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Continuity and change in Saudi Arabia's development and humanitarian aid

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the motivations and drivers behind Saudi Arabia's foreign aid, shedding light on the interplay between geopolitics, religious affinity, and strategic objectives. Drawing on newly released empirical data from the Saudi Aid Platform (SAP) dataset, encompassing 47 years of aid delivery, the study seeks to answer the long-standing debate surrounding the factors shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign aid decisions. The study focuses on two pivotal periods: the Bosnian War and the post-Arab Spring era. By examining Saudi aid allocations during these periods, we investigate the influence of foreign policy and geostrategic objectives versus the humanitarian needs of the recipients. Religious ideology, geopolitical interests, and strategic objectives drive Saudi Arabian aid. The study reveals that Saudi Arabia adopts a value-neutral strategic approach. The research contextualises these findings within geopolitical events, regional dynamics, and internal governance changes, providing insights into the factors influencing Saudi Arabia's aid allocation decisions. By examining Saudi Arabian aid's historical patterns and drivers, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of one of the world's largest foreign aid providers. Additionally, it offers valuable insights for shaping effective aid strategies and policies in the future.

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Introduction

At the World Economic Forum 2023, Saudi Arabia's Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan announced that Saudi Arabia would abandon its longstanding policy of providing unconditional financial support to allies (Saudi Gazette 2023). Instead of their traditional 'no strings attached' approach, they would now 'work with multilateral institutions to say we want to see reforms'. For Al-Jadaan, the logic was simple: 'we are taxing our people, so we expect others to do the same. We want to help, but we want others to do their part'. If implemented, this will represent a major policy shift for a country that has made \$28 billion in cash deposits and general budget support loans over the last decade, ostensibly based on geopolitical goals and religious ideology (Li 2019; Diwan 2017; Almatrooshi 2019).

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But which domestic factors drive Saudi Arabian aid? Indeed, persistent budget surpluses from large-scale oil revenues in most years provide the liquidity necessary to generate large-scale outflows. The primary source of Saudi Arabia's national wealth, low-cost petroleum exports, had driven foreign aid since the 1960s when primary recipients were Muslim allies such as Egypt and Jordan (Amīn 1995). But after widespread criticism of Saudi Arabia's role in the oil embargo of 1973 that inflicted considerable economic pain across the Global South, Saudi Arabia modernised its foreign aid programme through new delivery channels (Momani and Ennis 2012). It created the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) in 1974, providing \$3 billion in concessional infrastructure lending for transport, energy, agriculture and water projects in 30 Muslim countries within the first 10 years of its creation (Saudi Aid Platform 2023).

During the same period, Saudi Arabia also improved its standing in the multilateral development system by making significant contributions to the World Bank Group (\$785 million) and various United Nations (UN) agencies (\$672 million) (OECD 2022). Together with its oil-producing partners in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia also founded the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) with \$240 million and the Special Arab Fund for Africa with \$100 million, totalling \$2.15 billion in multilateral development bank allocations between 1975 and 1985 alone (Economist 1975). To this day, Saudi Arabia continues to allocate multi-billion-dollar budgets for foreign aid every year, averaging \$3.4 billion per year since 2000, out of which 92% is allocated through bilateral channels (OECD 2022).

The academic literature offers two primary explanations of the drivers of Saudi foreign aid: geopolitics and religious ideology (Neumayer 2003; Li 2019; Harmáček, Opršal, and Vítová 2022). Papers favouring geopolitics claim that Saudi Arabia has successfully deployed its vast foreign aid budget to fend off the advances of regional adversaries like Israel and Iran while strengthening economic and military alliances with the likes of Egypt and Pakistan (Neumayer 2003; Diwan 2017). Saudi leaders have used large-scale foreign aid flows to maintain their grip on power at home, exert influence internationally, and augment their country's pro-Western foreign policy posturing by supporting recipient countries allied to Western powers (Wehrey et al. 2009; Gause 2014, 2015).

On the other hand, Gause and Hernandez and Vadlamannati (2017) argue that Saudi aid strategy is almost entirely driven by religious affinity to Sunni-Muslim majority countries, where historical and cultural ties between elites trump other considerations (Almatrooshi 2019). Saudi Arabia's traditional ideology-driven foreign policy, where development assistance to strategically vital allies was prioritised over humanitarian needs alone, resulted in sub-optimal geostrategic results such that it consistently punched below its weight (Schomerus, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, and Sandhar 2017). Generations of Saudi rulers have deployed foreign aid to extend regional and global influence, established deep networks of allied elites globally, gained worldwide recognition for generosity, and secured allegiances in key regions (Lowi 2019). Indeed, the two largest recipients of Saudi foreign aid since 1974 – Egypt and Pakistan – have large Sunni-majority populations.

This paper extends this debate by critically examining these long-held hypotheses through newly released empirical data based on Saudi Arabia's official aid flows combined with carefully selected case studies. We focus on Saudi aid allocations around two pivotal moments: first, the Bosnian war of the 1990s, when Muslim affinity drove previously unknown humanitarian support, and, second, the post-Arab Spring years when unprecedented multi-billion-dollar unrestricted budget support packages and cash deposits were used to stabilise friendly regimes in nearby countries like Egypt and Yemen. This two-case approach enables us to

explore each hypothesis, ultimately answering the question of when, how much and why Saudi Arabia's foreign aid spending is driven by foreign policy and geostrategic objectives versus the humanitarian needs of recipients. Since Saudi Arabia is one of the world's largest and historically most generous foreign aid providers, examining its motivations enables policymakers in recipient countries to better anticipate future allocations.

We study these questions by analysing the Saudi government's newly updated Saudi Aid Platform (SAP) dataset, which provides a unique time series of the country's foreign aid delivery over 47 years between 1975 and 2022. It contains data on 5344 projects committed by 15 Saudi government agencies, totalling over \$65 billion. Given that SAP underwent major upgrades in recent years, in terms of both coverage years and project-level details, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first known attempt to utilise this new data to answer these questions. The literature's understanding of how Saudi Arabia's conflicting priorities have manifested over numerous years, sectors, and nations remains limited. To address this gap, we provide fresh insights into the factors influencing Saudi Arabia's decisions regarding aid allocation. Our approach involves an empirical analysis of recently released official Saudi foreign aid data spanning almost five decades. We employ a conceptual and empirical framework that distinguishes between development and humanitarian aid allocations throughout these 47 years, enabling us to identify the drivers of both continuity and change. We contextualise these findings within the backdrop of geopolitical and regional events and internal governance changes by examining the specific periods of continuity and significant shifts in disaggregated Saudi aid allocations.

