

Saudi Arabia - Iran Conflict in the Middle East: A Struggle for Regional Hegemony

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Abstract: *This article seeks to examine the existing state of chaos in the Middle East, which is exacerbated by Saudi Arabia and Iran's long-standing rivalry. When this conflicting relationship is taken into consideration for analysis, a wide range of factors come into play, including competing legitimacies, geostrategic interests, historical animosity, and religious and sectarian differences. Both states have significant involvement in proxy wars, direct and indirect, in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, which is fueled by both sectarianism and power politics combined, has definitely increased the likelihood of a new cold war, which is one of the dangerous factors defining regional politics. This article will also look at the fresh improvement in relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran and investigate China's role as a mediator in the peace agreement. Using the theoretical framework of Neoclassical Realism (NCR), the study examines the intricate dynamics of relations between Riyadh and Tehran, taking into account both foreign and domestic factors. The study examines the historical background of their tense relationship, which was fueled by proxy conflicts and geopolitical aspirations. China's role in mediating the peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran highlights its strategic and security interest in the area and reaffirms its use of economic power to further diplomatic goals. The discussion then turns to Saudi Arabia's and Iran's reconciliation efforts and goals.*

The article concludes that there may be hope for stability in the Middle East as a result of Beijing's mediation and the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Proxy wars, geopolitical interests, great powers, rapprochement.

Introduction

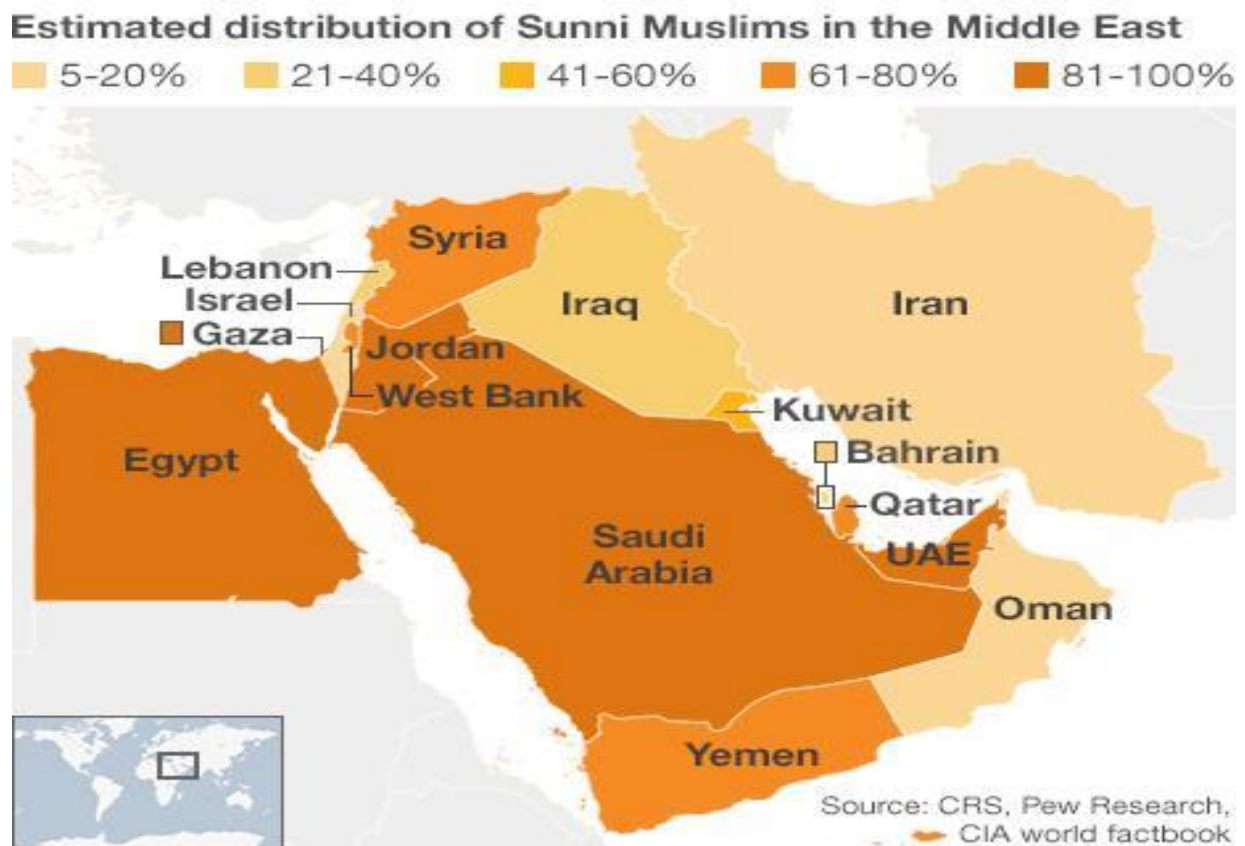
Although both Riyadh and Tehran are significant regional powers vying for dominance in the Middle East, tension and rivalry have been fueled by their divergent ideologies, geopolitical objectives, and competing interests. Fundamentally, the conflict reflects a deeper tension between various forms of political and economic organization, with Iran standing in opposition to both Saudi Arabia's market-oriented policies and the prevailing neoliberal order supported by the West. The fact that Iran is a majority Shia Muslim state and Saudi Arabia is a majority Sunni Muslim state further complicates the regional dynamics. The two states frequently hold divergent opinions about the place of Islam in politics. Each state has charged the other with promoting discontent, arming terrorist groups, and meddling in the other's political processes. The conflict serves as a crucial case study for understanding how concepts and ideologies can develop into potent social forces that influence history and shape a region's boundaries. This ongoing conflict has its roots in three major events: the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the US-Iraq War in 2003 and the Arab Spring. The Islamic Revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 gave Iran's ambitions for geopolitical domination a sectarian component, which set off the wave. Since he believed that Islam was political, a large number of Shia people in Iraq rebelled against the Sunni Baathist government of Saddam Hussein. His assertive foreign policy simultaneously posed a

serious threat to the Saudi Monarchy and its regional clout.

