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**Gulf Investments and Regional Security: Applying Barry Buzan's  
Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to Saudi Economic  
Diplomacy in Syria and Jordan**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates how Saudi Arabia uses economic diplomacy – including investment, aid, and reconstruction financing – as a tool for political influence to manage regional security. With a focus on Syria and Jordan, this research examines how Gulf economic engagement varies across levels of stability – post-war and aid-dependent– and how that engagement translates into political power and strategic regional alignment.

To argue that financial influence is slowly replacing direct military force, the study uses the core principles of RSCT – security interdependence, penetration, and polarity – to analyze Gulf economic engagement as a manifestation of soft security governance. The study demonstrates that Syria exhibits signs of penetration as Gulf states are cautiously re-entering and investing in post-war reconstruction to gain political influence amid the fragile environment. Jordan shows signs of stabilization following consistent aid, reinforcing its political loyalty and role as a buffer state.

The study posits that economic diplomacy has become the Gulf’s primary strategy for maintaining regional power and influence. This tool allows states like Saudi Arabia to leverage their economic power to exert political influence, effectively controlling and shaping alliances, influence, and balance in the Middle East.



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## Introduction

Gulf monarchies – particularly Saudi Arabia – have gradually become central regional powers, using their vast economic resources to expand political influence both within the Middle East and on the global stage. After 2011, as traditional power centers fractured, the regional order shifted toward the Gulf monarchies, which expanded beyond traditional energy dominance and established power through economic statecraft – including aid, SWFs, and reconstruction financing. The shift towards economic diplomacy as their primary instrument is crucial to tracing how influence, alliances, and power are produced within the region, illustrating a new form of regional management and reshaping political alignments across the broader Middle East.

This study investigates how strong Gulf investment in Syria and Jordan can still yield significant variation in responses depending on the political, economic, and security conditions of each state. These countries represent vastly different political and security environments that shape how Gulf economic diplomacy operates. Syria is a fragmented post-war environment; it is still economically vulnerable and saturated with foreign influence from Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Jordan is an aid-dependent buffer state: it is politically stable, but economically constrained and resource-limited. There is extensive research on Gulf aid and investment, but there is little work that compares how these practices operate across different contexts. Additionally, no study systematically links economic tools to political influence outcomes across these variations. This remains the central unresolved issue addressed by this study.

The two cases of Syria and Jordan were selected because they vary across dimensions, including state capacity, economic dependence, exposure to external actors, and security role within the region. The variation is crucial for assessing financial engagement, as it affects regional alignment and the balance of power and shapes the political and security effects of Saudi financial



influence. The difference in economic statecraft approaches allows the study to observe the adaptation of Gulf strategy and the variation in political influence outcomes, which helps understand the broader political and security consequences of Gulf economic diplomacy. This logic rationalizes the analysis that follows and supports the use of regional security concepts described in the next section.

The work draws on key concepts of Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), a significant framework for understanding security patterns in the Middle East. RSCT argues that geographically proximate states develop interlinked security dynamics, meaning that a country's stability, threats, or alliances can directly affect those of others. There are four components used in this study: security interdependence, regional polarity/core states, penetration, and buffer states. RSCT is especially relevant in the Middle East, which is understood through interdependence and extensive external penetration. Buzan's theory helps clarify why the Gulf engages differently in Syria and Jordan, as each state's stability level shapes patterns of regional interdependence and influence.

The research centers on economic diplomacy – the strategic use of financial tools to achieve political objectives – while drawing on RSCT to situate these practices within the region's broader security structure. By operating through mechanisms of dependency, incentives, inducements, and punishments, these financial tools create uneven relationships that give Gulf states meaningful political leverage. Through these mechanisms, economic engagement produces security effects – enabling penetration in fragile environments, securing relationships in aid-dependent states, and reinforcing alignment in strong, stable political systems. This approach extends beyond RSCT's usual emphasis on military and political leverage by demonstrating the political implications and



advantages of financial statecraft. This framework provides the foundation for analyzing the political and security outcomes of Gulf economic strategy in following case studies.

This study asks: In what ways does Saudi Arabia's economic diplomacy generate distinct political and security outcomes in Syria and Jordan, given the region's tightly linked security landscape? The question is essential for understanding Gulf foreign policy and regional order, as well as addressing how and why economic tools are replacing military tools. Existing scholars treat economic statecraft and political influence cases separately, never relationally, which is why there is a gap in comparing how these practices operate across different state conditions and how they connect to broader security outcomes.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section will provide background on Saudi economic diplomacy and outline the political and economic conditions in Syria and Jordan. The comparative analysis section will examine how Saudi financial engagement produces distinct political outcomes across states. The paper concludes by outlining the overarching implications of these findings for regional security and the study of economic statecraft.

## **Literature Review**

Across the modern Middle East, financial flows, including aid, investment, and reconstruction funds, are becoming the primary mechanisms for gaining political influence. Gulf monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, made this shift after the Arab uprising in 2011, increasingly using their vast economic resources to shape regional alignments and maintain regional order. Through this new advantage, though, comes a new consideration: how economic diplomacy will work with contrasting regional powers. Although Saudi Arabia's economic engagement is widespread, political and economic differences shape financial engagement with other regional powers: post-war Syria and aid-dependent Jordan have distinct economic and political relations



with Saudi Arabia, an indicator of their state stability. This contrast highlights deeper structural forces that existing literature has not yet fully explored, leading to the research question and further investigation of how differing structural positions within the Regional Security Complex shape the political influence Saudi Arabia's economic diplomacy achieves in aid-dependent Jordan and post-war Syria.

First, this study will draw on the independent variable and the research's core theme: economic diplomacy. The literature will conceptualize how states use financial tools, including aid, investment, trade dependencies, and credit, to shape the political behavior of other states. Foundational works by Baldwin, Hirschman, and Keohane outline financial tools as intentional instruments, as techniques of influence embedded within the pattern of interdependence. The body provides the base for understanding Saudi Arabia's use of economic statecraft as a political tool.

Second, the study will draw on scholars such as Gause, Luciani, Hanieh, Dalacoura, and Kausch to review the political economy of Saudi Arabia's regional influence. In the aftermath of the Arab uprising in 2011, the Gulf monarchy leveraged its vast financial resources to shape regional alignments and maintain regional control. The literature provides tools to understand a geopolitical landscape framed by instability, shifting alliances, and multipolarity caused by Saudi economic tools. It also highlights Saudi Arabia's recent shift from direct military intervention to financial mechanisms. Together, these works explain Saudi economic statecraft and its relation to foreign policy.

Third, the study draws on Buzan and Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to provide a framework for the variation in Saudi economic and political influence. The theory conceptualizes the Middle East as an interdependent and highly penetrated region in which nations experience external pressures and regional influence differently, as they are characterized by



distinct structural positions – core powers, buffer states, or penetrated states. Pour Esmaeili et al., as well as other scholars critique this theory, arguing that the framework does not extend to economic forms of influence, thereby revealing a theoretical gap (Pour Esmaeili et al., 2021). Linking Saudi economic diplomacy to political influence from RSCT facilitates a structural comparison between post-war Syria and aid-dependent Jordan, providing the study with a theoretical backbone and a foundation for the dependent variable, political influence.

### ***Economic Diplomacy and Statecraft***

Economic diplomacy is the core framework for the research, providing a groundwork for understanding why states utilize this method to gain political influence. Rather than relying on direct military intervention or coercive measures, scholars agree that there is an increasing use of economic measures like aid, investment, trade, loans, and reconstruction financing to shape economic behavior. Introductory analyses from David Baldwin and Albert Hirschman create the framework for understanding economic tools as leverage for political influence. This section synthesizes these theoretical contributions to illustrate how economic instruments function as mechanisms of power within international relations. These concepts illustrate how and why Saudi Arabia deploys extensive financial engagements as a strategic approach for political influence.

