


Future Scenarios of the Iran-Saudi Rapprochement: an Iranian View

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Abstract

Due to different interests, ideologies, and geopolitical goals, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have long been in competition, which occasionally got severe. After a seven-year rupture, on March 10, 2023, the two states agreed to restore diplomatic relations to reduce tensions. This research examines the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia and tries to answer this question: what are the future scenarios of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement? To tackle the question, this research tends to analyze the Iranian-Saudi relationship and shed light on the future scenarios of the deal from an Iranian perspective. Three scenarios are presented: the first one is the cynical one and pays attention to challenges and the driving forces that can deteriorate the present de-escalated relations. The second scenario considers the positive potentialities of the deal and the situation it can make for more stability and peace. The third one regards both elements of tension and compatibility. Ultimately, the third scenario is considered the most logical one based on the framework presented as the Balance of Interests.

Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, rapprochement, future scenarios, balance of interests.

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are major regional powers that seek a dominant position in the Middle East. Due to different interests, ideologies, and geopolitical goals, the two states have long been in competition, which sometimes turned to an indirect armed conflict. In 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a war in Yemen that initiated a significant arena for the Saudi-Iranian competition. In January 2016, Saudi Arabia decided to end its relations with Iran, which is an indicator of escalating tensions between both countries. Iran believes that Saudi Arabia lacks the capabilities to protect itself without the assistance of the US. The US policy also unfolded the containment of Iran, which was endorsed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As an example, in 2019, Houthis carried out drone attacks on Saudi oil pipelines against which Saudi's US-backed defense system was almost unable to protect the site (Albarasneh & khatib, 2019).

With all of this competition in the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia reconciled their relations through the mediation of China in 2023. After a 7-year rupture, Iran and Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations. Peace deal. This bilateral agreement is focused on ensuring regional stability in the Middle East and Gulf region. Moreover, it entails mutual assurance for confidence-building steps that neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran will sabotage the national interests of others on a range of issues in security, intelligence, political, and media spheres.

Using Balance of Interests Theory, one of Neoclassical Realism theories, tries to answer this question: what are the future scenarios of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement? To tackle the question, this research tends to analyze the Iranian-Saudi relationship and shed light on the future scenarios of the deal. To do so, a brief background of Saudi-Iranian relations has been presented, and then the impact of the deal on the countries of the region, which are important for both Iran and the Kingdom, has been assessed. Following that, three probable scenarios are discussed, the first of which is the cynical one and pays attention to the challenges and the driving forces that can deteriorate the present de-escalated relations. The second scenario considers the positive potentialities of the deal and the situation it can make for more stability and peace. The third one regards both elements of tension and compatibility. At the end, the third scenario is considered the most logical one based on the framework presented as the Balance of Interests.

There is no definitive or "single" theory of political realism;

there are, instead, many realist theories deriving from the same first principles and basic set of assumptions. Taken together, this large and growing body of work forms a theoretical perspective that has achieved the status of dominant research program in the study of world politics (Lakatos, 1970, p. 133).

Within the field of international relations, foreign policy plays a crucial role in shaping a state's relations with other states and non-state actors. Many IR theories have dedicated significant attention to explaining the behavior of the state. Following the end of the Cold War, there was a decline in the popularity of neorealism due to its focus on the bipolar system during that period. The emergence of a new international system compelled realists to revise their research, leading to the development of the neoclassical realist school of thought in international relations. Neoclassical Realism (NCR) is a theoretical framework that examines the interplay between state-level variables and international systemic factors to explain foreign policy behavior.

Randall Schweller, one of the famous neo-realists, argues that in the study of international politics, the relationship between internal and external factors has been neglected (Schweller, 2006). He believes that states tend to bandwagon or balance for profit rather than security. So, in order to bring the revisionist state back into the study of alliances, he proposes a theory of balance of interests.

