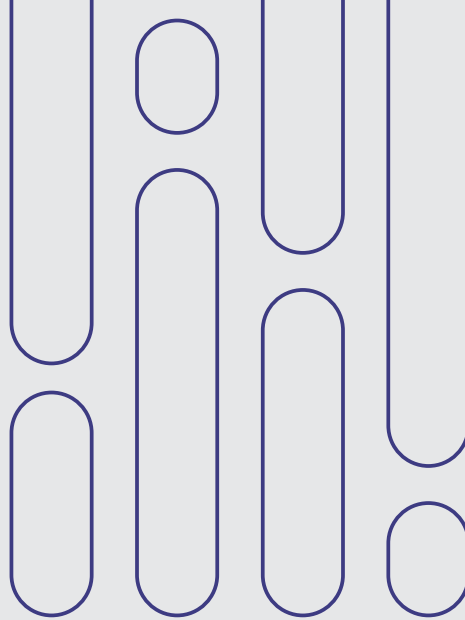


Study

# Shifts in Saudi Policy Toward Iran: Motives, Features and Policy Outcomes

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## Introduction

The Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal signed in Beijing in March 2023 caused shockwaves and elicited varying reactions in the West. In most instances, the landmark deal has not received a neutral reading, particularly when it comes to the assessment of Saudi policy. Analyses have often focused instead on specific angles, mostly pertaining to security and geopolitical aspects, paying no heed to the wider internal and external dynamics of Saudi policy moves at the regional and global levels. The reality suggests that Saudi policy toward Iran has seen major shifts since 2015. These shifts have mainly arisen in response to Iran's growing ambitions for regional dominance and its relentless attempts to weaken Saudi Arabia's role and standing. The turbulent regional environment has played into the hands of Iran, however, major internal shifts in Saudi Arabia in light of Vision 2030 have accompanied the changing regional dynamics.

These shifts in Saudi policy are apparent in the two main approaches adopted by Riyadh which cannot be viewed separately. The first approach is based on confronting Iranian threats, which started in 2015 in conjunction with the operations led by Saudi Arabia against Iran's malign interventions in Yemen via the Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen. The second approach is based on diplomacy, which started with the Iraq-brokered negotiations in April 2021 and ended with the resumption of diplomatic relations in March 2023 following the China-sponsored deal. It is interesting that these two approaches emerged during this period (from 2015 to 2023) while at the same time leaving a clear imprint on the course of the two countries' relations — shifting from rupture and comprehensive escalation that had started in 2016 — to the

restoration of diplomatic relations and discussions on ways to enhance cooperation, boost bilateral ties, settle crises and deescalate regional tensions. The hybrid policy of force and dialogue adopted by Saudi Arabia has played a major role in reaching the ongoing understandings between the two countries as well as the ongoing shifts regarding the various contentious issues.

This hybrid policy has been significant and influential. However, the consequences of Saudi policy toward Iran still need to be examined. This is in light of the two countries' history of ups and downs, the gap in confidence between the two sides, the nature of Iran's policy and its well-established principles, not to mention the decades-long conflicting interests, as well as the two sides' network of relations with global powers. Therefore, several questions could arise here: how has Saudi Arabia adapted its foreign policy to respond to mounting Iranian threats? To what extent will Saudi Arabia recalibrate its foreign policy stance toward Iran? How have the features of Saudi foreign policy changed in this context? What are the Saudi gains from this policy? What are the consequences for Iran as well as for the disputes in the region? How far has this policy impacted the balance of power in the region as well as the influence of global powers in the region?

This study will attempt to answer these questions through the theoretical approach of neoclassical realism, given that it is a suitable conceptual basis for analyzing the shifts in Saudi foreign policy, and to review the impact of internal factors on the Saudi state and external factors on the global order, both of which have influenced Saudi Arabia's stance, particularly toward Iran. This study will also rely on the inductive method, which is centered on collecting accurate data and inter-

connected relationships to link these to a set of general and universal relationships. Like the other scientific methods, the inductive method identifies the problem or phenomenon in question to follow up on its details and discover its causes — thus moving from the specific to the universal; or in other words, moving from a specific concept to a general one. In the context of this method, this case study could be employed as a tool to ascertain the impact of internal and external factors on Saudi foreign policy — particularly with regard to Iran.

## **Saudi Arabia and Iran: Foundation and General Framework of Relations**

After the 1979 revolution in Iran broke out, relations between Iran and the region's countries were greatly impacted, particularly Saudi-Iran relations, the following part looks at the three factors that have impacted this relationship.

### **Disputed Identity**

The revolutionary and ideological approach adopted by the Iranian political system was the basis that determined the pattern and nature of relations. Iran, according to, “Umm al-Qura theory,” wanted to make the Shiite shrine city of Qom an epicenter for its transboundary globalist project as well as an alternative to the holy city of Makkah. Yet the revolution introduced Wilayat al-Faqih as an alternative model to lead the Muslim community. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, does not adopt the same globalist aspirations despite its ancient spiritual and sacred standing among Muslims in general as the home of the Two Holy Mosques, the cradle of the message of Islam and the bastion of Sunnis. Saudi Arabia, according to this standing, continues to fulfill its role in the Arab and

Islamic world — without any politicization whatsoever. This contradiction has overshadowed the two countries' relations as well as the standoff between them, giving rise to a sectarian and religious framework, which has emerged in light of Iran's aspirations for religious dominance over the Islamic world, with the aim of unseating Saudi Arabia and stripping it of its traditional status.<sup>(1)</sup>

The dispute over identity is linked to nationalist and cultural dimensions; Iran has always employed its ethnic and linguistic history to serve its regional dominance aspirations. In addition to seizing some areas of influence on the basis of this identarian dimension, Iran in parallel has attempted to disseminate Persian as a rival identity to that of Saudi Arabia in some of the spheres of competition. Arabic, meanwhile, with its linguistic and cultural dimensions, constitutes an important source of Saudi Arabia's clout and influence. It is derived from the Arab culture and traditions which have influenced a large part of the country's history; and it is a vital element that grants it authority in a sphere narrower than the Islamic sphere. Arabic is the basis of establishing communication with various Arab countries in the region. Linked with this identarian dispute is a new dimension, which is represented by the rise of Saudi identity that has a modernist inclination, correlated strongly to the country's Vision 2030. This vision aims to achieve social and cultural qualitative transformations. This new Saudi identity contradicts the Iranian traditionalist, conservative identity. Now, there are debates about the two opposing inclinations — one assisting Saudi Arabia in its current rise while the other causing Iran's current dilemma at the elite and societal levels, with Iranians expressing dissatisfaction over the nature and character of the Iranian state. This all-out dispute

over identity —with its varying dimensions — has characterized the nature of Saudi relations with Iran; both are rivals in the Middle East and in the wider Islamic world. <sup>(2)</sup>

### **Regional Standing and Conflicting Interests**

Iran and Saudi Arabia share the same geographic space, both belong to overlapping Lebensraums. Thus, their interests and projects conflict. Iran has an extraterritorial project that aims to gain influence and clout within the framework of the ideological propositions of the revolution. This Iranian project is driven by an old impulse and a dream to restore imperial glory, the vital sphere of which is the Middle East, particularly the Arabian Peninsula and the Mashreq, in which Saudi Arabia has traditionally wielded extensive clout. Iran has sought to implement this project through exporting the revolution, an aim according to which the Quds Force of the IRGC was formed. It was assigned with forging ties between Iran and Shiite hotbeds scattered throughout the region's countries, including Shiites in Saudi Arabia, ideologically, doctrinally and militarily linking them to Iran. The ultimate aim is to permit Iran to become the epicenter of an Islamic government, with like-minded governments established extraterritorially. This has resulted in conflicting political and economic interests, deeply complicated conflicts and security intricacies extending from Yemen in the south to Lebanon in the north and from Bahrain in the east up to the Maghrib in the west. This dispute has even extended to several countries in the wider Islamic world. <sup>(3)</sup>