David Baldwin's research is fundamental for comprehending economic statecraft, as his work defines economic tools as deliberate instruments of influence. He argues that financial mechanisms function similarly to diplomatic or military instruments and are employed strategically to achieve particular political objectives. Baldwin explains in *Economic Statecraft* how these tools are used, focusing on how inducements such as grants, aid, and direct investments can change incentives and ensure that countries adopt political beliefs. Countries adjust their policies to continue receiving economic benefits and avoid losses from potential economic shifts (Baldwin, 1985). In practice, Saudi Arabia's economic strategy mirrors Baldwin's theory, as its



use of aid, investment, and loans serve as clear inducements that align with his understanding of economic statecraft. Hirschman's study offers the structural side of economic influence, as his work focuses more on dependency than on Baldwin's intentional action. Hirschman expands on this by showing that states intentionally create unequal economic relationships in which one side is financially dependent on the other, giving the stronger side more power and making the weaker side more vulnerable. The study indicates that strong states deliberately foster asymmetric economic relationships, in which the dependent state incurs significant exit costs and increased vulnerability, enabling the dominant party to create a dependency that results in political compliance (Hirschman, 1980). The research shows how Saudi Arabia's dominance operates across different countries: Jordan fits Hirschman's model of an aid-dependent, politically sensitive state. Syria, on the other hand, is a post-war state affected by many different groups, making its dependence more complex. Baldwin and Hirschman, using the intentional tools and structural conditions, respectively, form the conceptual basis of economic diplomacy as leverage for achieving national interests. Combined, their insights lay the groundwork for broader theories of interdependence, which expand these ideas through concepts such as sensitivity, vulnerability, and economic coercion.

Building on the foundation provided by Hirschman and Baldwin, Robert O. Keohane's work on interdependence shows that economic statecraft is inherently political, especially when the relationships between two nation-states are asymmetric. In his study, Keohane contrasts sensitivity and vulnerability, arguing that states exposed to less economic risk are automatically stronger and hold more leverage over their more dependent counterparts (Keohane, 1988). This is critical when discussing the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Jordan/Syria, as Saudi Arabia exerts greater leverage over states that require larger financial flows. Krasner, Keohane, and



Katzenstein further reinforce the concept that political economy is always tied to power as states design political structures to advance their own interests. The authors expand interdependence theory by demonstrating that states consistently design trade, aid, and financial arrangements to maintain these power imbalances and to influence weaker states to comply (Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998). Stephanie Lenway's research on sanctions expands this concept, which can also operate in the opposite sense: as a punishment, states can use economic measures coercively, punishing non-compliant states to conform by imposing economic restrictions (Lenway, 1988). Together, these observations frame economic diplomacy as a spectrum of inducements and punishments that shape and reinforce asymmetrical power dynamics. In the Saudi context, it means that aid, tariffs, sanctions, investments, and a multitude of other economic factors serve as political currency to weaker countries. Overall, the interdependence literature clarifies how and why Saudi Arabia uses financial statecraft to exert political influence, thereby pointing the discussion toward an analysis of Gulf economic diplomacy.

### ***The Political Economy of Gulf Influence***

Building on these theories, literature on the Gulf's political economy shows that economic diplomacy has become a central factor of regional influence, especially for Saudi Arabia. Daniel Pontes and various other scholars define GCC-wide patterns of economic diplomacy that routinely include investment partnerships, trade agreements, commercial diplomacy, and intentional foreign policy strategy. By utilizing these methods, Saudi Arabia capitalizes on financial diplomacy to strategically and deliberately maintain regional order and secure political alignment (Pontes et al., 2024). Adam Hanieh adds a structural dimension to Pontes et al.'s insights by explaining how the Gulf's financial surplus penetrates regional economies through investment flows, capital mobility, and elite partnerships, supporting the argument that it is intentionally used as a structural resource.



These financial flows are inherently political, affecting the economic landscape in ways that create new dependencies and embed Gulf states within the domestic economies of other regional powers (Hanieh, 2018).

Giacomo Luciani's study on oil rent emphasizes the previous points because the expansive oil funds have created a regional hierarchy that positions Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia as a financial core, giving them disproportionate power over more vulnerable, non-oil states (Luciani, 2017). Barry Buzan and George Lawson connect these Gulf dynamics to a broader historical shift, arguing that economic penetration has become the norm in the international political economy, as global finance and industrial capitalism have created a new international hierarchy (Buzan & Lawson, 2013). Together, these scholars show that the Gulf's economic influence derives from the strategic use of financial tools, structural economic power imbalance derived from oil surpluses, and broader historical patterns that standardize economic penetration as political influence. In Saudi Arabia's case, the connection of these dynamics is clear: financial surpluses, elite investment networks, and control over regional capital flows indicate a shift towards economic diplomacy as the primary source of political influence.

Research on Saudi foreign policy highlights a consistent set of motivations that shape the monarchy's interactions with the region and clarify the significance of economic diplomacy in its approach. Gregory Gause asserts that regime security concerns primarily shape Saudi policy, as the country seeks to mitigate and manage ideological, political, or military threats to maintain domestic stability. This leads Saudi Arabia to shift towards soft-power tools rather than military force to contain destabilizing forces and shape behavior in other Arab nations (Gause, 2011). Ideological and governance concerns shape Saudi Arabia, as Katerina Dalacoura explains – there is a desire to counter political Islam and the post-2011 transformations that threatened the regional



order. Furthermore, the Gulf monarchy uses its financial surplus to reinforce allied regimes and weaken movements and nation-states that threaten the regional status quo (Dalacoura, 2012). Kristina Kausch presents the idea of strategic hedging – maintaining alliances with multiple actors to minimize uncertainty and risk – as a form of economic engagement to build influence in vulnerable states, maintain crucial alliances, and counter competing regional actors like Turkey and Iran (Kausch, 2014). Hedging is a critical strategy in economic diplomacy as it allows core powers like Saudi Arabia to expand influence without progressing to direct military intervention. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that Saudi Arabia’s main concerns stem from regime security, ideological competition, and geographical balancing, using financial statecraft over military tools to solve its problems effectively. As a result, economic diplomacy becomes the primary mechanism through which Saudi Arabia seeks influence throughout the region. However, both economic diplomacy and the consequential political effects vary across states, depending on levels of stability, economic dependence, and the degree of external penetration, as shown in the case studies of Syria and Jordan.

### ***Regional Interdependence and Theoretical Context***

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever’s Regional Security Complex Theory argues that security dynamics are concentrated at a regional level, where states’ security concerns are deeply interconnected and cannot be understood in isolation. RSCT is based on the core pillar of interdependence: the actions, threats, and vulnerabilities of one state directly affect neighboring states. The distribution of power within the region – its polarity – creates patterns of interdependence as states cluster around dominant powers or balance against threats. The theory captures several components of security interdependence, emphasizing the concept of penetration in which external actors intervene to shape internal security dynamics (Barry Buzan & Ole Waever, 2003). This concept is especially relevant in the Middle East, a region that is constantly influenced by external actors such as the United



States, Iran, Russia, and Turkey; these external powers create a penetrated and fragmented security environment. RSCT provides a strong framework for understanding variation in responses to Saudi economic diplomacy, as their levels of interdependence, penetration, and alignment also vary.

The Middle East is RSCT's perfect case: it forms a highly interconnected security complex marked by rivalry, ideological differences, and prolonged security interdependence. Although Saudi Arabia and Iran are key players in the region, the presence of subregional powers and external actors means the Middle East does not fit the standard bipolar model. Instead, the use of economic diplomacy to shape regional alignments is consistent with the RSCT argument of non-military forms of influence. As Jordan and Syria occupy distinct positions within the regional security complex – Jordan exhibiting high economic interdependence and Syria being heavily penetrated by external actors – their reactions to Saudi economic diplomacy vary.

Pour Esmaeli et al. claim that RSCT underestimates the role of economic diplomacy as an instrument within interlinked security dynamics, making the theory useful but not completely aligned with the research. Since RSCT focuses so heavily on military and security threats, the theory neglects economic statecraft, a component that is especially important in Gulf states. However, the gap is central to the study, which integrates economic diplomacy into Buzan and Waeaver's work involving state variation in the Middle East. Therefore, RSCT provides solid structural logic for understanding regional variation and how different types of diplomacy have effects on states with varying levels of stability, which can be understood through the differences in Saudi response towards Syria and Jordan.

