

## Post 9/11 Challenges in Saudi-Iran Relations in the Middle East Region

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### Abstract

*Saudi-Iran are the two major powers in Middle East, have experienced strained relations since decades. In Middle East region there were three powers existed namely Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, but post 9/11, the US led removal of Saddam Hussain reduced Iraq's influence as a balancing power, leaving Saudi-Iran as the two dominant states competing each other. This paper investigates how the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape reshaped Saudi-Iran relations through sectarianism, nuclear rivalry, power struggle, and regional proxy conflicts. By studying and analyzing pivotal details from books, reports, research articles, newspapers, regional and international media, dissertations and other relevant literature was used to identify consistent themes of rivalry. There are key challenges between Saudi-Iran relations, particularly after the 9/11 incident, which are Sectarianism, Nuclear issue, Proxy wars, and US excessive involvement. It particularly answers the question what are the post 9/11 challenges in Saudi-Iran relations in the region. The moderate initiatives of the King Muhammad bin Salman are for strategic growth, internal stability, diplomatic engagement, and to improve their global image. Moderate policies encourage diplomatic efforts which reduce tensions by restoring their bilateral ties; e.g. China mediated talks between Saudi-Iran in 2023-2025, eventually restored their diplomatic relations. The "Moderate Islam" policy of King Muhammad bin Salman allows greater freedom in Saudi Arabia which ultimately reduces the appeal of Iran's revolutionary ideology among its people, which creates potential tension between them. Findings suggest sectarian rhetoric often masked geopolitical objectives, while external actor, US deepened the rivalry in pursuit of their own interests.*

**Keywords:** Middle East, sectarianism, hegemony, proxy conflicts, US involvement

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## Introduction

Saudi Arabia and Iran are the two major Islamic countries, enjoying a special status in Middle East region and in the Islamic world. These two states are detached in the East by the Persian Gulf and to the West by Iraq. Iran and Saudi Arabia have relations for almost a century. In the first phase both were considered the twin pillars of regional power. Iran largely assumes the role of police man, while Saudi Arabia is important but not dominant United States (US) ally in the region (Weddington, 2017).

In the pre-1979's era, Iran-Saudi Arabia maintained enduring diplomatic relations. In 1960's they played a pivotal role in founding OPEC and OIC. From 1962-1965, Iran provided support to Saudi Arabia during the proxy war in Northern Yemen against Egypt. During 1970's Saudi-Iran served as crucial allies of US in the region. Both countries engaged in high-level diplomatic visits to contain Iraq's expansionist ambitions and to avail support to pro-western countries in the region. In 1968 Great Britain decided to withdraw its forces from the Persian Gulf by 1971, which created power vacuum. Even so, the resulted power vacuum did not disrupt the cordial ties between them (Hadžikadunić, n.d.).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran had a profoundly impact on Iran's relations with Arab countries in general, and specifically with Saudi Arabia. Ayatollah Khomeini aimed was to deliver a revolutionary message to the citizens of the Arab countries and encourage them to revolt against their corrupt leaders. Khomeini considered the monarchies of Arab countries as tools for the US to defend its interests in the region of Middle East (Ejaz, 2018). The Revolution sowed the seed and foundation of their increasing rivalry. Saudi Arabia and Iran are still engaged actively in regional competition which will consequently instable the security of the region (Ejaz, 2018). Saudi Arabia shows itself a stable monarchy, showcasing wealthy, humanitarian effort, guardian of the Gulf region, alliance with the west and adherence to moderate Islam. While, Iran positions itself as a revisionist leader, opposing the current regional arrangements and external involvement in Middle East (Cerioli, 2018)

There were three authorities in Middle East namely, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. After the 9/11 attacks on World Trade Center (WTC), US got an opportunity to intervene in the region under the poster of war on terror with the aim to eradicate Iraq (Hameed, 2017). The toppling of Saddam Hussain by the US, negatively effects the Saudi-Iranian relations and the problem of balance of power came into existence (Hameed, 2017). Saudi Arabia-Iran desires for geopolitical supremacy and it became national security objective for both states (Chen, 2017). They have intention to dominate the neighboring countries for their economic,

military and geopolitical interest. Both states are the immense oil producer therefore they declare their hegemony over the Persian Gulf. They make ready their army for doable war with each other (Fadaee, 2017). Saudi Arabia and Iran are seeking empowerment, security and supremacy by forming alliances with prominent countries in the region (Alghunaim, 2014).