Iran is presented as revolutionary and Saudi Arabia as the status quo, resulting in a zero-sum security scenario where each state takes actions intended to boost its own security at the expense of the other. Furthermore, Riyadh and Tehran are engaged in proxy wars as a result of their protracted struggle for dominance over each other's ideologies. To prevent any possibility of each other increasing their influence in the region, they both continue to meddle in the internal affairs and politics of their neighboring countries (Ghazali, 2021).

The Arab Spring provided Tehran with a fresh opportunity to increase its power. A tug-of-war broke out between the two states. On the one hand, Tehran tries its hardest to instigate an already unstable situation in order to pose a threat to any regional state that supports Riyadh. Conversely, Riyadh never abandons a case where the friendly Tehranian government is struggling to survive by inflicting more agonizing suffering on it and driving it to the brink. This study examines the new warming of relationship between Riyadh and Tehran as well as Beijing's mediating role in the peace accord using the theoretical framework of Neoclassical Realism (NCR). China's involvement in the rapprochement is arguably its most concerning aspect. Beijing's has always been hesitant to become involved in Middle Eastern politics, but owing to the region's importance to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its thriving economic interests demanded that it assume a diplomatic role. One could argue that Beijing's current involvement in the Middle East is intended to secure its strategic objectives going forward and to remove Washington as the head of the neo-liberal international order. Beijing must make sure that

Houthi drone or missile attacks won't jeopardize its investments in Riyadh's energy sector (Houghton, 2022). Beijing is also keen to increase its economic ties with Tehran, endorsing Moscow's proposal to build a transit corridor through Iran that would bypass the Suez Canal and enable Russian trade to reach international markets (Nawaz, 2023)



Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25434060>

I. Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature. The secondary sources from which the data was gathered were books, articles, research journals, newspapers, and websites. Time constraints prevented data from primary sources from being gathered. Furthermore, because the diplomats from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and

the United States were engaged in official business, it was difficult to approach and interview them. There is, however, a sufficient body of literature on the subject. Therefore, the absence of primary sources won't have an impact on research findings because the body of literature already in existence fills in the gaps to identify the main problems. It seeks to evaluate and comprehend Saudi Arabia's and Iran's use of sectarian proxy warfare to offset one another's strategic clout in the area. Information has been gathered from secondary sources. The document analysis method has been used to analyze the data.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this article a neoclassical realist approach is being applied to threat perception, combining insights from foreign policy analysis and information from IR theory to explain how states evaluate threats and use policies to boost their security in dealing with them. While Saudi elites' choice of specific policies in response to structural conditions is largely explained by domestic variables, international and regional dynamics may be the independent variable influencing Saudi foreign policy toward Iran. The term NCR was first used in 1998 by journalist and political scientist Gideon Rose in an article published titled *World Politics*. Using the writings of Fareed Zakaria, Michael E. Brown, Thomas J. Christensen, and Randall L. Schweller as a guide, he presented the main ideas of NCR as a foreign policy theory. Since that time, NCR has developed into a noteworthy contribution to the theoretical understanding of international relations. This neoclassical realist viewpoint places Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward Iran at the nexus of domestic, regional, and international dynamics. This framework integrates three steps in a causal chain to analyze Saudi Arabia's foreign policy toward Iran from a neoclassical standpoint: the

choice of policy escalation of conflict with Iran, namely, dependent variable, domestic level structures intervening variable, and the relative power distribution at the regional level independent variable. It is argued that the regional structure plays a major role in shaping Saudi Arabia's behavior and the escalation of its conflict with Iran. However, Saudi responses and policies are neither purely responsive to the regional structure nor objectively effective (Firoozabadi, 2016).

The advent of confrontational nationalism in the Saudi Kingdom following the year 2011 served as an "imperfect transmission belt" between the policies chosen against Iran and systemic limitations. The state's relative power within the regional structure, which establishes its interests and susceptibility to outside pressures, is the first step in the causal chain. Regional sub-systems are frequently disregarded by neoclassical realists, who frequently concentrate on the international system and great power competition. Certain regions have their own dynamics, like the Middle East, which can be somewhat autonomous without being totally cut off from the world's great power structure. Competition between regional powers for hegemony and leadership is a common feature of regional power distribution. Global shifts have the potential to both cause and impact these competitions in the interim (Schmidt, 2001).

The subsequent empirical analysis of Saudi Arabia's perception of Iran in the post-2011 regional order, which is based on this framework, shows a regional power contending with the expansion of Iranian influence in the region, which is amplified by the US withdrawal as a hegemonic power from the regional system. The Saudi Kingdom needed to create a strong nationalism that would bind the populace to the ruling class beyond the traditional elements of loyalty, Islam and the monarchy in order to ensure

regime survival in the face of declining oil prices and the ascent of a new generation of Saudi leaders, led by Crown Prince MbS. Saudi perceptions of these structural threats coincided with this need. The interplay between the emerging top-down nationalism in the Saudi Kingdom and the regional structure of the post-2011 regional order results in Saudi foreign policy, which portrays Iran as the enemy in the region. We can examine the intentions and deeds of the participating states as well as the possible results of the agreement by using neoclassical realism to examine the March 10, 2023, China-mediated peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Neoclassical realists contend that China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran each have particular internal and systemic dynamics that shape their foreign policy strategies. Middle Eastern regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran have a long history of rivalry and proxy wars, and they have been vying for supremacy in the region for many years. Other external players, like China, now have more room to intervene and mediate disputes in the region as a result of the United States' declining influence (Maryam Nawaz, 2023). Neoclassical realism indicates that all three parties had strategic reasons to accept the Saudi-Iranian peace agreement, which was mediated by China. Iran's faltering economy would greatly benefit from the lifting of sanctions and the possibility of greater economic cooperation with Saudi Arabia. The domestic factors influencing Iran's willingness to engage in rapprochement are its strategic partnership with China and its pursuit of economic diversification in the face of US sanctions. In addition to potentially opening up new economic opportunities, the peace deal would reduce Saudi Arabia's dependency on the US and other Western countries for security. The desire of the Saudi leadership to seek out new alliances and diversify the types of security partners it collaborates with was indicative of a shift in strategy (Kamrava, 2018).