Using two case studies (the Bosnian War and the aftermath of the Arab Spring), we find that Saudi Arabian aid is motivated by religious ideology, geostrategic interests, or a combination of the two. Saudi Arabia is not a donor driven by values but rather has adopted a value-neutral strategic approach, with foreign aid decisions solely guided by national interests.

The drivers of Saudi foreign aid

The voluminous literature on foreign aid, based largely on allocation data from Western donors since the 1960s, has found several determinants of donors' allocation strategies. These range from the desire to build soft power to geostrategic interests, and from objective assessments of needs to rewarding democratic values (Griffin 1996). Donors are motivated by potential economic growth impacts from delivering aid, ie they prioritise sectors and interventions that would pivot productive economic activity in recipient countries (Burnside and Dollar 2000; Ali and Said Isse 2006; Murshed and Khanaum 2012; Amusa, Monkam, and Viegli 2016; Zengin and Korkmaz 2019).

But the emergence of new donors, particularly from Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, who are now also publishing data on aid outflows, challenges the utility of established models and requires new research that revisits underlying assumptions.

Compared to G-7 countries, aid outflows from Gulf donors, including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait, are less predictable. Volatility is particularly high when regional events (eg Arab Spring) dramatically shape outflows (Salamey 2015). Over the medium to long run, outflows do not appear to follow a set pattern as they do not prioritise any sectors or delivery mechanisms (Werker, Ahmed, and Cohen 2009). While there is a positive correlation between global oil prices and aid outflows from the Gulf's petroleum-rich donors, the relationship does not hold when donors focus on protecting foreign and security

policy interests (Momani and Ennis 2012; Young 2017). Gulf countries provide more aid to Muslim-majority countries, comprising 62% of total Gulf aid from 1970 to 2008 (Momani and Ennis 2012; Neumayer 2004; Kragelund 2008). Much of this was motivated by the need to 'reward' allies in military conflicts, support common policy issues to build strategic alliances and stabilise Arab countries under stress from potential popular uprisings (Cochrane 2021).

Much of this work is based on qualitative methods, because data on Gulf donors' foreign assistance flows have been only narrowly available, inconsistent in record-keeping, and lacking in transparency (Dreher, Nunnenkamp, and Thiele 2011; Hynes and Carroll 2013). Barriers to transparency arise from insufficient data supplied by national aid agencies and additional unreported transfers by Arab governments that bypass bilateral organisations (Shushan and Marcoux 2011). It is well established that large proportions of Gulf donors' aid are allocated to physical infrastructure through bilateral channels, mainly in construction, transport, energy, water and telecommunications (Shushan and Marcoux 2011). Beyond this, however, the literature on Saudi Arabia's motivations for foreign aid is divided between two competing explanations.

The first is that as an instrument of foreign policy, Saudi aid is highly politically and ideologically focused, well beyond that of its smaller Gulf neighbours, which tend to follow regional trends set forth by Saudi Arabia (Neumayer 2003; Hernandez and Vadlamannati 2017; Li 2019; Harmáček, Opršal, and Vítová 2022). The Shia–Sunni ideological divide, particularly religious affinity towards fellow Sunni Muslims, has been a major driving force (Gause 2009; Hernandez and Vadlamannati 2017). For instance, the creation of the IsDB only accelerated the prioritisation of Sunni countries, although Shia-majority countries have received major aid packages during conflicts (Hernandez and Vadlamannati 2017). But regardless of short-term interests, Saudi decision-making on foreign aid has been shaped by historical context, cultural considerations, and tradition (Almatrooshi 2019).

On the other hand, Li (2019) argues that Saudi Arabia's aid is double-sided, ie it not only aims to increase South–South cooperation but also helps Saudi Arabia achieve its political aims by making up for military and diplomatic deficiencies in the region. It has invested heavily in proxy wars in response to changing geopolitical landscapes while deploying foreign aid to serve broader strategic objectives (Sons and Wiese 2015; Diwan 2017; Partrick 2018; Stark 2020). Since 9/11, the greater Western scrutiny of the link between foreign funding and extremism in Muslim-majority countries has accelerated this shift (Benthall 2018). Recent studies have argued that despite a link between Saudi-funded humanitarian relief activities and the export of Wahhabi Islam, the country's new leadership during the post-2015 era has broken from this past by 'presenting it as universal aid rather than Islamic charity' (Derbal 2022).

From the literature, two hypotheses appear, which we aim to confirm or debunk in this study:

1. Saudi Arabia's foreign aid is primarily driven by geopolitical considerations. According to this perspective, Saudi Arabia uses its foreign aid as a tool to strengthen economic and military alliances with friendly countries, fend off regional adversaries, and maintain its influence both domestically and internationally. This perspective emphasises the strategic importance of aid allocation in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy.
2. Saudi Arabia's foreign aid is primarily driven by religious affinity. This perspective highlights the historical and cultural ties that Saudi Arabia shares with Sunni-majority nations and suggests that these ties influence aid allocation decisions. It also emphasises Saudi Arabia's role in promoting Sunni Islam through its foreign aid activities.

Data

Since its launch in 2014, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Common Reporting Standard (OECD-CRS) has served as the go-to platform for members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to share data on their Official Development Assistance (ODA) allocations following a singular set of guidelines. In addition to 31 DAC members, 18 additional countries, including Saudi Arabia, are now reporting to OECD-CRS. Prior to 2015, Saudi Arabia's reporting to the OECD was limited to global aggregates. For commitment years 2015–2018, Saudi Arabia began including project-level information, but as compared to open-source datasets, reporting was incomplete and thus unreliable (AidData 2014). Since 2018, Saudi Arabia's reporting to OECD-DAC has become compliant with global standards, but these higher quality standards were not retroactively applied to prior years. The OECD data alone is insufficient because our research questions require an analysis over a longer time horizon.