### ***Economic Leverage in the Middle East: Case Literature – Jordan and Syria***

The effects and methods of Gulf economic diplomacy in the Middle East can vary widely, even within the same regional security complex. Jordan and Syria illustrate this variation clearly, as they are two states that reflect different forms of interdependence, shaped by their positions on stability and



security in the region. Jordan is a politically sensitive and economically unstable state; it is aid-dependent, relying primarily on external funding from core regional powers and external actors. Syria, on the other hand, is a post-war state defined by instability and extreme influence by external actors such as Iran, Russia, and Turkey. These political and economic differences affect how the countries respond to Saudi economic tools, which indicates that economic diplomacy may result in different effects on political alignment. The first case, Jordan, demonstrates how Saudi Arabia's strong economic ties give it greater power and help maintain its position.

Jordan is deeply reliant on external aid, with Saudi Arabia historically serving as one of the main sources of investment, aid, and reconstruction financing. Curtis Ryan emphasizes this by explaining how Jordan's foreign policy has generally been shaped by regime security agendas, making foreign aid from Saudi Arabia crucial to its economic and political stability (Ryan, 2004). Additionally, Sean Yom's analysis strengthens the argument by asserting that Jordan's dependence is structural rather than temporary, given the kingdom's limited resources and economic instability, which make it vulnerable to risk and reliant on external support (Yom, 2013). In line with Hirschman's analysis, the dependence produces high exit costs, so the loss or delay of Saudi funding would heavily impact the Jordanian economy, creating fiscal pressure, currency instability, and domestic political strain. Saudi Arabia uses tools such as direct budgetary support, targeted investment projects, and central bank deposits to reinforce Jordan's structural dependence. Most of the Saudi financial support operates as inducements, aligning with Baldwin's explanation that these financial tools encourage political alignment with Saudi agendas. Jordan's position in the regional security network further intensifies this vulnerability, given that the primary reason it can maintain stability is closely tied to the priorities of Gulf partners. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's financial statecraft translates into significant political influence in Jordan, reflected in shifts in diplomatic tone, tempered policy stances, and occasional



alignment with Saudi regional choices. This dynamic is notably different than that of Syria, where Saudi Arabia has been using the same, if not more, tools for a less ideal outcome.

Syria's post-war political economy is shown by its fragmented government, economic collapse, and substantial penetration by external actors. Devadas, Elbadawi, and Loayza reveal that over half of Syria's capital stock has been destroyed since the war, leaving the country unable to rebuild domestically, making it even more exposed to external influence and more extensive penetration. Global powers such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran all have profound influence in Syria's economic and security reconstruction (Devadas, Elbadawi, and Loayza, 2019). Yazigi's analysis of the pre-transition period further highlights how the previous regime weaponized the reconstruction itself by allocating funds to regime-held areas, keeping finances within elite-crony networks, and politicizing property laws, all of which created a system in which Russia and Iran dominated the most lucrative post-war opportunities (Yazigi, 2017). Referring to RSCT, this high level of penetration by external actors dilutes Saudi Arabia's ability to wield its political influence through economic measures. These powers hold deep economic footholds in Syria, making it difficult for Saudi Arabia to become a primary patron, despite the Gulf monarchy's persistent efforts to explore opportunities for reconstruction financing and diplomatic re-engagement. Syria, unlike Jordan, does not rely on Saudi economic assistance, making the exit cost less impactful and the country's foreign policy less sensitive to Saudi inducements. The post-Assad leadership still operates within an environment shaped by Iranian and Russian security guarantees, which limit the economic incentives that Saudi Arabia can provide to them to redirect their political alignment meaningfully. Thus, Saudi Arabia's continued financial engagement fails to generate an equal level of political traction.

Comparatively, Jordan and Syria demonstrate how the use of economic tools can have distinctive effects depending on each state's domestic stability, security position, and diplomatic



relations across the region. Jordan has high levels of economic dependence and low levels of external penetration. It is heavily reliant on Gulf finances, all of which give Saudi leverage through economic incentives when seeking political influence. Saudi influence is weak in Syria, though, as although they have a greater need for assistance to rebuild, there is already widespread influence by Iran and Russia, leading to little Saudi influence in a rebuilding a vulnerable state. The outcomes differ for a couple of reasons, but one of the main ones is external actors: Jordan does not have many strong allegiances to any nation and can receive aid from most countries without having to align politically. In contrast, Syria has deep-rooted alliances and history with powers like Iran and Russia, giving the country a political backbone that economic statecraft can have little to no effect on. Jordan also has a high exit cost with Saudi Arabia, one that differs from exit costs with the United States or the EU: Saudi Arabia provides oil, aid, and stability that makes it difficult for Jordan to completely cut off, whereas Syria has other forms of economic assistance that give it little incentive to politically align with Saudi Arabia for rebuilding purposes. Therefore, although the Gulf monarchy provides extensive assistance to both countries, the nations' differing domestic stability levels and external relations lead to varying political outcomes. In terms of RSCT, Jordan's interdependence only intensifies Saudi influence, while penetration in Syria limits it. This variation affirms the paper's core argument: economic diplomacy is conditional, as similar economic tools yield different outcomes due to dependence, established external influence, and varying security goals.

### ***Research Gap***

The previous literature has clearly demonstrated that economic diplomacy is a central feature of statecraft, with Saudi financial tools affecting political outcomes in aid-dependent or vulnerable states. Despite extensive research on economic statecraft and RSCT separately, there is a lack of studies demonstrating integrated approaches that show how economic tools can develop



political influence. Without understanding this vital variation, explanations of economic diplomacy are incomplete, as they cannot account for contrasting conditions and their effects on financial tools. This study fills the gap by comparing post-war Syria to aid-dependent Jordan, integrating economic diplomacy with RSCT to analyze how structural conditions in these countries mediate Saudi political influence. This contribution is pivotal to understanding Gulf influence – and, more broadly, the influence of core powers – and how it contributes to debates regarding economic statecraft, soft power, and regional security.

### **Theoretical Framework: Economic Diplomacy and Strategic Influence**

This research is grounded in two complementary theories: economic diplomacy and the Regional Security Complex Theory. When analyzed together, they provide the conceptual framework for understanding how Saudi Arabia’s economic tools operate as mechanisms of political influence across the region, and why these tools produce different outcomes in Jordan and post-war Syria.

#### ***Economic Diplomacy***

Economic diplomacy is the use of economic tools like aid, investment, trade, loans, and reconstruction funds in a strategic manner to assist in achieving national political objectives. Baldwin (1985) and Hirschman (1945) are the two prominent scholars who have written about economic statecraft, saying that it enables states to turn resources and wealth into political power by using assets and dependency to change the way other states act. Economic diplomacy functions a type of soft power that aids countries to meet their political goals without using force like military action or direct intervention. It additionally allows Gulf states to preserve order in the region with less political risk and lower costs. In the contemporary Middle East, financial statecraft



has become the primary tool for core powers to gain regional influence, especially in the post-Arab uprising region. Saudi Arabia, the main focus, employs financial statecraft tools such as aid, investment, and reconstruction financing with the goal of gaining influence in weaker, dependent countries. This study builds on works from David Baldwin and Albert Hirschman's theories to understand the link between financial engagement and political outcomes.

Baldwin (1985) and Hirschman (1945) offer a conceptual framework for understanding how economic tools can operate as instruments of influence. Baldwin introduces the idea of economic statecraft through inducements – through aid, loans, and budget support – and penalties – through sanctions and withholding investment – to shape another state's political behavior. Saudi Arabia takes advantage of these tools by using direct budget support, central bank deposits, and investments as inducements and non-disbursement as penalties. Hirschman, on the other hand, demonstrates the way dependence forms: when trade and financial ties are asymmetric, the weaker actor becomes more dependent which consequently leads to high exit costs, giving the stronger actor political leverage. This practice can be seen in Saudi and Jordan/Syria relations since Jordan's high exit costs are due to its chronic aid and capital needs while Syria has a lower exit cost – it depends on multiple partners to reconstruct, so dependence is fragmented. Baldwin's theory on inducements and penalties paired with Hirschman's theories on asymmetric dependence and exit costs provide a concrete foundation to analyze how Saudi financial flows can translate to political power. However, understanding economic leverage alone is ineffective; RSCT explains how and why these tools operate differently across the modern Middle East, balancing and rounding out the study's theoretical framework by situating it in the regional security dynamics of the region.