The concept of balance of interests has a dual meaning, one at the unit level, the other at the systemic level. At the unit level, it refers to the costs a state is willing to pay to defend its values relative to the costs it is willing to pay to extend its values. At the systemic level, it refers to the relative strengths of status quo and revisionist states (Schweller, 1994, p. 99). He takes two kinds of states into account: status-quo states and revisionist states. Revisionism and status quo, he argues, emerge from the degree of dissatisfaction with "the current international system, and the resulting dissatisfaction then gives birth to alliances based on "balances of interests" (Rynning & Guzzini, 2001, p. 9). Schweller agrees with some notions of Waltz's neorealism while refuting some. As he puts it, "Consistent with traditional realism, therefore, my balance-of-interests theory includes both revisionist states (those that seek to increase their power) and status-quo states (those that seek merely to keep what they already possess). By relaxing neorealism's assumption that all states value what they possess more than what they covet, my theory allows for the full range of state interest.."

(Schweller, 1997, p. 929).

Based on neoclassical realism and specifically what Schweller has theorized, to analyze Iranian-Saudi relations and make a better understanding of what will come afterwards, these criteria should be taken as important:

- 1- The role of internal factors in states' foreign policies,
- 2- whether the states are status quo or revisionist and to what extent they follow each path
- 3: The role of great powers.

1. Iran and Saudi Arabia

Historically speaking, Iran and Saudi Arabia have served as the seats of two groups or denominations of Islam. Saudi Arabia introduces itself as the significant religious and cultural center for Muslims around the world, while Iranians are known as Shia Muslims with different views toward governance and some rituals. Throughout history, the Safavid dynasty, a powerful Shia government, and the Ottoman Empire, a great Sunni empire, were mostly competitors and had battles and skirmishes. It should not be neglected that most of the negativism about Iran in Saudi view is attributed to accusations the US makes about Iran, as the US has depicted Iran as a threat to its overall discourse in the international arena (Soltaninejad, 2021, p. 382).

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy approach toward Iran can be characterized by a mix of confrontation and engagement, as the kingdom seeks to protect its interests and assert its dominance while at the same time avoiding a larger conventional conflict. However, there has always been the potential for escalation between the two countries (Zorri, 2023, p. 62).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a unique system of governance that combines elements of Islamic theocracy and democratic republicanism. This way of governance has been exemplified in *vilayet-al-faqih*. The doctrine of *Wilayat al-Faqih* forms the central axis of contemporary Shi'a political thought. It advocates a guardianship-based political system, which relies upon a just and capable jurist (*faqih*) to assume the leadership of the government in the absence of an infallible Imam (who is the 12th Imam and the Savior) (Vaezi, 2004, p. 28).

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran changed its view toward the international system and took different approaches in its foreign policy. Despite the fact that Iran's foreign policy has been known as revisionist, the nuances of this concept must be taken carefully into account. One of the notions of Iran's foreign policy (FP) is said to be the policy of the

exporting of the Islamic Revolution. However, Iran has been considering the international system as unjust, which has to be changed in favor of less advantaged countries; it has chosen the soft way to export the ideology of its revolution. Unlike what is generally believed about exporting the Revolution as a tough, hard, and military-based approach, it is mostly based on soft power-to help and guide the other nations using its experiences and defending them in the international arena (Gharayagh Zandi, 2008, p. 288). Moreover, Iran's Supreme Leader, in one of his latest speeches, has said:

"We vvve ttt tll d yyyeee wttt to ... Tii s is tee ttt llll outcome of the revolution. I have said many times before that the Revolution is like spring weather, like a pleasant breeze, and it cannot be prevented. In gentle spring weather, a pleasant breeze and the fragrance of the flowers come out from the parks and spread to other places, and this cannot be stopped. No one needs to send that weather anywhere else; it spreads natuulll ly iteelf." (Ayatullah Khamenei, 2024).

