Legitimacy in Contemporary Saudi Arabia: Religion, Reform, and Nationalism, 2011 to 2022

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Abstract:

This study examines how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms, which emphasize economic modernization and national development, are reshaping political legitimacy in an authoritarian context historically grounded in religious authority. Using survey data from the Arab Opinion Index (2011–2022), the study investigates whether religiosity, both self-reported and obligations-based, remains a significant predictor of legitimacy, and whether economic satisfaction is emerging as a complementary source of political support. Results indicate that religiosity continues to positively influence trust in institutions and attitudes toward secularism, although its effect varies across measures and over time, reflecting partial substitution by economic-nationalist legitimacy. Economic satisfaction consistently predicts higher institutional trust and lower perceptions of corruption, highlighting the growing importance of performance-based legitimacy. Gender differences suggest that women's legitimacy perceptions remain more closely tied to religiosity, consistent with their historically greater exposure to religious institutions. Overall, the findings demonstrate a nuanced dual legitimacy landscape in which religious and economic-nationalist sources coexist, illustrating that authoritarian regimes might partially substitute historically embedded religious legitimacy with material and nationalist appeals, though this substitution occurs unevenly across social groups and dimensions of political evaluation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Research Aims

Saudi Arabia's political legitimacy has historically rested on two mutually reinforcing pillars: vast oil wealth and religious authority rooted in its alliance with Hanbali-Wahhabism. Since the eighteenth century, the Saudi monarchy has derived authority not only from material resources, but from its role as custodian of Islam's holiest sites and as a patron of a reformist Sunni tradition grounded in the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. This alliance has provided the regime with a powerful source of religious legitimacy, understood as the perception that political authority is morally justified and divinely sanctioned, and reinforced through religious institutions, discourse, and social regulation.

In recent years, however, this foundation has come under pressure. Since the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) in 2015, Saudi Arabia has undergone sweeping economic and social reforms under Vision 2030, an ambitious modernization program aimed at diversifying the economy and reducing dependence on oil. Central to this transformation has been a reconfiguration of the religious establishment, including the curtailment of clerical authority, the restructuring of religious institutions, and the promotion of a more state-defined, "moderate" Islam. These developments mark a significant shift in the historical relationship between political and religious authority, raising a critical question: can the Saudi monarchy sustain its legitimacy as it redefines the role of religion within the state?

This study examines how these transformations are reshaping public perceptions of political legitimacy in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, it investigates whether traditional religious legitimacy is being supplemented or partially replaced by a form of economic-nationalist legitimacy grounded in state performance, modernization, and material well-being. The analysis

focuses on the role of religiosity in shaping political attitudes and considers how this relationship interacts with broader structural changes, including economic reform and globalization. Particular attention is given to gender, as well as other demographic factors such as age, education, and employment, in order to assess whether legitimacy perceptions vary across social groups.

Using survey data from the Arab Opinion Index spanning 2011 to 2022, this study analyzes three key dimensions of political evaluation: institutional trust, support for secularism, and perceptions of corruption. By linking individual-level attitudes to broader institutional transformations, the study explores how citizens interpret shifts in the foundations of political authority during a period of rapid state-led change. Although the empirical focus is on Saudi Arabia, the analysis engages more broadly with theoretical debates on political legitimacy, authoritarian resilience, and the role of religion in governance.

The Saudi case offers a particularly important context for examining these questions. Unlike many authoritarian regimes, where legitimacy is grounded primarily in ideology or economic performance, Saudi Arabia has historically institutionalized religion as a central pillar of rule. Vision 2030 therefore represents not simply an economic reform program, but a potential reconfiguration of the symbolic and institutional foundations of authority. By analyzing whether and how legitimacy is shifting from religious to performance-based sources, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how authoritarian regimes adapt to structural pressures while maintaining political stability.

More broadly, this study advances theories of authoritarian legitimacy by testing the conditions under which historically embedded forms of authority can be transformed. It argues that legitimacy in Saudi Arabia is not being fully replaced, but rather recalibrated through the

integration of economic-nationalist narratives alongside enduring religious frameworks. In doing so, the study highlights the hybrid and dynamic nature of legitimacy in contexts of rapid modernization, offering insights that extend beyond Saudi Arabia to other states navigating similar tensions between tradition, reform, and economic transformation.

1.2: Background

Vision 2030 represents not merely an economic development plan, but a structural reordering of the Saudi state. To understand how these reforms might reshape public perceptions of legitimacy, it is necessary to examine how religious institutions have been restructured under MbS. Saudi religious legitimacy was institutionalized as early as 1744, when Muhammad Ibn Saud established a covenant with the religious reformer Muhammad Ibn Abdul-Wahhab, providing the ruling family with religious validation in exchange for political support to institutionalize this religious alliance (Muharrem, 2017). In parallel, Saudi Arabia's economic legitimacy has rested on oil wealth, which accounted for 43% of its GDP and 75% of government revenues in 2020, supporting a vast welfare state, and bolstering the Kingdom's international influence (Grand, 2020).

Vision 2030, initiated in April of 2016, as the centerpiece of MbS's reform agenda, seeks to diversify the economy by expanding sectors such as technology, tourism, and entertainment, while reducing unemployment and boosting the private sector's contribution to GDP (Schulte, 2024). Thirteen Vision Realization Programs support this initiative, addressing areas like industrial development, public sector restructuring, and healthcare reform, many of which are backed by large-scale state investment via the Public Investment Fund (Silver, 2024).

Early indicators suggest positive momentum as Vision 2030 reaches its tenth anniversary: non-oil revenues have doubled, women's labor force participation has surged (from 17.4% in

2017 to ~36% in 2023) (“GCC,” 2025), and the private sector has grown substantially (Silver, 2024). As oil prices have fallen in 2025, diversification efforts have arrived at an opportune time for the kingdom. According to Saudi’s Minister for Investment, Khalid Al Falih, now more than half of the state’s economy (50.6%) has been decoupled from oil (Jie, 2025), and the most recent reports from the IMF show that roughly 76% of the total GDP is now non-oil based (“IMF Executive Board,” 2025).

The Kingdom’s investment into artificial intelligence is a major aspect to this progress, with information and communication technology now estimated at ~15.6% of the GDP. As artificial intelligence has emerged as a strategic sector in global economic competition, Saudi Arabia’s investments in AI signal not only diversification efforts but also an attempt to position the Kingdom as a leader in technological modernization, signaling economic progress and legitimacy. At the 2025 US-Saudi Investment Forum, Elon Musk announced that the largest xAI facility outside the United States was to be built in the Kingdom, and other prominent data companies such as AirTrunk announced similar partnerships (Azim, 2025). Saudi Arabia also committed to investing one trillion dollars into the United States in exchange for AI infrastructure, energy systems, and nuclear technologies (“Fact Sheet,” 2025).

Beyond economic restructuring, Vision 2030 represents a deliberate effort to recast the foundations of Saudi political legitimacy around national achievement and collective progress. Rather than grounding authority primarily in religious guardianship, the reform agenda promotes a forward-looking narrative of national revival, technological advancement, and global competitiveness. Economic diversification, megaprojects such as the NEOM Line, and high-profile international partnerships are not merely development initiatives, but rather they function symbolically to project a vision of Saudi Arabia as a modern, innovative, and globally,

not just regionally, influential state. In this framing, loyalty to the regime becomes intertwined with participation in and support for a shared national transformation.

High-profile megaprojects such as the Line illustrate both the ambition and the risk of this strategy. These projects serve as tangible symbols of modernization and national aspiration, reinforcing the narrative of economic-national revival. But this progress isn't without its challenges, as the Public Investment Fund (PIF) took down a $8 billion write down for several of its high profile gigaprojects. In 2024, the PIF valued the gigaprojects at $56.24 billion (Sayegh, 2025), making the write down an accounting move likely reflecting cost overruns, delays, and shifting market conditions. The Line, the architecturally ambitious planned desert mega-city intended to house nine million people on the Red Sea, specifically has faced many obstacles and delays to implementation (Magid, 2025), with the kingdom reportedly scaling back the project to focus on global sporting events, such as the 2034 World Cup.

Having already spent $50 billion and with a 2030 deadline for the first phase quickly approaching, the planned size of the Line has reportedly diminished and construction has virtually ceased. Such experiments might reflect the tumultuous nature of Saudi investment and economic priorities as the kingdom continually adjusts its strategy of modernization (Killing, 2025), and could potentially pose an issue to the economic legitimacy of the regime. Such delays and financial setbacks expose the regime to new vulnerabilities: if economic performance becomes central to legitimacy, policy failure might carry greater political costs than under a primarily religious framework.

Vision 2030 seeks not only to diversify the economy, but to recast political authority around national achievement and economic performance rather than religious stewardship. However, this economic modernization has brought with it a direct challenge to the

kingdom's religious foundations. MbS has increasingly distanced himself from Hanbali-Wahhabist interpretations, "declaring its ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam out of date and often based on a faulty interpretation of Islamic scriptures" (Ottaway, 2021). Under his leadership, Saudi society has seen the introduction of public concerts, increase in tourism, and the relaxation of gender segregation, reforms which were once considered incompatible with Hanbali-Wahhabi principles. These initiatives have disrupted the historical balance of power between the monarchy and the religious establishment, placing institutions like the Council of Senior Scholars (*Ulama*) in a precarious position. Once influential in judicial, educational, and legislative matters, the Ulama have become increasingly politicized, with key conservative voices either sidelined or brought into alignment with the state, evident in the 2020 appointment of the attorney general to the Council (Farouk, 2021).

Religious legitimacy in Saudi Arabia has never been merely symbolic; it has been structurally embedded in the legal and social frameworks of the state. Religious scholars historically legitimized the monarchy through the utilization of Islamic principles to justify monarchical actions, and in exchange, were granted authority over education, jurisprudence, and social behavior (Commins, 2006; Mouline, 2014). This partnership enabled Saudi leaders to present themselves as custodians of Islamic orthodoxy, particularly in direct contrast to rivals like Shiite-led Iran, through clerical justification of both domestic and foreign policy decisions (Haykel, 2013). Even more pragmatic and assertive rulers such as King Salman's predecessor, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, relied on clerical approval to pass reforms, reflecting the enduring power of the Ulama to shape state legitimacy. Religious support has helped sustain state spending patterns, justify authoritarian governance, and secure public compliance (Hertog, 2011).

However, Vision 2030 marks a departure from previous methods of clerical co-optation. Earlier Saudi regimes institutionalized Islamism by incorporating religious scholars into the bureaucracy while suppressing dissent (Lacroix, 2011). MbS has gone further, subordinating religious institutions to state control and folding them into the monarchical apparatus. This centralization represents a paradigm shift in which religious legitimacy is no longer negotiated but rather monopolized by the state. Religious institutions have been functionally absorbed into the bureaucracy, eroding their autonomy, and eliminating their role as potential counterbalances to political authority (Farouk, 2021). Whereas the previous relationship also led to internal contradictions between royal financial interests and Hanbali-Wahhabist clericy, MbS is centralizing control over religious institutions to prevent such fragmentation and dissent, in order to consolidate his power rather than simply maintaining it.

