

SAUDI-IRANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SECURITY AND STABILITY OF THE MIDDLE EAST: A CASE STUDY OF YEMEN AND SYRIA

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the implications of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement for Middle East security and stability, with a particular focus on Yemen and Syria as case studies. Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the most prominent regional actors in the Middle East, are also viewed as rivals due to their political and geographical positions. The Middle East's security and stability have been threatened by the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the past two decades. As a result, both countries have been involved in multiple proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, as well as the Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict in the region. The study highlights the multifaceted effects of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement on ongoing wars, security dynamics, and Middle Eastern stability by examining the case studies of Yemen and Syria. This study seeks to address the following inquiries: What major factors have prompted the two states to engage in negotiations and even consider resuming diplomatic relations? What are the ramifications of this rapprochement on the security and stability of the region, with a particular focus on Yemen and Syria? This study improves our knowledge of the complex Saudi-Iranian relationship and its consequences for regional security. The insights gained from the case studies of Yemen and Syria provide significant perspectives on the broader ramifications of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. These findings can assist policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders in comprehending the shifting dynamics of the Middle East and fostering increased stability and security in this region.

Keywords: *Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Rivalry, Security, Syria.*

Introduction

Regional and international changes in recent years, such as the fall of the former Iraqi regime, and the crises in Syria and Yemen precipitated by the Arab Spring, have strengthened Iran's position in the region while concurrently generating concerns for Saudi Arabia. Considering the complex dynamics prevailing in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia considers any Iranian movement and influence as detrimental to its interests. As a result, Saudi Arabia has actively pursued measures to counteract

Iran's efforts aimed at regional hegemony¹.

An examination of the historical records pertaining to Iranian and Saudi foreign policy behavior demonstrates that the relationship between the two countries has been defined by instability in recent decades. The extent and nature of their relationships have exhibited variations of partnership, conflict, and resistance.

The intricate interplay between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two major regional powers, has profoundly influenced by significant ideological and geopolitical differences that can become more divisive during times of regional turbulence². Among the issues that have contributed to the tensions between the two states in the region, including concerns related to religious and ethnic minorities, oil resources, arms races, disagreements in foreign policy, and interventions in each other's domestic affairs. With the invasion of Iraq in 2003 played the role of catalyst in conflicts that have drawn deep in sectarian divisions, were prompted to intensify their endeavors to assert dominance in the region³.

The Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 introduced another dimension of conflict and competition, igniting significant debates within the foreign policy strategies of both countries. Saudis were not looking happy with this revolution, on the other hand, Iran welcomed it in some states. During this transformative process, each party attempted to protect its own interests by limiting the other's influence, resulting in a significant impact on the regional countries. Consequently, the interplay of relations between the region's two leading powers, contextualized within the conflict-cooperation paradigm, has had a substantial impact on the countries within the region⁴.

Iran has employed complex strategies and provided support to ideological factions with the aim of interfering in the domestic affairs of other states and expanding its regional hegemony. However, these ideological conflicts have provoked regional reactions. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has persistently supported military campaigns

¹ Tali Rachel Grumet. "New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry." MA diss., University of Denver, 2015. <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2027&context=etd>.

² Andrew Terrill. *The Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the future of Middle East security*. Department of the Army, 2011.

³ Yildirim TURAN and Lan NGUYEN HOANG, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics in the Middle East: The Case of Iran-Saudi Arabia's Rivalry," *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi* 14, no. 2 (2019): 77–120, <https://doi.org/10.17550/akademikincelemeler.494934>.

⁴ Sania Zehraa, Noor Fatima, and Noor Ullah Khan, "Iranian-Saudi Strategic Competition in the Middle East: An Analysis of the Arab Spring," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 2, no. 2 (2018): 59–66, <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/2.2.7>.

against the governments of Syria and the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shiite groups in the region. Saudi interference in countries such as Yemen and Bahrain has intensified as a response to Iran's expansionist activities.

In an unexpected development, on March 10, 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two major players in regional and global affairs, declared an agreement to resume diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors in a trilateral statement sponsored by Beijing. The agreement places significant emphasis on respecting the sovereignty of each state and non-interference in internal affairs. Furthermore, the two sides have agreed to implement the General Agreement on Cooperation in the Fields of Economy, Trade and Investment, signed on May 27, 1998, as well as the Agreement on Security Cooperation, signed on July 17, 2001.⁵

The announcement of the agreement elicited major regional and global responses due to the involvement of two prominent regional players and their overlapping positions in several regional domains. This agreement has had substantial implications for the character, reestablishment, and future direction of the region. Also, it has been perceived as a potential resolution to several unresolved issues. Furthermore, it is considered as a potential answer to several unresolved issues and ongoing conflicts in the region, notably in Yemen and Syria.

Research Question

The aim of this paper is to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1- What are the main factors and drivers behind the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement? Is this reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia a strategic alignment of interests for both sides, or is it merely a tactical adjustment in response to perceived internal and external pressures?
- 2- What are the implications of this reconciliation for regional security and stability in the region, with a particular focus on Yemen and Syria?

Significance of Research

This paper is important for several reasons:

- 1- **Regional Security and Stability:** The geopolitical conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran presents complex challenges for security and stability in the region.

⁵ The United States Institute of Peace. "Iran and Saudi Arabia Restore Ties." April 18, 2023. Accessed May 16, 2023. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/mar/10/iran-and-saudi-arabia-restore-ties>.

Understanding the ramifications of a prospective reconciliation between these two nations is critical in assessing the future trajectory of the Middle East. By considering the situations of Yemen and Syria, which have been directly influenced by this rivalry, the research gives insights into how improved Saudi-Iranian ties may influence conflict dynamics and regional stability.

- 2- Resolving disputes: Iran and Saudi Arabia are deeply involved in Yemen and Syria's turbulent and complicated war. Interpreting the potential repercussions of the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation on these conflicts might provide insights into potential de-escalation, negotiation, and conflict resolution strategies. This information might be useful for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to develop long-term solutions to these disputes.
- 3- Humanitarian consequences: Conflicts in Yemen and Syria have resulted in significant humanitarian catastrophes, involving displacement, loss of life, and widespread suffering. Examining the implications of improving Saudi-Iranian ties on these situations may give information on the prospects for improved humanitarian access, ceasefire agreements, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. This knowledge can help to improve humanitarian operations and relief tactics, enhancing the effectiveness of humanitarian initiatives and relief efforts.

Research Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of this study, a qualitative research approach is adopted, focusing on secondary sources that address the impact and consequences of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement in Yemen and Syria and its implications for regional security. Data for this paper was gathered from primary sources identified as relevant, as well as from secondary sources including books, previous research, and analytical materials. The selected sources were carefully examined to confirm their direct or indirect relevance to the main subject of the study.

The Background of Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

The relationships between Saudi Arabia and Iran have undergone variations throughout history. Following the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, this period can be classified into four phases.