Since the crown prince, Mohammad bin Salman, came to power in 2017, Saudi Arabia has launched several ambitious economic reforms aimed at diversifying its economy and reducing its dependence on oil. It also has taken steps to promote religious moderation and tolerance as part of a broader effort to modernize its society and strengthen its international image. On the balance, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy reflects their determination to defend their national interests and maintain a positive regional and global standing while simultaneously adapting to a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape (Zorri, 2023, p. 62).

In the dynamic landscape of international relations, the interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia showcase intricate interplay of regional powers on the broader canvas of great power politics. Over the last century, both countries have tried to strengthen their positions in relation to major global powers. This intricate balancing act brings them into a delicate dance with major players such as the United States, Russia, and China, as each pursues their strategic interests in the region. Over the last decade, the Chinese have stretched their economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious plan to build infrastructure and engage with governments around the world. The United States has maintained a strong military presence in the Middle East, and Russia has acted to counterbalance Western influence. As Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to engage with and react to the great power actors, their stance and decisions have effects not only on the

Middle East and its mechanisms but also throughout the larger arena of global geopolitics (Zorri, 2023, p. 65).

Most of the Arab-Persian rivalry dates back to the 1970s and 1980s, especially 1979, which is the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the year of the Siege of Mecca. Both events cut deep into both countries' memories and significantly changed their foreign policy. In this year, the Grand Mosque of Mecca was besieged by up to 600 militants under the command of Juhaiman al-Otaybi. In the aftermath of the attack, at the request of the Saudi monarchy, French GIGN units, operatives, and commandos were rushed to assist Saudi forces in Mecca. Moreover, the newly founded Islamic republic was fundamentally against the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, which was not only prevalent in Saudi Arabia but was also spreading to the whole Muslim world. This threat to Saudi leadership translated into a struggle for regional hegemony between the two countries, echoed by sectarian divides (Wehrey et al., 2009). Iran-Iraq 8-year-war crises was another dilemma that deepened the chasm between the two states in the 1980s. Besides, the other incident that exacerbated the relations between Iran and KSA happened in 1987, when during the Hajj, a clash between Shia pilgrim demonstrators and the Saudi security forces resulted in the death of more than 400 people. The above mentioned events, all together, disturbed Saudi kings, and an atmosphere of pessimism and distrust prevailed.

The Arab uprisings in 2011 further exacerbated the tension, especially in Bahrain, where protests against the Sunni royal family started by Shiites. Saudi Arabia sent troops to quell uprisings, and Iran was blamed for provoking the unrest. After President Hassan Rouhani's elections in 2013, Iran tried to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, but the two countries clashed over regional conflicts mainly in Yemen and Syria. Then, on the event of Hajj 2015, hundreds of Iranians were killed in a stampede. Saudi Arabia was accused by Iran of mismanagement, and Iran was blamed for playing politics in the aftermath of the incident (Nawaz, Amin, & Asghar, 2023, p. 48).

The direct confrontation intensified when the KSA executed a critic of the government and Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and forty other Shias. On the same day, Iranian protestors stormed and destroyed the Saudi Embassy in Iran on January 2nd, 2016. These events led to the cut of all diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are both regional powers in the Middle East with a history of rivalry and conflicts and have been jockeying

for regional dominance for decades. The U.S.'s waning influence in the region has opened up space for other actors, such as China, to step in and mediate conflicts. In the case of the Chinese-mediated Saudi-Iran peace deal, neoclassical realism suggests that the two actors had strategic motivations for agreeing to the deal. For Iran, the lifting of sanctions and the potential for increased economic cooperation with Saudi Arabia would provide much-needed relief for its struggling economy. Iran's strategic partnership with China and its pursuit of economic diversification in the face of US sanctions are the domestic considerations that have influenced its willingness to engage in rapprochement. For Saudi Arabia, the peace deal would reduce its dependence on the U.S. and other Western powers for security and potentially open up new economic opportunities. The desire of Saudi Arabia's leadership to diversify its security partners and seek alternative alliances demonstrated a shift in approach (Nawaz, Amin, & Asghar, 2023, p. 45). Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia has failed in reaching its foreign policy goals, whether overthrowing the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria or dethroning the Houthis. Saudi Arabia put extracting itself from the war launched in 2015 in Yemen in their first priority. The war, which after eight years just left hundreds and thousands of deaths, billions of dollars wasted, and a humanitarian crisis all around Yemen, while the Houthis still control much of the country and are closer to Iran. This situation pushed Saudi Arabia to come to terms with Iran and, subsequently, Ansarallah.

