

STUDY

# THE IMPACT OF THE SAUDI DEVELOPMENT MODEL ON THE IRANIAN HOME FRONT

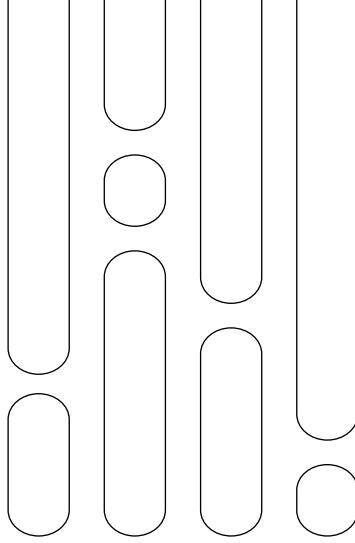
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Dr. Mohammed Alsulami

President, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)



**RASANAH**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies



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## **Introduction**

In the last decade, regional rivalry has significantly impacted relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, notably shaping perceptions of Saudi Arabia within Iran. Iranian official discourse has often portrayed Saudi Arabia in a negative light. However, there has been a recent shift, with the Saudi development model attracting regional and global attention. This newfound recognition holds significance domestically and internationally, as evidenced by various indicators and statistics placing Saudi Arabia in a prominent position on the regional and international stage. Iran has been one of the countries where the influence of the Saudi model has become apparent, particularly among the elite and a broad segment of the Iranian public. This development may have provoked discontent among certain elements within the Iranian establishment and its institutions. This is especially true given that the establishment perceives Saudi Arabia as a regional rival, and any positive view of the Saudi model torpedoes its narrative about the country, causing embarrassment and undermining its legitimacy.

Within this evolving landscape, the inquiry extends to assessing the extent of the Saudi development model's influence within Iran. This inquiry gives rise to several subsidiary inquiries, among which the following stand out: How have Iranian elites and public opinion interacted with the political, economic and cultural changes unfolding in Saudi Arabia? What implications can be discerned from this interaction for Iran's domestic front?

This paper addresses these questions by scrutinizing the viewpoints of Iranian elites and the general populace following the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023. It focuses on reactions to social and economic advancements in Saudi Arabia and the impact of the kingdom's development strategies, plans and projects for fostering cultural transformation and enhancing citizens' quality of life. Saudi achievements across various fields have drawn comparisons with emerging economies worldwide, provoking widespread discontent among Iranian elites and the general public toward their political system. Despite possessing capabilities comparable to Saudi Arabia, Iran grapples with isolation, sanctions and economic pressures, resulting in dire socio-economic conditions.

This paper sheds light on how the Saudi model has impacted the Iranian establishment, especially the continuity of its domestic and foreign policies.

This paper is grounded in data collected by the researcher, focusing on the most popular or prominent articles and analyses that followed the restoration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The collected material covers various aspects, including:

- Reactions to Saudi Arabia's statement concerning the Durra field.
- Articles, opinions and analyses regarding Saudi Arabia's heightened diplomatic role in resolving the Russia-Ukraine war.
- Commentary from Iranian experts, elites and social media influencers regarding developments in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi model.
- Responses to a video featuring Saudi sports journalist Khalid al-Shenaif critiquing Azadi Stadium, the venue for a match between Al-Nassr Football Club and its Iranian rival Persepolis in the AFC Champions League 2023.

The content examined spans the period from June 2023 to September 2023. Through the analysis of the data collected, a nuanced understanding of Iranian perspectives toward ongoing developments in Saudi Arabia is conducted, alongside an exploration of the impact of these viewpoints on bilateral relations.

## **Responses and Opinions of the Iranian Elite to the Saudi Development Model**

### **Saudi Political Performance at Home and Abroad**

The paper's sample data revealed a noteworthy internal admiration among elites and the general public for Saudi Arabia's political prowess on both domestic and international fronts. It became evident that public sentiment was significantly swayed by various facets of Saudi Arabia's political performance, with key aspects including:

#### ***Saudi Arabia's Diplomatic Role in Resolving International Disputes***

A discernible trend has emerged within Iran, suggesting a belief that Saudi Arabia has effectively leveraged various international relationships to advance its national interests. This achievement is attributed to the visionary leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed

bin Salman, alongside an academically proficient elite, as affirmed by opinions on the expertise of the Saudi elite and their adeptness in representing the state on the global stage. Such accolades are closely intertwined with commendations regarding Saudi Arabia's educational standards, particularly when juxtaposed with Iran's. Strikingly, discussions among Iranian elites underscore the pragmatic approach of Saudi Arabia's ruling establishment, which has played a pivotal role in the country's ongoing transformation. An example of such praise from Iranian elites can be observed in their commendation of Saudi diplomacy and its significant role in mediating international conflicts. Notably, Iranians positively acknowledged the peace meeting convened in the Saudi city of Jeddah, attended by representatives from approximately 40 countries, including Brazil, the UK, India, China, the United States, Turkey, South Africa and various European Union nations, aimed at resolving the Russia-Ukraine war. According to university professor Mohammad Mehdi Mazaheri, the decision to hold the meeting in Jeddah holds multifaceted importance. Mazaheri highlights that this gathering, hosted by an Arab nation, stands out as one of the few instances where an Arab country has taken the lead in mediating to resolve an international crisis. Historically, Arab states' mediation efforts have primarily focused on regional conflicts such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Yemeni civil war, the Syrian crisis, as well as political upheavals in Iraq and Lebanon.