### **Standings in the Global Hierarchy**

In the post-1979 era, Iran crafted its viewpoints and positions on global issues on the basis of ideological considerations, adopting a viewpoint hostile to the United States, thus initiat-

ing animosity with Washington. Iran turned into a power defying the rules set by the United States for both the regional and global orders since the end of World War II. This defiance led to an enhanced US military presence and partnerships and cooperation with the Gulf states, with Riyadh becoming a strategic and longstanding ally of the United States, a reason that fomented the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The aforesaid factors have continued to impact Saudi-Iran relations over the past four decades, primarily as ideological considerations have led to the following:

- **Iran as a source of threat:** From an early stage, ideological orientations have been driving Iran's aspirations for interference in Saudi Arabia's domestic affairs. Iran has targeted Saudi Arabia's security and stability through its Shiite minority, which was passive before the Iranian revolution. This was evidenced by several incidents in the first decade of the revolution, including inciting the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia and prompting it to rebel against the Saudi government and riot against the country's rulers. This is in addition to creating trouble during the Hajj pilgrimage season — with the aim of stripping Saudi Arabia of its custodianship over this religious ritual of immense significance to all Muslims. Moreover, Iran launched propaganda campaigns against Saudi Arabia, its policies and rulers — with a focus on Riyadh's relationship with the United States. The aim of these decades-long campaigns was to undermine Saudi Arabia's standing in the Arab and Islamic world as part of the competition for the spiritual and religious leadership of Muslims. Massive tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran resulted in a diplomatic breakdown in



2016. Following the execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr by Saudi authorities, Iranian demonstrators broke into the headquarters of the Saudi diplomatic mission in Iran. This incident was not the primary reason behind the two sides severing diplomatic ties — given that he was a Saudi citizen who incited violence. Rather, the incident represented the apogee of tensions between the two countries.<sup>(4)</sup>

The goal of exporting the revolution not only targeted Shiites in Saudi Arabia but also in the Gulf states as well. The most glaring example of this is Bahrain. In 1981, Bahrain saw a coup attempt staged by a number of pro-Iran Shiites; fierce clashes in the mid-1990s, and unrest in 2004. In addition, Iran supported the anti-government protests in 2011, which prompted Saudi Arabia to intervene to restore stability to Bahrain via the Saudi-led Peninsula Shield Force.<sup>(5)</sup>

• **Iran as a regional rival with an expansionist outlook:** The Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula are considered as Saudi Arabia's traditional geographic and historical spheres of influence. Heightened tensions with Iran, which seeks regional dominance through longstanding nationalist goals as well as ideological aspirations that grew stronger after the revolution, were manifested in Iran's attempts to export the revolution beyond its borders. This competition has overshadowed bilateral relations and was a reason for the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s; a war that was considered to be an Arab and Gulf joint effort to nip the nascent Islamic establishment in the bud and undermine the revolution and the theocratic power structure arising from it. The war entrenched the anti-Saudi identity in Iran.<sup>(6)</sup> Tensions with Saudi Arabia were

quelled due to the policies of the then-President Hashemi Rafsanjani who came to power in August 1989. These policies implied a willingness to abandon the principle of exporting the revolution and instead adopt reconciliatory policies toward Saudi Arabia, not to mention the proposal to establish a common regional market for economic and technical cooperation between the GCC countries and Iran, which would have led to a comprehensive security arrangement.<sup>(7)</sup> However, the plan to engage Iran in a regional security arrangement fell apart since the supreme leader and the IRGC insisted on their ideological outlook. The GCC countries also feared Iran's aspirations to become a dominant regional actor and the United States was opposed to engaging Iran in such an arrangement. The different priorities by the Gulf states and their disagreements over the threat they faced impeded the finalization of a collective security agreement, particularly after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.<sup>(8)</sup>

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami was more determined to end the differences with Saudi Arabia. He worked to improve relations with Riyadh and end the intervention and secret activism directed toward Saudi Arabia. In 1999, Khatami became the first Iranian president to visit Saudi Arabia since the revolution. However, given that Iran's policies toward Saudi Arabia had been based on and motivated by ideological orientations, the outcomes of this visit had no repercussion or impact (on the course of the two countries' relations). The supreme leader and the more radical state apparatuses such as the IRGC did not support any positive overtures toward Saudi Arabia. The impact of this orientation increased during the

last days of Khatami's tenure, with Iran's nuclear program exposed. This drew the ire of the United States and the West and raised Saudi Arabia's concerns. Thus, a position was taken in coordination with Saudi Arabia for the Saudi government to support the West's sanctions and pressures on Iran.

When former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power, he revived the revolutionary rhetoric. Calming tensions with Saudi Arabia was not a priority on his agenda. On the contrary, Iran intensified its regional activities, which appeared evidently in its role in Iraq following the US invasion in 2003. Iran succeeded to further entrench its clout in the country through supporting Shiite factions that dominated power in the post-invasion era. In addition, Iran strengthened ties with the axis consisting of Syria and Hezbollah, which was unquestionably manifested in the 2006 war waged by Israel against Lebanon. Tehran also established strong ties with the Palestinian militant factions, a relationship manifested in the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip in 2008. All these parties combined formed the so-called axis of resistance led by Iran. This axis of resistance was opposed to the axis of moderation that consisted of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. This reality fueled the mounting regional confrontation and the conflicting interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

After the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring uprisings, the differences further widened to an unprecedented level, with the competition escalating into disputes. There were divergent viewpoints on the events in Egypt and Tunisia in particular. According to the Iranian point of view, these uprisings were a continuum of the Iranian revolution, giving rise to Is-

lamist forces — with which Iran has no animosity. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, considered this wave of tensions as a blow to the well-established rules in the region, fomenting instability and leading to a state of uncertainty and insecurity in the region. However, the Iranian approximations were subverted when Syria joined the Arab uprisings. Tehran considered that the Syrian revolution was a scheme targeting the axis of resistance as well as a US conspiracy. Furthermore, it also deployed its ally Hezbollah to protect the Syrian regime, sent its advisers to put down the Syrian revolution and push Syria into civil war fueled by Iran-aligned militias deployed on the battlefield. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, supported the Syrian people's demands, throwing its weight behind the Syrian opposition to reach an equitable resolution in Syria. The dispute extended to Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen after 2011.

• **Iran repositioning itself within the alliances hostile to the United States:** The Cold War prompted the United States to draw closer to Saudi Arabia and Iran to get closer to the former Soviet Union and Russia afterwards. This deepened competition with the two regional powerhouses involved in two competing global axes (the Eastern bloc and the Western bloc). Global powers have employed this competition\dispute to ensure the achievement of their interests and to enhance their regional clout. This has led to the formation of transboundary alliances in the region and the forging of ties with wider alliances on the global stage. The manifestations of these alliances have appeared in several areas, crises and issues, including Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon as well as the Arabian Gulf. Moreover, these alliances extend to international are-

nas including Africa and Latin America as well as Central and Southeast Asia. Iran has appointed itself as the leader of the axis of resistance in the region. In addition, Iran has bolstered ties with Russia and China, within the framework of creating balances with the alliances that are hostile to it. The dynamics of this alliance have evolved into a bloc representing the forces hostile to US hegemony which seek to restructure the global order.