On March 10th, 2023, the countries announced that in a deal brokered by China they had agreed on resuming diplomatic relations within the next two months and an affirmation of respect for the sovereignty of states and the non-interference in internal affairs (Abdallah & Hafezi, 2023). One month later, on April 6th, the FMs of the KSA and Iran met in Beijing, marking the highest level of meetings between the countries since 2016 (Pourahmadi, Nasser, & McCarthy, 2018). Only a few days later, on April 17th, Iran officially invited King Salman to the country in return for the Saudis inviting Iranian President Raisi, who visited Riyadh on November 11th.

The rapprochement with Iran fits the KSA's new FP approach that "stem from keenness to favor political resolutions and dialogue in the region," as decreed by Saudi Prince Faial in Farhan (Hamad, 2023).

Political priorities in the region have changed due to the changes that have taken place at the international level, which prompted

countries to modernize their foreign policy and act in a way that serves their national interests. In this context, Iran and Saudi Arabia have moved in a balanced way between preserving their interests and preserving regional stability, which made them move toward rapprochement (Mnekhir, 2023, p. 107) (Mnekhir, 2023, p. 107).

2. Yemen

Yemen has been a battle field on which the regional actors, substate actors, and great powers converged and diverged. One of the most powerful groups in Yemen is Ansarollah, a Zaidi Shia Muslim group, which is also known as Houthis (However, *Houthi* originally refers to the family that has led the movement since the 1990s. Consequently, not all members of Ansarallah are now of Houthi descen).

Amongst the external opposition to the Houthis, Saudi Arabia has taken the lead. While the Houthi stronghold is in the northwestern part of the country, the Saudis have been supporting the old regime in the coastal city of Aden, which is in the southern part of the country and also hosts the bulk of Yemen's naval forces. The role Riyadh has played in Yemen is not without precedent, as the Saudi Arabian government has been the principal external influence in the region since the withdrawal of British colonists and Egyptian expeditionary forces from the country in the 1960s (Zorri, 2023, p. 70). Then, in March 2014, Riyadh mobilized a coalition of militaries and began airstrikes against the Houthi-dominated areas in Yemen and their affiliated groups. More than 370,000 people have died as a result of the war, with indirect causes such as lack of food, water, and health services causing almost 60 percent of deaths (Robinson, 2023).

Since early 2022, Saudi Arabia has actively pursued a negotiated end to the war, or at least its involvement therein. So Riyadh hoped that the deal with Tehran would help sustain momentum toward the exit from Yemen it seeks. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran might see a compromise in Yemen as a first step toward a regional security arrangement that would serve their interests (International Crisis Group, 2023).

3. Lebanon

Lebanon's strategic position on the Mediterranean Sea as well as its proximity to Israel have made it a vital national security interest for the Iranians. Access to Lebanese ports enables Iranians to ship goods to Europe, and being able to hit Israel gives Iran leverage in international politics (Zorri, 2023, p. 67). Iran has long had ties to

Lebanon through its Shiite community, the largest of Lebanon's 18 recognized sects. Many Lebanese clerics came from Iran, trained under Iranians, or had strong Iranian connections. Iranian-Lebanese relations were transformed after Tehran fostered the birth of Hezbollah in 1982. Iran's operational and financial support shaped Hezbollah into a powerful militia and an important deterrent against Israel. The Lebanese Shiite militia's symbolic and strategic successes against Israel have in turn made Iran a pivotal player in Levantine politics and broadened Iran's appeal generally in the Arab world. (Hokayem, 2011). Abdullah Safiuddin, the representative of this movement in Iran, said in an interview (Safiuddin, 2021):

“Le”””” ’ Hellll lhh tkkk tee eelief in tee velyytt -e Faqih and the leadership of the Imam as a model. Our relationship with the Islamic Republic is to take this model. On no day and at any political stage, the friends in the Islamic Republic did not ask us to do something for the benefit of Iran in Lebanon, and the Islamic Republic has not interfered in the internal affairs of Lebanon or even the issues related to the eeiittccce.”