Mazaheri emphasized that hosting an international meeting aimed at resolving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which is perceived as a confrontation between Western powers and Russia, serves as a notable example of this Arab nation's endeavor to underscore its role on the global stage.<sup>(1)</sup> Meanwhile, Mohammad Hosseini, former Iranian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, viewed the Jeddah meeting as a significant triumph for Saudi Arabia. Despite not achieving success in halting the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the meeting succeeded in swaying major global actors such as China and emerging powers like India, Brazil and South Africa from a stance of passive neutrality. Hosseini noted that this strengthened Saudi Arabia's standing as a proactive and neutral actor in global affairs. Particularly noteworthy was Saudi Arabia's ability to secure China's participation, as Beijing had abstained from attending a peace meeting in Denmark to end the war in Ukraine.<sup>(2)</sup>

### ***A Model Centered on Modernization and Development***

Iranian elites drew a stark comparison between Iran's development model, reliant on five-year plans that failed to achieve significant progress, and Saudi Arabia's forward-looking vision, which propelled it far ahead in terms of modernization and development despite both nations' abundant resources. According to the Iranian perspective, Saudi Arabia effectively leveraged its oil revenues for development and modernization, contrasting sharply with Iran's perceived failure to capitalize on its vast oil wealth, representing a significant missed opportunity. Former Iranian Parliament member and assistant to the Minister of Agricultural Jihad Ali Qambari emphasized this gap, stating, "We are 15 years behind neighboring countries, at best 10 years behind, and in more realistic scenarios, 15 years behind." Qambari highlighted that recent developments in Saudi Arabia compelled Iran's elites to critique "conservative" factions that sought to undermine Saudi Arabia by misrepresenting its vast strides in development or portraying it as regressive.

### ***Pursuing a Balanced Foreign Policy Between East and West***

Iranian elites have taken a keen interest in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy endeavors, lauding its well-calibrated approach, inclusive diplomatic relations and adept management of alliances across the global spectrum. Saudi Arabia's ability to foster positive ties with diverse international actors, including cooperative and adversarial parties like China, Russia, Japan, India, the United States and European Union countries, has garnered praise. Observers have also noted Saudi Arabia's adept utilization of prevailing international dynamics to advance its interests and bolster its autonomy on the global stage. Mahmood Sariolghalam, advisor to former President Hassan Rouhani and professor of political science and international relations at Shahid Beheshti University, emphasized this point, stating, "Six countries have achieved an important position among the midlevel powers; they are Brazil, Saudi Arabia, India, South Africa, Turkey, and Indonesia." These six countries engage with both East and West, maintaining positive relations with Russia as a cornerstone of their foreign policy. Their approach aims to leverage the strengths of major powers, enabling them to play diverse roles, negotiate effectively, and foster a strategy of "hedging." This contrasts with Iran's foreign policy, which has increasingly pivoted toward the East while distancing itself

from the West. However, this shift has not effectively resolved Iran's challenges and crises. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has been expanding its diplomatic engagement and international presence, actively participating in the existing global system. In contrast to Iran's oppositional stance, Saudi Arabia emerges as a mediator in key conflicts, a participant in the G20, and a regional player sought after by Russia and China for inclusion in their respective spheres of influence. Meanwhile, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi embarked on visits to select Latin American and African nations, possibly as a response to isolation, pressure, and sanctions.<sup>(3)</sup>

### ***Effectiveness of the Saudi Regional Role***

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a pivotal regional actor, contrasting sharply with Iran's approach. Through a strategy focused on problem resolution, stability and collaboration, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a key player in the Middle East. Ali Bigdali, an expert in international relations, suggests that Saudi Arabia aims to foster diversity and pluralism in the region.<sup>(4)</sup> Former Iranian diplomat Kourosh Ahmadi argues that Saudi Arabia possesses the requisite conditions to serve as a gateway to the Arab world, presenting an unparalleled opportunity to exert direct and indirect influence across the Middle East. Given its significant domestic and foreign policies, Saudi Arabia's actions inevitably reverberate throughout the region.

### ***Iranian Elites' Critique of Iran's Regional Role***

These elites have questioned the allocation of resources to regional endeavors instead of focusing on economic development. This strategy has propelled Saudi Arabia to become a formidable regional power. Political activist and University of Tehran Professor of Political Science Sadegh Zibakalam highlights the repercussions of Saudi Arabia's prolonged involvement in the Yemeni conflict. Despite seven years of war, substantial expenses and the human toll on Yemeni citizens, Saudi Arabia has paradoxically emerged stronger. Zibakalam raises pertinent questions about the Iranian government's responsibility in prioritizing regional ventures over the country's national interests, which is particularly evident in the Yemeni context.<sup>(5)</sup>

### ***The Enhancement of Saudi Arabia’s Image and Influence***

Iranian elites admire Saudi Arabia’s adept utilization of soft power and its comprehensive approach to improving its image and advancing its influence, contrasting this with Iran’s image on the global stage. Particularly noteworthy are Saudi sports and entertainment diplomacy efforts, characterized by initiatives to attract international stars and host major sporting events. Ali Faraidouni, writing in Setareh Sobh newspaper, observes, “Saudi Arabia is actively vying with neighboring nations to cement its status as a premier entertainment and sports hub in the Arabian Gulf region.” He adds, “The Saudis are strategically leveraging sports, especially football, as a means of diplomatic engagement with nations worldwide.”