## **Rivalry and the Policy of Using Force to Repel Iranian Ambitions**

Saudi Arabia has adopted a resolute stance in the face of Iran's excesses. The motives of this as well as its impact on Saudi foreign policy can be summarized as follows:

### **The Motives of Confrontation After the Arab Spring**

Following the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprisings, several threats emerged in front of Saudi decision-makers, including the erosion of the regional security system as a result of the general weakness gripping the Arab world. This state of weakness began at an early stage after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which resulted in a host of new threats and dangers — foremost of which was the detachment of a number of Arab nations from the Arab sphere, including Iraq after the US invasion and Syria after its strategic alliance with Iran in the aftermath of Israel's 2006 war against Lebanon. The latter became totally isolated from the Arab fold after Hezbollah took power in 2008. This is in addition to the weakness of the bodies supposedly existing to enhance Arab interaction such as the Arab League and the Riyadh-Damascus-Cairo Axis which collapsed when Syria fell

into the Iranian trap and the role of some regional powers declined, not to mention the rising role of non-state actors and their deployment as tools to undermine security and instability in the region, particularly by Iran. Terrorism emerged as a source of threat to security and stability and a lever used by global powers against the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia in particular.

Additionally, some countries were thrown into a vortex of failure and chaos following the Arab Spring. The uprisings turned into a genuine and constant threat to regional security and stability. This opened the door for foreign intervention and the regional arena turned into a sphere for settling accounts as well as disputes over interests and clout between major regional and international powers. Saudi Arabia's clout and security subsequently faced genuine challenges and threats, particularly in terms of its standing, border security and regional policy.

Not only that, none of the Saudi alliances on the global stage remained unscathed. Its relationship with the United States went through a palpable decline in light of the dwindling US protection umbrella since the tenure of former US President Barack Obama. Moreover, all US moves played into the hands of Iran. The US withdrawal from Iraq left the country to fall into Iranian hands, with Tehran seizing the opportunity and expanding its clout there. Furthermore, Iran used Iraq as a launching pad for extending its clout in Saudi Arabia's immediate geographical sphere. Yet the Obama administration did not adopt any clear policies toward the aggravating crises in the region, whether in Syria or Yemen. The administration ad-

opted a bizarre approach, calling on the Gulf states to reach understandings with Iran and open dialogue with it. This reflected US satisfaction with Iranian movements in the region, which wreaked untold havoc on the security and stability of traditional US allies in the region. Russia also became a major player in the region's crises — starting from the Syrian crisis. Russia's role significantly impacted the well-established regional balances, further helping Iran to enhance its presence and clout through a strategic alliance that bolstered Tehran's clout. Even when the Iran-aligned Houthi militia targeted Saudi oil fields, the United States did not stand by Saudi Arabia but rather withdrew its missile batteries from Saudi territories.<sup>(9)</sup>

Thus, it could be said that the prevailing regional order wherein Saudi Arabia achieved a recognized standing has collapsed, creating a state of chronic confusion and uncertainty. The reality has proven the effectiveness of the old strategy when it comes to countering the threats surrounding Saudi Arabia and its regional standing, particularly by Iran and its militias deployed throughout the region that are a threat to the country's regional prestige and standing. Iran took advantage of the financial and strategic gains of the 2015 nuclear deal to bolster its regional project. Iran also strengthened its ballistic missiles program and obtained international approval to develop its nuclear program and gradually lift the international restrictions imposed on it, including arms sales and the right to enrich uranium in the future.<sup>(10)</sup>

In light of these challenges, Saudi Arabia needs to achieve several objectives. The first of these objectives is to protect its

national security and internal stability after Iran moved toward its southern borders and even threatened the Gulf states' stability by aiding the protesters in Bahrain who attempted to overthrow the government there. The second objective is to defend its regional standing in light of the eroding traditional security structures and the declining US protection umbrella. The third objective is to stand up to the growing Iranian clout in the Arab and Islamic world and the spheres where their influence intersects. Finally, Saudi Arabia seeks to counter Iranian efforts to impose its agenda in the region through developing its own nuclear and defense projects.

### **The Confrontation's Dimensions and Arenas**

In a defining moment of its history, Saudi Arabia adopted a decisive and resolute policy to counter Iran's increasing threats. The most decisive factor that led to this shift was the designation of King Salman bin Abdulaziz as the seventh monarch of Saudi Arabia on January 23, 2015. The first of the king's decrees was to appoint his son Prince Mohammed bin Salman as minister of defense. Prior to this date, Saudi policy toward Iran was not devoid of a confrontational dimension, especially with the intervention of the Peninsula Shield Force in Bahrain. However, the confrontation became more strategic and institutional this time, growing extraterritorially as a means to counter Iranian threats in an uncompromising manner. Saudi Arabia allocated its soft and hard power potential to curb Iran's expansionism and clout in the spheres of common interest. This was a clear Saudi message to the outside world as well as to Iran that it would not allow the latter to intervene and spread chaos and instability in the spaces deemed as top priority for Saudi Arabia.<sup>(11)</sup>



For example, to offset the growing Iranian weight in this area, Saudi Arabia led efforts within the Arab League and international organizations and also provided massive support on the ground to the Syrian opposition. Saudi Arabia was on the verge of inflicting a major blow to Iran had the United States not withdrawn its assistance—defeating Iran in Syria would not benefit neither Israel nor the United States. However, Saudi efforts have helped to prevent Iran from winning an absolute victory in Syria, forging a balance that has brought the conflict to a halt and divided Syria between the regime and the opposition.

Iran has provided massive financial support and significant military assistance to Hezbollah for dominating the Lebanese arena — which is a tool to expand Iran’s outreach throughout the Middle East and a lever against its foes. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, withdrew its support for the government in which Hezbollah was participating, which plunged Lebanon into a vortex of economic collapse, totally paralyzing the political process. Political parties on both sides of the aisle have engaged in a zero-sum game that put Lebanon on the path of failure. Therefore, the situation in Lebanon has increasingly become a burden for Iran as well as Hezbollah, particularly following the anti-Iran popular protests, in which the Lebanese blamed Iran for the deteriorating conditions.<sup>(12)</sup>

In the Yemeni arena, Operation Storm of Resolve was launched via a major coalition led by Saudi Arabia. The operation came as the Saudis became aware of the increasing danger posed by the possibility of the Houthis taking power in a neighboring country, not to mention Iran’s clout reaching the southern part

of the Arabian Peninsula. This operation has been the fiercest direct confrontation with Iran, which supplies the Houthis with money, weapons, experts and fighters. In 2015, Saudi Arabia dispatched tens of thousands of troops and 100 fighter jets to Yemen in a bid to reverse the Houthi control over the country. The Saudi-led Operation Storm of Resolve in Yemen reflected the country's new foreign policy doctrine.<sup>(13)</sup>

While Iran has been increasing its influence in Iraq through Shiite proxies since 2003, Saudi Arabia has adopted plans to increase its clout in Iraq through new orientations, which will add to its conventional line of policy toward the nation. This happened by re-establishing ties with Iraqi parties and forces, particularly Shiite actors who have less strong ties with Iran. This is in addition to investments, economic cooperation and attempts to bring Iraq back into the Arab fold and restore its national sovereignty. All these efforts have resulted in the containment of the clout of Iran and its allies in the Iraqi arena.

In fact, the confrontation strategy has not been confined to the spheres where influence intersects, but it has extended beyond such arenas, including the African Arab countries such as the Maghreb countries. Most of these countries are aligned with the Saudi position toward Iran, which emerged more strongly after 2015. Yet the confrontation has extended into some African countries, the Red Sea and East Africa, not to mention Central Asia and the Caucasus. This Saudi policy has had a major impact on Iran in terms of exposing the nature of the threat it poses to the security and stability of these countries.

