawakkalna app potentially enabled the Saudi government to use the app for surveillance, too. This might represent a more pragmatic strengthening of authoritarian regimes in the Gulf and elsewhere as a result of pandemic autocratization.
- 2 There are no viewing figures for this show available, which is a constraint. However, the channel MBC1, which broadcasts the show, is by far the most popular TV channel in Saudi Arabia, with a market share of more than 14% (Saleh 2023).
- 3 For further discussion on classifying Saudi newspapers and interpreting op-ed content, see Leber (2020).
- 4 Bracketed ellipses, here and elsewhere in this article, indicate abridgements made by the author to the quoted text. Unbracketed ellipses represent pauses or faltering speech present in the original.

List of Interview Partners

Interviewee 1. February 2022. Riyadh. Interviewed online. Anonymous mobilized nationalist who grew up abroad. Operates an influential Twitter account targeting English-speaking audiences. Born in the early 2000s, currently lives abroad.

Interviewee 2. January 2022. Riyadh. Interviewed online. Anonymous female patriot with sympathies for the mobilized nationalists. Academic background in arts.

Interviewee 3. Continuous conversations with the author since January 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous female Saudi nationalist with a deep historic-cultural interest in the Arabian Peninsula. Born in the early 2000s and grew up abroad. Fluent in English.

Interviewee 4. January 2022. Eastern Province. Anonymous intellectual in the Eastern Province, critical of the mobilized nationalists on Twitter as too radical; questions the cultural unification of the country.

Interviewee 5. February 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous female patriotic bureaucrat at the Saudi Ministry of Culture with a background in business and communications. Born in the mid-1990s.

Interviewee 6. Continuous conversations with the author since February 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous mobilized nationalist from the central Najd region, invested in the idea of the Saudi nation since before the Arab Uprisings in 2011. Used to work with state agencies on matters of education, now a successful entrepreneur. Born in the 1980s. Middle-class background, well educated, and fluent in English.

Interviewee 7. March 2022. Riyadh. Nationalist Saudi television and social media figure.

Interviewee 8. March 2022. Jeddah. Anonymous female patriot with an entrepreneurship and business background. Works with global humanitarian foundations.

Interviewee 9. April 2022. Jeddah. Patriot; member of the Al Saud family.

Interviewee 10. February 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous nationalist activist, born in the late 1990s. Medical student; did not study abroad.

Interviewees 11, 12, and 13. March 2022. Jeddah. Anonymous patriotic intellectuals with particular interest in the sociocultural history of the country.

Interviewee 14. April 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous intellectual; influential author calling for the social liberalization of the country since the 1980s.

Interviewee 15. February 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous mobilized nationalist, invested in the idea of the Saudi nation since ca. 2009. Studied abroad during the Arab Uprisings. Today operates one of the most influential Saudi Twitter accounts.

Interviewee 16. April 2022. Ha'il, northern Saudi Arabia. Anonymous medical doctor.

Interviewee 17. April 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous former bureaucrat in the Ministry of Education.

Interviewee 18. April 2022. Riyadh. Anonymous employee at the Saudi Tourism Authority.

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