To fill this void, we utilise aid flow data from the SAP, launched in 2018 by the Saudi government's humanitarian agency King Salman Relief (KSRelief). Based on international standards of reporting foreign aid by the UN Financial Tracking System, OECD-CRS, and International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), the SAP is Saudi Arabia's official centralised database (Saudi Aid Platform 2023). With major upgrades in recent years, it now chronicles the full details of the country's foreign aid efforts since 1975 at the project level, classifying each activity using Saudi Arabia's official aid classifications: development, humanitarian, and charity.¹ The distinguishing logic stems from whether project-level activities and impacts are long or short term. It classifies provision of food, water and shelter in the immediate aftermath of a disaster as humanitarian aid, longer-term developmental projects like power plants, highways and hospitals as developmental aid, and charitable programmes with cultural and religious orientation as charity (Saudi Aid Platform 2023).

The evolution of Saudi foreign aid

The origins of Saudi foreign development assistance can be traced back to the Muslim Brotherhood movement formed in Egypt during the 1920s, which emphasises the role of Islamic charities in building solidarity within the Muslim Ummah (Benthall 2018). During the 1950s, this ideology began to influence Saudi Arabia, leading to the establishment of institutions like the Muslim World League (MWL) in 1962 and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1969 (Hegghammer 2010). These institutions were founded to promote Islamic identity and extend aid, assistance and religious instruction to Muslim populations where they lived (Mandaville and Hamid 2018).

Since the late 1930s, when the world's largest petroleum resources were discovered in Saudi Arabia's deserts, the sole source of Saudi Arabia's foreign aid allocation has been oil export revenues (Al-Rasheed 2010; Benthall 2018). In the post-World War II oil boom, Saudi Arabia enjoyed massive budget surpluses, enabling a bonanza of domestic public investments in infrastructure and social services. But it was only in the aftermath of the 1973 oil embargo, which quadrupled oil prices and inflicted severe economic hardships onto developing countries, that Saudi Arabia decided to counter the backlash that Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries were facing from the Global South (Smith 2012). Together with leading OPEC partners, many of whom were Gulf neighbours, it

launched several bilateral and multilateral initiatives, spending an average of \$394 million in ODA during the first five years of its foreign aid programme (see [Figure 1](#)).

This foray into foreign development assistance, which has continued until today, was marked by the creation of major institutions like the SFD in 1974 for bilateral and the IsDB in 1975 for multilateral assistance. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Saudi Arabia backed the creation of the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRISA), which later became the world's largest Muslim charity by the mid-1990s with an annual budget of \$85 million. High levels of Saudi aid allocations continued until the mid-1980s before falling in the years leading to the first Gulf War when it reached the lowest-ever level of just \$24 million in 1991.

But after hovering below less than 0.1% of gross national income (GNI) during most of the 1990s, global pressure following Saudi citizens' involvement in 9/11 and its alleged financial support for extremist organisations across the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia significantly increased its ODA allocations in 2002 and 2003 (see [Figure 2](#)). The year 2002 was only the second year in its history that ODA exceeded the globally benchmarked target of 0.7% of GNI. As the fallout from 9/11 continued, aid from 2003 to 2010 remained higher relative to pre-2000 levels, averaging \$810 million or 0.2% of GNI. With ever-greater scrutiny on Muslim charities in post-9/11 years, including extensive international audits and the banning of IIRISA's offices in Indonesia and the Philippines, its global budgets had fallen dramatically to only \$4.7 million by 2006 ([Benthall 2018](#)).

But the most dramatic increase in Saudi ODA allocations in its history happened in the Arab Spring, when the stability of several authoritarian governments in the region, such as Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and others, came under threat or were toppled.

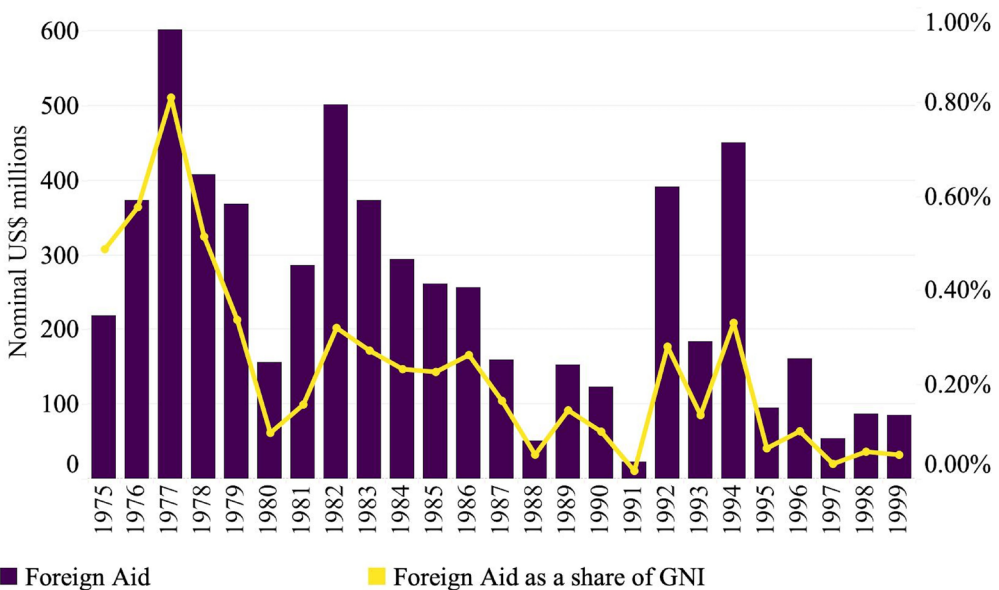


Figure 1. Saudi Arabia's foreign aid, 1975–1999.

Source: Saudi Aid Platform. World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) for Gross National Income (GNI). The figure shows Saudi Arabian foreign aid as blue bars and foreign aid as a share of GNI as the orange line. Foreign aid is shown in nominal US\$ millions, and foreign aid as a share of GNI is shown in percentages. The figure shows a downward trend in both measures.