3. Saudi Foreign Policy towards Iran in the Post-2011 Regional Order

Saudi-Iranian relations alternated between rivalry and cooperation prior to the regional order of 2011. Riyadh and Tehran have become rivals in a regional struggle for control of the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and the Muslim world since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Saudi Arabia became more fearful of Iran during the 1980s as a result of Iran's attempt to spread the Islamic Revolution throughout the Arab world and Khomeini's criticism of Arab leaders, particularly Al Saud. Over the course of that decade, this animosity led to a number of tensions that eventually resulted in a narrative war between Riyadh and Tehran as each attempted to demonize and discredit the other. The struggle to determine the physical makeup of the region, in which Saudi Arabia backed Iraq in its eight-year war against Iran, exacerbated these tensions even more.

A turning point in Saudi-Iranian relations was the 2003 Iraq War, and as Iran's influence grew in the region with the fall of Saddam Hussein, tensions between the two states increased once more. Tehran exploited Baghdad to break free from international isolation, avert further Washington strikes, and minimize Riyadh's influence in the country. In an effort to counter Tehran's regional influence, Riyadh sided with Washington after 2003. To put an end to Tehran's nuclear ambitions, Riyadh even pleaded with Washington to invade the country militarily. Then-Saudi ambassador to the US, Adel al-Jubeir, said that King Abdullah had urged Washington to "cut off the head of the snake," emphasizing that the Saudi Kingdom's top goal is to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq (Salacanian, 2021)

4. Rising confrontational nationalism

With the decline in oil prices, the ascent to power of King Salman, and the ascent of his son MbS, the post-2011 era has brought about plans to reshape the state-society relationship, as exemplified by the Kingdom's Vision 2030. A top-down nationalism known as "hyper-nationalism" accompanied these changes. The state has fostered and incited a new nationalism with the intention of supporting a reform agenda that deviates from the Kingdom's customary sources of legitimacy and legitimizing the ascent to power of younger leaders. By eradicating religion, this top-down, nascent Saudi nationalism seeks to forge new bonds between the people and the government. The society was mobilized and brainwashed into believing that its leadership was destined to take the lead in the region by this campaign of new nationalism promotion (Sunik, 2018).

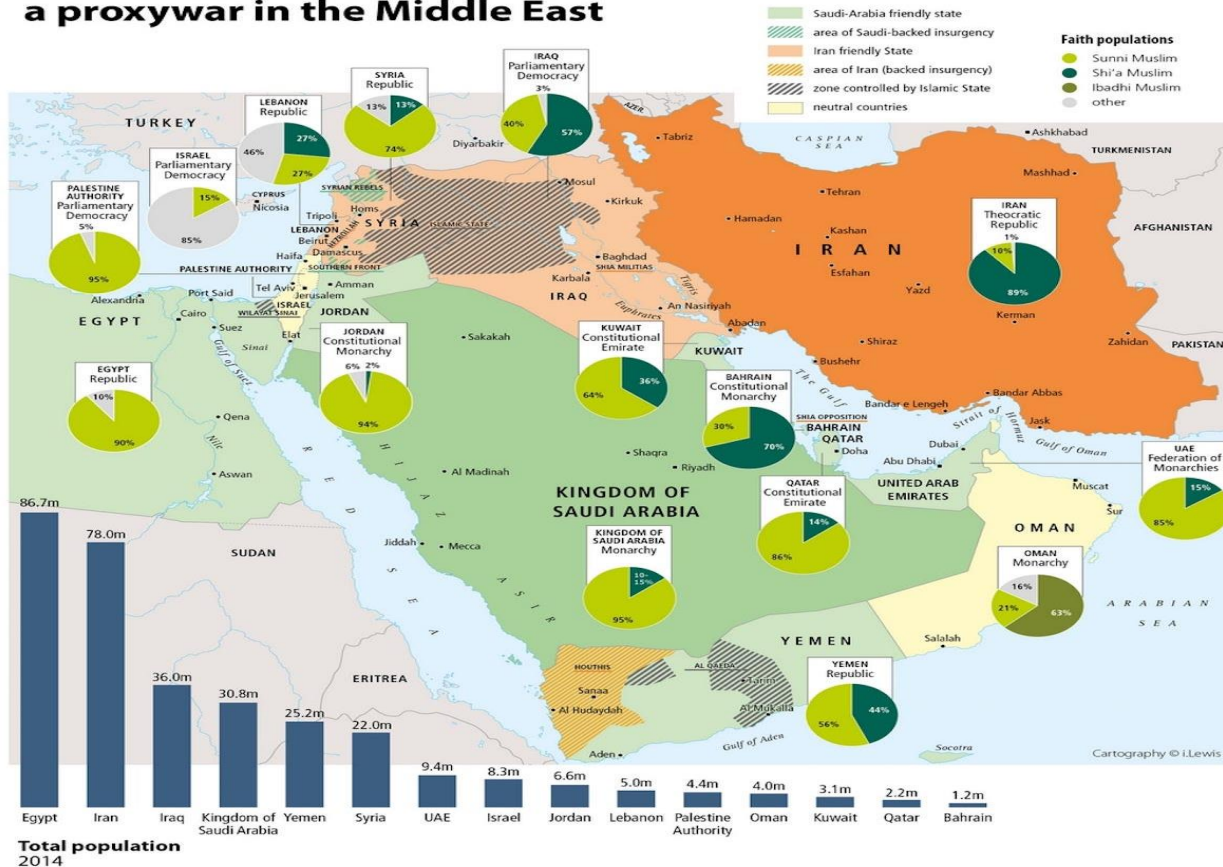
Since 2017, the Saudi leadership has intensified its crackdown on Sunni Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sahwa movement, and the arrest of well-known Sunni clerics and intellectuals, in an effort to assert a nationalist perspective by reexamining the sources of Saudi identity. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has diminished the power of the Saudi religious establishment in an attempt to move away from the Sunni orthodoxy that once defined Saudi identity. Parallel to this, there appears to be a shift in the nationalist discourse that will allow for the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia to be included more fully. Since their religion, the Shia has faced discrimination and is frequently perceived as less equal citizens in the Kingdom. Since 2011, the growing sectarian tone against the protests by Saudi Shia in its Eastern Province and the growing intensification of the security discourse against Iran has made their position even more precarious. Several Shia figures in the Eastern Province

interpreted MbS's description of Saudi Arabia as a nation of "Sunnis and Shias" in an interview as a sign of reconciliation. The goal of this rising nationalism is to entice Saudi Shiites to leave Iran (Hitman, 2018).