It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia successfully put pressure on Iran by convincing former US President Donald Trump to substantially change US foreign policy toward Iran. In his first foreign trip in May 2017, President Trump delivered an address during the American-Islamic Summit before Arab leaders in Riyadh. In his speech, Trump condemned Iran's spread of destruction and chaos in the region. Riyadh and Washington also sealed a \$400 billion arms deal, the biggest of its kind. This reflected the deep alliance between Washington and Riyadh as well as the Trump administration's support for Saudi Arabia's efforts in the face of Iran. The impact of this was evidenced by the US withdrawal from the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal and the Trump administration adopting the campaign of maximum pressure against Iran, which created huge challenges for the Iranian ruling establishment. Foremost among these challenges was the decline in the Iranian establishment's legitimacy, with it facing multiple waves of popular protests that demanded the end of the country's governing elite for its failure at home and squandering the country's resources on futile extraterritorial projects. US sanctions significantly impacted Iranian assistance to its militias in the region. In addition, a broad international maritime coalition was formed to protect maritime waterways, including the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, from Iranian attacks. Saudi Arabia also took into account and outlined a media strategy and a diplomatic campaign to counter the Iranian project in the Arab and Islamic world. This included Iran's sectarian policies and countering its efforts to spread Shiism and sectarian infiltration which Tehran considers a springboard for extend-

ing its clout throughout the Islamic world and even among Muslims in various other countries.

### **Policy Outcomes: Deterrence and Making the Dispute Costlier for Iran**

This policy has reaped some dividends. Iran has realized that animosity toward Saudi Arabia is costly and has already damaged its reputation, putting huge pressures on it and pitting it against an Islamic alliance plus other highly influential regional and global coalitions. Perhaps such pressures and coalitions have reached the point of threatening the ruling establishment's very survival and legitimacy at home. In addition, the Iranian project, in light of the Saudi pushback, has suffered a stalemate. Although the power structure changed in Iraq, with the Iran-backed Shiites and Kurdish groups having a strong foothold within the Iraqi power hierarchy, Iran's extensive clout has begun to erode. Iranian soft power has remarkably waned in light of the Saudi focus on exposing Iranian schemes and interventionist policies. This was expressed in the popular protests taking aim at Iran's proxies in these countries — which was the case in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

As a result, Iran began to show interest in renewed talks through a series of symbolic messages starting in May 2019. At the time, Hossein Mousavian, spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiations and Abdulaziz Sager, a Saudi researcher and analyst, published two articles, the first in *The New York Times* on May 14, 2019, titled "It's Time for the Leaders of Saudi Arabia and Iran to Talk" and the second in the *Guardian* newspaper titled "We Can Escape a Zero-sum Struggle Between Iran and Saudi Arabia – If We Act Now" on January 31, 2021.<sup>(14)</sup> The

second article coincided with the announcement by the Iranian Foreign Ministry that it was ready to engage in dialogue with the United States; and Qatar expressed readiness to mediate in this dialogue.<sup>(15)</sup> During that period, there were some overtures, including the Hormuz Peace Endeavor advocated by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in September 2019. The initiative was established on several principles, including non-interference in others' affairs, nonaggression, commitment to energy security and resolving disputes via international law. The initiative was brought forth following internal pressures on the Rouhani government as well as external pressures resulting from the maximum pressure campaign.<sup>(16)</sup>

## **Diplomacy and the Policy of Easing Tensions Within the Framework of the Saudi Vision for the New Middle East**

Saudi foreign policy has become more engaging and has acquired preemptive and realpolitik dimensions. Therefore, instead of ushering in an all-out escalation, which it the kingdom had been pursuing when it comes to Iran since the Arab Spring uprisings until 2020, it has started to explore dialogue and diplomatic opportunities. This new path is elucidated in the following lines:

### **A New Environment Conducive to Dialogue and Cooperation Rather Than Escalation**

The primary motives for this new and remarkable shift have been linked to internal and external factors. At the global level, Riyadh has become aware that it can no longer rely on the United States and its presence in the regional equation. Riyadh also realized that it should take the initiative regionally, reas-

sess its relations with Washington and reconsider its position on the war in Yemen — the cost of which has significantly increased, particularly following the September 14, 2019, attack on Aramco facilities — as well as on the nuclear issue. This came particularly after the Republicans lost the presidential election in the United States and a new Democratic administration led by President Joe Biden came to power. The high-level coordination between Saudi Arabia and the United States on Iran stopped, with the maximum pressure campaign waning as the Biden administration opted for the path of diplomacy to resurrect the nuclear deal. The United States paid no heed to the Saudi warnings of the consequences of this new US policy for the region. <sup>(17)</sup>

Regionally, the policy of force has proved successful in curbing Iran's ambitions and aspirations. Moreover, the face-off has created challenges for the Iranian government internally and globally. This has strengthened the view that the continuation of the dispute is futile and that the conflict has reached a point of balance in which neither of the disputants will be capable of clinching a decisive victory, with stalemate and attrition becoming the characteristic of the disputes in which the two sides are engaged. Countries such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are suffering from chronic chaos due to the regional cold war and the interventions by global powers. Saudi decision-makers have realized that without calming the situation and reconsidering policies, it would be difficult to stop the destructive impact of rivalry and ensure the sustainability of interests. On the contrary, the continuation of the face-off will lead to the further attrition of resources, foes taking advantage of the dispute and changing the course of the dispute in the region.

Finally, at the local level, Saudi Arabia now realizes, in light of Vision 2030, the high cost and lost opportunities as a result of the confrontation. Thus, it has laid out its vision for a truce and dialogue in order to redirect resources toward national development. Within the framework of this vision, Saudi Arabia has achieved remarkable progress at all levels. It has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, ranking 15th among the world's biggest economies. Its GDP has for the first time hit the \$1 trillion threshold, with an ambition to rank among the world's top 10 economies by 2030.<sup>(18)</sup> The country hoped to make great strides toward achieving the ambitious Vision 2030, but the coronavirus pandemic took a huge toll on the economy. Saudi Arabia has faced a challenge posed by the decline in foreign exchange reserves. The global economic contraction has spurred a significant dip in the demand for oil. Moreover, ensuring domestic stability and setting Vision 2030 into motion have required regional cohesion, including the easing of tensions with Iran.<sup>(19)</sup>

### **New Foreign Policy Pillars in Light of Vision 2030**

As part of Vision 2030, the Saudi foreign policy compass has moved toward working to put an end to disputes, pushing regional powers toward development and cooperation rather than chaos and failure. The Saudi policy reflects the shift in the Saudi approach to foreign policy as well as its vision for the new Middle East.<sup>(20)</sup> The Saudi viewpoint rests on several pillars, including the following:

- **Achieving stability and reducing regional tensions:** This is evidently manifested in the path of reducing tensions with Tehran, restoring diplomatic ties with it and even inviting the

Iranian president to visit Riyadh after signing the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal in Beijing in March 2023. Saudi Arabia ushered in a new era of relations that readmitted Syria into the Arab fold through the Arab League summit held in Jeddah on May 19, 2023. This is added to mediation and other traditional roles played by Saudi Arabia as is the case in the mediation between the warring parties in Sudan to resolve Sudan's ongoing crises, not to mention other efforts aimed at defusing crises and advancing peace trajectories.

• **Diversifying partnerships with global powers and repositioning in light of shifts in the global order:** Saudi Arabia has bolstered its ties with Asian powers, particularly with China. Over the past years, China has incorporated the Belt and Road Initiative in the national development strategies of the GCC states such as tied it into Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. This trend of diversification accelerated in 2022, with Saudi Arabia emerging as the second-biggest recipient of Chinese investments under the Belt and Road Initiative globally.<sup>(21)</sup> Saudi Arabia expressed interest in joining several multiparty organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. However, this does not mean that Saudi Arabia is down the road of totally moving away from the West, but it is attempting to entrench itself as a new rising global power, as part of a new global order in the making. In doing so, the country capitalizes on its growing geopolitical clout, the room for maneuver it enjoys, pursuing a realistic foreign policy resulting from breaking from ideological affiliations and dictates and adopting a policy that is biased toward none of the disputing world powers. The country also employs disputes to



enhance its maneuverability and advance its standing and influence. The aforementioned have aided its efforts to become a new global powerhouse, in addition, it has taken advantage of its economic standing and the increasing significance of oil in the prevailing global dynamics.