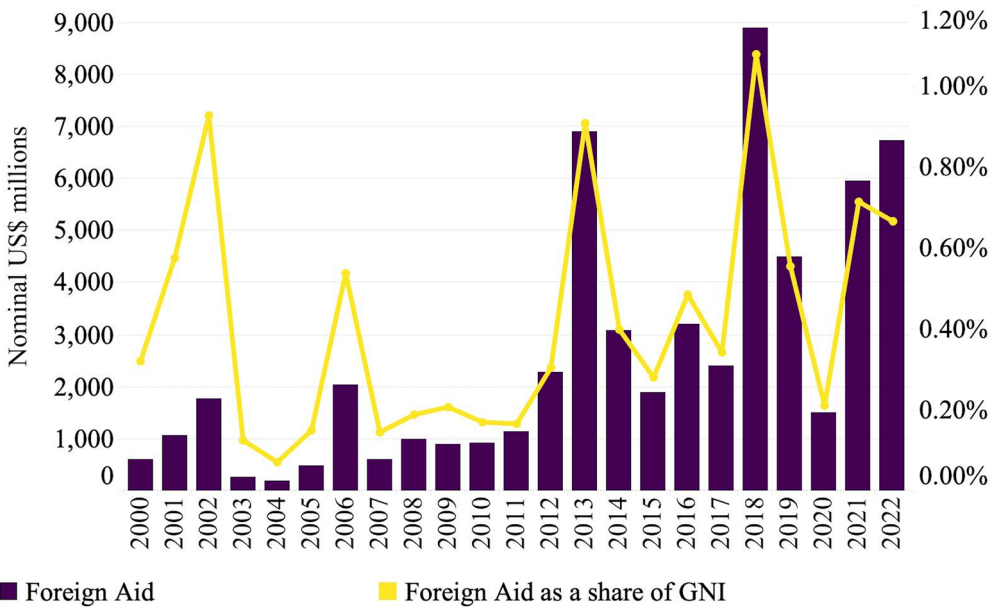


Figure 2. Saudi Arabia's foreign aid, 2000–2022.

Source: Saudi Aid Platform. World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) for Gross National Income (GNI). The figure shows Saudi Arabian foreign aid as blue bars and foreign aid as a share of GNI as the orange line. Foreign aid is shown in nominal US\$ millions, and foreign aid as a share of GNI is shown in percentages. The figure shows a slow upward trend in both measures.

Unsurprisingly, in 2013 total ODA allocations touched \$7 billion or 0.9% of GNI, mostly in the service of social stabilisation efforts across the region's authoritarian governments as they struggled for regime stability.

Until the establishment of KSRelief, overseas Saudi Arabian aid agencies practised segmented clientelism, which is best defined as conducting minimal contact with other agencies and answering to the royal family (Hertog 2011). That said, the establishment of KSRelief in 2015 by the Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, immensely altered the methodology of Saudi Arabia's humanitarian aid. It monopolised the aid sector and cut all religious ties for domestic and international purposes (Benthall 2018). All private and public funds are directed through KSRelief and distributed accordingly.

The war on Yemen propelled average global ODA allocations to historic highs of around \$2.7 billion between 2014 and 2017. During this period, Saudi Arabia's government created KSRelief, which was mandated to coordinate all foreign aid efforts while severing ties with all religious causes and charities (Al-Yahya and Fustier 2014).

Following the killing of Yemeni President Saleh by a Houthi sniper in 2017, Saudi Arabia stepped up aid efforts, topping the record level of \$9 billion, of which \$4 billion was for Yemen alone. As the newly created and fully empowered central Saudi government body responsible for delivering humanitarian assistance, KSRelief's first major international operation also helped establish regional recognition (Hamid 2022). Despite allocating record-high annual foreign aid averaging \$4.3 billion since 2014, critics have argued that this is driven by the war in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia is partially countering Iranian influence by quelling their allies, the Houthis (Alterman 2018). In response, KSRelief's leadership has pushed back, arguing that their operations in Yemen are impartial and purely in the service of their humanitarian mission,

irrespective of their country's role on the military front. However, it is important to note that Saudi Arabia's foreign aid data is not geocoded yet, making it challenging to definitively confirm or deny these claims, as we cannot follow where the money actually went within Yemen.

During the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, when oil revenues plummeted and the Saudi government imposed unprecedented domestic expenditure cuts, foreign aid allocations also underwent a significant decline in 2020, falling to only 0.2% of GNI. However, funding to the health sector in 2020 almost doubled in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, further supporting the argument that Saudi Arabia's aid allocations respond to changing humanitarian needs on the ground (see [Figure 3](#)).

Like the OECD's DAC, Saudi Arabia classifies foreign aid activities into 25 sectors, such as budget support, health, or energy, and has applied it to all aid projects since 1975. But unlike the OECD, it further divides sectors into developmental and humanitarian categories, partly reflecting the internal institution division between the SFD and KSRelief. While the development category sectors cover physical and social infrastructure and services activities, the latter mainly focus on post-disaster relief and rehabilitation interventions. This means that even within a given year, recipient countries could receive food and agricultural security assistance through distinct activities in development (eg irrigation schemes) and humanitarian (eg grain distribution) categories. As shown in [Figure 3](#), Saudi Arabia did not provide humanitarian assistance at all until the 18th year of its foreign aid programme, when the Bosnia War broke out in the Balkans, and large-scale support was provided to Bosniaks, the region's Muslim community that was under threat from Serb and Croatian forces. But despite major allocations around this period and later during the COVID-19 pandemic, overall, the vast majority of Saudi foreign aid – 83% or \$54 billion – has focused on development. But whether Saudi aid allocations are driven by genuine humanitarian needs, geopolitical considerations, or some combination thereof requires a deep dive into several periods of continuity and change in the context of changing regional and global events. A temporal analysis of major Saudi aid allocations, particularly budgetary support, during key moments in these countries' conflict histories uncovers answers.

Discussion: affinity or geostrategy?

Despite much literature discussing this issue, whether Saudi decision makers have allocated foreign aid based primarily on Muslim solidarity, historical-cultural affinity, or purely regional and geostrategic interests has not been settled. We evaluate these competing explanations through deep dives into Saudi Arabia's foreign aid flows during two critical episodes of history: the Bosnia War of the 1990s, when humanitarian aid was introduced, and large-scale bailouts to Egypt and Yemen during the crucial years of instability following the Arab Spring.