These reforms have most visibly affected the Ulama, the religious police (CPVPV), and educational curriculum. Although the Council of Senior Scholars and the General Presidency for Scholarly Research and Ifta retain formal authority, their independence has been significantly curtailed. Since 2016, clerics who have resisted the reform agenda have faced systematic repression, including arrests, travel bans, and dismissal from public roles (Farouk, 2021). A key symbolic shift occurred in 2020 when MbS appointed the state's attorney general, Sheikh Saud bin Abdullah Al-Mujib, to the Council, blurring the distinction between legal and religious authority (Lacroix, 2020; Farouk, 2021). Similarly, in 2016, the CPVPV was stripped of its enforcement powers, with its responsibilities transferred to the regular police. Once a powerful authority which was responsible for enforcing specific social behaviors, such as daily prayer, gender segregation, and public dress codes, the CPVPV is now little more than an advisory body (Farouk, 2021; Al-Rasheed, 2018).

In 2020, the Ministry of Education revised school curricula to reduce the emphasis on Hanbali-Wahhabi doctrine, and to eliminate divisive content about other Islamic sects, particularly Shiism. Simultaneously, the judiciary has undergone a shift toward codification, reducing reliance on discretionary rulings which are based on independent religious reasoning (*ijtihad)* (Al-Rasheed, 2020; Haykel, 2021). These moves suggest a deliberate retreat from religious jurisprudence towards a system which is influenced by both common and civil law.

While the most visible transformations have been institutional, the state's targeting of individual clerics underscores a broader shift in the management of religious authority. Prominent figures such as Salman al-Ouda, Awad al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari, who criticized MbS's reforms or called for political change, have been detained or suppressed since 2017, signaling a reduced tolerance for independent religious influence (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Amnesty International, 2021).

Tensions between religious authority and the state are not new, but their resolution has changed. In 2011, Sheikh Saad bin Nasser Al Shathri was dismissed from the Council of Senior Scholars after opposing gender mixing at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (Reuters Staff, 2009), reflecting a model in which clerics could still publicly contest policy. His assertion that religious scholars must "make governors fear God if they err from the right path" (Burke, 2011) highlights the historically normative role of clerical oversight. His later reinstatement contrasts with the more repressive approach under MbS, where dissent is less accommodated and more systematically curtailed, as seen in cases such as Ibrahim al-Duwaish ("One the Fifth Anniversary," 2025).

At the same time, religious debate has not disappeared but has been reconfigured. Public controversies, such as Adnan Ibrahim's 2016 *Sahwa* appearances addressing gender mixing and

atheism, reveal ongoing ideological contestation, particularly across generational lines (Diwan, 2025). Taken together, these developments suggest a shift from a system in which religious legitimacy was partly negotiated between state and clerics to one in which it is increasingly centralized and controlled. Rather than eliminating dissent, the state has narrowed the space in which religious authority can operate independently, subordinating it to broader political and ideological objectives.

This transformation raises urgent questions about the future of Saudi political legitimacy. With the religious establishment increasingly subordinated, and traditional clerical checks on authority eroding, MbS continually steers the state towards one of economic-nationalism state legitimacy. Yet this strategy carries risks. Can Saudi Arabia maintain cohesion and legitimacy through material progress alone, if its religious foundations are weakened? Given that the Saudi monarchy was founded on a marriage of religious and royal authority, the dilution of Hanbali-Wahhabi influence might shift public perceptions about the rightful basis of rule and potential religious discohesion might affect nationalistic ideals which are central to the formation of MbS's public identity and social order.

Vision 2030's success might hinge as much on cultural legitimacy as on economic performance. Saudi Arabia is unique among Arab monarchies in having formally institutionalized its religious authorities, and while reforms might appeal to younger, urbanized Saudis, more conservative constituencies might view them as a betrayal of core Islamic values. As Saudi Arabia continues to redefine its identity and economic future, the evolving relationship between political authority and religious legitimacy remains central. This study explores how these dynamics, anchored in both history and current reform, will shape the kingdom's trajectory, particularly as Vision 2030 is continually implemented.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Scholarship on Saudi Arabia has extensively examined the roles of religion, rentierism, and state-led development in sustaining political authority. However, the interaction between recent institutional reforms and public perceptions of legitimacy remains underexplored.

2.1: Religion and the State

Research consistently shows that culture and the state are deeply intertwined, with institutions both shaping and being shaped by cultural beliefs in ways which influence political outcomes. Collective memory, religion, education, and exposure to external ideologies are all factors through which culture interacts with state power. For example, memories of events such as World War II shape contemporary behavior and identity, with state-sponsored institutionalization of these memories affecting national identity and even consumer patterns (Fouka, 2023). Like WWII in Europe, Hanbali-Wahhabism in Saudi provides a deep cultural memory that states mobilize. Religious practices which are transmitted across generations similarly anchor cultural continuity (Nunn, 2010), while regional variation produces divergent cultural trajectories (Guiso, 2024). State institutions also mediate these cultural dynamics: strong institutions might reinforce or challenge traditional values (Lowes, 2017), but external interventions can leave long-term imprints on religious, political, and cultural identities (Nunn, 2010; Bai, 2024).

In authoritarian settings, religious identity often underpins both cultural continuity and public morality. In Saudi Arabia, Hanbali-Wahhabism has been central to governance since the 18th century, providing the monarchy with religious legitimacy, and shaping daily life through its integration into law, education, and social norms (Muharrem, 2017; Cook, 1992). Religious institutions are deeply embedded in state functions, influencing lawmaking, law enforcement,

public opinion, the judiciary, culture, tourism, media, and finance. Supported by oil revenues, Hanbali-Wahhabi clerics occupy critical institutional positions, and promote loyalty to the monarchy through religious doctrine (Mandaville, 2022). This integration has long reinforced state authority by aligning religious legitimacy with political rule.

Simultaneously, Wahhabism's global influence has drawn sustained attention, particularly over its association with extremism. Although scholars debate the extent to which groups such as al-Qaeda derive their ideology from Wahhabism (Ayoob, 2009; Bunzel, 2016), the intellectual and institutional links between Hanbali-Wahhabi teachings and the Taliban are well documented (Choksy, 2015). The Saudi state itself has consistently distanced its religious doctrine from extremism, building an extensive counterterrorism infrastructure to address threats from groups such as the Islamic State (Bunzel, 2016). External scrutiny of Wahhabism has therefore incentivized the state to redefine its religious positioning, particularly as it seeks to align legitimacy with modernization and global integration.

2.2: Saudi Cultural and Economic Development

Saudi Arabia has historically exemplified the rentier state model, where political stability is maintained through the distribution of oil revenues in exchange for political compliance (Gengler, 2021; Hertog, 2007; Beblawi, 1987). This 'rentier bargain' allows the monarchy to rule with minimal public accountability through welfare and patronage networks. Religious legitimacy further strengthens this arrangement, reinforcing the monarchy's authority (Hertog, 2011). While Vision 2030 seeks to diversify the economy, its political structure maintains core features of rentierism. Officials have ruled out income tax (Kumar, 2024), and economic reforms, such as expanding the private sector and upskilling labor, are framed as developmental rather than political (Nurunnabi, 2017; Moshashai, 2018).

Economic scholarship offers varied perspectives on Vision 2030's feasibility. Cowan (2018) warns of an impending 'economic implosion' due to overreliance on behavioral rather than structural reforms. Others focus on the Crown Prince's consolidation of wealth and power, noting risks of capital flight and elite resistance (Grand, 2020). Alhussein (2019) emphasizes the shifting role of religious institutions under MbS, which might reduce clerical influence, but also risk undermining the monarchy's traditional legitimacy. The literature therefore suggests that while rentierism remains central to Saudi politics, economic reforms are shifting the balance of religious authority. What remains underexplored is whether or not citizens view these reforms as enhancing or undermining state legitimacy.

However, there is strong research on economic development and how gender highlights how material opportunities and constraints shape how women evaluate state authority and legitimacy. Modernization theory argues that economic development expands women's agency by increasing access to education, labor force participation, and public life, thereby shifting political attitudes toward more emancipatory and performance-based evaluations of governance (Inglehart et al., 2003; Inglehart et al., 2005). As women gain greater economic independence, their political evaluations become less anchored in traditional authority structures and more responsive to state performance and material outcomes.

Comparative research demonstrates that improvements in women's socioeconomic status are associated with increased political engagement and more favorable evaluations of institutions when governments are perceived as delivering tangible benefits (Hughes et al., 2017; Krook et al., 2012). In developing and transitional contexts, women who experience upward mobility through employment and education tend to place greater emphasis on governance outcomes, such as economic growth, service provision, and anti-corruption, over purely normative or

traditional frameworks (Duflo, 2012; Kabeer, 1999). This suggests that in Saudi Arabia, expanding economic opportunities for women under Vision 2030 may shift legitimacy perceptions away from religious frameworks toward performance-based evaluations.

In authoritarian contexts undergoing state-led modernization, these dynamics often produce hybrid forms of legitimacy. Where regimes actively promote women's inclusion as part of broader development strategies, women's evaluations of the state might reflect both enduring normative frameworks and increasing responsiveness to economic performance (Blaydes, 2011; Sen, 1999). Applied to the Saudi case under Vision 2030, this literature suggests that women's legitimacy perceptions are likely shaped by a dual process: persistent religious socialization alongside expanding economic opportunities that encourage performance-based evaluations of state authority.

2.3: Legitimacy

Political and religious legitimacy are deeply intertwined, particularly in societies where religion plays a central role in governance. Foundational theorists such as Weber (1978) and Beetham (1991) distinguish between legal, moral, and cultural bases of legitimacy. Lipset (1960) emphasizes legitimacy as the capacity of political systems to engender support. In many contexts, religion functions as a moral justification for state authority, providing a powerful source of compliance which extends beyond formal institutions.

Building on these frameworks, scholars have highlighted the complex relationship between modernization and religion. Gellner (1983) argues that economic and cultural liberalization often replaces religion with secular legitimacy, although religion frequently persists as a key source of political authority. Casanova (1994) similarly emphasizes religion's dual role: it can either challenge or reinforce state power, depending on how elites and institutions mobilize

it. Together, these theories suggest that religious authority not only legitimizes governance but also shapes cultural identity and collective belonging.

Recent scholarship has refined these insights by examining the interaction between elites, clerics, and society. Bisin et al. (2019) propose that religious legitimacy enhances state extractive capacity and political stability through moral sanction, as clerics gain influence by providing religious goods, and by reinforcing cultural practices. This dynamic, however, is highly contextual. In settings where religion holds significant authority over social values, legitimacy is not simply derived from institutional authority but from the moral frameworks which religious institutions uphold. In such cases, religion stabilizes public opinion, and offers moral justification for state actions (Lipset, 1960; Beetham, 1991).

Religion also plays a central role in the construction of national identity, which in turn legitimizes political authority. Gellner (1983) notes that national identities often acquire moral grounding from religious traditions. Casanova (1994) highlights how religious worldviews can underpin political order. In Muslim societies, Islamic law provides both a moral and legal foundation for governance, embedding political legitimacy within Sharia principles. Esposito (2001) and Roy (2004) emphasize that in contexts where national identity is framed through Sharia, leaders derive legitimacy not only from political institutions but also from their ability to enforce religious law.

Scholarship highlights the demographic variability of perceptions of state legitimacy, emphasizing that political attitudes are shaped not only by abstract values but by individuals' interactions with state institutions. Differential institutional exposure theory suggests that citizens interpret political authority through the specific institutional channels they encounter, which structure their experiences and expectations of governance (Schneider et al., 1997;

Mettler, 2002). This framework builds on sociological institutionalism, which argues that institutions do not merely implement policy but socialize individuals into structured understandings of the political world, shaping identities, norms, and political evaluations (March et al., 1984; North, 1990).