In this context, the influence of Saudi Arabia was evident in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, particularly with it presenting an initiative to settle the dispute and its stance on cutting back oil production that was primarily linked to its national interests rather than due to US pressures.<sup>(22)</sup>

• **Building a model and laying out initiatives to put the region on the path toward growth and prosperity:** Saudi Arabia is setting a pioneering example of development and turning itself into a political powerhouse and a center for attracting investments as well as a hub for the global business community. The country will achieve its vision only if there is a climate of stability in the region. Thus, the Saudi vision not only aims to resolve crises, but push the region's countries to adopt safe alternatives to ensure future progress. Saudi Arabia believes that the expansion of markets and national economies provides opportunities to execute its vision. It is willing to work together to attain this aim, in which everyone wins via positive competition rather than destructive chaos. For example, its Green Middle East initiative went beyond simply dealing with the climate crisis. Rather, the initiative seeks to prepare the region for the post-oil phase, which is an advanced vision through which Saudi Arabia hopes to transform the region into the global provider of renewable energy in the future, similar to its role as the primary supplier of oil.

## **Diplomacy and Choosing the Approach of Easing Tensions With Iran**

Saudi Arabia has not adopted a zero-sum game versus Iran, but rather seeks to force Tehran to change its behavior. Thus, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman did not hesitate to call on Iran as a neighboring nation in July 2022 to cooperate with the region's countries to become part of the Saudi vision for the Middle East. This will only happen through Iranian compliance with the principles of international legitimacy, noninterference in the affairs of other countries and cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>(23)</sup> In addition to the Saudi initiative, developments led to Iraq-sponsored consultations between Riyadh and Tehran, which started in April 2021. The mutual remarks reflected a willingness to move ahead with finding an off-ramp to the differences. The Saudi crown prince said that his government sought to establish good ties with Iran and was working with its partners to overcome the differences with Iran. These calls resonated with the Iranians. The secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council said that Iran's effective presence in the bilateral talks hosted by Iraq stemmed from the Iranian republic's principled strategy in the field of cooperation and friendship with neighbors.<sup>(24)</sup> Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif expressed the Iranian republic's constant readiness to establish ties with Saudi Arabia whenever it deemed appropriate.<sup>(25)</sup>

In a remarkable shift that reflected the extent of the change in regional balance of power, the mentioned rounds of consultations paved the way for China to play an effective role to con-

clude an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. According to this deal, Saudi Arabia and Iran pledged not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, respect the sovereignty of countries and promote good neighborliness among the region's countries. They also restored diplomatic ties which were severed in 2016. The rapprochement deal also includes procedures related to restoring diplomatic relations. This agreement also generated a sense of optimism regionally and globally because it is hoped that it will have a significant positive impact on bilateral relations as well as on regional security and stability after more than two decades of unrest and chaos.

There is no doubt that the new Saudi foreign policy doctrine is effective in shifting the course of relations with Iran from rupture and dispute to resuming ties and exploring opportunities for easing tensions and differences. At the level of bilateral relations, the two countries have restored diplomatic ties. The two sides have also agreed to revive past bilateral agreements such as the 2001 Security and Cooperation Agreement, which addressed money laundering and fighting terrorism and the economic cooperation agreement, not to mention mutual pledges not to interfere in the internal affairs of each other.

China's standing exerted influence on the two sides to sign the agreement and opened up prospects for ceasing mutual escalation. The mediation has also ended the two-year-long negotiations between the two countries. However, the impact of China's mediation and its influence on the Saudi-Iran agreement is still being tested. According to Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the agreement does not mean resolv-

ing all the differences between the two sides, but it reflects a willingness for dialogue, easing tensions and adopting an approach to peacefully resolve differences. Yet the deal had major internal repercussions in the two countries. It also received remarkable regional and global support as expressed by the allies of Saudi Arabia and Iran, which creates an appropriate environment for the Saudi-Iran understandings to develop further if there is good faith on both sides.

## **The Policy Outcomes for the Two Countries**

With Saudi foreign policy tools ranging from the use of force to diplomacy, the implications are noticeable at several levels:

### **Saudi Foreign Policy Places “The Kingdom at the Heart of Regional Stability”**

Saudi foreign policy pursued a conservative path in the past to ensure the country’s influence mostly in the Islamic and Arab world particularly soft power was projected and economic assistance provided. However, now, Saudi foreign policy has undergone modifications, it has become much more proactive, participatory, decisive, flexible and responsive to threat and risk levels. One may describe this new trajectory as a “new Saudi foreign policy doctrine.”<sup>(26)</sup>

Interactions at the regional level to expand Saudi Arabia’s role and influence have been key features of Saudi foreign policy. The country has focused on countering threats, including those posed by Iran, in the most unstable and critical areas in the Middle East. This Saudi approach has been critical for regional stability, simultaneously, the country has not abandoned its role as a mediator in many regional conflicts. This role was in the context of regional institutional frameworks

and was undertaken with caution unlike other mediation processes in the region.

In addition, this foreign policy approach showed that Saudi Arabia could engage in large-scale confrontations on multiple fronts at once through the use of various economic, military, political, diplomatic and religious tools. Even if the confrontation with Iran extended to further geographical regions like Africa and Central Asia, Saudi policy led to a significant reassessment of some countries' relations with Iran. For example, Morocco, Mauritania, Comoros, Sudan, some West African countries, China and more recently Russia have recalibrated their relations with Iran. This is reflected in their positions on issues such as Russia's position on the dispute between the UAE and Iran over the three islands.

In fact, Saudi Arabia has never borne, almost single-handedly, the brunt of engaging in conflicts and crises with Iran directly. If any issue necessitated Saudi Arabia's participation to tackle Iran, it would be available immediately and deploy its plethora of tools to assert influence. Saudi Arabia has not ruled out taking its battle inside the borders of those countries that target its sovereignty and security. This reflects an important shift in the Saudi foreign policy approach.

Saudi Arabia has ensured that its new foreign policy direction remains within regional frameworks and in line with international and regional consensus. Therefore, the Global Coalition Against Daesh and the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen fit into the aforementioned frameworks and consensus. Saudi Arabia has turned into a regional and international destination, for example, it has hosted many important summits and meetings, including the Chinese-Gulf and Chinese-Arab summits, as well as the GCC-Central Asia

summit , and other important meetings. These efforts in their content reflect Saudi enthusiasm and willingness to adapt to changes and test multiple tools and mechanisms to confront the crises facing the region and the world. More significantly, these efforts reflect the country's role as a regional leader and its initiative to move on from the past and adjust its foreign policy in line with new realities and priorities. In addition, the country has the capability and resources to carry out its tasks and support existing structures and institutions in the region.

Moreover, in a fundamental shift in Saudi foreign policy, the country deployed military force to protect its security and interests and bore this responsibility without help for the first time from the United States, or even from some of its closest regional allies. For example, the military operation in Yemen reflects Saudi Arabia's decision to use its hard power as another prong of its foreign policy .This shift is remarkable given that Saudi had not been known for using military force except within narrow parameters.