In a notable example of such comparisons, Saudi journalist Khaled Al-Shanif’s remarks drew significant attention on social media platforms, garnering support from Iranians. Shanif’s commentary contrasted the conditions of Azadi Stadium with those of the stadiums in Saudi Arabia three decades prior. This comparison arose following a match between the Iranian team Persepolis and the Saudi team Al-Nassr in the AFC Champions League, during which concerns were raised about the field quality at Azadi Stadium, leading to injuries among some players. Table 1 illustrates various Iranian reactions to Shanif’s observations.

**Table 1:** Iranians’ Comments Supportive of the Saudi Anchor and Mocking the Iranian Establishment

<b>Comments Supporting Shanif’s Observations</b>	<b>Comments Mocking and Criticizing the Iranian Government</b>
Indeed, the truth is deeply bitter.	The Iranian government should be ashamed.
We should weep blood rather than tears.	I reject his comments. We have lagged a hundred years.
His comments were right.	We exclaim, how did they accept to play on this stadium? I think the matter is political. They did not want the relations between the two nations to deteriorate.



<b>Comments Supporting Shanif's Observations</b>	<b>Comments Mocking and Criticizing the Iranian Government</b>
<p>He points to part of our plight. We don't possess anything distinguished.</p>	<p>Since Al-Nassr and Ronaldo have arrived in Iran, many of our faults have been exposed. We have become certain that we are the most backward people in the region at all levels.</p>
<p>If we are lagging just three decades, it would be fine. But I think we are lagging far behind that.</p>	<p>In situations where a high-value player sustains an injury, the expenses incurred by their team and country for their treatment often amount to the cost of constructing an entire stadium.</p>
<p>What would our response be in the face of correct comments?</p>	<p>It is indeed puzzling how the Asian Football Confederation permitted matches to be held at the Azadi Stadium considering its subpar conditions.</p>
<p>Come and look at every place in Iran. This will rend your heart.</p>	<p>Thankfully, a thousand times over, [O media anchor], for sparing yourself from residing in this desolate land even for a single day.</p>
<p>Exactly. And things may be even worse. We did not have any alternatives to this stadium.</p>	<p>Just two weeks ago, I confided in my friend, expressing my regret for not being born in a country like Saudi Arabia, where the king's priority is the welfare of his people. Here, it seems that the government's sole aim is to harm its own citizens. It is truly shameful and deeply regrettable.</p>
<p>No one should be sad because he was right about all that he said.</p>	<p>The media anchor's remark about us being merely 30 years behind was delivered with remarkable politeness. He showed great respect for us.</p>
<p>He said the truth. And we should not hurl insults at him.<sup>(6)</sup></p>	

Source: Prepared by the researcher

The political shifts occurring in Saudi Arabia, both domestically and internationally, have drawn admiration from the Iranian elite. The kingdom has notably asserted itself in global forums and taken the

lead in proposing international and regional initiatives aligned with global aspirations. Particularly noteworthy are its climate policies and the Green Middle East project. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a regional diplomacy hub, actively mediating conflict resolution efforts.

### **Economic Performance**

Interest from Iranians has been observed across various economic sectors concerning the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, encompassing a wide array of economic and developmental aspects within the kingdom. This interest often prompts comparisons with the Iranian economy, leading to feelings of regret and despair at times. Some of the aspects that have gained attention from Iranians include:

#### ***Economic Growth and Human Capital Investment***

Advisor to the former president and esteemed university professor Mahmood Sariolghalam highlighted several positive economic insights gleaned from the Saudi delegation at the Davos World Economic Forum 2023. These observations include:<sup>(7)</sup>

- Saudi Arabia exhibited a buoyant attitude and a steadfast, positive perspective regarding its economic trajectory.
- The participating delegation demonstrated enhanced linguistic and analytical proficiency, indicative of robust human capital development, particularly in education within the kingdom.
- Noteworthy strides have been made in achieving an impressive economic growth rate, standing at 8.7%, alongside ambitious investment initiatives aimed at bolstering wealth and cash reserves to a projected \$2 trillion by 2030.
- Saudi Arabia solidifies its stature as a significant player among the global middle powers, alongside Brazil, India, South Africa, Turkey and Indonesia, while fostering amicable relations with both Eastern and Western counterparts.

In a similar vein, Ali Ghambari, a former parliamentarian and university professor, painted a stark picture of his country's developmental status in comparison to Saudi Arabia. He remarked, "We lag behind neighboring nations by approximately 15 years. At best, our deficit is 10 years, but in more realistic assessments, we find ourselves trailing by 15 years behind neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others."

Economist Vahid Shaqaqi emphasized the urgency of achieving substantial economic growth within the current decade (2020-2030) to bridge the gap with the Saudi economy. He highlighted Saudi Arabia's transition into the third wave of knowledge, characterized by significant shifts toward a knowledge-based economy and the integration of wealth-generating elements like virtual technologies, smart systems, green initiatives, and renewable energies. In contrast, Shaqaqi lamented that Iran remains stuck in the second wave.

Journalist Ihsan Badaghi highlighted significant disparities in education and healthcare between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Citing the PIRLS test results, Badaghi pointed out that Iran ranked poorly among 57 participating countries, only outpacing Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and South Africa. In contrast, Saudi Arabia demonstrated better performance. While Saudi Arabia aims to boost its population by 50% by 2030, Iran faces criticism for its restrictions on tests for fetal disabilities and limited access to contraceptives. Despite these challenges, some Iranian politicians continue to label Saudi Arabia's leadership as reactionary and uninformed.