The second dimension pertains to confrontational nationalism, which propels a robust foreign policy within and outside the region. The Kingdom endeavors to establish its dominance at the regional level and reacts forcefully to any criticism, including that of steadfast allies. This "new" Saudi nationalism surfaced with the thesis that the Kingdom is destined to be a major player in the region and the world at large. By promoting the "Saudi First" narrative, the Kingdom has improved its military prowess and positioned itself as the region's savior against Iranian expansion and the rise of Shiism in the Arab world. With the Kingdom leading the region in reducing Iranian influence in Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, MbS took up a fiercely anti-Iranian discourse. He has continuously vilified Iran by holding the country responsible for both the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as well as worldwide terrorism. In addition, he blamed Iran for the existence of sectarian militias and called Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader, the "new Hitler." Under King Salman, the monarchy and the old glue of Wahhabism have been replaced in the Saudi Kingdom by a militarized, populist nationalism that has thrived on the threat posed by Iran and its regional expansion. The rising tensions with Iran cannot be explained by Saudi nationalism alone. Moreover, the Saudi Arabian Kingdom utilized this nationalism as a means of undermining Iran's influence in other nations within the broader Middle East and Muslim world. Rather, it is an intervening factor that influenced Saudi Arabia's understanding of and responses to a challenging and evolving regional structure in the Middle

East after 2011 (O'Donnell, 2021).

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia vs Islamic Republic of Iran : a proxywar in the Middle East



Source: <https://www.businessinsider.com/map-of-saudi-and-iran-proxy-war->

5. Riyadh-Tehran Contemporary Relations

When one compares the projection of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, one finds a sharp difference in terms of national objectives, ideological drivers, and perceptions of other states in the region. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is focused on upholding strong ties with important allies around the world, especially the United States, safeguarding the country's interests at home and fostering

stability. Saudi Arabia has utilized its considerable economic and political clout to further its objectives in the region because it has long regarded itself as the leader of the Arab and Muslim world. Riyadh aims to increase its global reach and strengthen its relationships with more states, such as Beijing, New Delhi, and Moscow. Simultaneously, the Saudis have adopted a more assertive stance in addressing regional issues, including the conflict in Yemen and Iran's influence throughout the Middle East. Additionally, the Saudis have adopted a more assertive posture toward Iran through their own military actions as well as by providing support to their regional allies. For example, the kingdom has charged that Iran is destabilizing the Middle East and that it supports proxy groups that pose a threat to its security. Riyadh has simultaneously worked to counter Tehran's influence diplomatically (Mitreski, 2022).

In order to oppose Tehran's alleged attempts to take control of the Middle East, Riyadh has worked closely with Washington and other Western states to put pressure on Tehran through sanctions and other measures. It has also attempted to assemble a coalition of Sunni-majority states. A combination of engagement and confrontation characterizes Saudi Arabia's foreign policy approach toward Iran as it looks to maintain its dominance and safeguard its interests while averting a larger conventional conflict. Though there is always a chance for an escalation, the situation is still very unstable and tensions between the two nations constantly rise and fall. With the goal of lessening its reliance on oil and diversifying its economy, Saudi Arabia has initiated a number of significant economic reforms. As part of a larger initiative to modernize its society and improve its reputation abroad, it has also taken actions to support religious tolerance and moderation. All things considered, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy shows their commitment to upholding their good reputation both locally and internationally, as well as their ability

to protect their own interests while quickly shifting the geopolitical landscape (F Dashti, 2022).

Iran, on the other hand, is a theocratic republic with a distinctive form of government that blends democratic republicanism and Islamic theocracy. Iran's Supreme Leader, the highest authority in the state, defines Shia Islam, which forms the foundation of the Iranian government. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader of Iran, was a revolutionary, politician, and religious leader who made a substantial contribution to the founding of the Islamic Republic in the late 1970s. The Iranian regime and its foreign policy are based on the ideological framework that Khomeini developed during the 1970s. The Iranian government seeks to propagate vilayet-al-faqih, or theocratic style of governance, in addition to defending Shia Islam. Thirteen According to this interpretation of Islamic law, Tehran must provide this system of hierarchical government to all Shia communities, particularly those in Syria and Iraq, which are its neighbors. Iran uses soft power strategies to accomplish this, including preserving Shia holy sites around the region, helping the poor, rebuilding mosques, and appealing to the feelings, customs, and shared experiences of Shia Muslims (Mohammadi, 2012).

One could contend that Iran is pursuing a revisionist foreign policy in an effort to strengthen its standing in the Middle East and worldwide. Iran has a number of foreign policy goals, which can be roughly divided into four or five categories. Projecting military and economic power throughout the Middle East, exporting the Islamic revolution, shielding Shia Muslims, and fortifying their conventional forces are a few of these. Tehran's strategy entails making use of its power over organizations that support its objectives, regardless of whether they have similar ideologies. In addition, the international community

is worried that Iran may be enriching uranium with the intention of obtaining a nuclear weapon. This goal aims to improve Iran's standing in the international community while also giving it more negotiating leverage against more powerful governments and organizations on a regional and global scale. The regime gains diplomatic leverage and fortifies its position in negotiations simply by having a latent capability in nuclear technology (Hertog, 2018).