In contexts where religious institutions historically govern everyday life, such as family law and social norms, citizens' engagement with the state is mediated through religious rather than secular institutional frameworks. As a result, political authority is more likely to be interpreted through religious schemas (Norris et al., 2004; Blaydes, 2011). Comparative research further demonstrates that individuals embedded in religious institutional environments tend to evaluate political authority in ways that reflect those structures, reinforcing the salience of religion in political life. Applied to the Saudi case, this perspective suggests that women, whose legal status, mobility, and public participation have historically been regulated through religious institutions, experience state authority through a more direct, faith-inflected institutional lens. Consequently, religiosity might function as a stronger explanatory variable for women's perceptions of legitimacy, reflecting not only personal belief but institutional socialization processes that make religious frameworks particularly salient in evaluating political authority (Verba et al., 1995; Norris et al., 2019).

In Saudi Arabia, legitimacy is rooted in precisely this dual foundation: Sharia law and Wahhabi doctrine underpin both the legal system and the monarchy's political authority. Hanbali-Wahhabi clerics have historically legitimized the monarchy by providing a religious framework for governance. However, contemporary developments complicate this arrangement. Consolidating power in the hands of the monarch, rather than clerical institutions, risks undermining Sharia's role as a legitimizing force. Alhussein (2019) argues that reforms under

Crown Prince MbS reduce clerical influence, potentially shifting the balance of legitimacy away from religious institutions.

Beyond religion, contemporary Saudi legitimacy increasingly draws upon economic nationalism. Literature on authoritarian durability notes that economic performance and national development projects can serve as sources of political legitimacy, particularly in resource-rich states seeking to diversify their economies (Anderson, 1987; Hinnebusch, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 reframes the monarchy's legitimacy around a national image in modernization and economic transformation. This strategy shifts emphasis from redistribution through the rentier bargain toward mobilizing citizens as participants in a collective national project, where patriotism is sourced through economic achievement and global competitiveness (Alhussein, 2019; Grand, 2020).

By positioning himself as the architect of this transformation, MbS consolidates personal authority while linking loyalty to shared visions of prosperity. However, critics warn that reliance on economic nationalism is risky: public legitimacy becomes vulnerable to oil price fluctuations, foreign investment trends, and the regime's ability to deliver tangible improvements in employment and quality of life (Cowan, 2018; Gengler, 2021). In this sense, economic nationalism might complement but also destabilize traditional bases of legitimacy, because it grounds political authority in developmental outcomes rather than solely in religion or rentierism.

Therefore the literature highlights an unresolved tension: although religion has traditionally anchored the monarchy's legitimacy, it remains uncertain whether or not the economic reforms of Vision 2030 can compensate for religion's declining role, or whether this shift will instead alter how political authority is perceived and sustained. Scholarship

demonstrates that rentier arrangements, religious authority, and cultural identity have historically reinforced one another in Saudi Arabia, yet the Crown Prince's reforms mark a potential break from this historic equilibrium. If legitimacy is increasingly derived from economic performance and nationalist appeals rather than religious authority, the long-term durability of this new foundation remains open to question. Ultimately, this body of scholarship points to a crucial gap: little is known about how ordinary Saudis interpret these institutional shifts, and whether or not they view economic transformation as a sufficient substitute for the religious legitimacy that has long underpinned the monarchy's rule. This study addresses this gap by examining how institutional transformations reshape public evaluations of legitimacy.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1: Research Questions

This study assumes that Vision 2030 represents a shift from religious to economic-nationalist forms of legitimacy and investigates whether economic modernization can substitute for religious authority as a source of political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes, using Saudi Arabia's reforms as a case study and considering how this shift might be unevenly received across social groups. This study asks: How have the foundations of political legitimacy in Saudi Arabia shifted between 2011 and 2022, and to what extent is religious legitimacy being supplemented or replaced by economic-nationalist legitimacy under Vision 2030?

The study examines how religiosity, economic satisfaction, and demographic factors shape variation in three dimensions of political evaluation: institutional trust, support for secularism, and perceptions of corruption. Sub-questions include: Does religiosity remain a strong predictor of legitimacy, or has its influence weakened over time? To what extent does economic satisfaction predict legitimacy evaluations? How do these relationships vary across survey waves between 2011 and 2022? How do legitimacy perceptions differ by demographic factors, including age, gender, education, and employment? Does gender moderate the relationship between religiosity and legitimacy, particularly for women historically more regulated by religious institutions?

3.2: Hypotheses

These research questions are operationalized through four hypotheses, linking historical context, Vision 2030 reforms, and theoretical frameworks including rentier state theory and differential institutional exposure. My hypotheses are as follows:

1. **H1:** Higher levels of religiosity, both self-reported religiosity and obligations-based religiosity, will be positively associated with perceptions of political legitimacy in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia's political authority has historically been rooted in Hanbali-Wahhabi institutions and custodianship of Islam's holiest sites (Muharrem, 2017; Cook, 1992). Religious legitimacy structures law, education, and social norms, embedding political authority in moral and institutional frameworks. Individuals reporting higher religiosity, both self-reported and obligations-based (e.g., prayer, adherence to religious norms), are expected to express higher trust in state institutions, support religion-state integration, and perceive the monarchy as morally justified (Mandaville, 2022). Survey variables: self-reported religiosity, frequency of ritual observance.

2. **H2:** Higher levels of economic satisfaction will be positively associated with perceptions of political legitimacy.

Vision 2030 frames political authority around economic modernization, national development, and global competitiveness (Alhussein, 2019; Grand, 2020). Citizens' evaluations may increasingly hinge on perceptions of employment, personal prosperity, and the success of modernization projects, reflecting emerging economic-nationalist legitimacy. This aligns with rentier state theory, wherein legitimacy shifts from resource distribution toward diversified economic performance (Cowan, 2018; Gengler, 2021). Survey variables: personal economic satisfaction.

3. **H3:** The influence of religiosity on perceptions of political legitimacy will decline over time, while the influence of economic satisfaction will increase.

Historically, Hanbali-Wahhabi institutions shaped law, education, and social norms. Vision 2030 promotes economic diversification, technological development, and a nationalist-modernist Saudi identity (Grand, 2020; Alhussein, 2019). If economic-nationalist legitimacy is successfully substituting religious legitimacy, religiosity should become a weaker predictor of perceived legitimacy across the 2011–2022 survey waves, while economic satisfaction strengthens as a predictor. This hypothesis captures the broader transition from rentier-based to performance-based legitimacy.

4. **H4:** Gender moderates the relationship between religiosity and perceptions of political legitimacy, with religiosity exerting a stronger influence on legitimacy attitudes among women than among men.

Religious institutions in Saudi Arabia have historically structured a majority of aspects of women's legal and social status, including guardianship regulations, mobility restrictions, gender segregation, and dress codes (Blaydes, 2011; Verba et al., 1995). As a result, women's everyday interactions with state authority were frequently mediated through institutions grounded in religious law and clerical authority. This pattern reflects differential institutional exposure, in which social groups interpret political authority through the institutions that most directly shape their daily lives (Schneider et al., 1997; Mettler, 2002). Because religious institutions historically regulated women's public and private roles more directly than men's, religiosity might function as a stronger interpretive framework through which women evaluate the legitimacy of political authority. Consequently, highly religious women might be more likely to associate political legitimacy with religious institutions and norms than men, whose interactions with the state have historically been shaped by economic and bureaucratic structures. At the same time, the gender

reforms associated with Vision 2030 introduce competing narratives of legitimacy rooted in modernization and economic opportunity, potentially reshaping this relationship.

3.3: Predictions

In terms of predictions, based on the existing literature and the anticipated impact of Vision 2030 on Saudi Arabia's political and religious landscape, one prediction is that public perceptions of religious legitimacy in Saudi Arabia will decline between 2011 and 2022. As Vision 2030 pushes forward with reforms aimed at reducing the influence of religious institutions, including the Hanbali-Wahhabi establishment, and promoting a more economically-driven and nationalist narrative, we can expect to see a shift in how the public views the religious legitimacy of the monarchy. It is likely that younger, urbanized Saudis, particularly Saudis who have experienced the direct benefits of economic reforms such as increased employment and access to new opportunities, might exhibit reduced reliance on religious legitimacy as a pillar of state authority.

Additionally, the liberalization of social policies, such as the relaxation of gender segregation and the opening of entertainment venues, might further alienate conservative factions who place a higher value on traditional religious authority, leading to a decline in the perception of religious legitimacy among these groups. Therefore, I hypothesize that Saudis who identify more strongly with religious institutions will report lower levels of trust in government over time, while Saudis who prioritize economic or nationalist ideologies will demonstrate increasing political support, particularly after 2015.

Another prediction is that the shift in religious legitimacy will be uneven across different demographic groups, with gender acting as a potential moderator. Given the central role that religion has traditionally played in Saudi society, it is expected that men, particularly older men,

might show a greater attachment to religious legitimacy, whereas women might be more influenced by the economic and social reforms under Vision 2030. With increased opportunities for women in the workforce and the relaxation of certain restrictions, women might exhibit more positive perceptions of government legitimacy, particularly if these reforms lead to improved living standards and more public participation in decision-making. On the other hand, conservative male respondents might continue to view religious authority as an essential pillar of political legitimacy, and as such, they might show resistance to the state's shift away from religious governance. This gendered response could have significant implications for understanding the broader shifts in public legitimacy perceptions. As a result, I anticipate that the data will reveal significant gender-based differences in how legitimacy is perceived, with women potentially leading the way in embracing the new forms of legitimacy associated with Vision 2030, while men might hold on to older religious norms as a source of state authority.

3.4: Research Design

Saudi Arabia is formally grounded in Islamic and Sharia law, and its religious authorities are deeply institutionalized, consequently, religious legitimacy remains central to the state's identity and governance. The Saudi regime has historically derived its legitimacy from religion and its association with religious institutions, which makes survey-based perceptions of legitimacy particularly revealing. However, the concept of 'religious legitimacy of the state' is inherently abstract: therefore it cannot be measured directly, and must instead be inferred from observable indicators. In this study, religious legitimacy is operationalized as a latent construct, proxied by survey items which capture public trust in state institutions, perception of political corruption, and the role of religion in politics.

The primary data source for this analysis is the Arab Opinion Index (AOI), a series of nationally representative public opinion surveys which were conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Doha, Qatar). Four survey waves were selected: 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2022, chosen to capture key moments of political and social transition in Saudi Arabia. The 2011 wave serves as a baseline, reflecting the pre-reform order and the state of religious and economic legitimacy before the announcement of Vision 2030. The 2015 wave coincides with the early ascent of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the public unveiling of Vision 2030, providing a snapshot of attitudes just prior to the full implementation of reforms. The 2019 wave marks the midpoint of reform execution, allowing assessment of emerging effects on public perceptions of legitimacy. Finally, the 2022 wave offers the most recent evaluation, reflecting nearly seven years of ongoing policy, economic, and social transformation. Treating survey year as a categorical variable, rather than assuming a linear time trend, allows the analysis to detect discrete shifts in political attitudes that correspond with specific reform phases, rather than presuming a smooth, uniform trajectory.