These latest moves indicate that Saudi decision-making is more pragmatic and flexible than assumed ,allowing the country to adapt to major events ,priorities and interests .Although it embraced confrontation as an approach to address the challenges it faces ,Saudi Arabia never negated the possibility of dialogue and pacification .Saudi Arabia's main message to Iran in particular ,reiterated by the crown prince ,is that the country does not have a problem with the Iranian people ,or with Iran as a regional power that has its own national aspirations and interests ,but its problem rests with the Iranian system's foreign policy orientations that are predominantly based on exporting the Iranian ideology and fueling conflicts.

The Saudi commitment to defuse tensions is driven by the

domestic changes that are occurring ,transforming the country at all levels :political ,economic ,social and cultural These transformations reflect the country's resolve to diversify its partnerships ,which has become an important feature of its foreign policy .This feature has grown in importance since the period of frostiness between Saudi Arabia and the United States .Saudi Arabia no longer feels limited by Washington's diplomatic regional and international agenda <sup>(27)</sup>.This was evident in the country's resistance to US pressure not to cut oil production and the development of strategic relationships with China .These transformations on the domestic and foreign fronts ,no doubt ,motivated Iran to engage in dialogue with Saudi Arabia .In addition ,US-Saudi lack of interactions with Iran and new regional alliances aiming to isolate and weaken Iran ,were also key motivating factors that have pushed Iran to entertain dialogue with Saudi Arabia<sup>(28)</sup>.

Saudi Arabia proved that it is ready to shoulder the burden of regional leadership and play this role without any international support in what can be described as a self-reliance policy .This was evident in Saudi Arabia's approach to enhance its military capabilities and depend less on the umbrella of US protection .The growth in Saudi Arabia's military budget in recent years points to this shift to self-reliance .As per the Stockholm Peace Institute ,in ,2015 Saudi Arabia ranked third in terms of military expenditure after the United States and China and has remained within the top 10 of those countries spending the most on military defense .In ,2023 it ranked fifth ,despite the ongoing conflict in Europe ,and the consequent massive military spending by countries involved in the war .Despite the import of advanced weapons from the United States ,Saudi Arabia has moved to diversify its arms sources

and adopt a strategy to develop its domestic military base and export part of its weapons to other countries <sup>(29)</sup>. This spending and diversification have granted the country a well-deserved authority and leadership at the regional and international levels. Its role is now accepted as being reliable and credible.

However, the pursuit of diplomacy is not reflective of Saudi Arabia abandoning its aim to counter-Iran's regional project. It has relied on cooperation to achieve regional stability and create space so that other hot files are neutralized. This approach has enhanced the country's position and role as a regional leader. Saudi aspirations for regional leadership fall within the ambit of Vision 2030. A combination of force and diplomacy has meant that Saudi Arabia has the appropriate tools to act as a regional counterweight to deter threats and it is also now a regional destination for critical dialogue and interaction. All the recent conferences, meetings and alliances hosted by Saudi Arabia are evidence of the latter. This has impacted Iran, prompting it to reassess its approaches and policies toward Saudi Arabia.

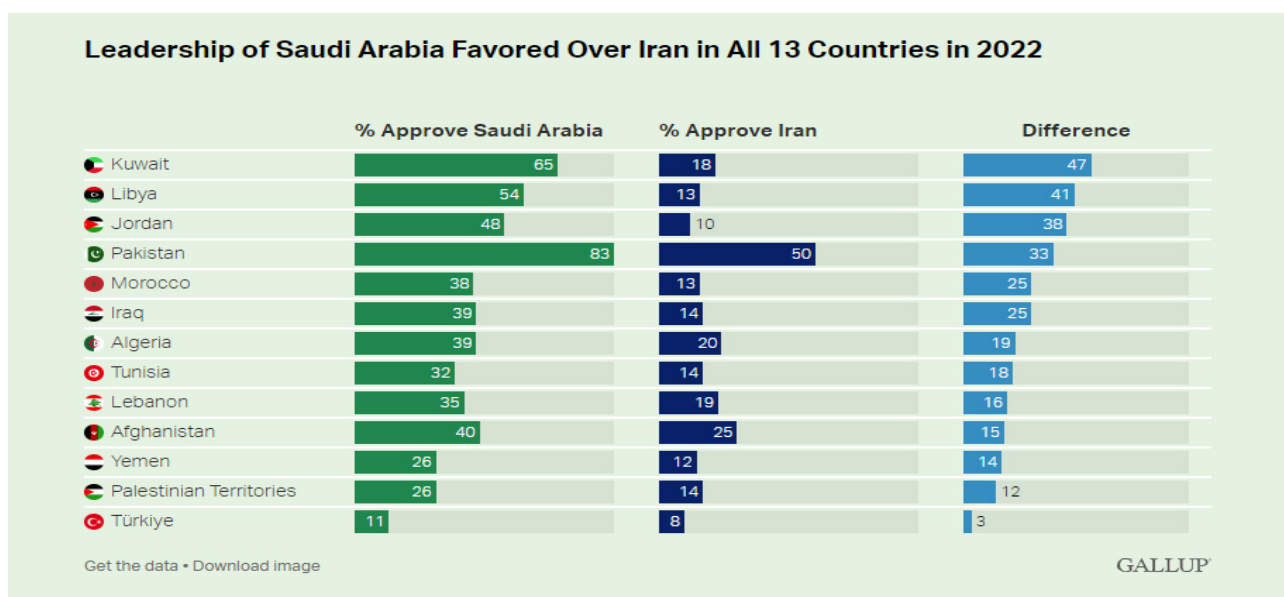
### **Changing Perceptions and Stereotypes About the Two Rival Forces**

Saudi Arabia's policy has contributed to improving its image regionally and internationally, according to many opinion polls such as the Gallup Poll. This improvement in image is not only because of domestic transformations and its significant economic support to the Arab and Islamic world, but also because it is viewed as a regional stabilizing force and an independent rising power that is impervious to the pressures of major powers. Saudi Arabia has significantly trumped Iran in these polls, meaning that the country enjoys great populari-



ty. However, Iran’s interventions and its anti-Saudi role have negatively impacted its regional reputation within the Islamic world. The decline of Iran’s soft power has driven it to reconsider its stance toward Saudi Arabia (see Figure 1).<sup>(30)</sup>

**Figure 1: Saudi Arabia’s Leadership Favored Over Iran in All 13 Countries in 2022**



**Source :** Gallup <https://bit.ly/3rmUGxf>

Saudi Arabia’s new domestic and foreign policies have prompted an embarrassing comparison to Iran’s in terms of economic status, the promotion of national identity and regional peacemaking. Saudi Arabia’s economic initiatives have enhanced its status and granted it regional and international influence. However, Iran’s policies have steered the country toward isolation, the imposition of sanctions and internal unrest. The international community is ready to consider Saudi Arabia’s G20 admission. The Iranian elites and public consider Saudi Arabia as a pioneer and a successful country in localizing modernization and development. This is borne out of the comparison between the two countries’ handling of the coro-

navirus pandemic that had a disastrous impact on the Iranian domestic front. Saudi Arabia was praised by the international community for the way it handled the crisis, and the international partnerships and alliances that it has established. Iran operates within what can be called the “alliance of the weak,” while Saudi Arabia has become a destination and an active hub for regional and international policies as well as an influential actor in global affairs. This has resulted in Iran’s allies such as China and Russia shifting their positions on some regional issues . In fact, they have adopted positions more favorable to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, this is apparent when looking at Russia’s recent remarks on the dispute between the UAE and Iran on the three islands. Amid the critical juncture that the international community is going through, Saudi Arabia has been able to reposition itself. Countries see Saudi Arabia as the most important and influential regional power and the most appropriate country through which to strengthen regional security and stability.