6. Riyadh-Tehran Conflicts in Bahrain

This controlled rivalry changed with the 2011 upheavals, presenting the Saudi Kingdom with a number of systemic risks and opportunities that influenced Riyadh's perspective and foreign policy towards Iran. The rivalry has been fought in Gaza, Lebanon, and post-war Iraq since 2003. The 2011 revolutions opened up new arenas for "geopolitical contestations" in Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. Any prospective regime changes in neighboring countries were seen by the Saudi Kingdom as either a chance to limit Iran's influence there or as a threat from Iran's pursuit of a bigger role in the region. When the 2011 Bahraini uprisings began, the monarchy maintained that the protests were a Shia plot masterminded by Iran to topple the government and jeopardize Al Khalifa's authority. Tehran was charged by Riyadh with interfering in Bahrain and stoking anti-Shia demonstrations. Ayatollah Khamenei declared that today's events in North of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia, and certain other countries have special meaning for the Iranian nation" in order to show support for the uprisings (Darwich, 2023).

This is the same as the "Islamic awakening," which is the outcome of the Iranian nation's major revolution. Iran's response to the upheavals in Bahrain was largely symbolic, and there were

serious concerns about Iran's ability to sway the majority of Bahrain's Shia population. As Mabon contends, both Manama and Riyadh have acted on the assumption that Tehran has offered support to opposition groups, even though the actual level of Iranian involvement within Bahrain is uncertain. Riyadh believed that if the Shia gained power in Bahrain, Iran could become a major player and that any change in the country's political system would eventually upset the status quo. The military action, according to the Saudis, was required to save Bahrain from Iranian influence (Khoury, 2013).

7. Riyadh -Tehran confrontation in Damascus

As soon as the Syrian uprisings began, Riyadh recognized a chance to reduce Iran's influence in the region. In an effort to topple Assad, the Saudi Arabian government has employed a number of strategies and tactics over the years. These include arming the Free Syrian Army (FSA), backing the Islamic Front, promising to send troops to Syria, providing support to the Syrian National Council (SNC), and hosting various Syrian armed groups in 2015. The Saudis remained committed to overthrowing Assad in spite of the way the conflict developed and the emergence of extremist organizations, especially Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (IS). "Bashar al-Assad must go or face [the] military option," stated Saudi Foreign Minister al-Jubeir during international talks aimed at coordinating efforts against the rise of extremism. The death of King Abdullah in 2015 brought about changes in Saudi leadership, but the country's foreign policy toward the Syrian crisis stayed mainly the same. Saudi Arabia's stance in Syria was predominantly anti-Iranian; it sought to destroy the Iran-Syria axis and reunite Syria with its allies in order to reshape the region to its advantage. Syria was the arena

where both indirect military confrontation and media attention were brought to bear during the Saudi-Iranian rivalry (Hashemi, 2021).

The Saudi Kingdom encouraged the US to play a more active role and called for military intervention, while also urging the international community to apply more pressure to Assad. Following reports that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons in August 2013, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia attempted to convince Washington that Assad had gone beyond the boundaries set by President Obama and that overthrowing him through military action was the right course of action. In February 2013, Saudi intelligence even purportedly provided evidence to the US that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons. Nevertheless, the US remained hesitant to take direct military action to overthrow Assad during the Obama administration. Driven to devise its own approach, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia expended significant financial resources to provide military backing to multiple opposition factions in their conflict with Assad (Al-Rasheed, 2011).

7.1 Geopolitical Significance of Syria for both regional giants

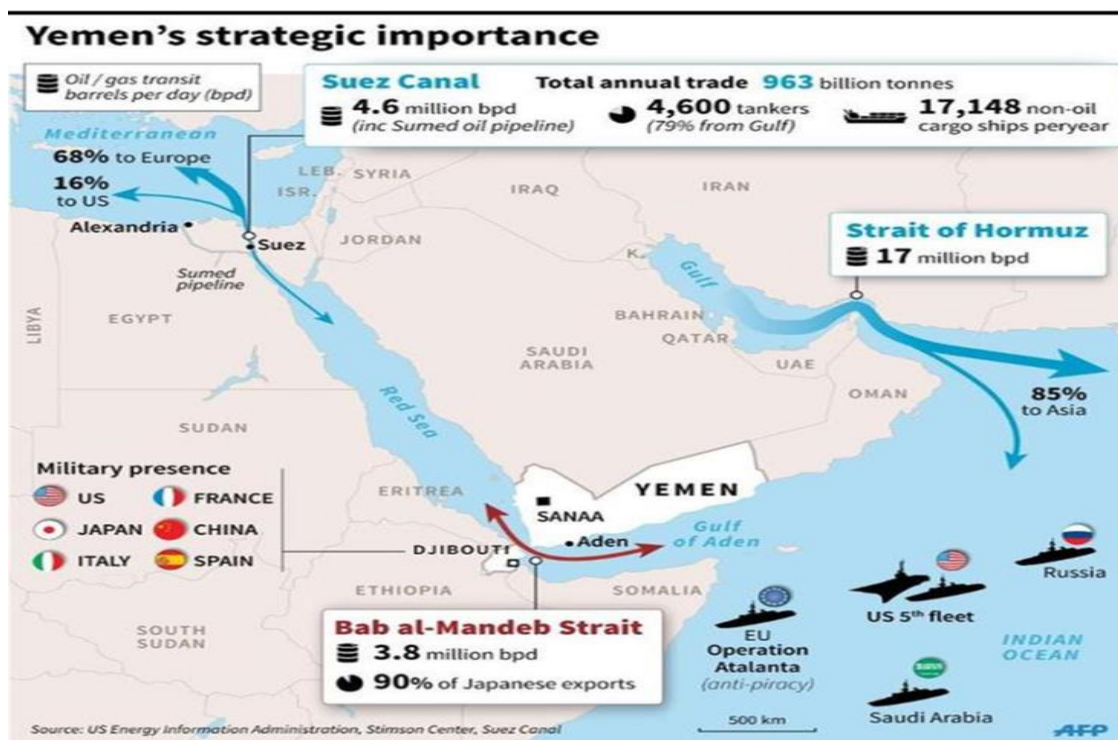
Syria has considerable land power and strategic importance as an energy corridor due to its location between the North Dome/South Pars gas condensate and the European Union. In order to gain advantage of this land power, the Middle Eastern states of Riyadh, Tehran, and Ankara have deliberately backed sectarian groups in Damascus in order to strengthen their influence over any future Syrian government. While Ankara and Riyadh hoped to secure an alternative government with stronger Sunni ties to see the construction of the Qatar-Turkey pipeline, Tehran's alliance with the