These perspectives underscore the entrenched discontent among Iranian elites regarding their country's economic and social conditions. Conversely, there is not only admiration but also a stark realization of the significant gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia's economic development. Given the prevailing circumstances, this sentiment is coupled with a sense of despair regarding the possibility of bridging this gap in the short term. In alignment with elite opinions, societal sentiments also lean toward acknowledging Saudi Arabia's advancements, as evidenced by the substantial support for various development and pioneering projects in the kingdom, with some garnering nearly half a million likes (refer to Table 1).

Table 2 highlights key development projects and topics concerning Saudi Arabia that have garnered likes from Iranians across various websites and social media platforms.

**Table 2:** Iran’s Social Media Responses to Key Development Projects in Saudi Arabia

Topic	Number of Likes
Development projects in the kingdom — the Mukaab: Golden cube-shaped project in Riyadh.	476,000
The Line: The world’s most sophisticated city in Saudi Arabia.	112,125
The assets of the Saudi Investment Fund have reached a substantial value of \$600 billion.	17,560
Saudi Arabia asserts its exclusive rights alongside Kuwait in the Durra field.	14,482
An article by Dr. Mohammed Alsulami, head of the Rasanah Institute, was featured on the Asr Iran website under the title “Competing Models in the Middle East.”	1,450
The Jeddah meeting on Ukraine: the DW account on Instagram. <sup>(8)</sup>	4,773

Source: Prepared by the researcher.

### ***Policies and Economic Planning for the Future***

Quoting a comparison with the effectiveness of Saudi economic policies, Hujjat Mirzaei, faculty member of the Economics Department at Allameh Tabataba’i University, remarked, “Making the right decisions in managing the economy could enable us to achieve Saudi Arabia’s current level in 15 years. However, if we make mistakes, our conditions could deteriorate to a level worse than Pakistan’s within a year and a half.”

Mirzaei aligns with the economic expert Siamak Ghasemi, asserting, “Even if everything in Iran changes today, prioritizing development and lifting all sanctions, according to World Bank data, it will take 15 years to reach the current economic level of Saudi Arabia and 13

years to reach Turkey’s level. To be frank, bridging this gap seems increasingly improbable.”<sup>(9)</sup>

In addition to economic policies and future strategies, the Iranian Saham News website applauded Saudi Arabia’s minister of tourism for his efforts to bolster the tourism and investment sectors with a hefty investment of \$800 billion over 10 years. Conversely, the Iranian Ministry of Tourism’s initiatives primarily focus on ensuring tourists have unrestricted access to the internet without website blockages, alongside attempts to dissuade the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from leveraging tourists as bargaining chips. The following table showcases comments from Iranians expressing admiration for Saudi leaders and their policies on Iranian websites, reflecting significant engagement from Iranian audiences.

**Table 3:** Comments by Iranians Expressing Admiration for Saudi Policies on Iranian Websites

Comment	Number of likes
He (the crown prince) is transforming Saudi Arabia into a global power while we .continue to support proxies	3,781
Salute to their patriotic ruler who thinks well of the consequences and final .outcomes of all matters	359
Mohammed bin Salman is one of the best living diplomats of .our age	143
Salute to the Saudi ruler who is adept at planning and thinking of his country’s .interests	16

Comment	Number of likes
O God. We have a lot of love and respect for Mohammed <sup>(10)</sup> .bin Salman	30

Professor Mehdi Bazuki of Allameh Tabataba’i University criticized Iran’s failure to realize its long-term economic objectives as outlined in the 20-year vision document. He emphasized that Iran aimed to become the leading power in Southwest Asia but had not achieved this goal. Instead, the gap between Iran and countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey and Azerbaijan had widened. Bazuki also highlighted the shortcomings of investments made by the National Development Fund, suggesting that its members should study the management of similar funds in countries like Norway, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.<sup>(11)</sup>

Indeed, these funds are among the world’s most successful and sizable sovereign wealth funds. Saudi Arabia’s ambitious plan to elevate the fund’s wealth to \$2 trillion by 2030 underscores its strategic vision. In contrast, Iran’s National Development Fund is depleted annually to support government expenditures, leaving only a few billion dollars in reserves. This stark contrast highlights a clear paradox in the economic management and policies pursued by the two nations, particularly considering Iran’s status as a major oil producer.

### ***Trade With Advanced Industrialized Nations***

Several Iranian economists and researchers have lamented the limited volume of their trade with major industrial nations renowned for exporting technology, such as Japan and China, compared to Saudi Arabia. This lament is amplified by the absence of trade with Western European countries and the United States since the reimposition of US sanctions in 2018.

Abolfazl Karimi, an Iranian researcher specializing in Arab world affairs, highlights a stark reality: while economic exchange between Saudi Arabia and Japan surged to over \$33 billion in 2021 and soared to approximately \$47 billion in 2022 — a notable 42% increase — Japan’s total exports to Iran in 2022 amounted to less than \$50

million. This paltry sum is even less than trade between two major firms, let alone countries. <sup>(12)</sup>

Another economist, Ehsan Soltani, a researcher and economic advisor, underscores this trend, stating that Iran has experienced a significant setback in global trade compared to its regional counterparts. This decline, which began four decades ago, is reflected in Iran's foreign trade volume, projected to be less than a quarter of that of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE in 2022.

Regarding trade with the world's second-largest economy, China, the Iranian newspaper Payam Eghtesadi notes, "The trade volume between Iran and China has risen from \$14.8 billion at the time of concluding the 25-year agreement to \$16 billion." Meanwhile, during the same period, Saudi Arabia's trade volume with China surged from \$87 billion to \$114 billion. This significant contrast speaks for itself. No more clarification is needed.