### **Policy of Containment and Enhancing Opportunities for Iran**

Saudi Arabia’s policy that brings together force and persuasion whenever possible, has forced Iran to reappraise its hostile positions and behavior toward Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia’s confrontation effectively achieved deterrence and a strategic balance with Iran. It also sent a clear message that the country is changing and will spare no effort to confront Iran’s regional project if considered to be necessary. Iran believed that Saudi Arabia lacked the necessary capabilities to protect itself without US assistance. This use of force has changed Iran’s percep-

tion of Saudi Arabia, while the Iranian people have looked on Riyadh's shifts and transformations with astonishment and perhaps some admiration. Saudi Arabia pursues regional initiatives, achieves successes and leaps forward in terms of economic growth and diversification, while the Iranian economy remains a prisoner of the system's ideology and project of regional hegemony.

The normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia will help in ending the former's international isolation and the US and EU sanctions imposed on it. This will have a positive impact on Iran's economic meltdown. The Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal will de-escalate domestic tensions and grant the Iranian political system a lifeline to restore its legitimacy, which has been largely eroded in light of the popular protests that swept the country after the death of the young Kurdish girl Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's morality police. The deal also enhanced Iran's quest to officially join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and will help it in its application to join the BRICS organization. There is no doubt that Iran will be supported by China to help it overcome the growing Western sanctions. The deal will provide Iran the ground to establish a stronger partnership with China; this will no doubt impact Iran's nuclear negotiations with the West.

In recent years, the Middle East witnessed security shifts as a result of the United States and its allies adapting to the ongoing confrontation with Iran. Despite the attempts to establish a Middle Eastern NATO to confront Iran, the old security framework and US military deployments have not been abandoned. Many schemes for cooperation to protect maritime navigation

in Gulf waters and the US vision to establish a regional security framework with Israel's participation have been discussed. Saudi Arabia's willingness to enter into dialogue with Iran will open space for a new reality in the region. The deal is accompanied by de-escalation and mutual understandings on a number of regional security issues. This may block the way for any regional security arrangement that includes Israel. The Abraham Accords are not expected to expand further; accordingly, the Gulf-Israeli normalization will be affected. Iran would not have put forth its Gulf Maritime Cooperation initiative in the absence of the conducive environment created by Saudi Arabia.<sup>(31)</sup>

Saudi Arabia has no interest in being Israel's front against Iran. This is consistent with Saudi Arabia's regional policy. The Saudi decision-maker has no desire to divide the region into conflicting axes, because this would hinder the country's development project and drain its efforts in fruitless conflicts. The major powers take advantage of regional conflicts/disputes to ensure the flow of their own interests. This is perhaps why Saudi Arabia welcomes any initiatives to reduce tensions when they arise. However, its condition is that Iran shows good intentions and changes its behavior so that the region shifts from a phase of crisis to stability<sup>(32)</sup>.

The breakthrough in Saudi-Iran relations also complicates Washington's diplomatic approach to address Iran's nuclear program. US pressure is declining while Iran's relations with its neighbors in the Gulf are developing. On the one hand, this will cost the United States some of its influence whereas on the other, Iran's hand will be stronger at the negotiating table.

The UAE is working to increase trade with Iran .According to a UAE official ,Iran is the largest trading partner of the country surpassing China .Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Jadaan days after the normalization deal was signed said” ,There are lots of opportunities for Saudi investments in Iran “ .Iran’s Minister of Economic and Financial Affairs Ehsan Khandouzi visited Riyadh in May 2023 to discuss the expansion of economic ties<sup>(33)</sup>.

After the current developments in Saudi-Iran relations ,Riyadh’s pressure on the United States and the signatory powers to the 2015 nuclear deal will decrease .This includes the Saudi and Gulf demands to be involved in the talks and for other outstanding issues like Iran’s regional behavior and its ballistic missile program to be included .These issues were one of the reasons for the talks stalling .Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif acknowledged that” Iran had obtained a draft agreement beyond the 2015 JCPOA with the4+1 )the P5 1 + minus the US [...] (In turn ,Europe was adamantly insisting on integrating regional issues into the negotiations“ . The United States and the partners of the nuclear agreement will be freed from some of the mentioned pressures/demands in any upcoming negotiations<sup>(34)</sup>.

### **Creating a New Middle East Away From Sectarian Conflicts**

The Middle East has suffered from large-scale regional rivalry, with its negativities evident in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Dialogue and cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran instead of confrontation will help in putting an end to this rivalry, however, in spite of some progress, this new phase

of relations still needs time and testing .<sup>(35)</sup>

Yemen is greatly impacted by Saudi policies. After 10 years of confrontation, ending the war in Yemen is clearly a priority for Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia believes that ending the Yemen war would reflect a success point in its foreign policy and is a condition for the acceptance of any understandings with Iran. Under pressure, sanctions, isolation and facing internal protests, Iran is no longer in a position to provide the necessary support to the Houthis to carry on with the conflict in Yemen. In addition, the de-escalation of tensions in this arena will be in Tehran's favor because its relationship with the Houthis is distant compared to the special relations with other groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or the pro-Iran Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Thus, the thorniest issue between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Yemeni crisis, can be resolved through diplomacy. Yemen will benefit significantly from the rapprochement deal since it represents the problematic intersection of interests between the two sides in recent years. The rapprochement may reduce arms smuggling to the Houthis in Yemen and increase pressure on the militia after years of hard conflict. Consequently, the Houthis may halt their repeated attacks on Saudi territories and oil sites. The permanent representative of Iran to the United Nations stressed that "the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia will help deliver a truce in Yemen." If this happens, the deal will put an end to the most complex issue between the two countries. This is likely because Saudi Arabia would not have signed the deal without guarantees on the Yemeni file as it directly impacts its national security. A cooling of the

Yemeni arena would be a gesture of goodwill by Iran and an important starting point in a long journey that will end with reaching understandings and settlement on many crises and the restoration of regional stability .This is the aim of Saudi Arabia ,hopefully of Iran as well.

The rapprochement deal has rapidly worked in the favor of many regional countries .After the deal ,former Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani made a significant visit to the UAE .Amid the recalibration in relations between the Gulf states and Iran ,the latter appointed on April ,2023 ,4 its first ambassador to the UAE since .2016An Iranian delegation from the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited Bahrain .After signing the deal ,Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman Nasser Kanaani said that" this positive development can take place in other countries in the region ,including Bahrain ".Iran's former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi also visited Syria .The announcement of Riyadh and Damascus followed this visit to hold talks on the resumption of consular services between the two countries ,paving the way for Syria's reintegration into the Arab fold through Riyadh's invitation to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to attend the Arab League summit hosted by Saudi Arabia in May .2023 Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said that a consensus is beginning to form in the Arab world and there is no point in isolating Syria and that dialogue with Damascus is needed at some point <sup>(36)</sup>.These developments indicate that a notable change is taking place in the economic and political relationships between Iran and the Gulf states ,this is a significant breakthrough.

In spite of the domestic debate between the "hardliner" and "reformist" currents on Iran's regional role, changing Iran's foreign policy is of particular importance to support the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia and reach understandings on fundamental differences. In this context, Iran's relaxed position on the issue of the Dorra gas field shared between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is definitely influenced by the Saudi-led openness toward Iran. It is notable that Iran's policy and media rhetoric is calm and relaxed regarding this issue. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman Nasser Kanaani said that the current Iranian government's policy is based on dialogue, cooperation and participation. This framework will be the basis of discussing bilateral issues. This means that Iran believes that the deal with Saudi Arabia is an opportunity to be seized. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's policy has succeeded in shifting the course of relations from conflict to de-escalation, or rather managing competition instead of confrontation at the regional level<sup>(37)</sup>.

### **The Recalibration of Relations Between International Powers and Middle Eastern Countries**

Over the past three decades, the United States was the dominant power in the Middle East. This shaped the region's strategic and political landscape in line with the interests of the United States. However, with the new Saudi foreign policy approach specifically toward Iran, the United States found itself unable to follow up on the fast-changing developments that seemed to be contradictory to its interests. This created an opportunity for China to extend its influence in the region that is now deeply part of the geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry between competing powers.