Assad government was partly driven by its desire to secure the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline. Since doing so will give them strategic influence over the world's oil and gas trade, the Middle Eastern states of Riyadh, Tehran, and Ankara have thus used sectarian alliances to increase their influence over any potential post-war Syrian government. (Al-Harake, 2014). Thus, it is clear that the Assad Government's policy choices contributed to the start of the Syrian Civil War and that internal sectarianism is one of its root causes. First, its pro-Shia alliances drove it to approve the pipeline connecting Iran and Iraq and reject the one connecting Qatar and Turkey, which prompted Sunni stakeholder states to back opposition forces. Second, these states' indirect intervention was justified by the use of military force to quell the Arab Spring uprising. The Assad Government has been able to hold onto power during the civil war thanks to its alliance with Iran, but it has not been able to end the conflict. But now that Russia has stepped in, the Ba'athist party is probably going to hold onto power in Syria because of its connections to Iran and its desire to maintain control over the world's gas and oil trade. Since Russia has tipped the scales in favor of the Assad Government, preventing Turkey and Saudi Arabia from exerting more influence over the world's oil and gas trade, sectarian opposition groups now seem unlikely to be able to topple the Government. Syria is likely to maintain pro-Shia geostrategic interests in the Middle East with the backing of Russia and Iran. This will ensure the construction of the Iran-Iraq pipeline and maintain Iran and Russia's hegemony over the world's oil and gas trade (Hartley, 2019).

8. Confrontation of Riyadh and Tehran in Yemen

The last region where the Saudi Kingdom could be threatened by possible change is Yemen. The narrative surrounding the upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia was identical to that of Yemen. Protests against authoritarian regimes spread throughout the Arab world, reviving social movements that had been marginalized and uniting various political and geographic factions in Yemen, including the southern secessionist movement Hiraak and the northern Houthi movement. The Saudis assisted Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, Ali Abdullah Saleh's vice president, in winning a one-man election and orchestrated Saleh's overthrow (Juneau, 2016).

Yemen has descended into a civil war-threatening conflict between various factions after this badly handled political transition. September 2014, four years after the uprisings, saw the Houthis seize military control of Sana'a, the capital, and the state broke up into political hotspots. Operation Decisive Storm, which Saudi Arabia announced as its mission, was to attack Yemen on March 25, 2015, with the stated goals of restoring Hadi's legitimate government and preventing the Houthis and their allies from seizing power. The Saudi Kingdom presented the war in Yemen as a conflict with Iran's allies, despite Iran's minimal and primarily symbolic involvement in the country. The war was always justified by the Saudi Kingdom as a means of stopping Iranian expansion on the Arabian Peninsula. Additionally, by labeling the Houthis with a number of derogatory terms for Shiites and portraying its intervention as a countermeasure against "Iranian-Shiite expansionism," the Saudi Kingdom stoked the discourse of a sectarian Sunni–Shiite divide. This helped to sectarianize the Yemen conflict (Clausen, 2015).



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8.1 Geostrategic Interplay in Yemen

Yemen's proximity to the Bab al-Mandab, one of the most important waterways in the world that connects the Arabian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean, adds even more strategic significance to the country. Approximately 6.2 million barrels of oil were shipped to Asia, Europe, and the US via the strait in 2018. With 3.6 million barrels per day heading north toward Europe and 2.6 million barrels per day heading toward Asian markets, it transported more than nine percent of the world's flows of crude and processed oil in 2017 (Barden, 2019). Furthermore, the strait carries between 12.5 and twenty percent of global trade; China alone sends almost one trillion US dollars' worth of goods to Europe annually, and thousands of merchant ships pass through it each year. Because of this,

the strait serves as a vital checkpoint for ships traveling between Asia and Europe by sea. If it were threatened, ships would have to travel around either Africa by way of the Cape of Good Hope or Eurasia by way of the Arctic Sea (Henderson, 2018).

Saudi Arabia wants to export its oil directly to the Arabian Sea, bypassing Bab al-Mandab and the Straits of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia intends to enlarge the Nishtun port, which will be used to ship oil, according to an Al Jazeera report. It also disclosed letters that the Saudi Ambassador in Yemen received from Hota Marine Company, expressing gratitude for the ambassador's support and requesting that the company "develop a technical and financial plan to design and operate the port" (Aljazeera, 2018). Yemen is a key battleground for regional supremacy between Saudi Arabia and Iran due to its advantageous geographic position, abundant natural resources, geopolitical significance, and maritime prominence. Yemen's major ports and islands, which are dispersed across the international maritime route that extends from the Indian Ocean via the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, Bab al-Mandab, and the Red Sea, are governed by both Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is due to the fact that they both want to strengthen their hegemony and influence over the area while also advancing their own goals. These days, both countries are using the Yemeni conflict as a means of achieving their objectives of regional hegemony. Each side seeks to strengthen its allies and decrease the influence of the other in a zero-sum game. Saudi Arabia is worried about Iran's growing influence in the area and sees the Yemeni conflict as a chance to stop Iran's rise, safeguard its borders and oil exports, and preserve regional stability. Saudi Arabia wants to keep things as they are and stop new regional powers from emerging in order to protect its interests and hold onto its power. Iran, on the other hand, wants to make a mark in this strategic

region in order to bolster its hegemony and influence, encircle its principal adversary, and get around the sanctions. It sees itself as a regional power and seeks to balance the power between it and Saudi Arabia by defending its vital shipping lanes, priceless natural resources, and improved bargaining position in regional and global negotiations. Yemen has become a strategic battleground with significant geopolitical and economic ramifications for the region and beyond as a result of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for regional supremacy. The Middle East's power and influence struggles are reflected in the ongoing conflict, whose settlement is essential to the stability and security of the area (Zou, 2023).