First Stage: The Evolution of Enmity in Saudi–Iranian

The collapse of the Shah's regime in mid-1979 marked a radical shift in Saudi-Iranian relations. The success of the revolution addressed everything that the Shah and the al-Saud dynasty had plotted against. During this period, the ideological identity of the Islamic Revolution, characterized by a desire to fundamentally change the existing status quo and opposition to the international system profoundly shaped Iran's foreign policy.⁶ This perspective on the international system can best be expressed within the framework of the principle "neither Eastern nor Western". Following the revolution and the breakdown of the regional balancing paradigm, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia became ambiguous and complex. The Islamic Revolution brought a new identity for Iran. As a consequence, Iran distanced itself from relations with the West and came to be viewed as a challenge to the monarchies and conservative systems in the region. The transformation in identity led to divergent perceptions between Saudis and Iranians, and the ideologies that both parties sought to uphold engendered rivalry.⁷

Since then, Iran has pursued specific goals in the Middle East. These objects encompass promoting its Shiite-based version of Islam to expand its influence and establish itself as the dominant power in the region, reducing the influence and military presence of the United States, increasing influence and support for anti-US groups and conflict with Saudi Arabia by taking advantage of divisions and psychological conflicts in the region. From the Saudi leaders' point of view, the Iranian revolution was a direct challenge as it questioned their claim to Islamic leadership. The revolution also appealed to deprive the Shi'a minority in the Eastern Province of their rights and provided a new definition of resistance to Islamists across the Middle East, regardless of their sectarian leanings. In addition to this, the Islamic Republic of Iran presented a model of government based on religious principles and brought attention to the Saudi royal family's alleged impiety. In September 1980, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq as a buffer against Iran and backed Iraq's invasion of Iran as a way of countering Iranian hegemony in the region.⁸

⁶ Ali, Anwar. "Saudi Iranian Rivalry: The Struggle for Power and Influence in the Middle East." *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 4, no. III (2020): 587–98. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020\(4-iii\)42](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020(4-iii)42).

⁷ Mohammad Reza. "Great Powers and Iran-Saudi Relations." *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2021): 223–245.

⁸ Mohammad Reza. "Great Powers and Iran-Saudi Relations," 226.

Table 1: Tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the 1980s.⁹

Year	Events/Agreements
1980-88	Saudi Arabia supported Iraq in its conflict with I. R. Iran, offering logistical support amounting to \$24.8 billion.
1981	Iran abandoned negotiations with Riyadh to resolve the war with Iraq.
1981-82	Saudi Arabia increased financial assistance to Iraq as Iran repelled Iraqi aggression and advanced into Iraq.
1984	Saudi ships were targeted by Iran in the Persian Gulf.
1986	In an effort to put pressure on Iran and lower oil prices, Saudi Arabia agreed to expand oil production.
1987	According to Tehran, 400 Iranian pilgrims were killed during the hajj function.
1988	Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Iran in April.
1988	Saudi Arabia imposed a ban on imports of Iranian products.

Second Stage: Saud–Iranian Rapprochement

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry changed following the end of the Iran-Iraq conflict and the death of Shiite leader Khomeini. This transformation coincided with the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and who pursued a pragmatic approach to Iran's foreign policy. Consequently, the principle of coexistence became more dominant in Iran-Saudi relations.¹⁰ Several external factors played a role in shaping this direction, including Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the bipolar international system. With the change of the ruling elite in Iran and regional and international changes, Iran's foreign policy priority shifted towards a more realistic direction based on a commitment to political, economic and domestic, regional and international security considerations.¹¹

*Table 2: From détente to Rapprochement.*¹²

9 Emir Hadzivadunic. "Iran-Saudi ties: Can history project their trajectory?" Middle East Institute Singapore, 22 Oct 2019. <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/publication/insight-215-iran-saudi-ties-can-history-project-their-trajectory/>.

10 Florence Gaub. "War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran." European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2016. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_2_Saudi_Arabia___Iran_01.pdf.

11 Maria Maddalena Settembrini. "The proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia: the case of the Yemeni Civil War". Desertations, ISCTE - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, 2019. https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/bitstream/10071/18837/4/master_maria_maddalena_settembrini.pdf.

12 Emir Hadzivadunic. "Iran-Saudi ties: Can history project their trajectory?", 9.

Year	Events/Agreements
	Saudi and Iran elevated their bilateral ties.
1991	The new Iranian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Mohammad Ali Hadi, declared that Iran and Saudi Arabia were the "two wings of the Muslim world."
1991	On the sidelines of the UN conference in Senegal, President Rafsanjani met with Crown Prince Abdullah, the meeting is considered the first high-level meeting since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.
1991	Bilateral trade, flights and the hajj resumed between the two countries.

Third Stage: Deconfliction and relationship-Building policy

This stage corresponds with the coming of the reformist government (reformists) which centered its foreign policy on avoiding conflict and building relations with the international community and neighboring countries. The Principles such as political and cultural development, erasing tensions, confidence-building, peacefulness and multilateralism took precedence in Iran's foreign policy framework for eight years. Internationally, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the onset of the nuclear crisis were four important changes that significantly influenced Iranian foreign policy.¹³

*Table 3: From Rapprochement to Strategic Cooperation.*¹⁴

Year	Events/Agreements
Between 1997-2005	Since the Islamic Revolution, cooperation between the two countries in the economic, energy, political and security fields has reached its peak.
between 1997 - 2005	Several visits between Saudi and Iranian officials took place, and committees and special commissions were established to monitor the development of economic agreements, collaborative projects, and the signing of new memoranda and contracts.
1997	The most senior Saudi official to visit Iran since 1979, Crown Prince Abdullah was in Tehran for the session of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.
1998	Cooperation agreements were signed to improve bilateral relations in the fields of economy, investment, science, culture and sports.
1999	In Saudi Arabia, Iranian President Khatami met with Crown Prince Abdullah, marking the first by a head of state to Saudi Arabia since

¹³ Altorai, Adel. "Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Rise of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement (1997-2009)." (PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012).
http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/683/1/Altorai_Understanding_role_state.pdf.

	1979.
2001	The security agreement represented a significant milestone in the normalization between the two states.

Fourth Stage: The Demise of the Rapprochement

In parallel with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, as head of Iran's ninth administration, a deeply conservative person, Iran's foreign policy had changed fundamentally in terms of identity compared to the previous two terms. The revolutionary radicalism of the 1980s was revived, leading to a natural cooling of Iran's relations with the world and neighboring countries. During this period, a resurgence of conflict and incompatibility was noticed in the relations between the two countries.¹⁵

On the other hand, Iran's ambition to become an influential power in Central Asia and the Middle East was deeply rooted in the geopolitical shifts that took place in the region. These shifts were a result of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the overthrow of the Taliban government and Saddam Hussein's removal, both of which were regarded as rival states to Iran.¹⁶

Saudi Arabia and Iran both held an interest in the regime change in Iraq and the subsequent rise of Shiites to power. Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in a power struggle in response to the subsequent security situation in Iraq. Iraq, which Saudi Arabia and Iran formerly regarded as an aggressive adversary, unexpectedly became a source of concern. Post-Saddam Iraq was very important to Iran due to its Shiite Muslim majority. In addition, the Askari shrine, as well as Najaf and Karbala, two Islamic holy cities are located in Iraq. Since Saddam Hussein's overthrow, Sunni political dominance has faced challenges across the Middle East. The region has confronted difficulties with regard to Sunni political standing since the fall Iraqi regime. This has driven Sunni-controlled states, particularly Saudi Arabia, to expect a decline in their regional influence.¹⁷ As a result, Saudi Arabia and Israel spearheaded a discursive effort to portray Iran as an

¹⁵ Frederic Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader and Jeremy Ghez. "Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy". RAND Corporation, 2009. file:///C:/Users/khetam721/Downloads/RAND_MG840%20(1).pdf.