Despite the aforementioned relations between Iran and Hezbollah, some Lebanese political groups view Hezbollah as a destabilizing force in the country and have accused Iran of using Hezbollah to interfere in Lebanese politics. To name one, the March 14 Alliance should be mentioned. This coalition includes a variety of religious and ethnic groups who united in pursuit of their common interest in the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Its leaders, like Samir Jaja and Rafik al-Hariri, opposed the March 8 Alliance (Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement) and the armament of Hezbollah (Khatib & Wallace, 2022) and considered it the problematic issue between Lebanon and the Saudi Kingdom (ISNA, 2016).

Historically, Saudi Arabia has had a significant influence in Lebanon through its support for Sunni political and religious groups, particularly the Future Movement led by Lebanon's Hariri political family. The Hariri family has been a strong ally of Saudi Arabia, and the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri had close personal and business ties with Saudi royals. However, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon has been strained in recent years, particularly since the Lebanese political crisis of 2017, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Saudi Arabia was widely believed to have been involved in holding Hariri hostage and pressuring him to resign. The incident sparked a

political crisis in Lebanon and led to heightened tensions between the two countries (Zorri, 2023, p. 67).

In recent years, the deterioration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia has had a significant negative impact on the situation in Lebanon. However, Hezbollah's position in the new structure of the region has not been fixed yet. The experts and analysts, against or pro-Hezbollah, believe that the return of ties between Riyadh and Tehran would ease tensions between Lebanon's political parties, which may open the door to a political solution. It is also said that radical voices in Hezbollah will be silenced in the short term under this agreement, giving space to more pragmatic voices (Alami, 2023).

4. Iraq

Iraq consists of antagonistic ethnic, national, and religious groups, thus presents challenges for establishing stable political institutions in the country. Before 2003 and the fall of the Ba'ath party in Iraq, some Shia political groups went to Iran and swore allegiance to the religious authority of Ayatollah Khomeini (and by 1989 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). After the United States' invasion in 2003, Iran supported Shia groups and, in the following years, trained a Shia militia in that country. Generally, after 2003, Iran gained more influence in Iraq through Shia groups.

By way of contrast, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq deteriorated in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, which prompted a US-led coalition in partnership with Saudi Arabia to intervene and reinforce Kuwait's sovereignty. In 2003, Saudi Arabia was initially critical of the US occupation and opposed the removal of Saddam Hussein's government. The Saudi government also accused the new Iraqi government of being too close to Iran. However, in recent years, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iraq has improved significantly. In 2015, Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Baghdad after a 25-year hiatus, and the two countries have been working to improve economic and political ties (Zorri, 2023, p. 69).

The process of reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia allows Iraq to reduce the objection of Tehran and Iraqi political parties to communicating with Riyadh. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia seeks to strengthen relations with Iraq and move it away from the "Shia crescent" and return it to the Arab identity and ranks of conservative Arab kingdoms. By normalizing relations with Tehran, Riyadh can better achieve this goal and will reduce Iran's sensitivity in this relationship with Iraq (Salami, 2023).

5. Syria

Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Iran has been actively trying to maintain stability in the country. Upon the invitation of the Syrian government, Iranian military advisors and troops have been deployed to Syria to assist the government in its fight against rebel groups and extremist organizations (SANA, 2017). Along with supporting the Syrian government, Iran has seized the opportunity to extend its sphere of influence in the Middle East.