Brotherhood and humanitarianism for Bosnia's Muslims

From 1975 until 1991, Saudi Arabia's foreign aid portfolio of \$4.7 billion across 59 countries was in development sectors and undertaken entirely by the SFD. Most funds were being spent on developing physical infrastructure and supporting food security. Leading sectors at the time were thus transport and storage (35%), agriculture, forestry and fish (25%), and

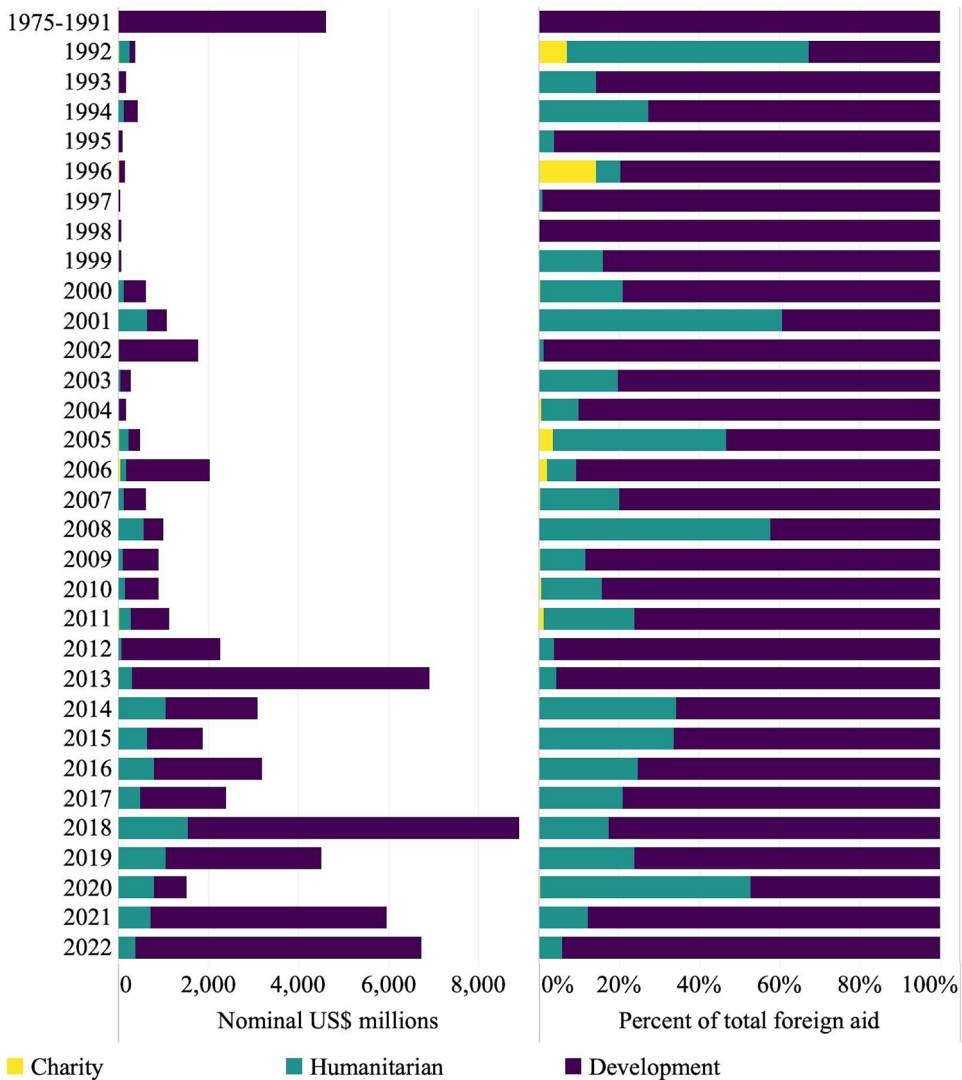


Figure 3. Saudi Arabia's development, humanitarian, and charity aid, 1975–2022.

Source: Saudi Aid Platform.

The figure shows Saudi Arabia's development, humanitarian, and charity aid from 1975 to 2022. The years 1975–1991 were collapsed into one measure since humanitarian and charity were non-existent categories before 1992. Charities make up a small portion of Saudi Arabia's development assistance.

energy (19%). In contrast, quintessential human and social development sectors like health (1.4%) and education (3.3%) received minimal attention. Even in the wake of natural disasters in friendly, Muslim-majority countries such as Bangladesh (1987 floods) and Sudan (mid-1980s famine), this trend did not change because Saudi Arabia did not have the institutional capacity or technical know-how to offer meaningful relief and rehabilitation services. Even during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, when Saudi Arabia offered major support to the resistance movement, no humanitarian or developmental assistance was offered, for the same reasons.

But the beginning of the Bosnian War in 1992 changed everything (see [Table 1](#)), becoming a watershed in the evolution of Saudi Arabia's foreign aid programme. Following the break of Yugoslavia, political tensions led to open hostilities and violence between Christian Serbs and Croats on the one hand and Muslim Bosniaks on the other (Burg and Shoup 1999). Given that Bosnia was one of the few remaining Muslim-majority regions within Europe, the plight of unarmed Bosniaks facing ethnic cleansing at the hands of well-armed Serbian groups became a major rallying cry throughout the Muslim world (Karčić 2022; Rrustemi et al. 2019). After two years of alleged international non-action, Saudi frustrations ran so high that Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal declared in November 1994, 'If a negotiated settlement can be achieved, it can only be achieved through a more balanced situation on the battlefield'. He went so far as to threaten a Muslim-led military response, arguing that 'Force must be met with force' (quoted by Reuters 1994).

Buoyed by the re-emergence of Islamic practices in post-Soviet republics, in response to the crisis, Saudi King Fahd declared, 'We in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia renew the determination to do our utmost to help these sister states recover their position in the (Islamic) nation' (quoted in Reuters 1992). After donating \$8 million from his funds, King Fahd later ordered the creation of the Saudi High Commission for Relief of Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth referred to as 'the Commission') under the leadership of his brother and the current king, Salman bin Abdul Aziz.

Showcasing his country's leadership by making major financial allocations through the Commission, he also called upon other Muslim countries to support the Bosnian cause, declaring that 'We look forward to *Moslems* everywhere backing efforts by their brothers in Bosnia-Herzegovina to consecrate independence and achieve stability in the face of violence targeting this people and hindering its march to join this (Islamic) nation' (Reuters News 1992). This was Saudi Arabia's first and, until now, single largest humanitarian project, which was highly significant for both external and internal reasons.

Table 1. Saudi Arabia's foreign aid by sector before and during the Bosnia War, nominal US\$ millions.