In the same context, Mahmoud Sadri, a journalist at Arman-e-Emrooz newspaper, noted, "The total trade between Saudi Arabia and Iran could potentially reach 300 billion dollars, with a target figure of \$500 billion in the future. This significant trade volume encompasses energy purchases, exports of services and technology and aligns with fulfilling China's considerable interests in energy procurement and exportation of goods." <sup>(13)</sup>

### ***Currency Stability and the Social Happiness Index***

Surprised by the substantial decline in the value of the Iranian currency and its adverse effects on the quality of life of Iranians in recent years, one social media user expressed astonishment in a post on Twitter, giving an illustrative example, "With 100,000 Saudi riyals, one can buy a BMW car, whereas with 100,000 Iranian riyals, it's only enough to inflate the car's tires."

In a comparison highlighting the contrasting fortunes of their respective nations, Mahmoud Sadri, a journalist with the Iranian newspaper Arman-e-Emrooz, expressed astonishment at the vast disparity in stability and happiness levels between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He remarked, "According to the latest reports of the World Happiness Index, Iran ranked 101st, while Saudi Arabia ranked 30th."



### ***Political and Economic Independence***

According to university professor Majid Muradi, there is a stark realization that challenges the long-held Iranian slogans of hostility toward the United States and ridicule toward Saudi Arabia for its perceived subservience to the United States. Muradi reflects, “For many years, we have been shouting the slogan of death to America and mocking Saudi Arabia by saying that it is subservient to America, but when we look carefully, we see that we have practically become subservient to America.” He further explains that Iran finds itself in a position where it seeks to appease the United States to access its frozen assets in South Korea for civil purposes, contrasting with Saudi Arabia’s stance, which has cultivated political independence through a strong economy. Muradi emphasizes the practical impact of economic strength on political independence, suggesting that Iran’s weak economy has compromised its autonomy despite its slogans of defiance against global powers.<sup>(14)</sup>

### ***Investment Climate and the Disparity in Exploiting Resources***

In the view of Davood Souri, a prominent economist and former professor at Isfahan University,

“Foreign investment isn’t just about money, which is abundant in Saudi Arabia. It’s about science, expertise, management, and integration into the global production chain of goods, services, and international luxury!; the attractive business environment. That’s what Saudi Arabia desires, but we lack it in Iran and seem uninterested. May God protect our country from ignorance and falsehoods.”

Peyman Molavi, an economist and university professor, emphasizes, “Saudi oil sales reach \$326 billion annually, translating to \$27 billion monthly or \$876 million daily, while we struggle to retrieve our funds from the International Monetary Fund.”<sup>(15)</sup> He contrasts this with Iran’s loss of \$4.5 trillion from oil sales due to sanctions. Regarding the mining sector, Molavi notes, “Saudi Arabia has invested \$50 billion in mining over the past two years. Riyadh aims to boost mining revenues from the current \$17 billion to over \$60 billion by 2030.”

In the same context, Siamak Ghassemi, an economic expert, remarks, “While a group stands in line in Iran to spread the news of the release of \$7 billion of Iran’s funds frozen in South Korea, last year, the UAE and Saudi Arabia began launching direct investments in South Korea worth \$40 billion. Last year, Saudi Arabia’s oil revenues were



approximately \$1 billion dollars per day, meaning that these \$7 billion are Saudi Arabia's revenues in one week. Oh, Iran! How poor you have become so that \$7 billion is an achievement for you."<sup>(16)</sup>

It is evident from the above that Iranian elites are keenly interested in the economic conditions of their neighbors, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They acknowledge, albeit with some regret at their own circumstances, the stark disparities between their own economic reality as an oil-rich state and the significant economic and developmental progress made by their western neighbor, Saudi Arabia. This comparison highlights differences in long-term economic planning, as well as disparities in societal prosperity and happiness. Furthermore, this comparison underscores the extent of Iran's dependence on the West despite its promotion of resistance policies and aspirations for political and economic independence. In contrast, it emphasizes the kingdom's remarkable ability to wield influence on the international stage and achieve a level of independence that eludes Iran.

### **Opinions and Responses to Religious and Cultural Issues**

These include the following:

#### ***Orientations of the Clerics***

Before the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal, Iran's clerics used to take a hostile position toward Saudi orientations, linking these to US and Zionist schemes. However, this deal has brought about a palpable shift in the positions of the clerics, with Iranian Friday prayer leaders describing the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal as a means of unifying the Islamic world and putting aside differences.

The Friday sermon in Iran serves as a prime example of this shift, given its wide circulation among concerned preachers across the country, with it reflective of the government's policies and orientations.<sup>(17)</sup> In a recent Friday sermon delivered by Hojatoleslam Hassan Zumi, he warmly welcomed the agreement with Saudi Arabia, emphasizing that the enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia only served to benefit the United States and Israel. He accused the previous government, led by Rouhani, of damaging Iran's relations with its neighboring countries while praising the current revolutionary government under Raisi for pursuing a policy of good neighborliness. Furthermore, the Friday prayer leader of Golestan highlighted that the Saudi-Iran agreement symbolizes the regional strength of Islamic Iran and represents a

defeat for foreign-backed opposition forces. He underscored that the agreement serves the interests not only of Iran and Saudi Arabia but also of the entire region and the broader Islamic world. In his Friday sermon, Hojatoleslam Hassan Turabi emphasized that the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia represents a significant setback for both the United States and Israel. This sentiment was echoed by Hojatoleslam Ismail Kazemi, who further highlighted the defeat of internal and external saboteurs.<sup>(18)</sup> Meanwhile, other preachers underscored that if implemented effectively, this agreement could mark the inception of the “union of the Islamic world.”<sup>(19)</sup>