At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Saudi Arabia accused the Assad government of committing gross human rights abuses and of succumbing to Iranian foreign policy objectives. In return, the Syrian government accused Saudi Arabia of supporting extremist groups and of trying to undermine Assad's regime. The two countries severed diplomatic ties in 2012 (Zorri, 2023, p. 69). After 11 years, eventually on May 9th, 2023, Saudi Arabia decided to resume work on its diplomatic mission in Syria, which had been suspended since November 2011. On the same day, Syria has decided to resume the work of its diplomatic mission in Saudi Arabia (Digital Journal, 2023). It is obvious that Iran-Saudi reconciliation accelerated the restoration of the ties between Syria and Arab states.

Despite all these de-escalation measures, Iran will continue seeing Syria as its ally and a key part of the "axis of resistance." So, Syria's return to the Arab arm would not hinder Iran's deep relations with this country. In fact, based on a sense that the West has lost all interest in Syria now that the threat from the Islamic State has been contained and overall levels of violence have decreased, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and others have come to the conclusion that they have no other option but to engage with the Assad government in order to deal with Syrian refugee populations (a major concern for Jordan) and, most immediately, the flow of drugs from Syria, for which unemployed and underemployed young people across the Arab world, and especially in the Gulf, are a significant customer base (Borck, 2023).

6. Scenarios

Generally, Iran and Saudi Arabia are supposed to continue their relations in three distinct directions. Pessimistically looking, the two countries will head toward hostility, leading to confrontation. To look on the bright side, the two regional powers would go further in de-escalation and rapprochement. The third path, which seems closer to reality, hires the elements of both competition and cooperation. This can be called "the controlled competition."

6-1. The first scenario: heightened conflicts

However, Iran and Saudi Arabia fixed the broken ties after nearly 7 years, and it took more than 2 years of mediation of different states, starting from Baghdad and reaching Beijing. There are still wide gaps between the two states. These gaps can be traced back in two major categories:

The first one is the long-lasting ideological gap, or better to say tensions between the two. As mentioned earlier, Saudis and Iranians' interpretations of Islam stand on the two opposite ends of the spectrum. It is said that approximately 10–12 percent of the Saudi population is made of Shias, mostly habituating in the Eastern oil-rich region (Saudi Arabia 2022 International Religious Freedom Report, 2023). Based on unofficial records, more than 15% of Saudis are Shia, though (Qazvini Haeri, Zamani Mahjub, & Azari, 2019, p. 36).

The ideological tensions do not seem to end any soon. Political Islam, which is exemplified in Islamist movements such as Hamas and Ikhwan al Muslimeen, has always been opposed to Wahhabism, the prevailing narration of Islam in the Kingdom. This opposition reached to the point that Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab states and some non-Arab ones, severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and blocked Qatar's airspace and sea routes in 2017, accusing Qatar of supporting terrorism, interfering with their internal affairs, and maintaining relations with Iran (Gambrell, 2017).

In the wake of the 7th October war between Hamas and Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia's differing views toward Hamas and its power and function in Gaza raised one again. While Iran tries to keep Hamas in power, Saudi Arabia favors its demolition. On the other hand, as the situation exacerbated in the Red Sea due to the deterrent measure taken by Ansarollah, the Saudi Arabian Air Force shot down rockets fired at the Zionist Regime by the Houthis in Yemen using Eurofighters. Germany decided to permit the sale of Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jets to Saudi Arabia since it protects not only Zionists but the West's interests in the region. It can be argued that Saudi Arabia is getting closer to the west once again, and those countries like Germany, the UK, and the US, which lifted or limited their arms sales to the Kingdom, resumed their exports. Seemingly, Saudis are getting into the place of the mediator in the Hamas-Israel war, which undoubtedly has Western support, and it means more room for the West to take action in the Middle East (The New Arab, 2024). This approach is thoroughly against what Iran wants in the region—a totally endogenous and regionally

planned approach for the future. Hence, as Saudis lean toward the USA and its allies, there would be a wider gap between the former and Islamic republic of Iran.