### ***Regional Security Complex Theory***

While the study is grounded in the logic of economic diplomacy, it is heavily influenced by the *Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)* by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, which argues that security must be analyzed at the regional level, where states' security concerns are closely interconnected due to proximity and interdependence. In the RSCT framework, regions become security complexes, which are networks of states whose conflicts and stability are inseparable.

The key RSCT concepts are:

- *Core/Super powers*: Nation-states within the Regional Security Complex (RSC) that have significant impact on the distribution of power and security dynamics within the region.
- *Penetration*: The active involvement or influence of an external power – either regional or global – in the security dynamics of an RSC.
- *Buffer states*: A nation-state at the center of securitization in the RSC, acting as both a geographical and diplomatic stabilizer state between two rivaling nations.

The Middle East being a highly interdependent and heavily penetrated region defined by its intense multipolar rivalry fits Buzan and Waever's framework. Although this theory is largely focused on military and political relationships, this research extends the framework to incorporate economic interdependence as an essential security linkage, demonstrating how financial tools shape regional hierarchies and stability. Saudi Arabia demonstrates this linkage and acts as a core power within the regional security complex, shaping security outcomes using economic tools. Jordan fits as a buffer state given its dependency and reliance on external support for stability while Syria is the penetrated state with multiple actors competing for influence. Given that buffer states are more dependent on core powers than penetrated states, RSCT predicts that Saudi economic tools should be more effective and lead to more influence in Jordan over Syria.



### ***Economic Diplomacy within Regional Security Dynamics***

By integrating economic diplomacy with RSCT, this study conceptualizes Gulf financial tools not merely as economic transactions but as mechanisms of regional security governance. Economic leverage has become a way for Saudi Arabia to reinforce alliances, balance other core rivalries, and shape regional alignment without using hard power. The RSCT theory clarifies nation-states roles and therefore their dependence within the complex: Jordan is a buffer state that is structurally more sensitive to Saudi inducements than Syria, which is a penetrated state that can have little political sway due to diluted Saudi influence and its fragmented dependence. Combined, the framework anticipates variation in the political effects of Saudi economic tools that the case studies will further analyze.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research Design***

This study is primarily a qualitative comparative case study designed to determine the ways in which Gulf States take full advantage of economic investment as a tool of political influence. A qualitative design is necessary because many of the factors in the research – including informal deal-making, elite bargaining, and promises made in return for financial help – are not properly captured through quantitative data sets. The research is more focused on observing how financial tools translate to political power within a regional security environment rather than the magnitude of the statistical effects. The case study reflects a context-dependent mechanism that is tied to regional security structures, allowing for a more purposeful application of each country's role in RSCT's logic. The qualitative method allows for a more narrowed scope that captures nuance, unofficial bargaining, and regime survival dynamics within the broader complexities of regional



politics, asymmetric relationships, and other important contextual factors that shape relationships between economic mechanisms and diplomatic behavior.

The research introduces a structured-focused comparison to ensure consistency across both cases. “Structured” refers to the same set of guiding questions that are applied to each case, allowing for consistency when comparing Jordan and Syria; “focused” limits the dimension which is being studied, homing in on Saudi economic investment as a foreign policy instrument instead of analyzing general interstate actions. This combination allows for a complete and objective evaluation of whether Gulf strategies produce different political outcomes under different domestic conditions by reducing the variation in measurement, further strengthening the internal validity.

Comparison is necessary to the study as Syria and Jordan reflect two drastically contrasting environments with the same exposure to Saudi influence in the regional security complex, exposing variation in state stability, regime vulnerability, and economic dependence. Syria is a post-war, economically and politically fragmented state that serves as a reconstruction arena for various external actors. Conversely, Jordan is a politically stable state with chronic fiscal dependency on foreign actors, acting as a long-standing buffer state within the region. These contrasts allow for theory refinement, providing stability conditions as a key moderating variable for observing how Gulf economic instruments differ with nations that have contrasting domestic characteristics while also analyzing how these instruments produce different political effects. This logic supports causal inference about how and why economic statecraft promotes political influence. Having established a comparative design that guides this research, the next section outlines the sources and indicators that made it possible to trace the sequence of economic tools and political responses in each case.



### ***Data Collection***

The study relies on a range of primary and secondary materials to trace political influence back to economic tools. This includes policy briefs, government statements, official agreements, and peer-reviewed analyses that illustrate the stated objectives behind Saudi economic engagement. Economic indicators from the World Bank, the IMF, and the IISS provide measurable evidence of financial flows and pressure leading to economic leverage reflected in data about debt, aid, investment flows, and GDP. Additional understanding is pulled from academic research, media reporting, and research analyses to embed the financial commitments and their political responses to them. On occasion, sovereign wealth fund documentation and investment verifies the timelines and scale of economic involvement. Collectively, these works capture both what Saudi Arabia does financially and how involved states react politically.

Triangulation is necessary to increase credibility: official announcements and claims are cross-checked against economic data and independent sources are compared before accepting claims. Although limitations exist – especially considering transparency limitations from Syria’s limited and inconsistent data on wartime economy – multiple source types ensure that political influence is evaluated through material indicators and visible shifts in policy behavior. The data being collected traces observable behavior, tracking financial input’s effect on political and security responses.

### ***Analytical Framework***

The analytical structure represents the dual theoretical foundation of the study. Economic diplomacy provides the independent variable, measured through observable economic tools such as loans, deposits, direct aid, investment agreements, and reconstruction financing, which Saudi Arabia employs strategically to secure political leverage. Political influence serves as the



dependent variable, implemented through indicators including foreign policy alignment with Saudi priorities, diplomatic coordination, voting behavior, and regime support practices during crises. The sequencing of political outcomes relative to financial interventions is analyzed to assess whether the Gulf monarchy's economic actions have a direct linkage to changes in influence. This method allows the study to distinguish causation from correlation, enabling the analysis of influence at not only the economic level, but also in terms of the political responses and their broader security implications within the regional complex.

Regional Security Complex Theory frames how these economic-political linkages are assessed in a security context. Considering the Middle East is an interdependent and penetrated region, Saudi's actions as a core power reflect their ability to shape regional security dynamics. Penetration is examined as the degree to which Saudi Arabia gains access within domestic political-economic spaces: referencing Saudi's ability to secure reconstruction opportunities in Syria as well as elite economic partnerships in Jordan. The category is also studied through the volume of Syria's penetration from external actors as a fragmented, post-war state. Interdependence is explored through indicators of fiscal instability and economic reliance including budget support and the structural exit costs that are associated with losing Saudi financial support. Regional polarity and hierarchy reflect on the shifts of nation-states foreign policy to align more with Saudi objectives, including increased diplomatic relations and regional positioning with Gulf-led coalitions. RSCT structures provide a method for identifying whether Saudi economic tools can influence, reinforce dependency, or reshape security roles. Instead of simply describing regional security dynamics, the analysis tracks how measurable economic activity manifests as coding influence patterns of political alignment and influence across the region.



### *Comparative Logic and Expectations*

The comparative logic of the study centers around how variation in domestic stability and external penetration controls the effectiveness of Saudi financial statecraft. Syria and Jordan share regional proximity and longstanding ties to Saudi Arabia, indicating that they function within the same security dynamic. However, there are several factors in state capacity and alignment structures which make them different. Jordan is an aid-reliant monarchy with limited external penetration but high economic dependency. Syria, as mentioned beforehand, has undergone regime collapse and is now governed under a transitional order, which further introduces high uncertainty and competing external influences, making it challenging for Saudi Arabia to use economic interventions for political influence. By comparing the economic diplomacy under two contrasting states, the study isolates how structural instability and political upheaval mediate the link between economic mechanisms and political outcomes.

Based on this framework, the study presents the following expectations. In Jordan, where institutional continuity, economic dependency, and limited external competition remain, Saudi economic diplomacy likely presents as a strong and stable political influence which is further reinforced through diplomatic alignment, foreign policy coordination, and cooperation on regional security goals. However, the expectation for Syria is vastly different: due to the competition of multiple external actors – including some that already have influence in the country – as well as the internal fragmentation due to the collapse of the previous regime, Saudi financial engagement is diluted and cannot generate substantive and reinforced political loyalty. Instead, the outcomes could be conditional depending on the strategy of the transitional government and power brokers. These expectations reflect a refined interpretation of regional dynamics under the lens of regional security theory: economic statecraft's effectiveness is highly dependent on domestic conditions



and external competition. These predictions therefore provide a direct test of how RSCT's concepts of penetration and interdependence function when economic diplomacy is the main tool of influence.