¹⁶ Mohammed, Ahmed and Ravichandran Moorthy. "Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry in the Middle East: Impact on national security," *e-BANGI: Jurnal Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan*, 16 No 1 (2019): 1-13. ISSN 1823-884x.

¹⁷ Mohammed, Ahmed and Ravichandran Moorthy. "Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry in the Middle East: Impact on national security," 6.

existential danger to the stability of the region.¹⁸

The Arab uprisings became geopolitical battlegrounds in a region characterized by a variety of common standards, resulting in what Paul Noble referred to as a "vast sound chamber" of political discourse. The resulting divisions provided opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Iran to pursue enhanced regional stature, sometimes at the expense of the other, particularly in societies divided along sect-based lines, most notably Bahrain and Syria.¹⁹ In Syria, elite Iranian forces played a key role in developing the Assad regime's strategy to defeat the demonstrators and the Islamist organizations that immediately developed; unexpectedly, the battle had catastrophic effects on Syrian populations. Despite extensive allegations of illicit Iranian activities, a Saudi-led Peninsula Shield Force crossed the King Fahd Causeway into Bahrain to safeguard the Al Khalifa royal family.²⁰

Iran's nuclear program has been a source of tension between the two countries. Saudi Arabia as one of the concerned parties, expressed reservations about the Western nuclear agreement with Iran. As a result, Saudis had a significant impact on the termination of the deal due to its perception of it as a way to expand Iran's influence in the region. Saudi Arabia defines its political relationship with Iran as a zero-sum game. According to the win-lose strategy, Saudi Arabia views Iran as a regional rival in the area and considers Iran's escalating influence over regional affairs to be a threat to its interests.²¹ The deepening tensions between Iran and the West over Iran's nuclear activities and the escalation of sanctions, including in the oil sector, have led Saudi Arabia and the Arabs to take advantage of this development to advance their goals and interests, especially against the Iranian state. In fact, the nuclear deal fueled tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia perceived the agreement as a return to historic US ties with Iran; which it believed would not only strengthen Iran's position but

¹⁸ Akbarzadeh Shahram, Cinzia Bianco, and Sukru Cildir. "Saudi Arabia, Iran and de-Escalation in the Gulf". SEPAD, 2016. [https://www.sepad.org.uk/app/sepad/files-module/local/documents/Saudi%20Arabia,%20Iran%20and%20De-Escalation%20in%20the%20Gulf%20-%20Formatted\[1\].pdf](https://www.sepad.org.uk/app/sepad/files-module/local/documents/Saudi%20Arabia,%20Iran%20and%20De-Escalation%20in%20the%20Gulf%20-%20Formatted[1].pdf).

¹⁹ Mohammed, Ahmed and Ravichandran Moorthy, "Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry in the Middle East: Impact on national security," 9.

²⁰ Mohammed, Ahmed and Ravichandran Moorthy. "Saudi Arabia and Iran rivalry in the Middle East: Impact on national security," 10.

²¹ Xiaoning Huang. "THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR ISSUE AND REGIONAL SECURITY: DILEMMAS, RESPONSES AND THE FUTURE". Department of Political Affairs, Middle East and West Asia Division 2016, <https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/The%20Iranian%20Nuclear%20Issue%20and%20Regional%20Security.pdf>.

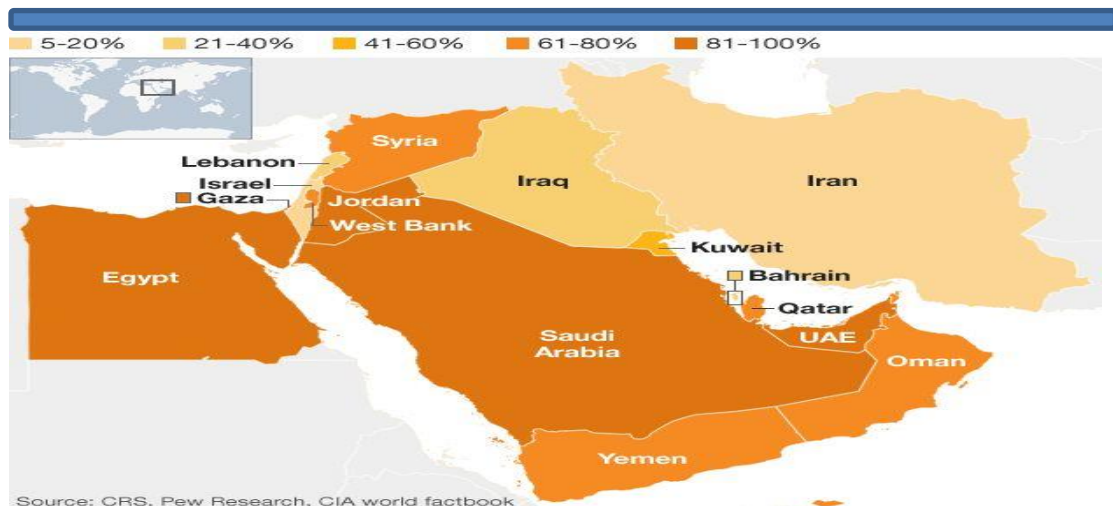
also the position and role of the Shiite community in the region. Both sides of the conflict were engaged in a zero-sum game, whereby gains for one side were seen as losses for the other.²²

Finally, Iran and Saudi Arabia have consistently worked to strengthen their alliances while simultaneously striving to reduce one another's influence in the region. The recent developments between Saudi Arabia and Iran represent a great rivalry for power and expansionist competition in the Middle East. Each Middle Eastern country is divided into different sects that join their religious allies to maintain their political leverage; Shiites predominantly support Iran while Sunnis align support with Saudi Arabia. Through the use of proxy forces, Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a brutal conflict that has broken out in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, fueled by their differences. The outcome of the clashes remains uncertain.

It is important to note that the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not only religious dimensions but also geopolitical, political and security concerns. Iran's support extends to the Sunni Taliban and the Sunni Palestinian Hamas movement indicating that the conflict involves more than religious affiliations.

Iran also has good relations with the Sunni government of Algeria. Furthermore, in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Iran supported Christian Armenia against Islamic and Shiite Azerbaijan.