The unit of analysis is the individual respondent, and data are pooled across waves to allow both cross-sectional and temporal comparisons. Saudi subsamples consist of 1,070 respondents (2011), 1,500 respondents (2015), 2,804 respondents (2019), and 2,400 respondents (2022), yielding a pooled sample which is sufficiently large to detect interactions across subgroups and time. The AOI itself is based on “face-to-face interviews with 33,300 respondents from 14 Arab countries, using a randomized, stratified, multi-stage, self-weighted clustered approach with a margin of error between +/-2% and +/- 3%” (Arab Center).

Dependent Variable

The analysis focuses on three dependent variables, each linked to dimensions of legitimacy: 1) Trust in institutions: *To what extent do you trust the following institutions: the government, Shari'a courts, and municipal council?* (1–4 scale, with higher values coded to indicate greater trust), 2) Perception of state corruption: *In your opinion, how serious is the government in combating financial and administrative corruption in your home country?* (1-4 ordinal scale, with higher values coded to indicate a greater perception of corruption) , and 3) Support for secularism: *It would be best for my home country if religion were separated from politics* (1–4 scale, with higher scores coded to reflect stronger secular preferences.) For plotting and interaction analyses, missing values in secularism and corruption measures were imputed with the mean of the observed values, ensuring complete coverage across survey years.

Independent variable

The main independent variable is religiosity, treated as a multidimensional construct to capture both personal conviction and culturally or socially prescribed practice. The first dimension measures self-reported religiosity using the question: *"Regardless of whether or not you attend places of worship, do you consider yourself to be a [very religious – not religious] person?"* (1–7 scale). Responses were standardized (z-scores) for comparability across models and interpretation. The second dimension captures the importance of religious practice, using the question: *"What is the single most important characteristic which an individual must possess in order to be considered religious?"* (answering 1 indicates observing religious obligations and acts of worship, with all others coded as 0).

The correlation between the two measures is $r = 0.25$ ($p < .001$), suggesting that while they are related, they remain distinct and capture different aspects of religiosity. Recognizing that

religiosity is dynamic and may shift in response to reforms, both dimensions are treated as time-varying individual attributes rather than static traits, allowing investigation of potential changes across the 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2022 survey waves. This distinction allows us to differentiate between internalized belief and externally visible or socially enforced practice, which may have distinct implications for political attitudes.

Moderators and Controls

Moderator variables are gender (male/female), survey year (2011, 2015, 2019, 2022), and their interactions with religiosity. In particular, two-way and three-way interaction terms (religiosity × gender, religiosity × year, and religiosity × gender × year) allow for testing whether or not the relationship between religiosity and legitimacy perceptions varies across time, and between men and women. These interactions are especially important given that Saudi reforms under Vision 2030 have targeted gender roles, particularly through changes in women's legal rights, economic participation, and mobility. Control variables include age group (18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55 or older), education level (Illiterate, Less than Secondary Education, Secondary Education, Higher than Secondary Education, Unknown), employment status (Working, Looking for Work, Not Looking for Work, Housewife, Student, Retired, Non-Work Income, Disabled/Ill, Unemployed, Unknown), area type (urban vs. rural), and personal economic satisfaction (reversed for consistency, with higher scores reflecting higher satisfaction). Where categorical predictors contained missing data, a 'Missing' category was explicitly included to avoid listwise deletion, and to preserve sample size.

Non-response Bias Index and Robustness Checks

It is important to reflect the potential bias reflected in survey responses in authoritarian contexts, where social desirability bias and preference falsification might affect respondents'

answers. Individuals might feel pressured to report more favorable attitudes toward government institutions or religious authorities due to fear of social, political, or even legal repercussions, especially when responding to sensitive questions about trust in the government or religious legitimacy, leading to systematic bias. To account for this, I construct a proxy measure of bias based on non-response and 'don't know' rates to sensitive items. Elevated non-response to religion–state questions can signal discomfort or self-censorship. This index is incorporated into regression models as a robustness check to test whether coefficients of interest remain stable after adjusting for potential response bias.

Robustness of findings is assessed by: including the non-response index to account for potential survey bias, using cluster-robust standard errors by survey year, testing alternative codings of dependent variables, and examining the impact of imputed values on interaction plots. This methodology ensures that the analysis captures both individual-level variations in religiosity and broader temporal trends while accounting for potential biases, providing a rigorous framework for understanding legitimacy perceptions in Saudi Arabia.

Regression Models

To estimate the effects of religiosity and its interactions on legitimacy outcomes, a series of regression models is fit. For each dependent variable, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models are employed, with conventional, cluster-robust, and bias-adjusted standard errors. Although the corruption measure could be considered bounded or ordinal, it was treated as approximately continuous after reverse-coding, with sufficient variation across respondents to justify OLS. Alternative specifications using logistic or ordinal regression produced similar substantive findings, so OLS was retained for consistency and interpretability. All models include: main effects of religiosity (both dimensions), moderators (gender and survey year),

two-way and three-way interaction terms (year x religiosity, year x gender, year x gender x religiosity), control variables (age, education, employment, area type, economic satisfaction), and a non-response index as a robustness adjustment. Clustered standard errors by survey year are used in all models to account for potential heteroscedasticity and within-year correlation. Model fit is evaluated using adjusted R^2 for continuous outcomes, and AIC/BIC for both continuous and logistic models. Multicollinearity is assessed with variance inflation factors (VIFs), with all values below conventional thresholds.

Data Preparation

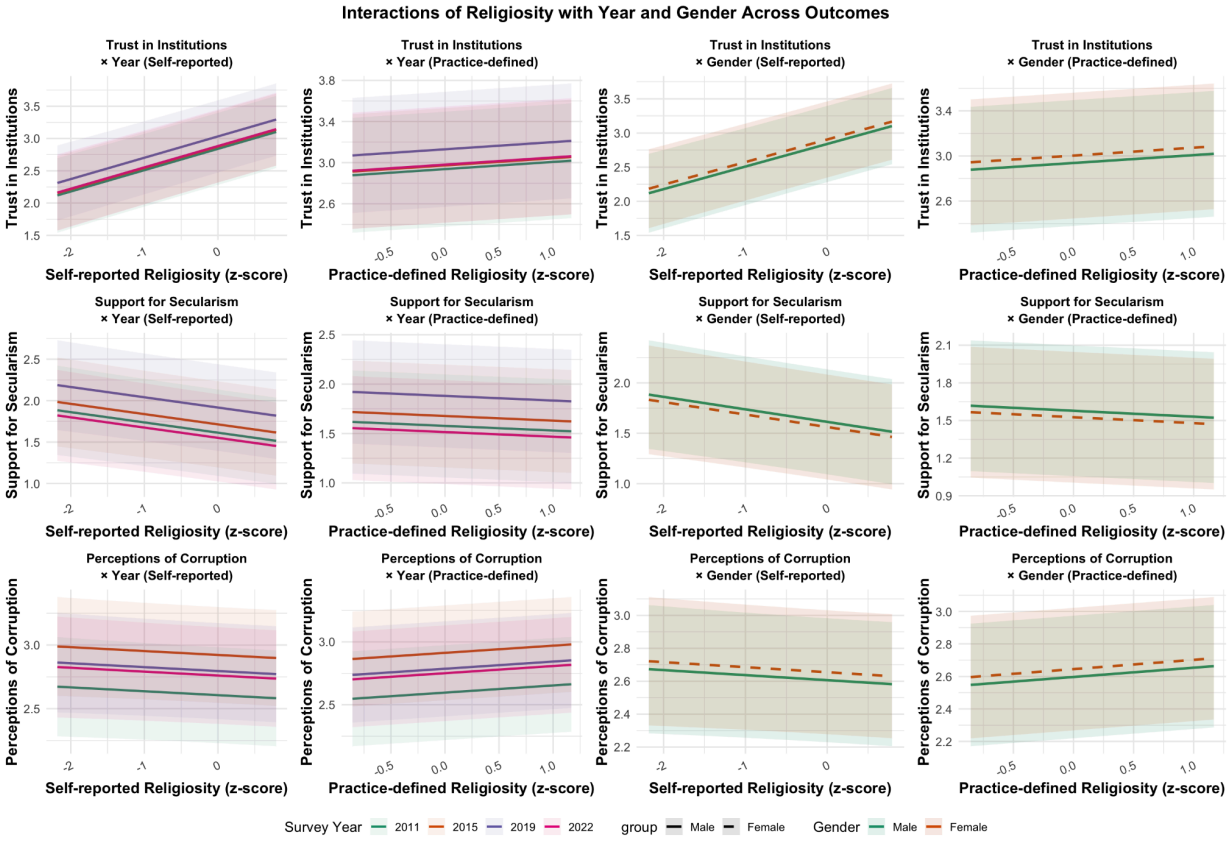
Data from four survey waves (2011, 2015, 2019, 2022) were combined into a single panel dataset. Respondents under age 18 were excluded. Variables were cleaned and recoded as follows: reverse coding of items where higher scores indicate lower levels of the construct, continuous variables standardized for interpretability, categorical variables explicitly labeled, with missing or ambiguous responses recoded as ‘Unknown,’ dependent variables with missing values imputed with mean values for plotting interactions, and non-response and ‘don’t know’ responses coded to generate a bias proxy. Descriptive statistics are presented for both continuous (mean and standard deviation) and categorical variables (counts and percentages) by survey year. Correlation matrices illustrate relationships among legitimacy outcomes across waves.

Chapter 4: Results

This section presents the results of regression analyses examining the effects of two dimensions of religiosity, self-reported and obligation-based (practice-defined), on three measures of public perceptions of state legitimacy: trust in institutions, support for secularism, and perceptions of corruption. Models were estimated separately for each religiosity measure and jointly to capture both distinct and overlapping effects. The full regression model table can be found in the appendix.

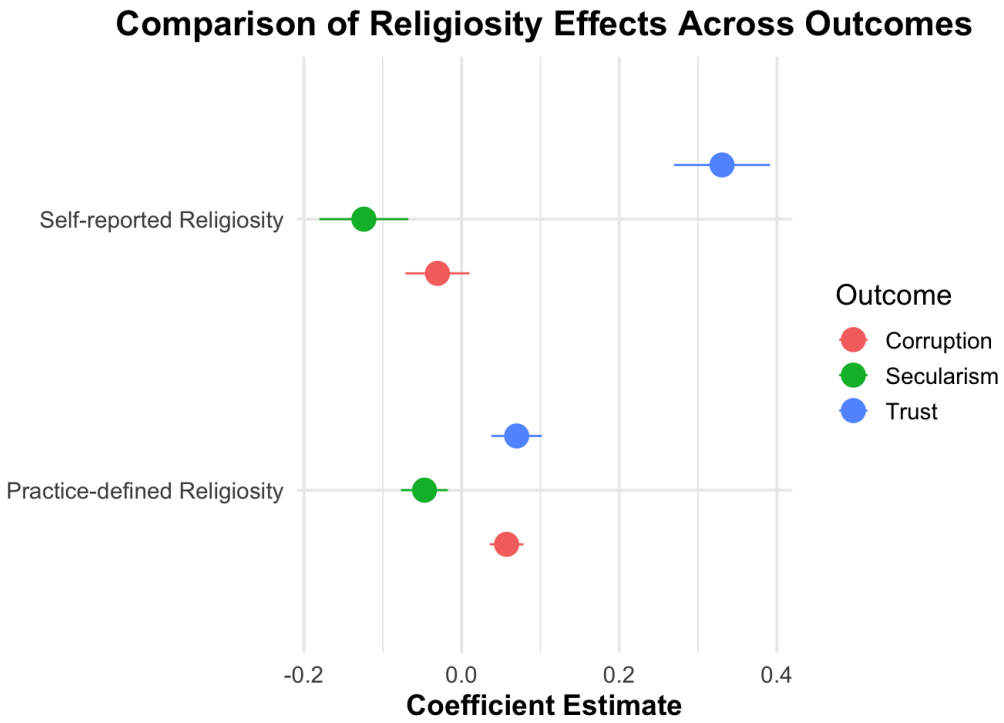
Figure 1 illustrates predicted coefficients for each dependent variable across survey years and by gender, highlighting temporal and demographic variation. Across survey waves, higher self-reported religiosity consistently predicts greater trust in institutions, with modest fluctuations over time, while its effect on secularism and corruption is weaker and less consistent. Practice-defined religiosity exhibits a negative association with secularism and a small positive association with corruption, the gender interaction reflecting a similar relationship, and with temporal trends indicating some decline in its effect on secularism after 2015. Figure 2 compares the magnitude of the associations between the two dimensions of religiosity, self-reported and practice-defined, and all three legitimacy outcomes. Across both measures, religiosity is positively associated with each outcome, but the strength of these relationships varies. Trust in institutions exhibits the strongest positive association, followed by perceptions of corruption, while support for secularism shows the weakest positive effect.