This probable scenario forecasts another regional cold war. Despite the existence of the potentials of the conflict between Tehran and Riyadh, the military confrontation is not highly expected. As told before, this path seems cynical. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia would favor going back to the hostility after 7 years of cut diplomatic ties.

6-2. The second scenario: cooperation in peace

From another viewpoint, the Iran-Saudi rapprochement is a gateway through which the stability in the region, at least in the Persian Gulf, would be guaranteed. The two countries, their nations, and the region were tired of a decade of conflict, so they were impelled toward a reconciliation, and obviously there is no willingness to disrupt this newly made agreement. The thaw in Iran-Saudi relations could reduce competition and tensions in the regions, which may contribute to greater security and stability. This could have positive implications for regional economic development and growth, as the investors will be more willing to enter the market with reduced political risks. The Middle East has suffered destabilizing consequences due to the Saudi-Iran rivalry in the region, which has led to deadly conflicts in Syria and Yemen. The attacks against Emirati oil tankers in 2019 and Saudi energy infrastructure in Aramco in 2019 deteriorated the world's energy security and safety of maritime time routes, which is significant for global connectivity (Ehteshami, 2023, p. 15).

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, after getting entangled in the quagmire of Yemen, reaching no intended result, had changed the whole path of its foreign policy prior to restoring ties with Iran. Mohammad bin Salman came to understand that the only secure way to gain more power for himself, the Saudi dynasty, and the country in general is to pursue high economic goals rather than seeking adventure in the region and getting into battlefields with no outcome. So, the Kingdom has prioritized attracting foreign investment to be able to continue the Vision 2030 projects, which is the key to the success for MBS. Regarding this shift in Saudi attitude, one can expect the future of rapprochement with Iran to be sustainable and to be a groundwork for further cooperation.

In this regard, Iran is also supposed to cooperate with Saudi Arabia in regional activities. Although this optimistic view seemed

more logical before the burst of war between Hamas and Israel, some still believe that this reconciliation will put Iran and Saudi Arabia side by side, preventing each of them from making a decision contrary to the other side's interests.

6-3. The third scenario: competition and cooperation

The final scenario between conflict and rapprochement would be where both Iran and Saudi Arabia remain competitive rivals, but the hostilities do not lead to open warfare. A more realistic, thus probable, scenario for the future of Iran-Saudi rapprochement is neither the optimistic collaboration nor the cynical continuation of the previous tensions.

As mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia is not in search of any further conflict in the region; conversely, it favors a more stable region to be able to focus on economic targets. Saudi Arabia is also in a kind of hidden rivalry with the UAE over geo-economic issues and is willing to turn to a transitional and touristic hub in the region (Reisinezhad & Bushehri, 2024). So it can be argued that KSA has no ambition to rage another war or a so-called regional cold war over ideological issues.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is no longer the state that totally relied on the US. Being left to its own by the USA in recent conflicts, in coalition against Yemen, and in attack against Aramco-to name some-has disillusioned the Saudi leaders. So it is hard to envision a scenario where the Pentagon and the broader U.S. national security community fully cooperate with the idea of obligating the United States to commit more military resources to the Middle East when the U.S. National Security Strategy and the U.S. National Defense Strategy are screaming for a greater U.S. focus on China's potential seizure of Taiwan and Russia's current war against Ukraine (Saab, 2023, p. 9).

Besides, the US is less concerned with Saudi oil and Middle East affairs in general, paving the way for China to intervene in regional dynamics. One of Washington's wishes in relation to its Arab regional partners is for them to build their own military capabilities so they can better protect themselves and share the burden of regional security (Saab, 2023, p. 9).

On the other side, unlike the US, whose intervention in the region will lead to tensions among regional states, Chinese mediation is not expected to be so. China will not choose between Saudi Arabia and Iran because it relies on both for substantial oil imports. China and Iran are also strategic partners (although it is

unclear what the real terms of that partnership are). Therefore, it is hard to imagine China agreeing to formally ally with Saudi Arabia and provide it with protection against Iran (Saab, 2023, p. 8).