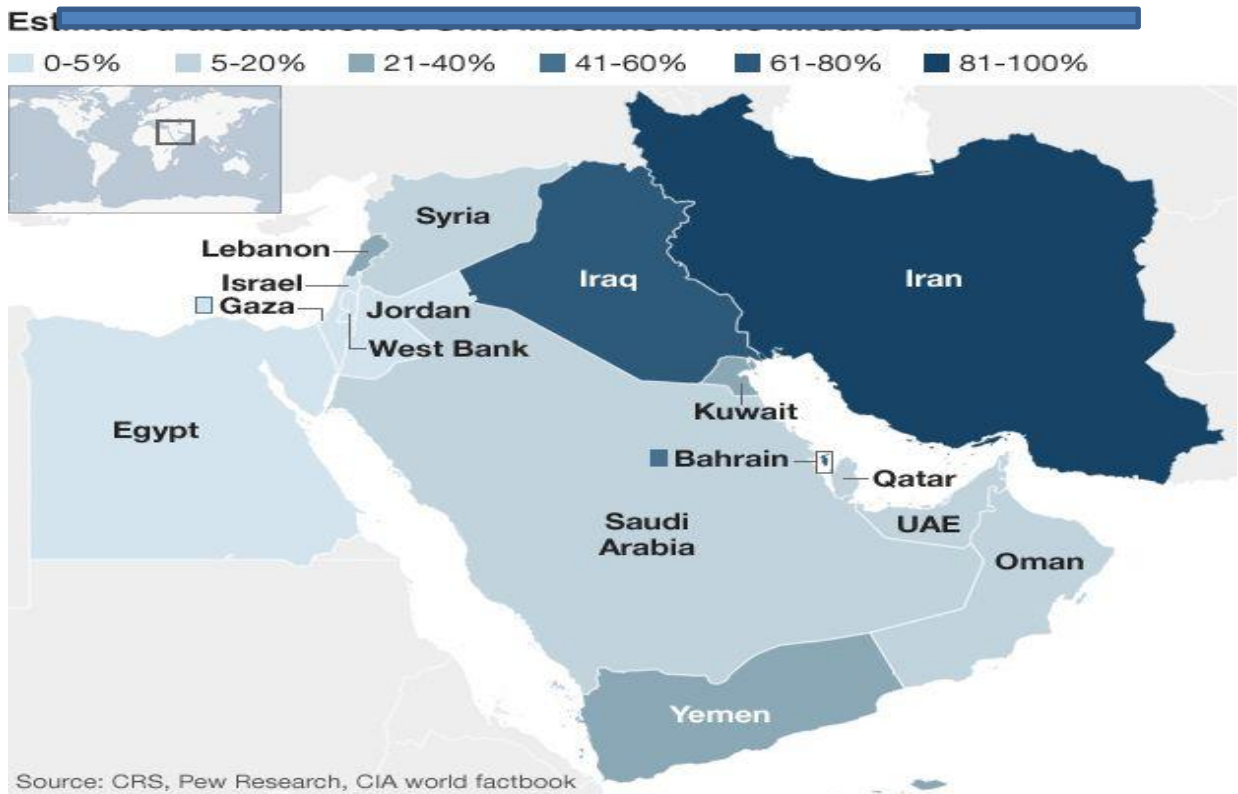
Map (1): Estimated distribution of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East. ²³



²² Khan Robina, Muhammad Muzaffar, and Nazim Rahim. "Iranian Nuclear Program: Impacts on Saudi-Iran Relations." *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 3, no. 2 (2019). [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2019\(3-i\)04](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2019(3-i)04).

²³ BBC. "Sunnis and Shia: Islam's Ancient Schism." January 4, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16047709>.

Map (2): Estimated Shia Muslims in the Middle East.²⁴



The Agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran

On March 10, representatives of Iran and Saudi Arabia, who had been meeting in secrecy in Beijing for five days, announced a Chinese-sponsored agreement to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries. As noted above, tensions between the two regional rivals have persisted for over four decades. Prior to the 1990s, tensions remained low but escalated throughout the following two decades. Riyadh officially cut ties with Tehran seven years ago. Both countries' efforts to restore ties were public — with previous rounds of negotiations between Iranian and Saudi officials held by Iraq and Oman. However, the agreement's speed and China's sponsorship were unexpected. The following section aims to outline the contents of the agreement between the two countries and provide an explanation an explanation for the reasons and driving factors behind the reconciliation, taking into account domestic changes, geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East in 2023, regional changes and divisions, and global factors.

²⁴ BBC. "Sunnis and Shia: Islam's Ancient Schism."

Content of the Agreement

The tripartite declaration elucidating the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran contains a number of crucial points, indicating the first step toward the restoration of diplomatic ties.²⁵ From a diplomatic point of view, the two countries have promised to begin the process of rebuilding their relationships and reopening their respective embassies and missions within two months of the agreement's signing. In addition, the foreign ministers of both nations are scheduled to meet in order to facilitate the agreement's implementation, arrange for the return of their ambassadors, and discuss ways to strengthen bilateral ties.²⁶

To alleviate recent tensions, the two sides have agreed to implement the security and economic trade agreements signed by both countries in 1998 and 2001. Given that the disagreement between the two countries involves issues of national security, the restoration of the security agreement is critical. Security institutions are more reluctant than other institutions to establish channels of political communication and are wary of undertaking practical and concrete steps only when they do not obtain certainty about the motives and actions of the other party. Therefore, the implementation of the security agreement will enhance the political credibility of the revival of bilateral relations and garner support of national security defense institutions.²⁷

TEHRAN'S MOTIVATIONS

Internal Motivations

Firstly, after the failure of the nuclear deal in 2017 and the subsequent imposition of economic sanctions, Iran has faced significant domestic pressure due to economic challenges. As a response to this pressure, the Islamic Republic has endeavored to reduce external tensions with the aim of mitigating internal threats.²⁸

Secondly, the past two years have been regarded as the most challenging in the Islamic Republic's 44-year history, even more perilous than the Iran-Iraq war; due to the

²⁵ Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Sweden. "Joint Trilateral Statement by the People's Republic of China, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic Republic of Iran". 10 March, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3YFWYm1>.

²⁶ Rania Makram. "Understanding Iran's motivation for restoring ties with Saudi Arabia." Future for Advanced research and Studies, 21 March 2023, <https://futureuae.com/en-US/Mainpage/Item/8096>.

²⁷ International Institute for Iranian Studies. Saudi-Iranian Agreement and the Return of Diplomatic Relations. 2023. <https://rasanah-iiis.org/wp-c>.

²⁸ Daily Sabah "Iranian Losses of 150 Billion Dollars due to US Sanctions," Daily Sabah, September 26,2020. <https://bit.ly/4297fd7>.

profound impact of the Zhina Revolution that nearly led to the regime's collapse. The long-term ramifications of this revolution, both domestically and internationally, continue to reverberate, with the protest movement still remaining active. Meanwhile, the Iranian security establishment is convinced that Saudi Arabia is funding a media campaign spearheaded by the Persian-speaking "Iran International TV". Iranian authorities assert that this campaign wields a significant impact over the trajectory of protests and the Iranian public.²⁹

Thirdly, the agreement reached with Saudi Arabia helps alleviate the overall concern regarding Iran's involvement in the region and its growing influence on the domestic affairs of other countries, notably in terms of the financial resources used by Iran for regional operations.³⁰

Regional Motivations

Firstly, the Islamic Republic has encountered security threats with the ascension a far-right Israeli cabinet led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Iranians fear that Israel, with assistance from the United States and European approval, Israel will provide support to Iranian opposition and demonstrators in their endeavors to topple or, at the very least, undermine the Islamic Republic. Additionally, plans to use limited military force against Iran's nuclear and missile programs are a source of concern.³¹

Secondly, the United States is striving to restructure the regional system in the Middle East, with the aim of incorporating Israel as a pivotal component within the security framework. Washington is exploiting Iranian threats to build an Arab-Israeli alliance against Iran. However, Saudi-Iranian rapprochement would undermine these efforts, as it would create a front opposing Israeli interests in the region and weaken U.S. pressure on Saudi Arabia to comply with the Abrahamic agreements.³²

Iran's perspectives on regional security encompass two interrelated strands, both of which hold significant implications for its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Firstly, they

²⁹ Abdolrasool Divsallar and Hesham Alghannam. "The Strategic Calculus behind the Saudi-Iranian Agreement". The Cairo Review of Global of Affair 2023, <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/the-strategic-calculus-behind-the-saudi-iranian-agreement/>.

³⁰ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. "China brokered Iran Saudi agreement: Motives and prospects". (2023). <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/china-brokered-iran-saudi-agreement-motives-and-prospects.pdf>.