Figure 1



Note. Figures constructed by the author using publicly available data from the Arab Opinion Index surveys (2011, 2015, 2019, 2022), conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Figure 2

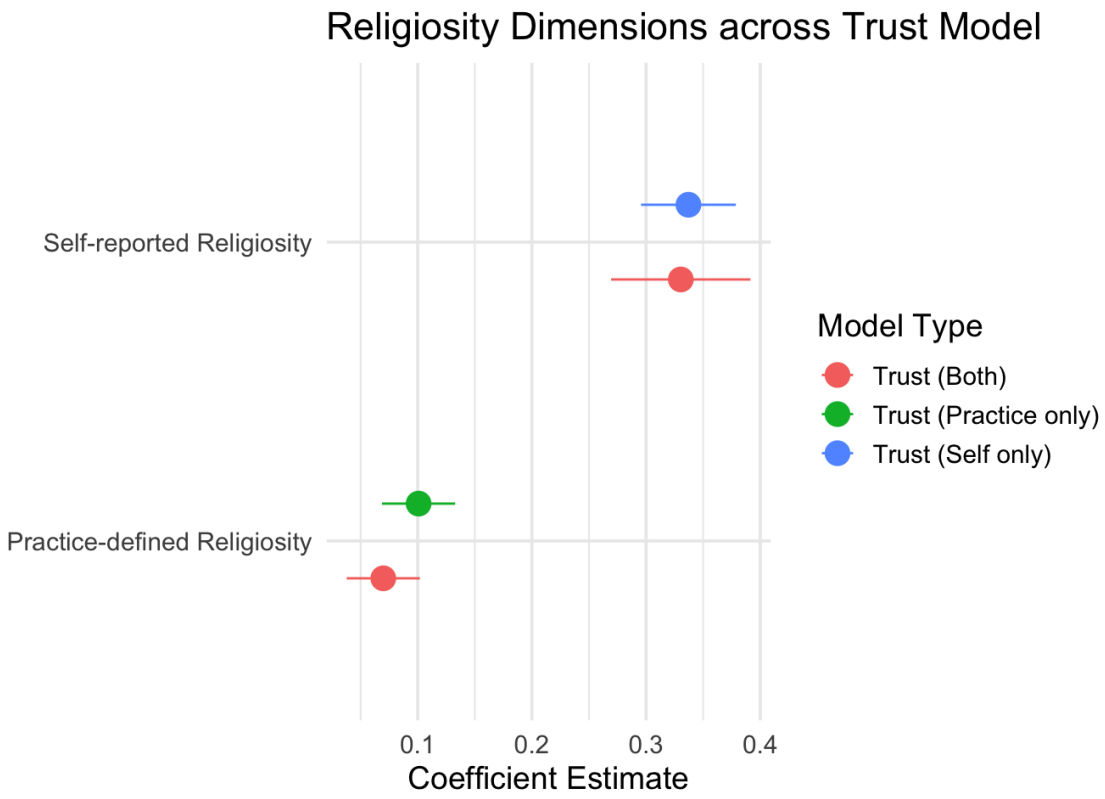


Trust in Institutions

Across models, religiosity shows a consistent positive association with institutional trust. In the self-reported religiosity model, the coefficient is positive and highly significant ($b = 0.337$, $p < .001$). This effect remains positive in the combined model that includes both religiosity measures ($b = 0.330$). The practice-defined religiosity dimension also exhibits a positive, but weaker, relationship with institutional trust ($b = 0.101$, $p < .1$), as visualized in Figure 3.

Among the control variables, economic satisfaction is a strong and consistent predictor of trust ($b = 0.597$, $p < .001$ in the self-only model; $b = 0.309$, $p < .001$ in the behavior-based model; and $b = 0.302$, $p < .001$ in the combined model). Gender effects are small: women exhibit slightly lower levels of trust ($b = -0.062$, $p < .05$). Age shows a gradual increase across age groups in the self-reported model, beginning with ages 25–34 ($b = 0.069$) and ending with 55+ ($b = 0.105$). Education displays mild positive associations. Employment status, particularly being a housewife ($b = 0.265$, $p < .01$), not looking for work ($b = 0.272$, $p < .001$), or a student ($b = 0.217$, $p < .001$), correlates with greater institutional trust. Temporal variation is present. Trust levels are lower in 2015 compared to 2011 ($b = -0.087$, $p < .001$) but rise in 2019 and 2022, particularly in the practice-based models. The interaction plots show that for both measures of religiosity, the most religious respondents report higher trust across all survey waves, with fluctuations over time.

Figure 3

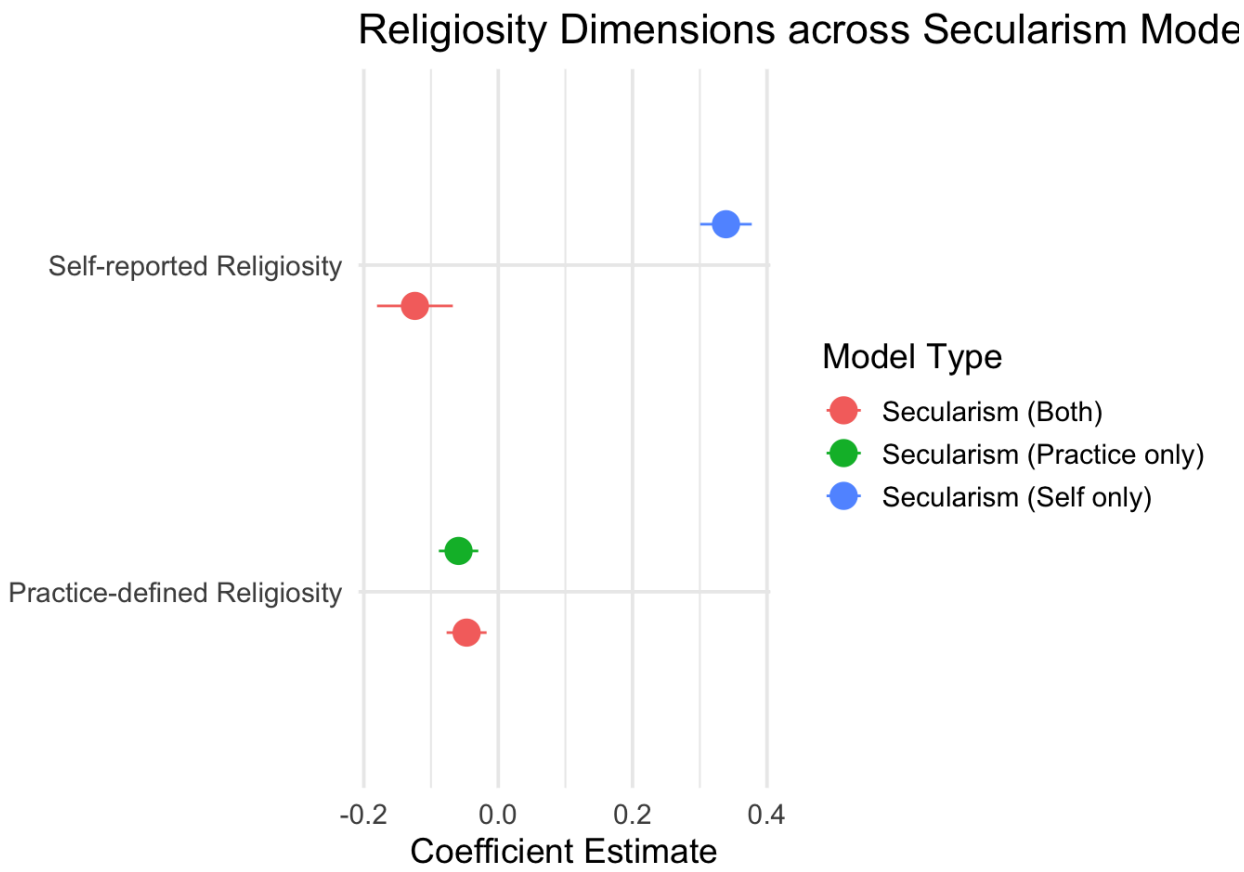


Support for Secularism

The relationship between religiosity and secularism varies by measure. As shown in Figure 4, in the self-reported religiosity model, higher religiosity predicts significantly higher support for secularism ($b = 0.339$, $p < .05$). For practice-defined religiosity, the relationship is negative and statistically significant ($b = -0.059$, $p < .01$). In the combined model, the self-reported religiosity coefficient is small and negative ($b = -0.0124$), while practice-defined religiosity remains negative and statistically significant ($b = -0.047$, $p < .01$). Among control variables, economic satisfaction is positive ($b = 0.054$, $p < .01$), while gender, age, and rural residence are not statistically significant. Education does not significantly predict secularism attitudes. Support for secularism declines in later survey waves ($b = -1.132$, $p < .05$ in 2019; $b =$

-1.342, $p < .05$ in 2022). Interaction plots show that lower-religiosity respondents maintain relatively stable secular attitudes across years, while higher-religiosity respondents display declining support after 2015.