### ***Evaluation Criteria and Limitations***

To examine the effectiveness of Saudi economic diplomacy, the analysis assesses if observable shifts in political behavior follow financial activity in a way that aligns with Saudi regional priorities. Support for the theoretical argument appears when economic engagement in Jordan strengthens interdependence and produces political alignment, whereas outcomes in Syria remain limited due to constrained penetration and unstable influence. However, particularly in Syria, failure to shift alignment towards Saudi agendas even when financial dependence is present may reflect a need to refine RSCT accounts for economic statecraft in rapidly changing landscapes. The goal is not only to document patterns of Gulf financial and political behavior, but also to determine whether RSCT can generate predictable political outcomes through economic leverage.

There are limitations that shape this evaluation. Syria is especially restricted in terms of data transparency: it is mainly conflict-driven economic reporting and often is incomplete or inconsistent. Additionally, there is also limited transparency about Saudi sovereign wealth funds and private capital, making it difficult to track the economic tools that can produce political influence. There is also an attribution complexity as the states studied aren't controlled and isolated environments. Syria's case is especially complicated as it is difficult to isolate shifts towards Saudi objectives due to multiple external actors. However, these challenges are addressed through the triangulation process across independent data sources as well as process-tracing techniques that establish a path between financial action and political response. Therefore, while analysis remains



cautious in its causal claims, it provides a foundation for examining how economic diplomacy operates as a tool of regional security management.

## **Case Studies: Gulf Economic Diplomacy in Syria and Jordan**

### ***Case Study 1: Syria (Penetration)***

Post-war Syria reflects on of the most fragmented political, economic, and security environments in the Middle East. After the collapse of the Assad regime, a mix of transitional authorities, local elite power brokers, and external actors now shape the institutional void left behind. Without a unifying state apparatus to anchor their presence, regional and global penetration has intensified, as Iran, Russia, and Turkey all attempt to secure surviving elements of influence built during the war. For Saudi Arabia, the current predicament is how to re-enter this environment after a decade of disengagement and lost leverage. This makes Syria a clear application of RSCT's logic of penetration: a powerful external actor attempting to insert influence into a security complex where rival actors already have deep military, economic, and ideological footholds. Direct political engagement in a transitional setting is risky and unpredictable, so Saudi Arabia has resorted to using economic diplomacy through forms of humanitarian relief, reconstruction financing, and selective engagement with transitional institutions to rebuild influence. These tools allow the Gulf monarch to re-establish influence and shape the emerging post-Assad order without exerting political intervention.

Post-Assad, Saudi Arabia's re-engagement with Syria was introduced through humanitarian channels and then strategically targeted financial interventions rather than overt political alignment with new authorities. The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSrelief) have gradually expanded operations in Syria, providing more than USD 528 million in



humanitarian assistance by mid-2025, including food, health, shelter, and winterization initiatives across multiple affected areas (Relief Web, 2025). These actions signaled the Gulf monarchy's willingness to re-insert itself as a major humanitarian partner in the Syrian arena, especially in moments of need. Serving as an initial olive branch, Saudi humanitarian aid built a soft form of engagement, acting as a precursor to the monarchy's more explicit political-economic role. In 2025, Saudi Arabia partnered with Qatar and cleared around USD 15.5 million in Syrian overdue financial commitments to the World Bank's International Development Association, a move that helped restore Syria's eligibility for new World Bank loans and grants (World Bank, 2025). This solution was generally interpreted as a key milestone in the country's post-conflict reconstruction track following the fall of the Assad regime. In RSCT terms, these steps demonstrate a phased penetration strategy: Saudi Arabia positions itself as a central broker to future Syrian reconstruction funds without tying itself to any single faction within the transitional political order through neutral humanitarian relief and multilateral debt clearance. For the monarchy, it is a low-risk, low-politics tool that helps rebuild its presence and reputation in the country and region.

With Syria's eligibility for multilateral finance restored, the post-Assad transitional government has moved to systematize reconstruction, creating formal frameworks that enable Gulf capital to flow in. In mid-2025, the transitional government established the Supreme Council for Economic Development, a body that is tasked with overseeing economic planning, investment, and reconstruction across the country (Asia House, 2025). This institutional move reflected an effort to centralize authority in the fragmented landscape and facilitate channels for foreign investors. In tandem, according to an announcement by Syria's finance minister in October 2025, private-sector channels are also re-emerging, with Saudi banking institutions planning to re-enter the Syrian market with new licensing and investment – most notably through the Saudi-backed



Elaf Fund – to finance reconstruction projects. These investments target sectors central to rebuilding energy, telecommunications, and industrial production (Al-Gharbi Al-Eqtisadiyah, 2025) For Syria, the step from humanitarian assistance to capital investment represents the second level of Gulf penetration: embedding influence in the country’s emerging economic architecture rather than solely providing through relief channels. The investment funds, industry-specific financing, and the creation of state-level economic bodies enable Saudi Arabia to shape credit flows, regulatory norms, and priority sectors during the transformational period in Syria’s political transition. However, the strategy remains restricted by government vulnerabilities, unclear property rights, and competition from other external actors, which invites conditions for Gulf investment while also complicating the depth of influence the monarchy can achieve.

On top of direct investment channels, Saudi Arabia has also developed political influence in Syria through leading regional and multilateral forums that are able to structure the broader landscape in which Syrian reconstruction takes shape. At the beginning of 2023, the Arab League renewed engagement with Syria; Saudi Arabia played a central role in these joint Arab consultations, ministerial meetings, and diplomatic working groups that structured the country’s stabilization direction (Vercesi, 2025). These meetings aided in the creation of regional government structures through which reconstruction and political stabilization were coordinated. Without having to commit to unconditional funding, these meetings gave Saudi Arabia the ability to influence humanitarian access, reconstruction priorities, and the political expectations for the transitional government. Regional reporting from 2023 to 2025 shows that Saudi Arabia consistently prioritized two goals within these channels of diplomacy: promoting institutional forums as prerequisites for large-scale economic support and countering Iranian entrenchments, positioning Saudi Arabia as a key actor and enabler of the conditions where the reconstruction will



proceed (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2024). Through this regional setup that Saudi Arabia has developed, it is able to exert a form of institutional gatekeeping that shapes not only economic flows but also the standards and political commitments expected of Syria during its transition and reconstruction. Saudi Arabia has figured out a way around direct political intervention by using Arab League frameworks, donor coordination platforms, and high-level regional consultations to influence the pathway of reconstruction in the strategic orientation of the transitional authorities (Alghamdi, 2025). From an RSCT perspective, this step represents the third and last stage of penetration: the monarchy is operating within the regional security complex by shaping multilateral rules and political expectations that define Syria's reengagement into the Arab region rather than going through military or coercive means. This leveled method gives Saudi Arabia leverage over the post-conflict regional order while avoiding the liabilities that are associated with direct alignment with any single faction inside Syria.

Despite Saudi Arabia's efforts to gain political influence through economic tools, the capacity of Saudi economic diplomacy in Syria remains structurally restricted. The post-Assad landscape is still heavily fragmented, with Turkey, Iran, and Russia maintaining deep military, commercial, and logistical ties that limit the depth of any new external influence (Reuters, 2024). Reporting throughout 2024 to 2025 emphasizes that Iranian-backed networks continue to function in local security and economic industries across several regions, while Turkish-supported factions maintain control over northwest Syria. Russia retains influence over strategic sectors such as energy, natural resources, and infrastructure contracts. This complex form of penetration significantly reduces the chance in which Saudi Arabia can translate financial into stable political alignment. Simultaneously, Syria's new government environment is defined by weak regulatory institutions, uncertain property rights, and persistent corruption, which attract conditions that are



widely identified as major deterrents to long-term capital. Analysis from Asia House describe Syria as a “governance fragile” and “high risk” investment environment, explaining that Gulf companies remain cautious about committing funds due to unclear investment protections and unpredictable legal frameworks. These institutional restraints constrain the potential of economic diplomacy: there is no way that investment can reliably generate influence when the mechanisms require to protect, coordinate and institutionalized that investment is underdeveloped. From an RSCT perspective, these economic dynamics show why Syria is still limited from Saudi influence. Saudi Arabia can reenter the Syrian security complex through humanitarian aid, multilateral channels, and emerging investment vehicles, however the broader regional environment which is defined by fragmented dependence, intense competition, and rival power involvement, prevent these tools from translating into stable political leverage. This environment stands in contrast to Jordan, where aligned interests, predictable institutions, and a unified state allow economic diplomacy to operate as a far more effective influence generating mechanism.