³¹ Michael Lipi. "Israel Will Prevent Iran From Acquiring Nuclear Weapons Capability" VOA. Voice of America (VOA News), 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/israel-will-prevent-iran-from-acquiring-nuclear-weapons-capability-envoy-says/6966513.html>.

³² Mary Maher. "Regional breakthrough, The geopolitical repercussions of the Saudi-Iranian agreement. The Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies". 2023, <https://ecss.com.eg/33346/>.

revolve around Iran's role as a central hub in the "Axis of Resistance." Secondly, they focus on Iran's emphasis on multilateral, "region-first" approaches to Middle Eastern security. Both aspects enable Tehran to conduct its foreign policy with a certain degree of independence. The former, which has a strong ideological leaning and longstanding ties and networks, grants Iran significant influence in the Middle East. The latter primarily aims to create an aspirational agenda for Iran's foreign policy in the form of a more conventionally understood regional security architecture. The "Axis of Resistance," initially composed of Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, sought to thwart Israeli objectives in the region and, indirectly, those of the US.³³

Thirdly, Securing shipping routes: The rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia can provide reassurance to oil-exporting and consuming countries regarding the continuity of energy supplies and international energy routes, particularly in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz.³⁴

International Motivations

Firstly, Increased Western pressure on Iran, stemming from deteriorating relations with the West regarding the nuclear file, deadlocked negotiations to restore the nuclear deal, escalating uranium enrichment levels and secret activities and preventing the Atomic Energy Agency from monitoring its nuclear activities, served as reasons for the Iranians to alleviate some of the international pressure by reaching an agreement with Saudi Arabia. The prevailing belief in power circles in Tehran was that an understanding with Saudi Arabia could potentially garner Saudi support in reviving the nuclear deal, which is a prerequisite for the lifting the unprecedented sanctions imposed on Iran by President Trump's administration.³⁵

Secondly, Iran misinterpreted the Russian-Ukrainian war from the perspective that this conflict weakens the role of the United States and Europe. Iran believed that Russia, Russia can subjugate the West with its energy card, and Iran itself, with its vast energy resources and geostrategic position, especially control of the Strait of Hormuz,

³³ Banafsheh Keynoush and Edward Wastnidge. "Narratives of power politics in the Iran-Saudi relationship: The view from Tehran". 2023, file:///C:/Users/khetam721/Downloads/9781526150844-9781526150844.00007%20(3).pdf.

³⁴ Banafsheh Keynoush and Edward Wastnidge. "Narratives of power politics in the Iran-Saudi relationship: The view from Tehran".

³⁵ Arab center for research and policy studies. "The motives of the Saudi-Chinese-Iranian agreement and its prospects Banafsheh". March 14, 2023. <https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/china-brokered-iran-saudi-agreement-motives-and-prospects.pdf>.

can impose its demands alongside Russia and negotiate with regional countries from a position of strength, even in dealings with Even Europeans and Americans. However, due to Russia's economic and military limitations, the determination of the United States and Europe to oppose Russia and supporting Ukraine, as well as the Europeans' pursue for energy alternatives, Russia has emerged as a competitor to Iran in the oil markets, particularly in China and India.

Third, In addition, the Europeans' strong reaction to Iranian drone exports to Russia has put Iran in a very weak position. All of this has led the Islamic Republic to reduce its tensions with regional and international actors in order to survive.³⁶

Fourthly, strengthening strategic relations with China: Iran has played an active role in enhancing Beijing's influence and expanding Chinese presence in the Middle East, as well as in its efforts to establish itself as a successful diplomatic force in the region. This is because, on the one hand, China's readiness is important to ease tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and on the other hand, Iran needs stronger economic ties with its allies to counter Western pressure.³⁷

SAUDI MOTIVATIONS

Internal Motivations

Through this agreement, Saudi Arabia intends to eliminate the threats to its internal security, often indirectly posed by Iran through its allies. These include attacks by the Houthis and Shiite militias in Iraq in 2019, which posed a serious threat to the country's security. Additionally, the drone and missile strike on Aramco facilities in Abqaiq Khorais in September 2019 severely reduced Saudi Arabia's oil income and hindered its ability to produce oil by over 50% for weeks. Above all, the Iranian strike showed the strength of its military and intelligence capabilities and how easily it could have harmed Saudi Arabia.³⁸

Second, reducing the escalation of Saudi conflict with Iran is part of a broader foreign policy objective to support the social and economic development plan, known as

³⁶ Parwez Rahim. "Middle East Geopolitical Equations in 2023: Shifts and Polarization". Penus, March 31, 2023. https://penus.krd/index.php/ckb/2018-04-02-19-12-28/item/2084-2023-03-31-10-05-55#_ftn41.

³⁷ Rania Makram. "Understanding Iran's motivation for restoring ties with Saudi Arabia". 21 March 2023, <https://futureuae.com/en-US/Mainpage/Item/8096>.

³⁸ Roy Cahanovitz. "The Iran-Saudi Arabia Agreement: Background, Considerations, and Significances". Research and Education center, May 3, 2023. <https://israel-alma.org/2023/05/03/the-iran-saudi-arabia-agreement-background-considerations-and-significances/>.

Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia is investing billions of dollars to implement this plan, and escalating tensions with Iran pose a threat to project financing, blocking foreign investment, and jeopardizing Saudi aspirations of becoming a regional and global hub for logistics, trade and industry.³⁹

Regional Motivations

Firstly, Saudi Arabia's motivations for seeking rapprochement with Iran can be understood within the framework of a rational approach. It assumes that Saudi Arabia is convinced that the US administration will not initiate a military attack on Iran and instead expects Iran to comply with its demands to reach an agreement through negotiation. In this situation, Saudi Arabia feels that Iran's influence in the region would grow stronger.

Second, Saudi Arabia has come to the conclusion that the path towards normalization with Israel is both costly and of limited benefit. This assessment is based on the understanding that Israel refused to supply modern weapons to Saudi Arabia due to its military doctrine, which aims to maintain its position as above all Arab countries as the first military power in the Middle East and the only nuclear power in the region.⁴⁰

Thirdly, Saudi Arabia intends to maintain its neutrality and avoid being attacked by Iran in the case if Israel attacks Iran. According to French reports since early February, Israel has identified 3,000 targets inside Iran. However, it needs allies, including the United States and some Gulf countries threatened by Iran, to support its campaign.⁴¹

Fourthly, in addition to the Yemen crisis, Saudi Arabia has not been successful in reducing Iran's regional influence. To explain Saudi failures, one can point to the ineffectiveness of its policies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon over the past two decades. Saudi Arabia aims to reach an agreement with Iran in order to peacefully resolve the Yemeni crisis.⁴²

³⁹ Chad Iran. "What are Saudi Arabia's motives for an agreement with Iran?" 2023, <https://jadehiran.com/archives/71646>.

⁴⁰ Wissam Abu Shamala. "A reading of the motives of the Iranian-Saudi agreement". April 4, 2023, <https://www.almayadeen.net/articles/>.

⁴¹ Al Furat Center for Studies. "In light of deep-rooted differences, the motives of the Saudi-Iranian agreement". 2023, <https://firatn.com/?p=3862>.

⁴² Majid Bozorgmehri and Hakem Ghasemi. "Significant Changes in Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy towards Iran (2021) Reasons and Motivations". *The Quarterly Journal of Political Studies of Islamic World*, Vol.10, NO.40, (2022): 17-30.