Figure 4

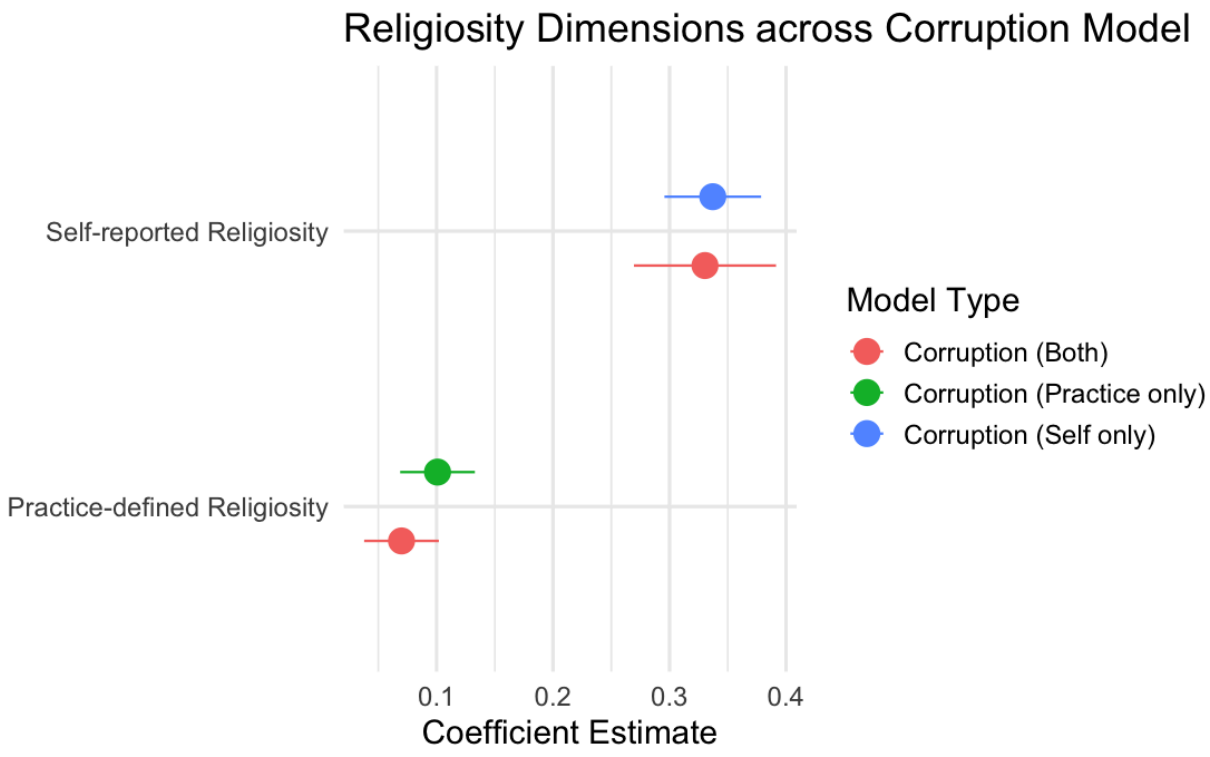


Perception of Corruption

Results for perceptions of corruption are weaker overall. In the self-reported religiosity model, Figure 5 depicts religiosity as a small, non-significant negative coefficient (b = -0.011). Practice-defined religiosity shows a positive but non-significant association (b = 0.054). In the

combined model, both religiosity measures retain their directional effects. Economic satisfaction predicts lower perceptions of corruption (b = 0.137). Gender and age are not statistically significant. Employment status, including working (b = 0.169 in the self-reported model; b = 0.464, p < .001 in the practice-defined model), non-working income (b = 0.303 in the self-reported model; b = 0.744, p < .01 in the practice-defined model), and retired respondents (b = 0.125 in the self-reported model; b = 0.408, p < .05 in the practice-defined model), is positively associated with corruption perception. Perceptions of corruption increase between 2011 and 2019 (b = 0.347, p < .001), leveling off in 2022. Interaction plots show that the increase is more pronounced among more religious respondents.

Figure 5



Comparison and Summary of Findings

Across outcomes, self-reported religiosity shows stronger and more consistent associations with trust and secularism, while practice-defined religiosity shows comparatively stronger associations with corruption perceptions. The direction of effects varies by outcome: religiosity is positively associated with trust, negatively associated with secularism (in the practice-based models), and weakly associated with corruption. Model fit statistics indicate that trust models explain the greatest variance (Adjusted $R^2 \approx 0.26–0.40$), followed by secularism ($\approx 0.20–0.25$), and corruption ($\approx 0.07–0.12$). Temporal patterns show variation across survey waves, including recovery in institutional trust and declines in support for secularism. Gender differences are small across models. Economic satisfaction shows consistent associations across outcomes.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The preceding section presented the empirical results from regression analyses examining the relationship between religiosity and key political attitudes. This section discusses these findings in light of the study's hypotheses and broader theoretical and historical expectations. Specifically, it assesses the extent to which the results support or challenge the initial propositions regarding the role of religiosity in shaping institutional trust, support for secularism, and perceptions of corruption. By situating the empirical patterns within the literature on political legitimacy, authoritarian resilience, and the sociopolitical functions of religion, this discussion aims to interpret how religiosity operates as both a moral and political resource in Saudi Arabia.

5.1: Interpretation of Results

The findings provide nuanced evidence regarding the evolving foundations of political legitimacy in Saudi Arabia during the period surrounding Vision 2030. Across models, religiosity remains a significant determinant of political attitudes, but its effects vary systematically by outcome and by how religiosity is measured. These patterns offer important insight into whether performance-based and nationalist forms of legitimacy can substitute for historically institutionalized religious authority.

First, the consistently positive association between religiosity and institutional trust suggests that religion continues to function as a stabilizing force within the political system. Individuals who identify as more religious report higher levels of confidence in public institutions, even amid institutional restructuring and clerical subordination. This pattern indicates that the weakening of formal religious authorities has not translated into an erosion of trust among religious citizens. Rather than producing alienation, the centralization of religious institutions under the state appears compatible with continued regime support among the

religiously inclined. In this sense, religious identity may remain symbolically embedded in the regime, even as institutional autonomy declines.

However, the secularism results complicate a straightforward narrative of substitution. Although practice-based religiosity predicts lower support for secular political principles, the temporal decline in secular attitudes across survey waves suggests a broader shift in the political climate. Following 2015, the most religious respondents became markedly less supportive of secularism, indicating that institutional reforms might have heightened the salience of religion in political identity rather than diminishing it. If economic modernization were fully replacing religious legitimacy, we would expect secular attitudes to increase or religiosity to become politically irrelevant. Instead, religion remains a meaningful axis of political differentiation, even as the state redefines its public narrative.

The corruption findings further illustrate the multidimensional nature of religiosity. While overall effects are weaker, practice-defined religiosity is associated with greater sensitivity to corruption over time. This divergence between subjective religiosity and behavioral religiosity underscores an important conceptual distinction. Self-identified religiosity appears more closely linked to regime trust and political loyalty, whereas practice-based religiosity might capture moral vigilance or normative expectations that heighten scrutiny of institutional conduct. These differences suggest that religiosity is not a uniform political resource; its influence depends on whether it operates as identity, behavior, or moral framework.

Economic satisfaction emerges as one of the most consistent predictors across all outcomes, reinforcing the importance of material well-being in shaping political evaluations. Individuals who are more satisfied economically express greater institutional trust and lower perceptions of corruption. This pattern lends support to the argument that performance-based

legitimacy plays a substantial role in sustaining regime support. As Vision 2030 promotes diversification, technological advancement, and national development, economic satisfaction might serve as a crucial mechanism through which economic nationalism is translated into political approval. However, the coexistence of strong religiosity effects indicates that performance legitimacy supplements rather than fully replaces religious foundations.

Temporal variation offers additional insight into this transitional moment. Trust in institutions recovers modestly in later survey waves, while secular support declines. This divergence suggests a consolidation of religion-linked political legitimacy rather than its displacement. If substitution were complete, institutional trust would decouple from religiosity over time. Instead, the association remains stable, indicating that economic reform has not severed the symbolic link between religion and authority. Rather, the regime might be integrating economic nationalism into an existing moral framework, blending modernization with selectively curated religious identity.

Gender differences are comparatively modest but consistent, with women expressing slightly lower institutional trust. Although the reforms under Vision 2030 have expanded women's labor force participation and public presence, these shifts do not appear to dramatically restructure gendered political attitudes within the timeframe examined. The anticipated moderating role of gender is therefore more limited than expected, suggesting that religiosity exerts broadly similar political effects across men and women, even as social reforms alter gender norms.

Taken together, the findings point toward partial rather than complete substitution. Economic-national narratives and performance-based legitimacy are clearly gaining prominence, particularly through material satisfaction and modernization efforts. Yet religious identity

continues to shape political trust and normative attitudes in durable ways. The Saudi case therefore illustrates the resilience of historically embedded legitimacy structures, even amid ambitious institutional reform. Rather than abandoning religious legitimacy, the regime appears to be reconfiguring it, centralizing religious authority, reducing clerical autonomy, and embedding religious symbolism within a nationalist developmental framework.

More broadly, these results contribute to theories of authoritarian legitimacy by demonstrating that substitution is conditional and uneven. Regimes might successfully expand performance-based legitimacy without fully displacing traditional sources of authority. In contexts where religion has long been institutionalized within the state apparatus, legitimacy transformation is likely to involve adaptation and hybridization rather than replacement. The Saudi experience under Vision 2030 thus offers insight into how authoritarian governments navigating modernization seek to recalibrate, rather than erase, the symbolic foundations of rule.

5.2: Discussion of Hypotheses

In summary, the results largely support the hypothesized trade-off between religious and economic-nationalist legitimacy. Religiosity remains a significant predictor of institutional trust and shapes attitudes toward secularism, confirming the continuing role of religious legitimacy (H1). At the same time, economic satisfaction consistently predicts higher trust and lower perceptions of corruption, highlighting the rising importance of performance-based, economic-nationalist legitimacy (H2). Temporal patterns indicate partial substitution: while religiosity retains influence, economic-nationalist narratives gain traction over time, consistent with the substitution hypothesis (H3). Gendered effects are modest but suggest that groups historically more regulated by religious institutions, particularly women, might experience these legitimacy shifts differently (H4). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Vision 2030 is

reshaping the sources of authority in Saudi Arabia, providing evidence that authoritarian regimes can diversify legitimacy bases, yet must navigate persistent cultural and institutional constraints. This sets the stage for a broader discussion of how these dynamics inform theories of authoritarian resilience and legitimacy substitution.

H1: Religious Legitimacy

The findings provide strong but differentiated support for the hypothesis that religiosity remains a significant predictor of political legitimacy across multiple dimensions. In line with expectations, religiosity is positively and consistently associated with institutional trust, with self-reported religiosity showing a strong and highly significant effect ($b = 0.337$, $p < .001$) and practice-defined religiosity exhibiting a weaker but still positive relationship ($b = 0.101$, $p < .1$). This supports the argument that religious identity continues to anchor confidence in state institutions.

However, the relationship between religiosity and support for secularism is more complex and depends on how religiosity is measured. Practice-defined religiosity is negatively associated with secularism, consistent with expectations that religious practice reinforces support for the integration of religion and politics. In contrast, self-reported religiosity shows inconsistent or even positive associations in some models, suggesting that subjective religious identity might be less tightly linked to political ideology than behavioral religiosity.

For perceptions of corruption, religiosity exhibits weak and largely non-significant effects. While practice-based religiosity trends toward a positive association with corruption perception, these results suggest that religiosity does not strongly structure evaluations of state integrity in the same way it shapes trust or normative attitudes.

Across models, control variables further contextualize these relationships. Economic satisfaction consistently predicts higher trust and lower perceived corruption, while temporal variation shows that trust and secular attitudes shift over time. Gender differences are modest. Taken together, these findings support H1 while also demonstrating that religious legitimacy is multidimensional, shaping trust and normative orientations more strongly than evaluations of institutional performance.

H2: Economic-National Legitimacy

The results provide strong and consistent support for the hypothesis that economic satisfaction is positively associated with perceptions of political legitimacy across all three outcome variables. Economic satisfaction emerges as a robust predictor of institutional trust, with large and highly significant coefficients across all models ($b = 0.597$ in the self-reported model; $b \approx 0.302–0.309$ in others), indicating that individuals who perceive economic improvement are substantially more likely to view state institutions as legitimate.

This pattern extends to other dimensions of legitimacy. Economic satisfaction is positively associated with support for secularism, suggesting that individuals who benefit from or perceive economic modernization might also be more receptive to shifts away from strictly religious political frameworks. At the same time, economic satisfaction predicts lower perceptions of corruption, indicating that material well-being and perceived government performance reduce critical evaluations of state integrity.