### ***Case Study 2: Jordan (Buffer State)***

Historically, Jordan has occupied a structurally distinct position in the regional security complex: rather than a contested, unstable nation, it functions as a buffer state whose stability is necessary for the wider Arab regional order (Chatham House, 2022). It is situated between multiple conflict zones – Iraq to the east, Syria to the north, and the Israel-Palestine area to the West. Jordan’s security strategy rests on containing external instability and preserving steady, predictable regional alignments. For decades, this structure has been supported and supplemented through political coordination and strong economic ties with Gulf actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, whose financial support has played a foundational role in sustaining Jordan’s economic stability. Reuters reports that during moments of economic strain, such as the 2018 protests over IMF-backed



austerity, Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, provided USD 2.5 billion in emergency support to stabilize the Hashemite Kingdom (Reuters, 2018). Jordan also receives long-term flows from the GCC, including a USD 5 billion development fund, remittances from Jordanian workers in Gulf economies, and Saudi-sponsored budget support (World Bank Remittance Data, 2023). These funds have firmly situated Jordan within a durable network of economic interdependence. Unlike Syria's fragmented post-conflict environment, Jordan's stable state institutions and long-standing political alignment allow Saudi Arabia to use economic diplomacy as a tool of stabilization rather than a mechanism of penetration, reinforcing Jordan's primary role as a reliable and predictable actor in the regional security complex.

Jordan's moments of economic crisis reveal how crucial Gulf economic diplomacy is to maintaining Jordan's financial and institutional stability. During the 2011-2015 period, the GCC's USD 5 billion development program served as an early example of large-scale Gulf stabilization support when Jordan faced fiscal pressure. In particular, the program targeted infrastructure, energy, rising debt, and the economic fallout from regional instability, further reinforcing the view that the Gulf's economic tools are a mechanism of stabilization. The Gulf aided Jordan again in the 2018 Mecca summit bailout: Saudi Arabia teamed up with Kuwait and the UAE to provide a USD 2.5 billion support package after the 2018 protests. The support package consisted of central bank deposits, annual budget grants, concessional development loans, and World Bank credit guarantees, which Reuters reported as necessary to prevent further economic deterioration. As a result, Jordan was able to avert physical and economic collapse, stabilizing the monarchy and containing the domestic unrest. However, Jordan's dependence requires more than the inputs of flows in crises. Its fiscal model requires periodic external injections to stabilize the institution, further leaning away from the argument that external investments are episodic events and instead



showing they are long-term patterns and opportunities for Gulf states to maintain a strategically aligned partner. The IMF and the World Bank consistently highlight Jordan's reliance on external budget support to sustain social spending, manage debt obligations, and absorb the burdens associated with hosting millions of refugees from across the region. In terms of RSCT, these inputs demonstrate the logic of stabilization: Gulf aid functions to strengthen an already aligned and cooperative buffer state, not to generate new influence. This alignment is important for Saudi Arabia because it reduces the likelihood of domestic upheaval and preserves a predictable political order that is central to multiple conflict-prone zones, a strategic objective Saudi Arabia has sought since the 2011 Arab Spring. Where Syria has external actors that compete for influence, Gulf economic engagement serves as a strong, consistent flow of investment and aid that maintains equilibrium within the regional security complex rather than trying to reshape it.

Beyond crisis bailouts, Saudi Arabia maintains its relationship with Jordan through major investment vehicles that link the kingdom's economic trajectory to the Gulf's. The main form of these investments is the Saudi-Jordanian Investment Fund (SJIF): a joint investment fund established in 2017 with a capital commitment of USD 3 billion, 90% of which is owned by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and the remainder by a consortium of 16 Jordanian banks (Reuters 2017; SJIF 2023). One of the fund's main projects is a medical university and teaching hospital costing USD 400 million in Amman, which was designed to expand Jordan's health and education sectors while also having an impact on jobs, medical tourism, and capacity building (SJIF 2023). The second flagship project of the SJIF was the JOD 500 million railway and dry port logistics project that was tied to Aqaba, a coastal city on the Red Sea. This railway that connects Aqaba to Ma'an strengthens Jordan's logistics capacity and its role in the region as a transit hub (Reuters, 2023). These projects show how Saudi economic diplomacy in Jordan is centered around



interdependence rather than leverage, with the goal of strengthening Jordan's infrastructure, creating employment, and integrating Jordan into the broader Gulf economic space. Additionally, deepening investment is reflected in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy, which prioritizes political cooperation and economic integration as a foreign-policy objective. The Saudi-Jordanian Investment Fund, which is primarily financed by the Public Investment Fund, symbolizes how financial partnership reinforces political alignment. These works also ground Saudi Arabia in Jordanian sectors as they aid in long-term development rather than solely addressing immediate fiscal pressures. In RSCT terms, these actions reflect on institutionalized stabilization rather than penetration: the investment flows and aid reinforce a cooperative buffer state and strengthen its institutional resilience, keeping the kingdom predictable and aligned with Saudi agendas.

The sheer depth of these economic ties is further amplified by links such as labor mobility and remittances, which further tie Jordan's stability to its Gulf partners. According to World Bank data, Jordan receives between USD 3 and 3.5 billion in remittances annually, which is around 8 to 10% of its GDP (World Bank Remittance Data, 2023). A vast majority of these remittances originate from Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. These inflows serve as a buffer for Jordanian households, easing the pressures of the unstable domestic labor market and reducing fiscal strain on the state by supplementing income without requiring government expenditure. These structural ties to the Gulf bloc incentivize Jordan to maintain its economic dependence on the Gulf labor markets, as these ties generate long-term incentives for policy coordination and political alignment with Saudi Arabia. In the context of RSCT, this represents a form of structural stabilization: the Gulf's socioeconomic ties with Jordan face no meaningful rivals and thus reinforce a predictable, cooperative relationship, one that differs from Syria, where external actors compete for a presence. These connections help explain why economic diplomacy is more effective in Jordan because its



political cooperation and extensive inputs allow economic engagement to produce lasting effects. It is important to note that Saudi-Jordanian relations have experienced periods of reduced coordination in the past decade, particularly when regional priorities diverged. However, despite occasional tension, the structural interdependence and importance of the relationships have led to continued cooperation, supporting the argument that financial tools continue to have a meaningful place in the Hashemite kingdom.

Unlike Syria, Saudi economic diplomacy is far more effective in Jordan because the kingdom provides an economic and political environment capable of absorbing and embracing economic support, thereby translating it into stable outcomes. The kingdom's consistent alignment with the Gulf bloc, paired with the lack of competition from external actors means there is no need for Saudi Arabia to build influence, which further increases the effectiveness of its engagement. Jordan fits the logic of stabilization as the economic flows reinforce an already cooperative buffer state whose strategic predictability benefits the more expansive regional security complex. The disparity between Syrian and Jordanian economic engagement with Saudi Arabia underscores why Gulf tools generate more influence in Jordan yet remain conditional and constrained in Syria, providing a foundation for the comparative analysis that follows.

### **Comparative Analysis**

The purpose of comparing Syria and Jordan was to illustrate how Saudi Arabia forms its economic diplomacy according to the political and institutional conditions of each state. When studied through the lens of the Regional Security Complex Theory, the cases reveal that financial engagement is not solely reactive. Instead, it is intentionally coordinated with each state's conditions in mind, including political stability, regime strength, and each state's security role. By comparing the two cases, a pattern emerges of Saudi Arabia's economic activity within the



regional security complex: this form of diplomacy functions as a flexible instrument of influence, with its purpose shaped by the role each country occupies within the security complex. This comparison also further exposes a broader Gulf strategy, as the shift towards economic tools presents a new dimension of diplomacy. This section outlines how these contrasting strategies manifest in Syria and Jordan and what their differences reveal about the broader logic of Gulf financial statecraft.