	Before	During	Difference
	1987–1991	1992–1996	
Energy	17	278	261
Food and agricultural security		176	176
Education	3	162	159
Infrastructure development	5	76	71
Development – health	21	60	38
Religious facility		36	36
Shelter and non-food items		33	33
Water and environmental sanitation	4	31	27
Early recovery		27	27
Security and protection		19	19
Logistics		13	13
Humanitarian – health		7	7
Social services		6	6
Humanitarian operations support and coordination		6	6
Unspecified	116	122	5
Industry and mineral resources	58	49	–9
Agriculture, forestry, and fish	127	78	–49
Transport and storage	157	106	–52

Source: Saudi Aid Platform.

Note: The table shows Saudi Arabia's foreign aid by sectors before and during the Bosnian war and the difference in aid between the two periods. The table is organised from sectors receiving the most support to the least support.

For international audiences, it was the first time that Saudi Arabia's foreign aid programme was recognised internationally as a *tour de force* by the humanitarian system as it was achieving positive impacts on the ground in stabilising a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation (Derbal 2022). For the domestic governance environment, it was the first institutionalised attempt by the country's leadership to design and implement foreign assistance programmes in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction activities in an alien environment. Vestiges of the management systems developed then for request curation, allocation decisions, delivery partnerships and on-the-ground progress monitoring can still be detected in today's humanitarian operations led by KSRelief (Hamid 2022). Back then, like today, Saudi officials maintained that their humanitarian operations were run 'solely based on humanitarian need and without any other motive' (Saudi Aid Platform 2023).

Unlike recent trends, when strategically vital allies like Pakistan and Egypt were the largest recipients of Saudi assistance, in the pre-1991 years, most funds were allocated to Muslim-majority countries not adjacent to Saudi Arabia's borders (see Table 2). Between 1975 and 1991, the top three recipients were Tunisia (\$313 million), Indonesia (\$265 million), and Bangladesh (\$234 million), where funds were mostly allocated for physical infrastructure facilities in the healthcare, transport, and mining sectors. But as shown in Table 2, as compared to the five years preceding the commencement of hostilities, during the Bosnia War years (1992–1996), foreign aid to these countries dried up completely. The annual average allocations of \$3 million to Indonesia, \$4 million to Jordan, and nearly \$7 million to Bangladesh were zero during the Bosnia War years. Presumably, they shifted entirely towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, which received \$582 million. During this period, the largest sectors were food and agricultural security (\$176 million) and education (\$145 million), but major allocations were also made to quintessential humanitarian sectors, including shelter (\$33 million) and social services (\$7 million). Controversially, the

Table 2. Saudi Arabia's foreign aid by top recipient countries before and during the Bosnia War, nominal US\$ millions.

	Before	During	Difference
	1987–1991	1992–1996	
Bosnia and Herzegovina		582	582
Syria		200	200
Lebanon		122	122
Guinea	6	66	61
Pakistan	2	44	42
Eritrea		41	41
Algeria	39	78	39
Senegal	21	36	16
Bahrain	17	16	–1
Egypt	55	39	–16
Indonesia	19		–19
Jordan	24		–24
Mali	28		–28
India	29		–29
Sudan	31		–31
Morocco	33		–33
Bangladesh	33		–33

Source: Saudi Aid Platform.

Note: The table shows Saudi Arabia's aid recipients before and during the Bosnian war and the difference between the two periods. The recipients are presented in descending order.

Commission spent \$36 million on religious facilities (presumably mosques and madrasas), which, together with the September 2001 discoveries of 'Islamic terrorist-related materials' during a raid by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on their headquarters, later caused major embarrassment to the Saudi royal family due to strong scrutiny from US Congress (Kohlmann 2010; Pallister 2002).

Strategic spending to absorb tremors of the Arab Spring

Perhaps the most significant historic challenge to regime stability across the Middle East and North Africa region came in the spring of 2011 when a Tunisian street vendor's act of burning himself in protest over police corruption and brutality triggered a massive regional upheaval from Morocco to Yemen (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015). Between the spring of 2011 and 2012, the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen were toppled, the Jordanian king dismissed the prime minister, Syria descended into a civil war that continues today, and Bahrain was rocked by protests for the first time in its history. Even Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province saw small-scale protests, mainly by its Shia Muslim minority, which the government could quell on short notice (Lacroix 2014). Naturally, the Saudi supreme leadership became incredibly concerned about the situation at home, particularly the potential for further spill-over into its borders (Dunne 2020).

The Saudi policy response was to stabilise governments in countries with large populations and those with shared borders, which it saw as the only get-out-of-jail card in an otherwise deteriorating situation (Steinberg 2014). As shown in Table 3, Saudi foreign assistance allocations became a cornerstone of this policy as total aid allocations during the Arab Spring years from 2011 to 2015 tripled from levels during the preceding five years (from 2006 to 2010). Countries directly affected by the Arab Spring – Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Syria, and Bahrain – accounted for only 11% of Saudi foreign aid during 2006–2010. However, their share increased to 60% of a larger aid budget. Conversely, the countries that experienced

Table 3. Foreign aid allocations before and during Arab Spring in major and minor countries, nominal US\$ millions.

		Before Arab Spring					During Arab Spring						
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
Major countries	Egypt	24	49				73	50	230	5300	100	0	5680
	Yemen	65	49	19	114	13	261	12	1116	104	1013	279	2523
	Syria	0	1	2		141	144	100	27	157	208	35	527
	Tunisia				21	19	39		221	150	0	140	511
	Bahrain					77	77						
Minor countries	Palestine	109	104	14	336	162	725	383	31	562	504	429	1910
	Iraq										500		500
	Mauritania			57	20	25	102	30	30	35	34	300	429
	Morocco		27		16	24	67		211		0	0	211
	Djibouti	0			0		0		26	5		36	67
	Jordan	30	22			53	105	0	0	6	0	53	60
	Algeria	14					14	5				17	23
	Lebanon	1576	113	38		1	1728	0	0	2	0		2
	Oman			0			0						

Source: Saudi Aid Platform.

Note: The table shows major and minor recipient countries affected by the Arab Spring. It shows the aid allocation before and during the event per year, including a total for before and after the event.

minor spillover impacts – Palestine, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, Djibouti, Jordan, Algeria, Lebanon and Oman – saw their shares fall from 50% to 20% in the same period.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia also halved its aid allocations to the rest of the world, clearly highlighting the dramatic changes in its foreign aid strategy in support of the country's overall policy of regional regime stabilisation (Steinberg 2014). Unlike the Bosnia case, where religious affinity and solidarity drove foundational changes in the Saudi foreign aid system, the motivation for this second transformation was simply political and related to regime survival.