The dynamics between Saudi-Iran can be analyzed through the lens of Neo realism.

There are many tenets of Neo realism; anarchy, structure, capability, national interest and polarity (Ababakr, 2021)

According to Neo realism, the international system has anarchic structure (Ababakr, 2021). Initially, each player is accountable for itself, because the international system is a self-help system. The second assumption is that states frequently felt in danger by a possible assault from other states (Alghunaim, 2014). Therefore Saudi-Iran is in doubt about whether or not there will be an attack from each other state. This is the reason to get ready for any future attack, which put them in the series of influence rivalry to assurance their continued existence. They are competing for leadership and hegemony in the Gulf region, and struggling to enhance their ability for the purpose to guarantee their protection from opponents.

According to Neo realism, all states are equal but power makes a distinction between states because power is the perfect survival. The power of a state is calculated by its tangible capabilities (armed assets) and its dormant capability (wealth and population). So, just war is not the entire method of gaining power (Alghunaim, 2014). Therefore Saudi-Iran attacked oil power station and launched cyber-attacks in order to weaken each other's economy, When JCPOA was signed between Iran and P5+1, Saudi Arabia was worried about it while Saudi Arabia takes satisfaction when US withdrew from JCPOA and imposed economic sanctions on Iran.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are in power struggle and support different proxy groups in Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq to enhance their influence (Fatima, Zehra, & Malik, 2017). In the proxy wars Saudi-Iran played their active role against each other, and indirectly fought for their national interest, have no sympathy and sincerity with the civilian of these countries. Because in Neo realism, national interest is mainly specified in terms of survival and security, rather than morality, ideology and internal affairs.

There are three kinds of polarity; unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity. Bipolarity occurs when two performers have almost equivalent quantity of qualified capability (Waltz, 2008). The polarized relations

between Saudi-Iran make a bipolar framework suitable perspective for analysis, because these are two regional powers.

The aim of this paper is to investigate challenges in Saudi Arabia and Iran relations in the aftermath of 9/11 in regional geo-politics. The secondary data sources are used, includes books, reports, journal articles, newspapers, websites, videos and dissertations related to Saudi-Iran relations. Document analysis is utilized throughout the study. Data collected from multiple sources are carefully analyzed and examined to reach the facts. Through qualitative method and analytical approaches, the enduring challenges in Saudi-Iran relations are investigated.

### **Challenges in Iran Relations with Saudi Arabia**

#### *1. Sectarianism*

Ayatullah Khomeini was a political and religious leader of Iran, having a particular ability to formulate and unify people on a broad range. He was opposed to domestic fascism and foreign imperialism. Therefore, he represented an action to the Shah Dictatorship and massive people joining him, because he was in favor of social justice and income distribution, common people heard him enthusiastically. Due to a large number of huge demonstrations, the Shah of Iran fled Iran in 1979 and Khomeini returned, through elections he comes to power and declared Iran an Islamic country. Khomeini wanted not just only as a head of the Shi'a Islamic world but required to be chief of the whole Muslim world. He wanted to be a revolutionary leader and working towards exporting revolution to other regional countries. The revolution (1979) was becoming a beginning point of emerging power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Because it was a direct threat to Saudi monarchy. Inter-state competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia seen, and it has a very bad effects on socio-economic for Sunni Muslims in Shi'a countries and for Shi'a Muslims in Sunni countries. Iran-Saudi domestic policies favored one sect while ignore the other opposite sect (Chen, 2017).