At the Islamic Unity Conference this year, Hojatoleslam Shahriari highlighted the significance of Iranian-Saudi cooperation. He described the resumption of political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a crucial development that has sparked hope among Islamic reformers. Shahriari emphasized that both political-ideological schools have set aside conflict in favor of cooperation, leading to influential actions in this regard. He also commended the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its new approaches and religious discourse leaning toward openness.<sup>(20)</sup> Hojatoleslam Mohsen Haidari, a member of the Assembly of Experts, attributed the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran to the marginalization of what he referred to as the “Wahhabi” movement in its stronghold.<sup>(21)</sup>

Thus, hardline clerics are on the same page in the context of the Iranian government’s course of action. They consider the agreement to be one of the accomplishments of the revolutionary government and that the deterioration in relations with neighboring countries was caused by previous governments. Therefore, it is probable that the clerics will maintain their support for the agreement as long as the ruling elite perceives it as a solution to many of Iran’s political, economic, and social challenges. However, if the Iranian government opts not to proceed with it, there is a likelihood that hardline clerics will retract their support. Each stage of this process comes with its justifications from within, reflecting a system of conjectural and expedient Islamic legal corpus aimed at bolstering legitimacy and reinforcing the incubators of emulation (taqlid).

### ***Expressing Admiration for Reforms Related to Women and the Youth***

In the same vein, Iranians have acknowledged the influence of the Saudi model on their society, particularly after witnessing the

significant advancements and progressive reforms implemented by the Saudi government. These reforms, particularly those pertaining to the youth and women, such as granting women the right to drive, access to stadiums and employment in various sectors without strict dress codes, have resonated with Iranian women. This comparison between the Saudi and Iranian contexts has placed pressure on the Iranian ruling elite. As a response to internal discontent, particularly in the wake of events like the killing of Mahsa Amini and subsequent protests by youths and women against the government’s policies, Iran sought a truce with Saudi Arabia. This truce aimed to appease internal dissent and maintain a similar religious and jurisprudential framework, albeit with adjustments in literature and discourse. The following table illustrates some of the dynamics involved in this context.

**Table 4:** Comments of Iranians Expressing Rage at Their Economic and Social Conditions Compared With Saudi Arabia

Comment	Number of likes
O my sister, put on your hijab (in a mocking tone).	1,170
We are preoccupied with the hijab and with which foot we should enter the bathroom.	886
I wish I were a Saudi citizen.	74
We are now fighting for a lock of hair.	8
We will reach the day whereon Iranians will mount on camels (for transportation) due to those officials. <sup>(22)</sup>	23

Source: Prepared by the researcher

### ***Standing Up to Extremism and Radicalism***

Similarly, on the Saudi front, there was a noticeable crackdown on all forms of intellectual and religious extremism. This crackdown effectively curtailed hate speech, declarations of takfir and the marginalization of minorities, religions and sects to a significant extent. This strategic approach exerted pressure on the Iranian side, serving as an inspiration for its populace. Therefore, in response to certain clerics' actions within the seminary, such as issuing excommunications and excluding dissenters, Iranians found themselves compelled to adjust or refine their rhetoric to align with the rationality of Saudi religious discourse in its updated form.

### **The Impact of the Saudi Development Model on Iran's Home Front — Key Points**

The rivalry between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran, as two regional powers in the Middle East, has intensified the reciprocal scrutiny of domestic developments in both countries. This rivalry has impacted internal public opinion, leading to various comparisons drawn between the two nations based on the issues highlighted in the competing countries through international and local media outlets. There are several points of convergence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, including their economic capabilities, geographical expanse, religious significance, and the conservative nature of their societies. These intersections fuel societal discussions, as living conditions in both countries are presumed to be similar. Consequently, the greater the disparities, the more fervent the debate becomes. Iranians often gravitate toward comparing conditions in their own country to those in neighboring Gulf states, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The competitive backdrop between Iran and Saudi Arabia accentuates the unique impact of news originating from or pertaining to Riyadh. This is because the internal dynamics within the kingdom are relatively settled, with society enjoying safety and stability for decades, coupled with significant advancements under the Vision 2030 initiative in recent years. Conversely, the internal battle in Iran remains distinct, as Iranian society has grappled with worsening conditions over the decades. At the grassroots level, there is prevailing dissatisfaction and resentment among Iranians regarding declining living standards and the political choices that have led to confrontation and hostility with numerous countries worldwide.

### **The Decline of Iran's Official Narrative Regarding Saudi Arabia**

In the official Iranian narrative, its internal agenda and external relations are framed within the context of the ongoing confrontation with foreign powers, chiefly the United States, which seeks to dismantle Iran by toppling the current theocracy and installing a subservient government akin to the Pahlavi era. Despite facing sanctions, Iran has asserted itself significantly in the international and regional arenas. Within this narrative, Saudi Arabia is depicted as a key player aligned with the Western plan to undermine Iran. The country is portrayed as a hub of terrorism which plots against Iran. According to the official Iranian narrative, Saudi Arabia acts as an agent of the United States, backing extremist groups and Iranian opposition factions abroad and participating in alliances aimed at destabilizing Iran.

The Iranian ruling establishment had long propagated a false and inaccurate narrative about Saudi Arabia. However, recent developments within the kingdom have significantly eroded this narrative. The changing discourse among Iranians, both in comments and writings within Iran, signifies a shift away from the state-controlled narrative. This shift marks an end to the ruling establishment's grip over public opinion regarding Saudi Arabia and its ability to shape policies that are hostile to the kingdom.