9. The Interests of Great Powers in the Region

Owing to the immense potential of world energy outlets and the web of global transport roots the Middle East has always been center of gravity for the great powers. Until, the WW-II the European Colonial powers had their hunters-fight in the region, however in the bipolar world the United States and its rival Russia also continued their competition in the region through allies and client states.

9.1 The United States

The US has numerous primary goals in the Middle East. These include preventing the spread of nuclear weapons in the region, ensuring the easy and uninterrupted supply of oil for itself and its allies in Europe and Asia, retaining dominance in the area through the use of all available national power, and impeding the ability of any potential power to gain influence that could endanger US political and economic interests. The US has signed multiple defense treaties, acquired access to significant bases, and acquired territorial rights in exchange for achieving its goals. Due to this, the US is now not only one of the

Middle East's biggest arms suppliers, but it also serves as a security guarantee for the area. Since the Obama administration, the US has provided Saudi-led efforts in Yemen with complete moral, logistical, and intelligence support. The US's current approach to the Middle East is centered on giving Saudi Arabia special treatment. As a result, it is involved in nearly every crisis that the area is experiencing. Syria and Yemen are two notable instances. It is clear that the US's role in Yemen is to draw attention to Iran's support for and involvement with the Houthis. But in Syria, the role remained vocal in presenting the Syrian National Coalition to give the opposition forces a legitimate international recognition, since the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) had not issued any legal authorization to use force (Vatanka, 2019).

9.2 Role of Russia

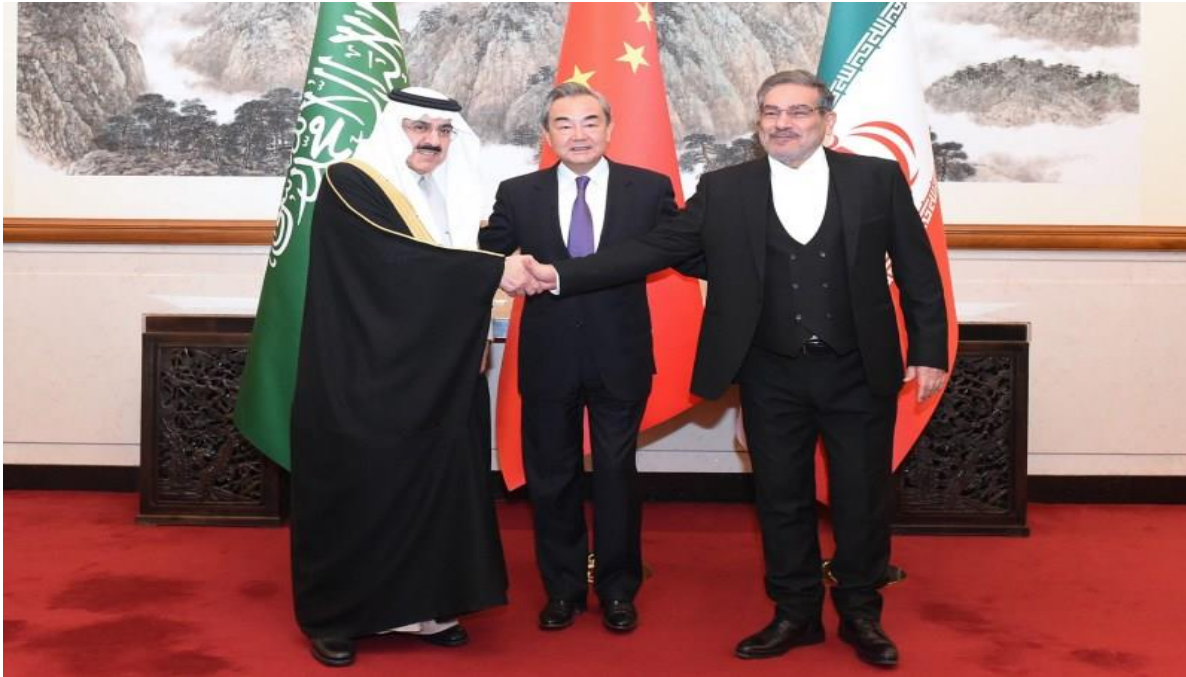
Russia's main goal in the Middle East has been to thwart secessionist movements in the North Caucasus region. Because of this, Russia continues to accuse the Arab states especially those in the Persian Gulf of funding radicalism and insurrection. Russia was given the chance to be an ally of the West due to the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent war against terrorism. Despite its aspirations, Russia has had very little impact on the economies of the Arab states, particularly those in the Persian Gulf. Russia's strategy in the area is one of balance. Russia shares interests with Israel that are compatible, even though it has strong ties to Iran and other agreed-upon states. As a result, it became the Middle East's second-biggest exporter of weapons. Russia has taken an active role in Yemen through diplomatic, commercial, and non-commercial channels. Russia views Yemen's

sea ports as a strategic resource that its naval fleet can safely access. Furthermore, since 2014, Russia has been heavily involved in maintaining its position as a peacemaker in the nation by recruiting and sending retired servicemen to conflict zones as contractors. This is the most significant way that Russia has been involved. Additionally, Russia has offered to mediate a successful settlement of the conflict. Russia has played the role of a strategic ally in Syria ever since the end of the Cold War. Three pivotal moments have seen Russia exercise its veto power to prevent the imposition of sanctions or the use of force against the Syrian regime. One of the main countries backing Assad's government is Russia. Russia has consistently given the Syrian government strong military, political, and logistical support. Furthermore, Russia's support for Assad is largely due to its naval interests in the strategic base at Tatus (Grumet, 2015).