These large-scale shifts in allocations notwithstanding, the timing and composition of these record-high aid allocations, particularly in Egypt and Yemen, offer insights into the implementation of Riyadh's policy (see Figure 4). In February 2011, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned after 30 years in power following mass street protests. In June 2012, Egypt held its maiden election, which resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi forming a government. But in early July 2013, amid a deteriorating economic crisis and street protests, the Egyptian military staged a coup to overthrow the Morsi government and installed an interim government. Within days, Saudi Arabia delivered its single-largest foreign assistance transaction to date, a \$5 billion cash deposit by their Ministry of Finance, into the Egyptian government's exchequer. This was part of an unprecedented \$12 billion package offered by three Gulf donors, including the UAE (\$3 billion) and Kuwait (\$4 billion), which dwarfed direct grants from the USA (\$1.5 billion) and European Union (\$1.3 billion), intended to support the post-Morsi set up in Egypt.

This step's significance can be evaluated by considering that, except for the extraordinary situation in Palestine, it was the only known instance where the Saudi Ministry of Finance deposited cash into a foreign government's accounts instead of following the typical route of SFD. But besides this extraordinary one-off step in July 2013, SFD had also been ramping

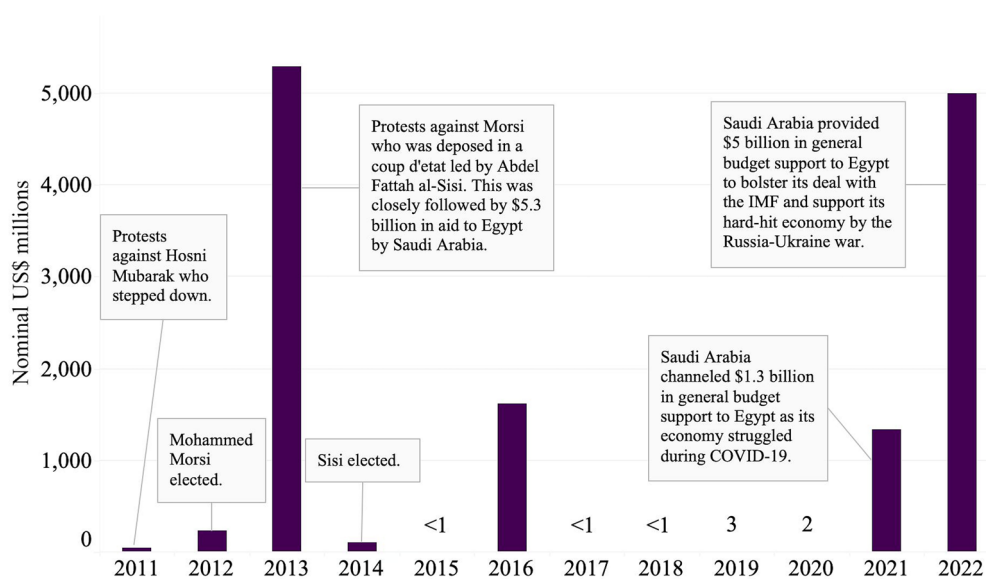


Figure 4. Saudi Arabia's foreign aid to Egypt, 2011–2022.

Source: Saudi Aid Platform.

The figure shows Saudi Arabian foreign aid to Egypt from 2011 to 2022. The figure includes important political events in Egypt that could have impacted Saudi Arabia's aid allocation decisions.

up development financing in Egypt in the immediate aftermath of Hosni Mubarak. After averaging only \$12.5 million in foreign aid to Egypt between 2000 and 2011, Saudi Arabia committed \$280 million in 2012 for three infrastructure projects to improve drinking water and grain storage facilities. Likely due to Egypt's large population and proximity to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh appeared keen to utilise every tool at its disposal to stabilise the government of Egypt (Piazza 2019). Above all else, the key motivation was ensuring that the revolutionary fervour of the Arab Spring did not spill over into Saudi territories (Quamar 2014).

A similar situation occurred in Yemen in February 2012, when President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled the country for 33 years, handed over power to his deputy, Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi (see Figure 5). This power transfer came after a year of widespread protests demanding political reforms and an end to Saleh's authoritarian regime. Within months, Saudi Arabia made its first-ever cash deposit to Yemen, providing \$1 billion to Yemen's Central Bank in May 2012, following up on the general budget support of \$100 million for unrestricted government expenditures to meet the difficult political situation facing the then government. But the new government faced numerous challenges, including economic hardships, political fragmentation and sectarian tensions. These factors provided fertile ground for the rise of Houthi rebels, who capitalised on popular grievances and their sectarian agenda. From September to November 2014, the Houthis took control over Yemen's capital, Sanaa, and the Red Sea port city of Hodeida. This prompted the next significant rise in Saudi aid to Yemen to stabilise the political and economic situation under Hadi. On 22 January 2015, the Houthi rebels staged a coup and overthrew the Hadi government, plunging Yemen into chaos and triggering the Yemeni Civil War. Since then, a Saudi-led coalition has been engaged in a military conflict with varying intensity intended to oust the Houthis from the government (Brehony 2020). Throughout the subsequent years, humanitarian and