In the recent period, particularly after the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia undertook several significant actions that underscored a clear shift in its relationship with the US administration. A prominent example was its refusal to comply with President Joe Biden's request to increase oil production, followed by its agreement to reach a deal with Iran itself, a deal brokered by China, a primary competitor of the United States. These decisive moves affirmed that Saudi Arabia's priorities in advancing its national interests are genuine and not merely rhetoric. This development unsettled the official Iranian narrative, which had long portrayed Saudi Arabia as closely aligned with the United States, attempting to conceal its own failures while downplaying the significance of Saudi accomplishments by attributing them solely to Western support. Furthermore, the cessation of media hostilities, a direct outcome of the Saudi agreement, compelled Tehran to refrain from framing its internal challenges as part of foreign schemes, particularly those involving Saudi Arabia. In contrast, Saudi

achievements across various sectors highlighted the root cause of Iran's predicament: flawed internal and external policies. This reality starkly contrasts with the official Iranian narrative, which consistently attributes all of its problems to external actors.

### **Indirect Leverage Over the Iranian Political System**

In societies facing challenges, discontent typically arises, but when individuals compare their circumstances to those of similar societies with favorable conditions, their dissatisfaction deepens. This leads to heightened resentment toward their political leadership, whom they hold accountable for their plight. In this context, the ongoing successes in Saudi Arabia will likely exacerbate societal tensions in Iran. The Iranian political system will struggle to find flaws, especially with the extensive coverage of Saudi achievements in the global spotlight, facilitated by technological advancements and diverse media sources. Furthermore, some of these achievements directly impact Iranians, particularly during their visits to the kingdom for Hajj and Umrah, where they witness significant developments in the organization and provision of services. Sporting events involving teams from both countries, such as the match between Saudi Arabia's Al-Nassr football club and Iran's Persepolis, also provide opportunities for Iranians to witness the manifestations of Saudi accomplishments firsthand, alongside interactions with international footballers such as Cristiano Ronaldo.

Social media will remain the largest medium for the expression of Iranian public opinion in response to ongoing Saudi developments, with most Iranians holding their leadership responsible for the country's problems. The challenge facing the Iranian establishment in this context is that it is still a prisoner of the first stage after the success of the 1979 revolution when it was at the height of its revolutionary enthusiasm. It presented a model drawing on moral and religious values that fight injustice and corruption and spread justice and promised the Iranians a better future than the situation they were living in under the rule of the shah. However, after four decades, the Iranian establishment has failed in all its promises, and the new generations have only witnessed the calamities of the current establishment. Even those who lived through the period of the monarchy yearn for its return with great sorrow. This does not mean that there are no critics of the kingdom in Iran. Still, their size at the

popular level seems small compared to those who admire the Saudi development model. The following table illustrates some of these criticisms and the negligible levels of support received compared to the positive interaction in the previously presented tables.

**Table 5:** Comments of Iranians Angry at Saudi Arabia

Negative Comments	Number of Likes
Pilgrims head to Saudi Arabia and provide it with the budget it needs.	168
Saudi Arabia managed to devour the money of Muslims through its ancient cube-shaped Kaaba. And now it plans to devour the money of non-Muslims.	83
We will head to the embassy to close it.	22
Again, Saudi Arabia behaves rudely.	3
Whatever advancements it achieves, Saudi Arabia will remain the cradle of terrorism and ISIS.	1
We have reached a point where we moan about what is happening in a tiny state on the map.	14
They don't build eternal paradise; they just build a good cage.	360
We don't look enviably to Saudi Arabia because they house the Kaaba and the Prophet's grave. Let them go to hell. We will build 2,000-3,000 shrines. <sup>(23)</sup>	17

Source: Prepared by the researcher

In light of this, the Saudi model is poised to become an indirect external factor in potential future protests in Iran if the ruling elite continues pursuing its failed political approach and fails to enact meaningful changes to address the country's longstanding economic challenges. This situation mirrors the dynamics of the Cold War era and the clash of systems between the Soviet Union and the United



States. While Vision 2030 embodies the Saudi dream of progress and prosperity, Iranians are grappling with the realities of daily life and remain apprehensive about an uncertain future.

### **A Card to Force Political Reform and Change the State's Orientations**

The current developments raise the stakes for reform within Iran, not limited to the “reformist” movement but encompassing all factions advocating for change. The worsening situation and escalating problems prompt the emergence of voices calling for a balanced foreign policy to normalize relations with the West to alleviate sanctions and integrate Iran into the global economy, enabling the implementation of stalled economic programs and development plans. It is plausible that the “reformist” movement could capitalize on Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy shifts, particularly toward the United States, as leverage against “hardliner” factions. The “hardliners” may react by either co-opting these options or adopting more uncompromising stances to maintain control and perpetuate their narrative of blaming foreign powers for Iran’s predicament. However, such reactions could lead to long-term repercussions. In this context, the Saudi model indirectly influences the Iranian political landscape.

### **Emulating the Saudi Model and Achieving Potential Benefits**

While Iran grapples with a multifaceted internal crisis, including deteriorating living conditions and strained relations with global and regional powers, the ruling establishment may be influenced by the pragmatic Saudi model. There is a growing recognition of the need to rationalize policies, governance and economic planning, driven by internal aspirations and the desire not to fall behind Saudi Arabia, which has surged ahead in all indicators. This shift could be facilitated by a reformist orientation at home, emphasizing precise scientific planning and development as a means to address Iran’s current predicament. However, implementing an economic simulation of the kingdom’s model would come at a significant cost for the Iranian government. Iran’s hostile policies limit its ability to diversify partnerships, and sanctions impede access to knowledge and modern technologies crucial for development. Furthermore, the government remains captive to an ideology that hampers progress and development.