International Motivations

Firstly, Saudi Arabia's interpretation of the United States' shifting objectives over the past ten years has influenced the Kingdom's security calculations. President Obama's nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015 and along with his stated policy that Iran and Saudi Arabia "need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace;" Saudi Arabia's strategic thinking has also been influenced by the United States' intention to reduce its presence in the MENA region and refocus its military and diplomatic resources on its rivalry with China. Additionally, the United States has refrained from intervening in response to the Houthi drone attack on the facilities of the oil giant Aramco. Saudi Arabia has two choices in light of these shifting dynamics in the security environment: leveraging great power rivalries and broadening its security arrangements to de-escalate tensions with Iran or improving its current security assurances from the United States. It appears that Riyadh has taken a multifaceted approach. On one hand, there is diplomatic engagement with Iran alongside deterrence measures. On the other hand, is looking into using multilateral diplomacy to find a new political guarantor with more power over Tehran, with China emerging as a possible candidate.⁴³

Second, Saudi Arabia has played a crucial role in engaging China as a mediator to promote the reestablishing of relations with Iran. However, it is clear that China has its own objectives in the region, including defending its investments and guaranteeing energy security. Through this strategic move, Saudi Arabia effectively introduced China into the regional geopolitical landscape. By doing so, it has created a balance between the United States and China in the management of Iran's influence. In parallel, Saudi Arabia strengthened its position in the region in 2022 when it signed 34 long-term agreements with China regarding technology, military and economic matters. This development implies that Iran will no longer be a threat to Saudi Arabia because any action or threats from Iran would directly jeopardize China's significant interests in the region. As a result, Iran would be in a vulnerable position.⁴⁴

⁴³ Abdolrasool Divsallar and Hesham Alghannam. "The Strategic Calculus behind the Saudi-Iranian Agreement". The Cairo review of global affairs, April 9, 2023. <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/the-strategic-calculus-behind-the-saudi-iranian-agreement/>.

⁴⁴ Jennifer Bell. "Saudi Arabia and China sign 34 investment agreements during Xi's visit". Al Arabiya News, 2022. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2022/12/08/Saudi-and-China-sign-34-investment-agreements-during-Xi-s-visit>.

The implications of the agreement on the region

The tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have an impact on every aspect of political, economic, security, social, religious, and sectarian life. Furthermore, the conflict extends beyond the boundaries of the two countries, it also extends to the whole area of the region. As a result, the growing conflict between the two countries has become the focal point for all other issues and conflicts in the region, effectively dividing the territory and powers into two factions. There is no doubt that just as the Iran-Saudi conflict has had an impact on the region, its resolution may have a similar effect.

Due to this agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, there is a strong possibility that some countries, such as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, will no longer be the focus of the Saudi-Iranian conflict. The measure of the success of this agreement will be whether the parties continue to interfere in the domestic politics of countries throughout the region. Riyadh has long complained about Iranian support for armed groups across the region and its alleged efforts to incite insurgency among Saudi Arabia's minority Shiite population. Similarly, Iran accuses Gulf Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, of facilitating the presence of the United States and Israel on its doorstep.

The final section focuses on the impact of the recent rapprochement and agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia on two specific countries: Yemen and Syria. As previously stated, any reconciliation or confrontation between the two countries would directly affect the region and the Middle East. However, due to the limitations of the study, the focus will be on Yemen and Syria.

Yemen

The transformations of the Middle East and North Africa, which began in Tunisia in late 2010 and led to a wave of the collapse of authoritarian governments in these countries, eventually spread to Yemen.⁴⁵ Abdullah Saleh resigned as a result of protests in Yemen, which also led to the emergence and strengthening of the Houthis in Yemen. The political crisis in Yemen unfolded in two phases, beginning in July 2014. In the first phase, as the crisis escalated in the summer of 2014 in various Yemeni provinces and Ansarullah strengthened its social position and public organization, Mansour Hadi's interim government was forced to sign the September 21, 2014 agreement with Ansarullah. In the second phase, the Houthis came to power, resulting in Saudi Arabia's

⁴⁵ Mather, Yassamine. "The Arab Spring and Its Unexpected Consequences". *Critique* 42 (1), 2014: 73-86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2014.909977>.

military intervention in Yemen in March 2015, which began as Operation “Decisive Storm” and continued as Operation “Restoring Hope”. It is considered the largest Saudi military intervention since the 1930s.⁴⁶

Saudi Arabia is concerned about the dominance of the Houthis and the expansion of the Islamic Republic of Iran's influence in Yemen as part of its rivalry with Iran. The Saudis interpret the strengthening of the Zaidi Shiites in Yemen as an increase in Iranian power in the region and perceive themselves as being under siege by regional Shiite power. Therefore, the country has launched an offensive to destroy the Houthi forces and confront the Iranian regime in the region. Saudi Arabia is also more concerned about the recent developments involving the Houthis, notably their control of the port of "Hodeidah" and the strait of "Bab al-Mandeb," which would increase Shiite forces' access to the Red Sea. Furthermore, more than two million Yemeni Shiites living in Saudi Arabia use the border crossings for travel. For the Saudis, this issue poses a serious threat to their national security.⁴⁷

On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran's support for the Houthis in this country is tied to a number of objectives. First, In Yemen, Iran's influence aims to drive Yemen out of the control of the US and its regional allies. Second, it seeks to expand the scope of resistance against Israel and the United States in the region. Third, Iran aims to secure a favorable outcome in the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq by opening another front against Saudi Arabia and its regional and supra-regional allies. Iran's strategic deepening in the region and potential for a complete victory and domination of Ansarullah over Yemen could form the fourth pillar of the resistance front in the region, encircling Saudi Arabia.⁴⁸

From another perspective, the conflict between the two countries in Yemen has had two ideological and strategic aspects. On one hand, the confrontation between the discourse of Zaidi Shiites and Sunni Wahhabis in Yemen has turned the crisis into a clash of Zaidi and Wahhabi ideas. Saudi Arabia provides material and spiritual support to the Wahhabis, while the Islamic Republic of Iran provides political and diplomatic support to

⁴⁶ Dawud Ansari, Mariza Montes and Helen Schlüter. “What drives Saudi airstrikes in Yemen? An empirical analysis of the dynamics of coalition airstrikes, Houthi attacks, and the oil market”. 19 July 2021, https://eadp.eu/uploads/dp_202102.pdf.

⁴⁷ İzol, R. , Cingöz, M. "Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry and the Yemen Crisis". *Gazi Akademik Bakış* 16 (2022): 345-360.

⁴⁸ Juneau, Thomas. “Iran’s Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment.” *International Affairs* 92, 3 (2016): 647–63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12599>.

Shiite and Zaidi political and religious groups.⁴⁹ On the other hand, this ideological dimension is linked to the strategic dimension. Saudi Arabia aims to prevent the collapse of the Yemeni government and the establishment of a Shiite government, which would pose a serious threat on its southern borders. Iran, on the other hand, seeks to secure its national and security interests in the region by establishing a Shiite government and allies along Saudi Arabia's southern borders and gaining control over the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb. Therefore, the ideological aspect of the crisis and the Saudi-Iranian conflict in Yemen has been influenced by the strategic considerations underlying these changes.⁵⁰

Map (3): Current frontline in the Yemen conflict.⁵¹



Returning to the Iran-Saudi agreement on March 10, it is evident that the issue of Yemen was not specifically mentioned in the official text of the agreement. The agreement states that all three countries will make every effort to maintain regional and international peace and security. However, the issue of Yemen has been raised in relation

⁴⁹ James Brandon, Nicholas A. Heras. "Saudi Arabia's Yemen Intervention: A High Risk Gamble?" *Terrorism Monitor*, 13, N, 20, (2015) 8-10. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/saudi-arabias-yemen-intervention-a-high-risk-gamble>.