Importantly, these effects remain consistent even when controlling for religiosity, gender, age, and employment status, underscoring the independent explanatory power of economic factors. Temporal patterns further reinforce this interpretation, as improvements in trust and

stabilization of corruption perceptions in later waves coincide with the implementation of Vision 2030 reforms.

Therefore taken together, these findings strongly support H2 and demonstrate that economic-nationalist legitimacy operates across multiple dimensions of political evaluation, reinforcing trust, shaping ideological attitudes, and mitigating perceptions of state failure.

H3: Substitution Hypothesis

The substitution hypothesis predicts a declining influence of religiosity and a rising influence of economic satisfaction over time. The results provide partial and nuanced support for this expectation across the three dependent variables.

For institutional trust, religiosity remains a stable and significant predictor across survey waves, with highly religious individuals consistently reporting greater trust. However, economic satisfaction also remains a strong and persistent predictor, suggesting that rather than being displaced, religious legitimacy coexists with an increasingly salient performance-based dimension. Temporal fluctuations, such as the dip in trust in 2015 and recovery in later waves, indicate that legitimacy is responsive to changing political and economic conditions, consistent with a gradual rather than abrupt substitution process.

In the case of support for secularism, the results complicate a straightforward substitution narrative. Although economic satisfaction is positively associated with secular attitudes, support for secularism declines over time, particularly among highly religious respondents. This suggests that economic modernization has not led to a linear shift toward secular political preferences, and might instead coexist with, or even intensify, religious identity as a political marker.

For perceptions of corruption, religiosity shows weak effects, while economic satisfaction consistently predicts lower perceived corruption. However, perceptions of corruption increase

over time, particularly among more religious respondents, indicating that performance-based legitimacy does not fully offset critical evaluations of the state.

Overall, these findings suggest that substitution is incomplete and uneven across dimensions. Economic-nationalist legitimacy is clearly gaining importance, particularly in shaping trust and corruption perceptions, but religiosity continues to structure key aspects of political evaluation, especially trust and normative attitudes. Rather than full replacement, the results point to a hybrid legitimacy model in which economic performance supplements but does not displace religious authority.

H4: Gendered Effects of Religious Legitimacy

The results provide limited but meaningful support for the hypothesis that gender moderates the relationship between religiosity and legitimacy. Across models, women exhibit slightly lower institutional trust ($b = -0.062$, $p < .05$), but the overall magnitude of gender effects is modest. This suggests that while gender plays a role, it does not fundamentally restructure the relationship between religiosity and political legitimacy.

Across the other outcomes, gender differences are minimal. There are no significant gender effects for support for secularism or perceptions of corruption, indicating that men and women respond similarly across these dimensions. This challenges the expectation that women's historically greater exposure to religious institutions would produce substantially stronger religiosity effects.

However, when interpreted alongside control variables and broader patterns, a more nuanced picture emerges. Economic satisfaction influences both men and women similarly, suggesting that economic-nationalist legitimacy cuts across gender lines, particularly as reforms expand women's access to education and employment. At the same time, the persistence of

religiosity effects across all groups indicates that shared cultural and institutional frameworks continue to shape political attitudes.

These findings suggest that while differential institutional exposure might have historically structured gendered experiences of authority, the reforms associated with Vision 2030 have not yet produced large divergences in political attitudes. Instead, gender appears to play a subtle moderating role within a broader system where both religious and economic sources of legitimacy operate across the population.

5.3: Synthesis Across Hypotheses

Across outcomes, the results illustrate a complex interaction between religious and economic-nationalist legitimacy. Self-reported religiosity remains a robust predictor of trust and secularism, whereas economic satisfaction consistently predicts higher trust and lower perceptions of corruption. Temporal patterns indicate that, while religion continues to anchor legitimacy, Vision 2030's economic-nationalist narrative has gained traction, particularly among those responding to material improvements. These findings suggest a partial but incomplete substitution of legitimacy sources, highlighting the nuanced trade-off between historical religious authority and emerging performance-based legitimacy in an authoritarian context.

The results of this study have important implications for theories of authoritarian legitimacy, particularly regarding the substitution of historical religious authority with performance-based, economic-nationalist legitimacy. The persistence of religiosity as a predictor of institutional trust confirms that deeply embedded cultural and religious frameworks continue to anchor political support, even amid sweeping reforms. At the same time, the consistent and strong effects of economic satisfaction demonstrate that economic-nationalist narratives, rooted

in modernization, national development, and material performance, can complement or partially substitute traditional religious sources of legitimacy.

Temporal variation and fluctuations across survey waves suggest that this substitution is neither uniform nor complete: the monarchy's efforts to reframe authority are gaining traction, yet the durability of religious legitimacy, particularly among highly devout populations, moderates the pace and scope of this transformation. Furthermore, gendered patterns indicate that social groups with historically greater exposure to religious regulation, such as women, might experience legitimacy substitution differently, reflecting the uneven reception of reforms across society. Together, these findings support a theoretical model in which authoritarian regimes can strategically diversify the bases of legitimacy, blending symbolic, religious, and performance-oriented appeals, but must navigate persistent cultural and institutional constraints that shape how such substitutions are received by the public.

5.4: Historical Comparisons

The Saudi dynamic of both rentierism and hyper religious legitimacy isn't entirely unique. The transformation unfolding in Saudi Arabia raises a broader theoretical question central to the study of political legitimacy: can regimes historically grounded in religious authority successfully substitute sacred legitimacy with performance-based or nationalist legitimacy without destabilizing rule? Political legitimacy is rarely static. While Weber's typology distinguishes between traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority (Weber, 1978), most regimes combine multiple sources of legitimacy that shift over time (Gerschewski, 2013; Schlumberger & Bank, 2001). Authoritarian systems in particular tend to rely on layered foundations, religious, ideological, economic, and nationalist, which are recalibrated when

structural pressures emerge (Gerschewski, 2013). Therefore when one pillar weakens, regimes often attempt to reinforce or substitute another.

Given Saudi Arabia's political legitimacy has rested on two mutually reinforcing foundations, religious-traditional legitimacy and rentier-economic legitimacy (Beblawi & Luciani, 1987; Herb, 1999), Vision 2030 signals a strategic rebalancing of these pillars. Although religious symbolism remains central to the Saudi state, clerical autonomy has been curtailed, and economic diversification, nationalism, and modernization have been elevated as primary sources of authority (Al-Rasheed, 2020; Hanieh, 2018). This shift situates Saudi Arabia within a broader pattern observable in other authoritarian regimes that have undergone legitimacy transformation. Comparative historical cases suggest three broad models: secular substitution, performance-based legitimacy, and controlled religious reframing.

The first model, secular substitution, involves the assertive displacement of religious authority by secular-nationalist ideology. The Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk provides a prime example, as following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Atatürk abolished the Caliphate in 1924 and dismantled the institutional fusion of religious and political authority (Zürcher, 2004; Kuru, 2009). Religious courts were eliminated, Islamic education was reorganized, and religious institutions were placed under the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), effectively nationalizing religion. Legitimacy shifted away from sacred sovereignty toward republican nationalism and secularism (Kuru, 2009). The Turkish case represents a radical re-foundation of authority in which religion was subordinated to the state and stripped of independent political power. Although Saudi Arabia has similarly centralized control over religious institutions, it has not, and likely will not, pursue outright secularization. Instead, the KSA seeks to redefine and monopolize religious interpretation rather than displace it entirely.

Iran under the Pahlavi Shah represents another version of secular substitution, though with a dramatically different outcome. The Western backed Reza Shah and later Mohammad Reza Shah pursued rapid economic modernization and Westernization while marginalizing clerical authority (Abrahamian, 2008; Keddie, 2003). The White Revolution alienated key segments of the religious establishment while attempting to ground its legitimacy in Persian nationalism, developmental progress, and centralized authority. However, by weakening independent clerical institutions without replacing their moral authority and abandoning attempts to nationalize the oil sector, the regime generated latent opposition. When economic performance faltered and repression intensified, religious networks and schools became central sites of mobilization, culminating in the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Abrahamian, 2008). The Iranian case illustrates the dangers of dismantling religious legitimacy without replacing it with an alternative framework of authority that aligns with the population's cultural and ideological context. For Saudi Arabia, this raises the question of whether centralization neutralizes dissent or merely postpones it.

A second model centers on performance-based legitimacy, in which authoritarian regimes justify rule through economic development and national advancement rather than religious or ideological foundations. South Korea under Park Chung-hee exemplifies this pattern (Woo-Cumings, 1999; Kim & Vogel, 2011). Following his 1961 coup, Park consolidated power and pursued aggressive industrialization strategies that transformed South Korea's economy. The regime cultivated developmental nationalism and attempted to justify political repression through tangible improvements in living standards. Sustainment of rapid economic growth, though over time, expanded middle classes and generated pressures for democratization (Kim & Vogel, 2011). Similarly, beginning in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping, China shifted away from Maoism

toward a more open market-orientated economy, facilitated by agricultural reform and the establishment of decentralized Special Economic Zones. While maintaining elements of socialism, the Chinese Communist Party increasingly grounded its legitimacy in economic growth, national rejuvenation, and social stability (Zhao, 2009; Dickson, 2016). This form of 'performance legitimacy' tied regime survival directly to continued material progress. These cases demonstrate that historically authoritarian regimes have sustained authority without strong religious or ideological mobilization, provided economic gains are widely perceived and distributed.

The third model, controlled religious reframing, is particularly relevant to religiously grounded regimes. In this approach, religion is neither abolished nor displaced but bureaucratized and subordinated to centralized state authority. Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser illustrates this dynamic. In 1961, Nasser nationalized Al-Azhar and incorporated it into the state apparatus, reducing its independence while preserving its symbolic importance. Independent Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, were suppressed (Zeghal, 1999; Wickham, 2013). Legitimacy shifted toward Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism, but religion remained embedded within state structures. Similarly, Morocco under King Mohammed VI represents a reformist religious monarchy in which the king retains the title "Commander of the Faithful" while promoting social reforms and a discourse of 'moderate Islam.' Rather than diminishing religious authority, the Moroccan monarchy redefines and centralizes it (Daadaoui, 2011). This model offers a closer regional parallel to Saudi Arabia, where religious symbolism remains foundational even as clerical autonomy is suppressed.

Saudi Arabia's case is further shaped by its rentier structure. Oil wealth historically reduced reliance on taxation and grounding redistribution-based legitimacy (Beblawi & Luciani,

1987; Ross, 2001). Yet fluctuations in oil prices and demographic pressures strain this model. Historical experiences such as Algeria in the 1980s demonstrate that when rent-based legitimacy weakens, Islamist movements can capitalize on socioeconomic dissatisfaction (Entelis, 1999; Volpi, 2003). In this sense, Vision 2030 is not merely an economic reform project but a strategy aimed at restructuring the foundations of regime legitimacy in anticipation of post-oil vulnerability.

Comparatively, Saudi Arabia does not fit neatly into any single model. It has not pursued full secularization as in Turkey, nor has it abandoned religion entirely in favor of nationalist modernism as attempted in Pahlavi Iran. It is not solely reliant on performance legitimacy in the manner of China or South Korea, and it differs from Morocco in the historical depth and institutionalization of its clerical partnership. Instead, Saudi Arabia appears to be constructing a hybrid model that combines centralized religious reframing with performance-based nationalism. Religious institutions have been subordinated and bureaucratized, yet religious symbolism remains central to the state's identity. Simultaneously, economic diversification, technological modernization, and nationalist rhetoric are increasingly invoked as primary sources of legitimacy.