Considering Syria's fragmented conditions and post-war landscape, the environment is highly susceptible to external penetration from multiple regional and international actors as they attempt to compete for influence. For Saudi Arabia, this setting is viewed as an opportunity to re-enter after decades of being sidelined, with the goal of reshaping parts of the post-war political order and counterbalancing rival influences within the nation. The economic instruments used in this context included reconstruction promises, sovereign wealth fund signals, calibrated diplomatic engagement, humanitarian assistance, and selective investment, all of which were deployed cautiously and symbolically rather than as comprehensive economic agreements. These tools allow the absolute monarchy to exert influence in a competitive landscape but reflect the selective nature and constraints of operating in a fractured political economy defined by shifting alliances, overlapping jurisdictions, and unstructured institutions. In this re-engagement, it also emphasizes Saudi attempts to dilute rival influences, especially those of an already-weakened Iran. The purpose of reentry focuses more on political positioning than on stabilization, as large inflows of money and influence would not yield a parallel political outcome. Together, these dynamics position Syria at the penetration-oriented end of the spectrum, where Saudi diplomatic strategy is defined by limited engagement, opportunistic inflows, and efforts to influence a competitive security environment.



In contrast to the competitive landscape in Syria, Jordan presents an institutionally coherent and politically stable case in which Saudi economic diplomacy operates through stabilization rather than penetration. Jordan's conditions, including its position as a buffer state and its established alignment with Gulf partners, create a space for a predictable security relationship in which the monarchy can prioritize regime stability over external competition. Within this context, Saudi Arabia harnesses their financial support through direct budget assistance, labor opportunities for Jordanian workers in Gulf states, and GCC development funds to help bolster Jordan's economic stability and prevent destabilizing shocks. These instruments highlight the structured and enduring nature of Saudi engagement and mirror RSCT's logic of interdependence. Given Jordan's role as a buffer state whose stability underpins the wider regional security architecture, Saudi financial support is oriented toward maintaining existing political arrangements rather than reshaping them. It is also important to note that this is a long-term relationship, not situational or opportunistic like Syria's case; Saudi Arabia puts great effort into maintaining this alignment, considering Jordan's strategic geography and diplomatic role and the kingdom's benefit of being a stable, predictable state for the region. For Saudi Arabia, Jordan represents the stabilizing end of the spectrum, as evidenced by its long-standing political coordination aimed at preserving an aligned and economically vulnerable partner.

A clearer strategic pattern emerges when the two cases are examined together: Saudi Arabia adapts its economic diplomacy to the structural environment of each state, employing penetration in Syria and stabilization in Jordan. Different political and security opportunity structures explain why strategies shift: Saudi strategy shifts because conditions differ, not because objectives do. In Syria's landscape, economic engagement functions as a method to reinsert influence and navigate rival actor presence, while Jordan's setting is more predictable and stable,



in which financial support reinforces an existing alignment and minimizes the risk that could disrupt the regional order. RSCT clarifies this contrast by showing how factors such as state capacity, external actor density, and security roles shape which economic tools are available and effective in each case. This further reflects the pattern shown in the two cases: fragmentation invites selective, competitive, and opportunistic tools, possibly with little political influence, while stability provides long-term, institutionalized support through financial means. This demonstrates that Saudi economic diplomacy is systematic and intentional, emphasizing that financial tools are tailored to each state's security role and structural conditions rather than applying a uniform strategy across the region.

Together, these cases reveal an overarching insight: Saudi Arabia uses a deliberate, coherent pattern of strategic logic, adapting to the structural conditions of the state. RSCT helps emphasize this pattern by showing how different conditions and factors shape the range of economic tools that are viable in each setting. Instead of reflecting on the success or failure of Saudi engagement, the comparison ultimately illustrates the logic through which financial statecraft is matched to different security contexts: competitive arenas open a space for selective, influence-seeking economic gestures, while strategically aligned and cooperative states invite a more institutionalized and stabilizing form of support. The theory underscores that economic diplomacy is adaptive and corresponds to structural constraints present within each national setting. Rather than observing future impact, this section lays the groundwork for understanding how and why Saudi strategies differ, setting the stage for subsequent discussion of the expectations derived from these patterns.



## **Findings**

This study found that Saudi Arabia has made economic diplomacy its central regional strategy, using financial mechanisms as a strategic, systematic tool to both substitute for and complement hard-power methods. By allocating investments, aid, deposits, and development financing towards target states, Saudi Arabia has transformed financial statecraft into a form of political leverage, deepening their influence in the region. The comparative patterns demonstrated that economic engagement, especially in recent times, has become a more effective mechanism for Saudi Arabia to manage alliances, respond to geopolitical competition, and position itself within the broader regional hierarchy. The following subsections expand on these results by outlining the broader patterns that emerge from this analysis and demonstrating how Saudi economic diplomacy functions as a structured mechanism of regional influence within the security complex.

### ***Economic Diplomacy as the Core of Saudi Arabia's Regional Strategy***

The evidence from the study supports the finding that Saudi Arabia now uses economic diplomacy as its primary foreign-policy mechanism, reflecting their strategic, systematic shift rather than spontaneous economic activity. Rather than merely operating alongside traditional diplomatic mechanisms, the research shows that financial tools are increasingly being used as substitutes for hard-power practices, further shaping political alignment and behaviors through dependence. Saudi Arabia applies financial tools such as SWF investments, development financing, remittances, aid, and deposits in a way that indicates strategic coordination rather than isolated acts of assistance. These instruments create an asymmetrical financial relationship in which one state has developed sustained leverage over a long period and has made the recipient state dependent on economic support, helping to maintain partnerships and political alignment.



Across the region, this pattern of economic input has signaled a clear shift towards financial statecraft, which Saudi Arabia has sought to use to shape its regional behavior and assert its role within the regional security landscape.

Saudi Arabia's sudden increase in energy resources in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – such as oil revenue, fiscal surpluses, SWF capacity, and low-cost, large-scale financial transfers – has given it a structural advantage in the region, allowing it to sustain influence at relatively low cost. Where military intervention is costly, risky, and not always efficient, economical intervention can avoid these constraints and offers a flexible, low-risk way to shape regional dynamics. The ability to preserve its international image, avoid domestic backlash, and align with global norms of development engagement is why economic diplomacy is so attractive to Saudi Arabia: it allows it to foster influence while avoiding reputational risks. In a region characterized by economic fragility, financial support can be instrumentalized as a particularly effective tool: it creates a dependence for many states that rely on external assistance to stabilize budgets and navigate internal economic pressures. Thus, the findings show that Saudi Arabia has the capacity to meet the needs that give it asymmetric influence, making economic diplomacy a highly effective tool for controlling the regional security complex.

The Gulf monarchy's use of economic diplomacy reinforces its leadership in the region, as its financial tools create dependencies that tie weaker, economically vulnerable states to Saudi Arabia's political objectives. These financial ties create repeated actions and entrenched expectations that institutionalize political relations and produce strong channels of influence. This form of leverage is hard to realize, as it generally occurs in places with high regional competition: so, states like the UAE, Qatar, Turkey, and Iran also rely on economic engagement as a source of influence. Saudi Arabia differs, though, in that it can deploy large sums of financial resources to



maintain regional superiority and shape regional alignments in ways that reflect its political and security priorities. These findings indicate that in the long term, economic diplomacy is not solely a tactical tool but a core mechanism through which Saudi Arabia can restructure relationships, manage interdependence, and shape the broader regional security complex. The following section explores how these strategy manifests across varying security environments.

### ***Variation in Influence Across Security Environments***

The research demonstrates systematic variation in Saudi influence across recipient-state conditions, showing that the effectiveness of financial statecraft is shaped more by recipient-state conditions than by Saudi objectives. While Saudi Arabia uses similar instruments across the region, the political effects of these tools vary in terms of regime stability, institutional consistency, and the volume of external actors. Saudi Arabia can function as a selective mechanism of penetration in fragmented states while serving as a stable actor of reinforcement for aligned ones, demonstrating its ability to adapt to different environments based on their conditions.