⁵⁰ Abdalqader Faez. "A Struggle of Influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Repercussions of Confrontation and the Likelihood of Peace A Case Study of Yemen". 8 May 2023. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/struggle-influence-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia-repercussions-confrontation-and>.

⁵¹ Mareike Transfeld. "Three Scenarios for the Yemen War". Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C06/>.

to the agreement, particularly regarding non-interference in internal affairs and efforts to restore regional stability. In reality, the positive remarks made by both the Houthis and the Saudi government immediately following the agreement demonstrate that the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is effective in initiating a constructive process in Yemen.

The likelihood of putting an end to the crisis in Yemen is among the most important issues related to the recent agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Iranian administration emphasized that improved relations with the Kingdom would be helpful in achieving this significant objective; therefore the agreement was a step in the right direction.⁵² The IRNA news agency quoted a statement from Iran's UN mission as saying that the agreement with Saudi Arabia would speed up attempts to extend a cease-fire agreement that had run out of time, "help start a national dialogue, and form an inclusive national government in Yemen." According to Mohamed Abdulsalam, the rebels' spokesperson and chief negotiator, "the region needs the return of normal relations between its countries, through which the Islamic society can regain its lost security as a result of the foreign interventions, led by the Zionists and Americans". In addition, Abdel-Bari Taher, a Yemeni political commentator and former Journalists' Union head referred to the Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement as a "positive first step".⁵³

Many analyses and evaluations of the agreement between Riyadh and Tehran have been conducted. However, there is a general consensus that any Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, regardless of its nature and content, will be obligated to resolve the Yemeni crisis. This is crucial for the success of this reconciliation, whether it is an agreement between two parties in need or a significant regional agreement.⁵⁴ Following their reconciliation, the Houthis and the Yemeni government have started the process of exchanging families of prisoners from both sides. The recent steps taken by the Yemeni government, in which 104 Houthi families were liberated, has been described as a positive step by the Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia claims it wants to put an end

⁵² MAJID RAFIZADEH. "Saudi-Iran deal opens the door to peace in Yemen". Arab News, March 26, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2276011>.

⁵³ SAMY MAGDY. "Iran says deal with Saudi Arabia will help end Yemen's war". March 12, 2023. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iran-deal-saudi-arabia-end-yemens-war-97801598>.

⁵⁴ Abdalqader Faez. "A Struggle of Influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Repercussions of Confrontation and the Likelihood of Peace A Case Study of Yemen". 8 May 2023. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/struggle-influence-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia-repercussions-confrontation-and>.

to the Yemeni conflict and restore to Islamic principles, Arab tradition, and human rights. Observers believe that this process may provide an opportunity to finally put an end to the eight-year conflict in Yemen, which has caused immense devastation to this nation. All these changes have come after the Saudi-Iranian agreement, which was initiated by China. The Kingdom aims to seize this opportunity to consolidate peace and bring an end to the conflict in Yemen. Meanwhile, Iran is pleased with the developments in Yemen and hopes that they will provide an opportunity to bring peace to Yemen.⁵⁵

Syria

The strategic position of Syria in the Middle East, with its Mediterranean coastline and borders with Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine has granted it a significant role in political geographical theories. Due to this unique strategic position and the outbreak of civil war in the country in 2011, both Iran and Saudi Arabia became directly involved in the Syrian crisis.⁵⁶ The crisis showcased their contrasting directions to the forefront more than ever before, as both nations took more aggressive and elaborate moves in response to the Syrian crisis in comparison to other developments in the region. Iran provided military support and funding to assist al-Assad in combating rebel groups, while Saudi Arabia provided support to organizations working to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.⁵⁷

Saudi Arabia's objectives for its engagement in the Syrian civil war can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, First, Riyadh anticipated that the overthrow of an Iranian-backed administration would have a greater impact on the political processes in Iraq and Lebanon or, at the very least, restore some balance to the political and religious forces there in order for the region to be able to fight the Shiite front and Iranian dominance.

Secondly, Saudi Arabia perceived the crisis in Syria as an opportunity not only to test its new strategy, but also to reshape the Arab uprisings by pushing Syria into armed conflict

⁵⁵ Ramyar Jamal. "The opportunity for peace in Yemen". Standard, April 27, 2023. <http://skurd.net/2023/04/27/%D8%AF%DB%95%D8%B1%D9%81%DB%95%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D9%84%DB%95-%DB%8C%DB%95%D9%85%DB%95%D9%86/>.

⁵⁶ Alireza Alipoor. "Iran-Saudi Arabia's proxy War in West Asia: Case Study of the Syrian Crisis". *political studies of Islamic world*, 7, 2, (2018), 143-171. doi: 10.30479/psiw.2018.1463

⁵⁷ By Al Jazeera Staff. "How has the Saudi-Iran divide affected the Middle East?" 7 Apr 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/7/how-has-the-saudi-iran-divide-affected-the-middle-east>.

and raising the possibility of a regional war.⁵⁸

Thirdly, from an ideological standpoint, the Saudis have always accused Syria of supporting defense front groups, which they believe threaten the policy of maintaining the status quo and promoting resistance in the region. Consequently, they view Syria as a threat to the future of their conservative monarchy. Fourthly, from a regional geopolitical perspective, the significance of developments in Syria is assessed from two perspectives: the regional balance vis-à-vis Iran and Syria's interference in Saudi Arabia's spheres of influence in Lebanon and Palestine.⁵⁹

Furthermore, supporting the opposition in Syria would resonate positively within Saudi Arabia, helping to counter some of the regional criticism of the KSA's approach to the Arab Spring. In other words, the Saudis' efforts to mobilize the international world and the region against Assad can be seen as part of a broader regional power struggle between the Gulf States and Iran. This is why, in the case of Syria, the Saudis openly supported regime change—a position that completely contradicts their stance since the start of the Arab Spring. Riyadh has always been wary of revolutions, fearing that regional instability would jeopardize the Kingdom's authority and control. This was undoubtedly the driving motivation behind Saudi efforts to keep the Arab Spring from extending to regional allies such as Bahrain and, to a lesser extent, Jordan.⁶⁰

On the other hand, Tehran-Damascus ties have historically been founded on common Middle Eastern strategic objectives. These two countries have joined forces to counterbalance opposing Arab regimes, notably Saudi Arabia. During the costly Iraq war, Syria remained the only country aligned with Iran, bringing the two countries closer than ever before. Furthermore, Syria was the first Arab country to recognize Iran's Islamic republic. Another factor driving Iran and Syria closer together is the same anti-Sunni religious worldview. Along with Lebanon, Iran and Syria appear to have overlapping interests in the region. Totten defines the significance of Assad by stating: “The overthrow of Assad is the worst thing that can happen to the Iranian government and Hezbollah. Iran will lose its only ally in the Arab world, and Hezbollah will lose one of

⁵⁸ Hamid Daraj. “Analysis of Saudi Arabia's approach to the developments in Syria”. February 16, 2018. https://pijaj.sbu.ac.ir/article_99589_2f61e2eed2d7459c89d3ba52ebfc954c.pdf?lang=en.