This comparative framework generates several theoretical implications. First, economic modernization might compensate for declining religious authority if material improvements are visible and widely distributed. Second, suppression of independent religious elites might generate latent opposition if alternative moral frameworks remain socially embedded. Third, regimes that successfully monopolize and redefine religious authority rather than abolish it might achieve greater stability during periods of transformation. The Saudi case therefore provides a critical test of whether a historically religious monarchy can recalibrate its legitimacy without

undermining its foundational identity. By situating Saudi Arabia within this broader comparative landscape, the study contributes to theoretical debates on authoritarian resilience, legitimacy substitution, and the evolving relationship between religion and state power in an era of economic globalization.

5.5: Conclusion

This study set out to examine how political legitimacy is evolving in Saudi Arabia in the context of Vision 2030, with particular attention to the relationship between religiosity, economic satisfaction, and key political attitudes. By analyzing institutional trust, support for secularism, and perceptions of corruption, the findings provide a nuanced account of how traditional and emerging sources of legitimacy interact in a period of state-led transformation.

The results demonstrate that religious legitimacy remains a durable and influential component of political evaluation. Across models, religiosity continues to shape institutional trust and normative attitudes, confirming that deeply embedded religious frameworks have not been displaced by recent reforms. At the same time, economic satisfaction emerges as a powerful and consistent predictor across all outcomes, highlighting the growing importance of performance-based legitimacy rooted in material well-being and state delivery. Rather than observing a linear transition from religious to economic-nationalist legitimacy, the findings point to a hybrid configuration in which both sources operate simultaneously. This suggests that legitimacy transformation in Saudi Arabia is best understood not as replacement, but as recalibration.

Importantly, the study finds that substitution is partial and uneven across dimensions of political evaluation. Although economic satisfaction strongly influences trust and corruption perceptions, religiosity remains central to shaping normative orientations, particularly regarding

secularism. Temporal patterns further reinforce this interpretation, indicating that economic modernization has not diminished the political salience of religion, but instead coexists with it in complex and sometimes reinforcing ways. Gendered effects, while modest, suggest that structural differences in institutional exposure might subtly shape how legitimacy is experienced, though these differences have not yet produced substantial divergence in attitudes. These findings contribute to broader theories of authoritarian resilience by demonstrating that regimes can diversify their legitimacy strategies without fully abandoning historically embedded sources of authority. In contrast to models that predict the displacement of traditional legitimacy under modernization, the Saudi case illustrates how regimes can integrate new forms of performance-based legitimacy into existing symbolic frameworks. This hybridization allows for adaptability while maintaining continuity, offering a more flexible foundation for political stability.

At the same time, the results highlight important constraints. The persistence of religious legitimacy suggests that efforts to centralize and redefine religious authority do not eliminate its influence, but rather reshape how it operates within the political system. Similarly, the reliance on economic performance introduces new vulnerabilities, as legitimacy becomes increasingly tied to the state's ability to deliver sustained material improvements. These dynamics underscore that legitimacy transformation is contingent, negotiated, and subject to both structural and temporal pressures. More broadly, this study underscores the importance of disaggregating legitimacy into multiple dimensions and recognizing that different sources of authority might operate unevenly across them. By examining trust, normative attitudes, and perceptions of governance simultaneously, the analysis reveals that legitimacy is not a singular construct but a layered and multidimensional process. This has implications not only for the study of Saudi

Arabia, but for understanding how authoritarian regimes navigate modernization in contexts where religion, identity, and economic change are deeply intertwined.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring longer-term trajectories of legitimacy transformation, particularly as Vision 2030 continues to unfold. Additional work might also examine generational differences, regional variation, or the role of emerging forms of nationalism and identity in shaping political attitudes. As Saudi Arabia continues to redefine its political and economic landscape, understanding how citizens interpret and evaluate authority will remain central to assessing the durability of its evolving legitimacy framework. The Saudi case demonstrates that legitimacy in authoritarian systems is not simply replaced but reconfigured. Vision 2030 has not displaced religious authority, but has layered economic-nationalist legitimacy alongside it, producing a hybrid system that reflects both continuity and change. This dynamic offers important insight into how regimes adapt to shifting structural conditions while maintaining political stability, contributing to broader debates on legitimacy, modernization, and authoritarian governance.

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Appendix

Full Regression Table

Comparing Models with Single and Both Religiosity Dimensions

	Trust (Self only)	Trust (Practice only)	Trust (Both)	Secularism (Self only)	Secularism (Practice only)	Secularism (Both)	Corruption (Self only)	Corruption (Practice only)	C
(Intercept)	1.073*	1.874***	1.736***	1.454***	2.000***	2.051***	2.790***	2.093***	
	(0.451)	(0.142)	(0.192)	(0.260)	(0.122)	(0.139)	(0.230)	(0.431)	
relig_self_z	0.337***		0.330	0.339*		-0.124	-0.011		
	(0.102)		(0.208)	(0.155)		(0.104)	(0.018)		
gender_factorFemale	-0.062**	0.077+	0.066	-0.036	-0.056	-0.051	0.035	0.047	
	(0.021)	(0.046)	(0.044)	(0.046)	(0.040)	(0.035)	(0.029)	(0.057)	
survey_year2015	-0.087***	0.007	0.036**	0.192***	0.111***	0.100***	0.357***	0.319***	
	(0.018)	(0.021)	(0.012)	(0.053)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.021)	(0.030)	
survey_year2019	-0.002	0.240***	0.193*	-1.132*	0.291***	0.303**	0.347***	0.187***	
	(0.043)	(0.058)	(0.085)	(0.503)	(0.088)	(0.096)	(0.048)	(0.051)	
survey_year2022	-0.086	0.198+	0.044	-1.342*	-0.109	-0.062	0.369***	0.143**	
	(0.057)	(0.114)	(0.233)	(0.599)	(0.180)	(0.202)	(0.047)	(0.046)	
age_group25-34	0.069***	0.030	0.030	0.012	0.010	0.010	0.008	0.036	
	(0.021)	(0.039)	(0.043)	(0.038)	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.018)	(0.031)	
age_group35-44	0.096	-0.032	-0.044	-0.049	-0.006	-0.001	-0.012	-0.077**	
	(0.075)	(0.063)	(0.055)	(0.049)	(0.098)	(0.096)	(0.037)	(0.025)	
age_group45-54	0.104+	-0.007	-0.040	-0.075	0.026	0.038	-0.002	-0.082*	
	(0.062)	(0.085)	(0.065)	(0.075)	(0.115)	(0.116)	(0.045)	(0.038)	

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

age_group55 or Older	0.105	0.115	0.064	-0.077	0.038	0.058	-0.000	-0.065
	(0.085)	(0.265)	(0.232)	(0.090)	(0.091)	(0.090)	(0.040)	(0.058)
education_levelIlliterate	0.096+	0.022	0.002	-0.033	-0.031	-0.022	-0.039***	0.003
	(0.053)	(0.029)	(0.033)	(0.040)	(0.062)	(0.060)	(0.006)	(0.024)
education_levelLess than Secondary Education	0.033	0.016	0.010	0.011	0.029	0.031	-0.003	0.066*
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.025)	(0.022)	(0.043)	(0.040)	(0.025)	(0.033)
education_levelSecondary Education	0.066*	0.031	0.034	0.052	0.030	0.029	0.028	0.132*
	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.031)	(0.037)	(0.046)	(0.047)	(0.041)	(0.064)
education_levelUnknown	-0.172	-0.264***	-0.077	0.160	-0.033	-0.103***	-0.134+	-0.105
	(0.160)	(0.049)	(0.190)	(0.124)	(0.025)	(0.022)	(0.081)	(0.125)
employment_statusHousewife	0.265***	0.430	0.448	-0.020	0.023	0.017	0.123	0.432*
	(0.049)	(0.323)	(0.331)	(0.043)	(0.206)	(0.200)	(0.154)	(0.192)
employment_statusLooking for Work	0.331**	0.511	0.525+	0.121	0.219	0.216	0.108	0.409+
	(0.109)	(0.314)	(0.318)	(0.132)	(0.327)	(0.324)	(0.157)	(0.243)
employment_statusNon-Work Income	0.194*	0.486	0.472	0.102	0.309	0.314	0.303	0.744**
	(0.092)	(0.392)	(0.407)	(0.148)	(0.275)	(0.274)	(0.282)	(0.253)
employment_statusNot Looking for Work	0.274***	0.487+	0.394	0.036	0.152	0.187	0.083	0.339**
	(0.065)	(0.296)	(0.400)	(0.091)	(0.199)	(0.200)	(0.096)	(0.120)
employment_statusRetired	0.229*	0.408	0.437	0.093	0.045	0.034	0.125	0.408*

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

	(0.096)	(0.443)	(0.431)	(0.082)	(0.152)	(0.148)	(0.142)	(0.200)
employment_statusStudent	0.217**	0.403	0.392	0.011	0.200	0.205	0.079	0.369+
	(0.077)	(0.251)	(0.261)	(0.094)	(0.221)	(0.224)	(0.144)	(0.222)
employment_statusWorking	0.238*	0.483+	0.496+	0.129	0.215	0.211	0.169	0.464*
	(0.093)	(0.293)	(0.287)	(0.083)	(0.176)	(0.175)	(0.151)	(0.212)
employment_statusUnknown	-0.325+	-1.215***	-0.859***	-0.360	0.170	0.036	0.177	0.646*
	(0.187)	(0.320)	(0.157)	(0.330)	(0.157)	(0.142)	(0.193)	(0.298)
area_typeRural	0.101+	0.112	0.105	0.003	0.016	0.018	0.038	0.096
	(0.053)	(0.120)	(0.115)	(0.020)	(0.050)	(0.050)	(0.053)	(0.081)
econ_sat	0.597***	0.309***	0.302***	0.054**	-0.044	-0.041	0.026	0.136
	(0.104)	(0.091)	(0.079)	(0.018)	(0.052)	(0.053)	(0.033)	(0.085)
nonresponse_index	0.425***	0.283+	0.697	1.307	-1.513***	-1.646***	-0.024	0.327***
	(0.071)	(0.167)	(0.444)	(1.518)	(0.329)	(0.388)	(0.089)	(0.080)
relig_def_practice_z		0.101+	0.070		-0.059**	-0.047**		0.054
		(0.060)	(0.054)		(0.018)	(0.015)		(0.062)
Num.Obs.	9402	3379	3379	9582	3429	3429	9582	3429
R2	0.405	0.240	0.265	0.254	0.207	0.212	0.069	0.125
R2 Adj.	0.403	0.234	0.259	0.252	0.202	0.206	0.067	0.119
AIC	29820.9	9060.1	8950.2	29163.0	8648.0	8631.3	12036.2	6407.3
BIC	30006.7	9219.4	9115.6	29349.3	8807.6	8797.1	12222.6	6566.9
Log.Lik.	-14884.425	-4504.060	-4448.109	-14555.490	-4297.984	-4288.649	-5992.100	-3177.653
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001								
RMSE	1.18	0.92	0.90	1.11	0.85	0.85	0.45	0.61
Std.Errors	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom	Custom
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001								

Note. Tables constructed by the author using publicly available data from the Arab Opinion Index surveys (2011, 2015, 2019, 2022), conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.