Consequently, when institutional instability prevails, Saudi influence and economic activity are weakened, producing limited and inconsistent political effects. High levels of penetration and a fragmented transitional government limit the tools that the Gulf monarchy can use to accumulate meaningful influence. In contrast, in stable environments with a controlled political order, financial ties can be absorbed into long-term state institutions, creating a stable inflow of long-term aid programs, remittance flows, and development financing. The findings establish a clear pattern of the variation in economic diplomacy: these financial tools are not deployed uniformly; instead, they are used strategically, adapting to the structural environment to optimize effectiveness.



The findings further reflect on how Saudi Arabia adapts the form and intensity of economic engagement to the conditions of each environment. In highly penetrated competitive environments, Saudi Arabia is selective and limited in its economic engagement, using any activity as a symbol of presence without deep commitment or risk. On the other hand, Saudi economic engagement is sustained, institutionalized, and predictable in stable environments. This engagement prompts extended development frameworks and established relationships. This adaptation strategy reflects a cost-benefit logic that Saudi Arabia pursues through economic diplomacy; it seeks to optimize the relationship between political outcomes and financial diplomacy, maximizing benefits while minimizing risk.

Together, these variations reveal a flexible yet coherent strategy in which Saudi Arabia prevents any alteration of its overarching political objectives by using economic diplomacy to manage diverse security challenges. While the intensity and degree of influence vary across the region, Saudi Arabia consistently uses financial tools to pursue alignment, maintain order, and limit the expansion of regional powers. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's influence is best understood within the context of the state's conditions rather than as a universally transformative method for shaping institutional behavior. This conclusion only enhances the understanding of Saudi foreign-policy behavior by showing the adaptability and consistency of the kingdom's economic tools. The following subsection further develops these implications by linking regional order to economic statecraft.

### ***Economic Statecraft as a Mechanism of Regional Order Maintenance***

Saudi Arabia uses economic diplomacy not just as a form of bilateral alignment but to maintain the broader regional order. The monarchy can stabilize key partners and manage patterns of regional interdependence through financial statecraft, thereby reinforcing its political



alignments. Economic ties, such as aid, labor market absorption, or development financing, operate as governance tools that bind states into predictable patterns of cooperation within the security complex. This form of statecraft reduces the need for coercive interventions while still exerting meaningful influence over the region's dynamics. Collectively, these findings suggest that economic diplomacy functions as a key tool for shaping regional order and influencing state behavior within it.

Another motive for Saudi Arabia's economic diplomacy is to limit the influence of rivals, including Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE. Financial leverage provides a method to counteract other regional influences, especially in nations like Syria, where military competition would be costly and destabilizing. Through mechanisms such as targeted aid, market access, and investment signals, Saudi Arabia can maintain a presence in the region and in strategically important states without becoming involved in confrontation or escalation. These channels help Saudi Arabia preserve its leadership position in the area while limiting opportunities for rival actors to expand their influence and undertake extensive action. As a result, economic statecraft can shape competitive dynamics while also serving as a stabilizing instrument.

These patterns further demonstrate how the Gulf monarchy institutionalizes long-term dependencies that reinforce its position within the regional hierarchy. These dependencies create stable alliance patterns and predictable alignment, with weaker states tending to depend on Saudi economic support, thereby aligning with their political preferences and stabilizing the broader network of political relationships. Fiscal ties strengthen the regional hierarchy, with Saudi Arabia at the center, as they provide broad economic security in a region defined by uneven development and financial volatility. In such an interconnected security complex, leveraged economic relationships shape the incentives and constraints of regional players. Saudi Arabia has shifted its



principal diplomatic mechanism to economic statecraft, allowing it to influence the long-term environment in the Middle East.

### ***Theoretical Implications for RSCT and Economic Statecraft***

The findings reinforce RSCT's core assumption that racial dynamics are interdependent and vary in security roles. Within the dynamic, economic diplomacy functions as a security behavior that aligns with RSCT predictions by structuring alignments and managing external threats through financial engagement. These results were satisfactory, as RSCT demonstrated that economic interdependence is an underemphasized yet crucial dimension of regional security interaction, especially in settings where military and traditional forms of intervention produced lackluster outcomes. RSCT aided the study by explaining why Saudi financial tools produced different outcomes across Syria and Jordan. The institutional conditions of each state and their exposure to external actors determined how financial diplomacy functions within the broader environment. These findings support RSCT but also extend it by highlighting the importance of economic mechanisms in contemporary regional security politics.

These findings also advance theories of economic statecraft by showing how the tools operate within a broader security dynamic rather than solely at the bilateral level. Economic diplomacy in the Middle East is dependent on the wider regional order, not on the relationships between the two countries. The research reveals variation in effectiveness depending on structural conditions, with more stable states absorbing Saudi Arabia's economic and political presence. This also adds nuance to existing theories, which often assume uniformity as being applicable across all contexts. Instead, it reveals that economic statecraft is context-dependent and can maximize political return within the limits of each environment.



When analyzed together, RSCT and economic statecraft insights paint a broader picture of Gulf power and the shift in how power is exercised within the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's increasing reliance on financial mechanisms rather than coercive means to shape regional dynamics indicates a transition both in the region and globally towards economic forms of influence as the primary driver of control. This form fundamentally challenges traditional understandings of security power by showing that economic mechanisms can constrain rivals, reinforce hierarchy, and maintain alliances at lower cost and lower risk. It further highlights that economic diplomacy can reshape research on regional politics as a structural force rather than a practical strategy. This analysis sets the tone for understanding how these patterns reflect a broader transformation in regional power and order.

### ***Synthesis of Findings***

Across the analysis, a coherent pattern emerges in Saudi Arabia's use of economic diplomacy as a regional strategy. The findings show that financial statecraft is a structured and intentional mechanism, rather than a spontaneous episode, through which Saudi Arabia can control its political relationships and regional order. While Saudi Arabia exercises consistent influence and economic activity across the region, the impact varies due to structural conditions. Economic diplomacy can adapt to different environments: it limits financial engagement and influence in more penetrated arenas while establishing long-term impacts in more stable environments. This adaptability is crucial for understanding Saudi foreign policy, as it reflects a strategy that is both flexible in its methods and consistent with its broader regional objectives.

Combined, these findings prove that economic diplomacy has become a central mechanism for shaping regional order. For Saudi Arabia, it has created long-term patterns of alignment and reinforced the regional hierarchy, allowing it to shape political architecture in a safe, low-risk way.



In theoretical terms, these behaviors demonstrate how Saudi Arabia, as a core power, can operate within the regional security complex while still leveraging economic diplomacy as a tool of control. It also highlights how stability in the Middle East is achieved through economic ties rather than coercive measures, thereby extending the literature on economic statecraft. Together, these discoveries indicate how Saudi Arabia and potentially other world powers will use financial statecraft as an instrument of influence in the future.

## **Conclusion**

This research set out to examine how Saudi Arabia uses economic tools to shape political and security outcomes in Syria and Jordan and reveal the dynamics of the regional security complex. The research finds that Saudi Arabia has shifted its primary tool of diplomacy towards economic diplomacy to influence their foreign policy. Across Syria and Jordan, financial engagement produced varying political effects depending on the stability, institutional capacity, and density of external actors.

In aggregate, the findings show that the recently prioritized Saudi economic diplomacy is adaptive and intentional. It can assert a limited presence in fragmented environments with weak institutions and multiple external actors, symbolically creating opportunities without raising concerns from rival external actors. In comparison, Saudi Arabia can leverage its financial resources to reinforce its influence and develop long-term, established relationships with stable, allied countries. These patterns emphasize that variation in outcomes is not determined by the Gulf state's financial strategy but rather by the receiving state's conditions.

The study also supports RSCT's emphasis on structural drivers of regional behavior while advancing the theory by highlighting the central role of economic interdependence in shaping security interactions. Additionally, the evidence reaffirms the economic statecraft theory by



demonstrating that financial tools operate within the regional security system, not just through bilateral relationships, further emphasizing how institutional and political conditions alter their effectiveness. This conclusion reframes how regional political order is determined and maintained in the contemporary Middle East.

Looking ahead, the findings suggest that economic diplomacy will remain a central instrument in Gulf foreign policy, as states increasingly rely on it to manage alliances and counter rival powers. As traditional hard-power methods prove futile, economic tools offer a modern, flexible means of shaping political outcomes in an interdependent security environment. Understanding this shift is essential for evaluating future developments in Middle Eastern politics and assessing how Gulf states will continue to maintain a central role in this regional order.



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