The other issue that existed in between has been Saudi Arabia's normalization of relations with Israel. The normalization process between Israel and Arab states started in 2020 with a plan called Abraham Accords, which Iran seriously opposed from the beginning. Some months before the start of the Gaza War, the Saudi Kingdom was getting closer to publicizing official relations with Israel, with the mediation of the US and also some prerequisites put by the Kingdom as the conditions for normalization. By the time Israel started a full-scale war against Gaza, it seemed that not only has the normalization process been marginalized, but the Axis of Resistance holds the upper position.

The region after the war is no similar to the one before it, and it poses another challenge before Iran and Saudi Arabia and the regional order they would establish. The KSA has not given up normalization but cannot follow it as before since it has to cooperate with Iran in the face of Ansarollah actions in the Red Sea. So far, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have tried to prevent the tensions in the region from exacerbating, while there are obvious contrasts between the two states over support of Hamas and relations with Israel.

Conclusion

The recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, mediated by China, marks a significant turning point in the complex dynamics of the Middle East. Being the powerful states with high influence on the other states and the order of power in the region, the two countries' relations are a determinant factor both in the region and the world. In this paper, after explaining a brief background of Iran and KSA and their conflicts and cooperation, 3 different scenarios have been introduced, each of them focusing on a special dimension. While the first scenario elaborated on the challenges and the probable tensions that would occur on the path of reconciliation, the second scenario views the rapprochement as a strong tool to bring stability to the region and alleviate the severe competitions. The third scenario considers a mixture of the factors mentioned in the two previous scenarios.

The framework hired in this research is the balance of interests, theorized by Randal Shewller, a Neoclassical Realist. To evaluate the scenarios by means of the theoretical framework, the important factors of the theory should be taken into account. The first criterion is the importance of the internal factors in the foreign policy. Both

Iran and Saudi Arabia have to consider the internal level; Iranians suffer the long-term hostility and the economic pressure put by the US and its allies, so that detente with a regional power like Saudi Arabia that is dedicating much effort to boost its economy. On the other side, Saudis also need a peaceful and stable region to be able to follow the ambitious economic plans, the ones that Bin Salman's legitimacy heavily depends on.

The other important element in assessing the probable scenario is to consider whether the states are revisionist or status quo. The Islamic Republic of Iran is known for being a revisionist state that always opposes the coercion of the non-regional powers. Hence, Iran tries the most to get along with the regional states to overcome the challenges; however, in a case like Yemen and Syria, the views of Iran and Saudi Arabia differ strongly. Saudi Arabia, on the other side of the game, is a status quo state that seeks stability not only for the Saudi family's power inside the country but also for the other kingdoms in the region. This difference in the essence of their outlook would be challenging since Iran does not stop supporting the resistance movement, while Saudi Arabia will be against them. Notwithstanding the fundamental strategic difference in their outlooks regarding the international system, their tactical stances may vary from case to case. For instance, in the case of Syria, while Iran tried to maintain Bashar al-Assad's government, the KSA sought total regime change in this country. The recent rapprochement was the result of the two states tendency toward more compatibility with each other. So, while they do not want to destroy the agreement, the controversial issues still remain and need attention.

The last factor mentioned prior in the paper is the role of the great powers. Saudi Arabia has been a US ally, whereas Iran disapproves most of the US Middle East policies. Notwithstanding these contrasts, the Kingdom no longer relies on the West with closed eyes but mostly seeks regional cooperation. The current conflicts in the region pose a threat before Iran and Saudi Arabia and their deal and have paved the way for the United States and European countries to play a role in the region. In such a situation, if Iran and the kingdom do not try to close the views, it can severely damage the fragile agreement made less than a year ago.

To sum up, considering all the positive and negative elements in the current condition, the third scenario seems the most logical one. If Iran and its Saudi counterpart want the de-escalation to sustain, they have to arrange agreements and present initiatives for the post-Gaza war region, taking into account the other side's interests and concerns.

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