Saudi Arabia's independent approach and diversification of partnerships forced Iran to normalize relations and discuss ways of cooperation. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy orientations indicate that national interests determine its relations with other states, not foreign dictates. This Iranian approach involving rapprochement is consistent with Iran's desire to reduce US involvement in regional issues and conflicts, with it aiming to end its isolation and remove the sanctions imposed on it. If the deal succeeds in enhancing economic cooperation and trade between the two countries, Iran will greatly benefit. The rapprochement deal will complicate efforts to isolate Iran, but US influence is likely to decline further. <sup>(38)</sup>

After improving its ties with Saudi Arabia, Iran is aiming to subvert the US-led anti-Iran regional coalition. Saudi-Iran understandings on bilateral relations and economic cooperation are moving forward, and they are likely to weaken the impact of the US sanctions policy. As both parties reach understandings on many files including Bahrain and Yemen to a certain extent, Iran will greatly focus its efforts on preserving its regional gains in anticipation of the US-Israel confrontation against it. This is evident through pro-Iran militia attacking US bases in Syria, the targeting of US ships in Gulf waters, the rapid developments in Iran's missile program, the fast-paced movements to reaching the nuclear threshold and the acceleration in the policy of looking East via advancing relations with China and Russia. The growing anti-US coalition at the international level, Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Iranian president's visit to Latin America can also be considered to be part of Iran's pol-

icy to shift away from the West. The Iranian president's visit to Latin America aimed to enhance Iran's influence in what is considered as the United States' backyard. Unlike what some expected, the rapprochement deal gives Iran a chance to establish anti-US regional and international arrangements. <sup>(39)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia helps in creating a stable security atmosphere, allowing both countries to carry out domestic plans. The deal gives Saudi Arabia a chance to pursue its ambitious Vision 2030 that aims to place the country among the 10 largest economies in the world. The vision will also propel Saudi Arabia's regional leadership aspirations and transform the country, leading to stability and prosperity. In addition, it will help the country to play a greater role at the international level; diplomatically, Saudi Arabia brokered the prisoner exchange deal between Russia and Ukraine, and now it aims to be a regional hub for sustainable development and is preparing the region as a whole for the post-oil era through its Middle East Green initiative.

Yet, many challenges remain; despite Saudi Arabia creating a balance of power, so that no party is able to resolve the conflict in its favor, the intensity and historical background of the conflict may continue to have negative impacts. The conflict between Riyadh and Tehran was always indirect, yet it affected the whole region, extending to Africa, Central Asia and the Caucasus, needless to mention their disagreement over the Iranian nuclear program. It can be said that the challenges facing Saudi-Iran relations are complex and intense; the ideological and sectarian issues intersect with regional

interests and the two countries' relations with great powers. For example, China's mediation faces numerous challenges such as Iran's relations with its armed militias and non-state actors that are sponsored and supported by Tehran. Thus, reducing the influence of Iran-backed militias is critical to ending the conflict and ensuring diplomacy is kept on track and the doors of cooperation are kept open.

Iran will definitely not abandon its ideological motives and efforts for regional domination". Hardline "actors in Iran oppose the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia as they continue to be motivated by ideological considerations. The hostility toward Saudi Arabia is inherent and rooted in the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih that dominates Iranian foreign policy. The doctrine of the IRGC is based mainly on ideas and an identity that depicts Saudi Arabia as a regional competitor. It is not fully clear whether the Iranian political system is willing to change its ideological viewpoints. Although Riyadh is more realistic and pragmatic, Iran must show similar flexibility. China's pressures on Iran may bear some results. However, China's potential pressure on Iran could be a source of domestic debate as Tehran's revolutionary fundamentals reject any kind of foreign dictation or pressure.

In light of a lack of a "security architecture", complex regional dynamics and interactions as well as regional competition will cast a shadow over Saudi Arabia's policy in the region. Any security cooperation with Israel may affect the country's foreign policy as Saudi Arabia is keen to maintain a balance between its identity and any action it takes with Israel. Iran uses Israel as a card to harm the image and legitimacy of Sau-

di Arabia .Other regional actors also have aspirations for influence including the Gulf states . These states are concerned about the effectiveness of Saudi policy as they see the emergence of new dynamics and alliances that are dominating the regional landscape especially in light of the current arms race and variant regional alliances .These developments have made Saudi Arabia much more competitive and assertive in the region .Iran may exploit the aspirations of other actors to counter Saudi Arabia's rise in the region.

The troubled international environment poses threats and challenges to the potency of Saudi policy .The United States views the Saudi approaches toward Iran and China as diminishing its international weight and regional influence .After decades of consensus between Saudi Arabia and the United States regarding Iran ,Riyadh took a sudden pragmatic decision to sign a deal to normalize relations with Iran .This decision is reflective of Saudi independence ,with the country viewing the world from a different perspective .This may force the United States to change its approach toward the region. The deal is inconsistent with the US concept of regional security .The United States planned to establish a broader security framework that would include Israel ;its primary aim would be to counter the risks posed by Iran .This plan was evident when the US President Joe Biden's visited the region in the middle of .2022 He aimed to transfer the responsibility of security to regional countries including Israel .This US plan was motivated by the aim to counter Iran and deter its destabilizing activities while prioritizing the diplomatic path to tackle the nuclear file — although other options were not ruled out.

However, as doubts increased about the seriousness and effectiveness of the US plan, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal effectively ended it, however, it may be revived at a later stage. The Saudi-Iran agreement will not terminate the US security partnership with the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia in particular, nor will it prevent other countries from signing the Abraham Accords. However, it will alter the US concept of regional security and limit it extensively, as long as the agreement is valid and bears fruit. Another challenge arises about how the United States would accept such developments that are inconsistent with its aspirations in the region and the world.

In conclusion, the structural changes and new vision that direct Saudi foreign policy, whether the use of force or dialogue, are deemed to reflect considerable shifts in the country's longstanding foreign policy. These shifts aim to preserve Saudi Arabia's national interests and enhance its external power and influence. They are also part of adding new dimensions to Saudi foreign policy and propelling the country to take up a greater role at the regional and global levels through constructive diplomacy, promotion of cooperation and positive involvement in crises. This new Saudi foreign policy along with advancing the country's soft power through social, political and economic reforms at home, will help in changing the stereotypical image of the country. It will also facilitate Saudi Arabia's emergence as a major hub for investment in the region. Needless to say, it will also contribute to strengthening Saudi Arabia's deterrence and the defense of its own vital national interests whenever needed.

The new feature of Saudi Arabia foreign policy is that it is

interactive and pragmatic ,allowing the country to keep up with new developments .Saudi Arabia's policy is effective in seizing new opportunities and addressing challenges it faces whether in the region or the world .Most importantly ,the shifts in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy have been carefully crafted based on the deep structural transformations at home, i.e ,the comprehensive national Saudi Vision .2030 They consider the geopolitical shifts in the region and the world. Through this new foreign policy ,Saudi Arabia appears different on the regional and international stages , and has been able to reposition itself as well as enhance its national interests and diversify its partnerships .Riyadh would not have been able to achieve the aforementioned successes without investing in its own physical and human capital .This new foreign policy has entrenched the country's status as well as advanced its soft and hard power tools especially within its spheres of interests .Reconsidering its relations with Iran is a prominent outcome of the shifts in its foreign policy . .The process of normalization with Iran and changing the nature of the regional conflict /competition as well as forcing major powers to adjust their roles in the regional equation are significant and fundamental outcomes of the recalibration in Riyadh's foreign policy.

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