## Possible Impact on the “Hardliner” Discourse

The inspiring Saudi model, coupled with recent religious experiences and comprehensive social reforms in Saudi Arabia, will exert continued pressure on both the Iranian government and its people. This pressure underscores the need for Iran’s religious elites and seminary to rationalize religious discourse and consider embracing radical and profound reforms akin to those witnessed in Saudi Arabia. Such reforms prioritize development, societal renaissance, the well-being of citizens and women’s rights over religious radicalism and divisive confessionalism.

## Conclusion

In the Iranian sphere, perceptions of Saudi Arabia tend to be largely positive among both elites and the general populace, despite the presence of a minority holding more extremist views rooted in ideology or sectarianism. The most prominent aspects of this perception can be summarized as follows:

■ **Attractive, influential model:** In recent years, Saudi Arabia has garnered significant regional attention, including from Iran, owing to its notable strides in internal development and its affirmed regional and global stature. Moving forward, it is anticipated that Saudi influence within Iran, both among its elite and the general population, will persist. This is attributed not merely to rhetoric but to tangible developments, positioning the kingdom as an indispensable regional power and a focal point for global interests. A potential catalyst for further shifts in Iranian attitudes toward Saudi Arabia could come from initiatives such as facilitating tourist visits for Iranian youths or inviting Iranian influencers to attend cultural events like Riyadh Season or exploring historical sites such as Al-Ulla. Observers anticipate that the positive image of the kingdom could gradually seep into Iranian literary and cultural expressions, including short stories, films and series, provided there is a degree of receptiveness from the Iranian government toward such voices.

■ **The stereotype of Saudi Arabia among Iranians has changed:** The perception of Saudi Arabia among Iranian elites appears to be undergoing a significant shift, with many expressing admiration for the kingdom’s modern approach to governance and strategic planning. This newfound admiration is characterized by a neutral

perspective, free from the influence of the Iranian government. The recent restoration of relations between the two countries has provided Iranians with a platform to voice their opinions more openly, liberated from the authoritarian constraints and propaganda that previously shaped their views of Saudi Arabia. This shift in perception reflects Iranians' aspirations for modernity and a desire to break free from ideological constraints imposed on society and individuals.

■ **A bigger role for alternative media outlets:** Undoubtedly, social media platforms and unofficial media channels have played a pivotal role in spreading news about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and comparing its policies with those of the Iranian government. These platforms have become instrumental in shaping perceptions of the kingdom, particularly since they operate outside the realm of the state's control. Furthermore, these channels facilitate interaction between individuals both within and outside Iran, including exchanges between Iranian and Saudi elites. This digital interaction is anticipated to continue to grow, driven by the kingdom's continued progress and widespread impact. Simultaneously, Iranians have a keen interest to closely monitor Saudi Arabia's progress and current affairs, viewing it as a means to exert pressure on the government through various media platforms.

■ **Credibility and reach:** Opinions and viewpoints regarding developments in Saudi Arabia are voiced by various individuals, including experts, specialists, former government officials and activists on social media platforms, alongside ordinary citizens. This collective expression underscores the widespread awareness and engagement with Saudi Arabia among a significant segment of Iranian society. The resonance of these perspectives from within a competing state holds substantial significance, particularly given their alignment with the notable advancements witnessed by the kingdom over the past decade. Saudi Arabia's strides in national development and the consolidation of its regional and global stature are underscored by credible data and media coverage, enhancing the credibility and reach of these viewpoints.

■ **Exposing the development gap between Saudi Arabia and Iran:** Experts and elites have articulated their perspectives on Saudi Arabia's developments, often juxtaposed with the situation within Iran, revealing a significant developmental contrast between the

two regional states despite their shared regional prominence and resources. While the kingdom has surged toward a future marked by prosperity, meeting the aspirations of its populace and playing a constructive role in advancing regional stability and progress, the Iranian government has adhered to an unrealistic approach, resulting in harsh living conditions for its people. Moreover, Saudi policies have bolstered its regional standing and global image, positioning it as a hub for international conferences. In contrast, Iran's policies have led to isolation, increased sanctions and internal unrest, exacerbating political instability and straining the country's budget with burdensome foreign policies.

In conclusion, restoring relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran has provided Iranians with a more realistic perspective on Saudi Arabia. The newfound openness has allowed for a candid assessment of the kingdom's developments, contrasting these with Iran's complex living conditions. As internal admiration for the Saudi model grows in Iran, Saudi Arabia's influence on the Iranian arena, albeit indirect, becomes increasingly significant. The kingdom's policies and achievements have become a source of embarrassment for the Iranian government. In a few years, Saudi Arabia has ascended to become the largest regional player, a pivotal actor, and a desirable regional partner for major powers. Externally, it has demonstrated independence and diversified partnerships, in contrast to Iran's alignment with Russia and China. This admired policy may incentivize Iran to reconsider its own behavior and emulate Saudi Arabia's approach to resolving issues and pursuing economic goals. Consequently, the Saudi model could serve as a potent pressure point on the Iranian government, prompting potential shifts in its domestic and foreign policies. Failure to adapt may lead to significant internal crises and a diminished standing on the regional and international stage.

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✉ [info@rasanahiiis.com](mailto:info@rasanahiiis.com)

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