9.3 Role of China in Saudi-Iran Rapprochement

Following their breakup in 2016, diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran were reestablished in March 2023. The Saudi consulate in Mushhad and embassy in Tehran were set on fire by a mob in January 2016. It was a response to the death of Saudi Arabian Shia cleric Nimr Al Nimr. Following the incident, relations reached a new low and gave the centuries-old rivalry between the two nations a new face. Saudi Arabia and Iran have a long-standing rivalry rooted in opposing and disputing political, ethnic, and religious differences and worldviews. Both states have engaged in combat via Middle Eastern states and other proxies. The decision to sever diplomatic ties nearly put an end to the situation, but they chose to get back involved by reopening their respective embassies.

Iran's top security official, Ali Shamkhani (right), China's top diplomat, Wang Yi (center), and Saudi National Security Advisor Musaid al Aiban pose for a photo after Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to resume bilateral diplomatic ties.



Source: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/14/china-brokered-saudi-iran-deal-explained-diplomacy-biden>

China recently established diplomatic ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Under Xi Jinping, China is reshaping both the regional and global strategic orders. China and Saudi Arabia and Iran have historical ties. China has reconciled two long-standing rivals in the Middle East. China continued to be Iran's most powerful Security Council ally and had contributed to the modernization of Iran's military and oil industry engineering services (Graver, 2006). Iran sees China as the greatest ally against the US, while China sees Iran as a possible Middle East ally for containing US influence (Gambrell, 2023).

In order to achieve their shared strategic goals, both depend on one another to limit the influence

of their rival in the Middle East. China and Iran were friendly states that worked closely together during the Cold War and beyond. The events of 9/11 only served to strengthen their relationship. The two states are still "committed to undermining the US led rules based order" and have announced a 25th year, four hundred million US dollars strategic cooperation at the regional and under the title "General Framework for China-Iran Cooperation" at the global levels in 2021. In the face of the current complex changes in the world, times, and history, China and Iran supported each other and worked together in solidarity and cooperation," said the statement. (2023 Al Jazeera. Throughout the Cold War, relations between China and Saudi Arabia were tense due to their opposing ideologies, which continued to be a source of friction until 1990, when diplomatic ties were restored. The only country to oppose China's UN admission was Saudi Arabia in 1971. However, trade has always been important between China and Saudi Arabia; trade volumes between the two have increased to four hundred eighty million US dollars in 1990, six hundred four billion US dollars in 2011, and \$78.8 billion in 2019. China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) also aligns with Saudi Arabia's 2030. Following Xi's state visit in 2006, the two nations have developed a deeper and mutual understanding of coexistence, as evidenced by the thirty-five cooperation agreements that China and Saudi Arabia signed in 2019 (Wintour, 2023).

Due to Israel's war against the Palestinian Gaza Strip, Saudi Arabia and Iran have both normalized their relations and established strong contact. In 2023, China has emerged as a mediator between the two regional rivals in the Middle East to end their hostility. The history of international relations since 1945 demonstrates that "there is no permanent rival in politics," with former adversaries evolving into close allies and partners. In terms of their foreign policy

and relations, some of them have changed their paradigms. For example, tensions between Iran and other regional nations that had distanced themselves in support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have decreased as a result of the warming relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Ehteshami, 2023).

In order to discuss their bilateral and regional concerns, Saudi Arabia and Iran have grown in importance as regional players. The international community has been urged to end the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas Organization by the recent phone conversation between the president of Iran and the prince of Saudi Arabia. China has broken through the ice to allow the president of Iran and the Saudi prince to communicate in order to fulfill their respective roles in the region. The improvement in their relationship could lead to greater peace in the Middle East and aid extra-regional actors in comprehending the intricacies of the region (Fulton, 2019).

Conclusion

The two states came to the realization that for the region to be stable and peaceful, communication and mutual understanding are essential. It is now obvious that the best course of action for resolving regional crises is not through violence and hostility, but rather through mutual understanding, communication, and cooperative efforts to strengthen regional stability. This is due to the fact that both regional and global conditions are changing. After years of tension and regional conflicts, Saudi Arabia and Iran are moving toward improvement and rapprochement. This is a positive and significant step towards achieving peace and stability in the region, but there are still many issues

that need to be resolved before a stable and solid relationship can be established.

This will assist Iran in moving from increasing isolation to openness during its protracted passivity under US sanctions. Iran intends to defuse tensions in the Middle East with Saudi Arabia through the agreement. Particularly in Yemen and Syria, the two nations are at odds with one another. A more long-term solution could result from the thaw with Saudi Arabia, according to Iran's UN mission. According to reports, Iran has decided to cease arming the Houthis; however, this pledge was left out of a brief joint statement released by China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Iran has always contributed positively to the region, so its pledge to reduce hostilities with its neighbor is a significant step in the right direction. In the near run, the agreement will support the economy's recovery. Following the nationwide protests that followed Masha Amini's death in police custody in September 2022, the Iranian rial had lost half of its value against the US dollar by March 2023. Two days after the announcement of the settlement, the value of the rial increased by twelve percent in relation to the US dollar.

It assists Saudi Arabia in building a diverse alliance in the Middle East, which is becoming more complex and dynamic. Iran's seemingly unstoppable and expanding regional agenda, which includes Iran's increasing direct and indirect influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and other places, calls for Saudi Arabia to adopt a new strategy. Because crucial Saudi and Emirati infrastructure has been targeted and the US is perceived as repositioning itself in the region, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern states believe that the US's commitment to providing security guarantees is insufficient. The Saudis feel that their security can be strengthened by using China's and Russia's influence over Iran, rather than

investing in pricey American defensive weaponry. Reducing its military involvement in Yemen, halting Houthi attacks supported by Iran, safeguarding its borders and investment environment, concentrating on a constructive agenda like Vision 2030, and interacting with Iran via de-escalation and communication instead of the well-trod path of hostilities and confrontation are all necessary actions that Saudi Arabia must take. Another indication that Saudi Arabia is serious about diversifying and hedging even as it upholds its strategic alliance with the United States is China's involvement. China strengthens Saudi Arabia's relations with the country, gives the kingdom the technology and other resources it needs, and gives Saudi Arabia leverage against Iran as a rival to the United States.

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