⁵⁹ Hamid Daraj. “Analysis of Saudi Arabia's approach to the developments in Syria”, 95–100.

⁶⁰ Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky. "THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE SAUDI-IRANIAN RIVALRY". foreign policy Research Institute, October 2012. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/161960/Berti_Guzansky_-_Syrian_Crisis_and_Saudi-Iranian_Rivalry.pdf.

only two patrons and its entire over-ground logistics network.”⁶¹

From Tehran's vantage point, Syria acts as both a barrier against the US and Israeli dominance and a vital link to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran's foreign policy has been centered on defending its strategic interests and significant impact on the political and security balance in the region, particularly in its relationships with Hezbollah, Lebanon, Hamas, and the Israeli-Arab peace process. Iran plays a sensitive and crucial role in these matters. As a result, Iran's perspective on the Syrian events differs greatly from that of other Arab countries. The diverging approaches adopted by Iran and Saudi Arabia in broadening and spreading the Syrian crisis have resulted in a loss in collaboration and an increase in antagonism, approaching a "zero-sum" game driven by competing agendas.⁶²

Saudi Arabia and Iran have contributed to altering the course of the Syrian civil war since its beginning. They have been the two main drivers behind the sectarianism that fueled much of the conflict in Syria. The Iran-Saudi agreement holds the potential to influence the conflict, particularly regarding the relations between the Assad regime and Iran and Gulf Arab powers that have long supported rebel groups.⁶³

According to Syrian observers, the country's most likely to benefit from the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation would be Yemen and Iraq, with Syria in second place. In an article published on Al-Mayadeen Net, the director of the Jerusalem Center for Studies stated, “Syria stands to benefit as the second beneficiary of this reconciliation. Saudi Arabia has shown indications of adopting a new approach towards Damascus after the earthquake. After a decade-long hiatus, its planes landed at Damascus and Aleppo airports, delivering aid and relief. It is not inconceivable that the next surprise will be the arrival of the Saudi Foreign Minister’s plane at Damascus airport.” Similarly, Dr. Abdullah al-Assaf, a political media professor at Imam University, stated to the American news station Alhurra that “the Saudi-Iranian agreement is significant and will have a positive impact on the region as a whole, including the Syrian issue.” It is expected that

⁶¹ Furkan Halit Yolcu. "Iran's Involvement with Syrian Civil War: Background, Reasons and Alternatives". *B i l g i*, Vol. 18 Issue 2 (2016) <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/301337>.

⁶² Furkan Halit Yolcu. "Iran's Involvement with Syrian Civil War: Background, Reasons and Alternatives", 47–50.

⁶³ International Crisis Group. "The Impact of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on Middle East Conflicts". 19 APRIL 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/impact-saudi-iranian>.

there will be some sort of agreement on the Syrian issue.⁶⁴

Following the Saudi-Iran deal, Saudi officials have allegedly agreed to restore the Saudi embassy in Damascus, which had been shuttered since 2012. Riyadh has also suggested that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad be re-admitted to the Arab League summit in May, 12 years after Syria was suspended in reaction to.

Finally, the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia is crucial for the region's stability and will have long-term consequences for the turmoil in Yemen and Syria. The restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran might help resolve the Yemeni crisis, as both the government and the Houthi group have received covert political, military, and economic support from Riyadh and Tehran, respectively. Additionally, the agreement could accelerate Syria's reintegration into the Arab world. Following the decade-long conflict, under Bashar al Assad leadership, remained isolated, with only Saudi Arabia and Egypt opposing Syria's admission to the Arab League in November 2022. However, as Syria attempts to recover from the destruction caused by the earthquake, Arab governments have expressed interest in opening diplomatic missions in Damascus. Egypt expressed a desire to strengthen ties with Syria during the February 2023 visit of its Foreign Minister to Damascus. Two days before the agreement was signed, the Saudi Foreign Minister suggested that Syria could rejoin the Arab League, albeit not immediately. In light of the agreement, a shift in Saudi policy can be expected. Iran and Syria share historic relations, and Tehran, along with Moscow, has been a significant supporter of the Assad administration since the beginning of the conflict. Consequently, Saudi Arabia's and Iran's regional stability-focused policies may shift as a result of the agreement.⁶⁵

Conclusion

This study examines the interaction between Iran and Saudi Arabia in light of domestic, regional and global factors and its impact on regional security and stability, particularly in Yemen and Syria. This study concludes how any convergence and divergence between Iran and Saudi Arabia affects regional stability and security, with their influence extending across a broad geographic border. Additionally, the rise and fall

⁶⁴ The Syrian Observer. "How Will Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement Affect the Syrian Issue?" March 15th, 2023, <https://syrianobserver.com/news/82139/how-will-saudi-iranian-rapprochement-affect-the-syrian-issue.html>.

⁶⁵ Lakshmi Priya. "Significance of the Saudi-Iran Deal". Indian Council of World Affairs, 16 March 2023. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=9183&lid=5962.

of their power have been directly influenced by the pattern of regional change. Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the collapse of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and the establishment of a new political system dominated by Shiite forces disrupted the balance of power between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic, leading to disorder in the previous Middle Eastern system. This became the primary cause of the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh, two regional powers engaged in confrontation across the Middle East. This new development led to Iran's role and infiltration into Saudi Arabia's vulnerable borders. Tehran has significantly increased the capabilities of its allies to unprecedented levels not just in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, but also in two other strategic locations including Bahrain and Yemen, leading to direct this confrontation with Saudi Arabia. Over the last two decades, Saudi Arabia has devoted its efforts to countering Tehran's influence and maintaining a balance.

Following the Arab Spring upheavals that began in Tunisia in 2011, Iran and Saudi played a crucial role in breaking the dynamics of regional conflict, particularly as the wave of revolution reached Syria and Yemen, which fell their direct sphere of influence. However, it was in Yemen where the two regional major players tested the extent to which they could affect one another's areas of influence. In their efforts to maintain a balance against Iran, Saudis have used aggressive strategies and aggressive behaviors, including military measures, exacerbating the situation, and alternative wars. Internationally, the US and its Middle Eastern allies' regional policy have played a significant influence in the deteriorating of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia perceived the developments in Yemen and Syria as an existential threat to its security, political stability, and geopolitical calculations, while Tehran considered these events as a factor in its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia. These divergent viewpoints led to a brutal cold war unfolding in Yemen and Syria, where both Saudi Arabia and Iran crossed important red lines that had previously defined the nature of the conflict. As a result, both Yemeni and Syrian found themselves caught between two regional powers locked in a decisive battle on their territory. This manifested through direct Saudi military action against the Houthis and the Assad regime, as well as through proxy warfare involving Yemeni and Syrian internal allies supported by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively.

Both parties eventually reached to the conclusion that bilateral negotiations should be employed to explore any potential solutions to the issues in Yemen and Syria. This realization followed dialogues in Oman and five rounds of negotiations in Baghdad.

Finally, through extensive mediation and talks, a joint accord in Beijing to reestablish diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh after a seven-year rift.

The agreement reached between Riyadh and Tehran has been extensively interpreted and explained. Nevertheless, there is a general understanding that any Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, regardless of its structure and content, is committed to resolving the Yemen-Syria crisis, whether in the short or long term.

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