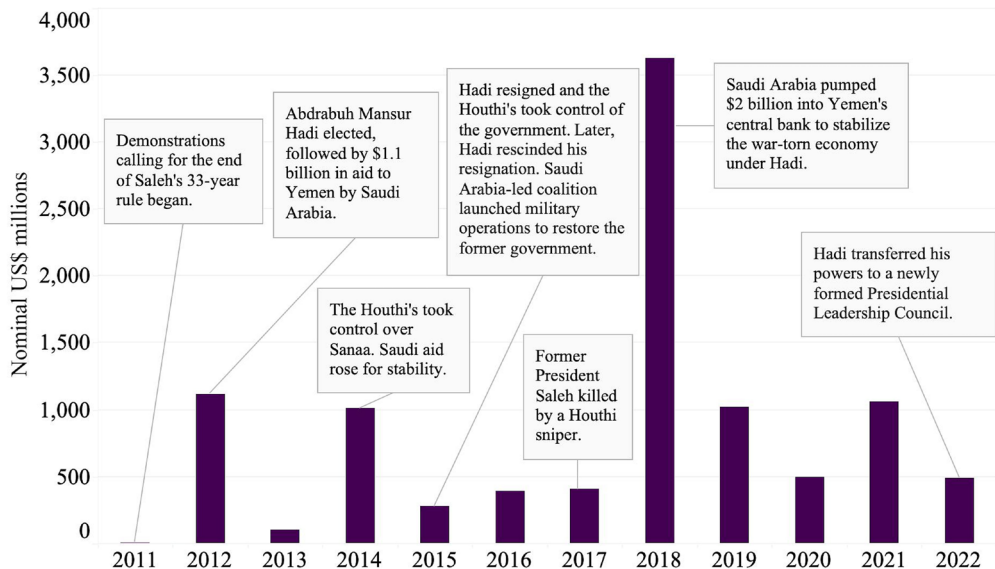


Figure 5. Saudi Arabia's Foreign Aid to Yemen, 2011–2022.

Source: Saudi Aid Platform.

The figure shows Saudi Arabian foreign aid to Yemen from 2011 to 2022. The figure includes important political events in Yemen that could have impacted Saudi Arabia's aid allocation decisions.

development assistance has followed the ebbs and flows of the conflict, which drives demand for emergency assistance during crucial periods. This included a \$2 billion deposit into Yemen's Central Bank in 2018 to counteract the war-torn economy and Houthi rebels.

Compared to the average annual aid of only \$45 million in the decade from 2001 to 2011, in the 10 years from 2012 to 2022, Saudi Arabia's average annual commitments increased 20-fold to \$912 million. Of the \$10 billion committed during this decade, 30% went into the banking and financial services sector due to further deposits, followed by 15% for food and agricultural security and 10% for health and budget support. Quintessential development sectors, such as transportation, education and infrastructure, have received only 4% of total allocations. What started as a regime stabilisation intervention through foreign aid for propping up their favoured regime has become a protracted conflict with no apparent end in sight and, thus, an open-ended engagement solely focused on dampening the humanitarian catastrophe arising from the ongoing violent conflict.

Conclusion

This paper utilised newly available data and case studies to test the efficacy of two popular hypotheses of Saudi Arabia's primary drives of foreign aid allocations, ie religious ideology and geostrategic interests. It also examined descriptive evidence on the geographic and sectoral allocations of foreign aid over a nearly seven-decade period, focusing on moments where regional and global events shaped significant changes in aid allocations. As has been established in the literature, foreign aid for every country has an element of soft power to it. In the case of Saudi Arabia, we find that prior to the creation of KSRelief by Mohammed bin Salman, religious affinity was the primary driver behind their foreign aid. This included aid to Islamic charities and the spread of Wahhabism. In the time after KSRelief was established we find that religious affinity as a driver for aid is less pronounced. There has been a shift away from Islam solidarity as a soft power tool. Aid from Saudi Arabia in more recent times seems to be more need based. On the one hand, the Bosnia case study suggests that humanitarian aid was galvanised to support the leadership's moral position in response to widespread outrage around the Muslim world, within which Saudi Arabia was demonstrating genuine leadership. But on the flip side, its much larger-scale foreign aid allocations during and after the Arab Spring uprisings indicate that the then Saudi leadership's aid allocations were fully focused on regime stabilisation in the region and, ultimately, their own survival.

Across both cases, however, we found that Saudi policymakers simply follow tactical approaches to make the most out of political circumstances. They are not a values-driven donor, or they do not value religious affinity consistently over time. In the post-Arab Spring era, the new generation of Saudi royalty has abandoned their traditional approach of prioritising religious ideology and humanitarianism. Instead, they have developed a new, values-neutral strategic approach where only national interests dictate foreign development assistance allocations. Moreover, had Saudi Arabia's foreign assistance truly supported Muslims worldwide, surely the world's largest Muslim-population hosting countries like Indonesia, Bangladesh, Iran and India would have received significantly larger shares of foreign aid. Instead, Saudi leaders have prioritised friendly authoritarian governments in military-dominated countries like Egypt and Pakistan and conflict-ridden states like Yemen and Syria, where they greatly influence public policies.

However, this analysis is limited by two factors. First, it completely relies on a single official data source, the SAP, for all financial flows and sectoral definitions. The sectoral definitions and categorisation, such as the distinction between developmental and humanitarian allocations, do not comply with OECD-DAC guidelines. This means that our analysis is not strictly comparable to other OECD-DAC donors' activities. Despite repeated attempts to engage with the KSRelief team responsible for this platform, we could not obtain methodological documentation that would detail quality assurance procedures that the team may have followed prior to publication. Second, our analysis is mostly based on quantitative data analysis tracking financial flows. Thus, our interpretations of empirical results do not benefit from key informant interviews or focus groups with public officials or experts. We have instead undertaken extensive desk research and source triangulation to ensure our take-aways are grounded in realities.

Despite these caveats, our paper provides the starting point for further exploration of what motivates Saudi Arabia's foreign aid allocations and what this tells us about its foreign policy priority setting. As the new Saudi leadership navigates tectonic shifts in their regional and global environments, ie improved Arab–Israel and Arab–Iran relations and heightened Sino–US tensions, its foreign aid allocation decisions will reflect these new realities. Future studies will thus have the opportunity to further study allocation decisions of the current leadership in Riyadh in light of these shifts, to answer several open questions. For example, would more peaceful relations with Iran result in greater aid allocations to Shia-majority regions? In an era where Saudi Arabia is demonstrating unprecedented openness to data sharing, researchers could undertake geospatial data coding to enable sub-national analyses on aid allocations to answer this question. In addition, the new SAP dataset will allow future research to examine how a potential Saudi–Iran peace deal for Yemen would affect the former's current commitments to its rebuilding activities. Finally, given that Saudi budget support services were first introduced for the Palestinian Authority in prior decades and have not always been renewed in recent years, it would be worth exploring whether Saudi Arabia's potential joining of the Abraham Accords would further reduce their financial support to Palestine.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Note

1. The complete details of sectoral breakdown across these three categories are available on the SAP website (<https://data.ksrelief.org/?ContinentID=>).

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