Saudi Arabia and Iran are in a constant struggle for regional supremacy, ambitions to lead the Islamic world, to dominate and influence the neighboring countries like Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon for their economic, military and geopolitical interest. Saudi Arabia and Iran accused each other for charging sectarian hostility by supporting militia in all these countries. Their conflicts have been traced back to the 1979 revolution. Saudi Arabia worried about the Iran's intentions to enlarge revolution in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East region. Over time, Saudi Arabia became strategic partner and close ally of US, and Iran established close ties with Russia. Saudi Arabia and Iran are challenging

each other for regional and political domination for decades but after the 2003 Iraq war, both states have been combating next to each other and are still busy in sectarian differences (Chen, 2017).

The cancellation of the Hajj pilgrimage in 2016 was due to two controversial incidents took place in Saudi Arabia, which was directly influence their relations. The first incident was the two Iranian teenagers in Saudi Arabia Jeddah airport attempted rape by security guards. The Saudi Arabia even did not apologize for the incident and stop issuing visas to Iranians whose wish to perform Lesser Hajj (Umra). The second incident was the Saudi Arabia mismanagement of the pilgrimage resulted in Mina calamity in September 2015, in this tragedy 2000 pilgrimages were killed in which 464 were Iranians. The Saudi political elite promised that Saudi would conduct a thorough investigation of the tragedy in Mina and would punish the Jeddah security guards, but no satisfactory results were found against these incidents. The Hajj was stopped due to different issues, which was not directly related to Iran but it took main part in cutting off their diplomatic ties i-e the execution of Sheikh Nimr Baqr al-nimar (Amiri, 2016). The Saudi official put certain conditions that were not acceptable to Iran and eventually resulted that the Iranian pilgrims not being able to perform the annual pilgrimage.

Unfortunately, this was not the first time and every year we witness a repeat of deadly Hajj calamities, particularly in Mina. In 2006, the Hajj charge caused pilgrims to walk in excess of drop-down pilgrims which resulted 289 offended and 380 deceased. Dead are grounds by skull injuries and suffocation; they were not rescued properly in large mob. Disturbance during Hajj is a genuine surgical problem that deserves special concentration (Manoochehry & Rasouli, 2017). The performing of Hajj is an important religious duty, therefore Saudi Arabia should not have imposed such restrictions on Iranian pilgrims and should have treated them equally.

US survey shows that the sectarian conflict between Saudi-Iran is likely to widen the existing sectarian schism in the region, which could create further frictions among Muslim communities (Dawn, 2016).

Saudi-Iran uses sectarian element as a label for their geo-political interests (Chen, 2017). Because they don't support other Shia or Sunni states or movements grounded on their religious shared sect alone, while they invest on those countries that satisfy their geo-political interest. They had struggle for power and influence through socio-economic and political power which results largely in increase of sectarian conflict. Sectarianism is just a pretext, Saudi-Iran are in power struggle i-e in the Arab Uprising Saudi Arabia was backing the Yemeni, Bahraini, Egyptian governments and was against the Syrian government and supporting the protestors while

Iran supporting the protestors in all these countries except Syria. Syria is a secular state then why Iran protecting the Asad regime? It shows that they are playing game just for the expansion of power.

King Muhammad bin Salman said that people emulate the 1979 (Islamic Revolution) model in different countries including Saudi Arabia, but now we have to get rid of it, and to move towards 'Moderate Islam'. Because we do not know how to deal with it, this problem is spreading throughout the world. His behavior indicates that for achieving this target he will soft the values of Saudi Arabia. In the last month he removed restrictions on women driving car, can avail higher education, opportunity for employment, and are entitled to receive medical services. Saudi Arabia's economy depends on oil but now the new economic zone is expected to extend into neighboring countries Egypt and Jordan, will feature in tourist hub in which men and women can interact freely (Hincks, 2017).

The Saudi government organized events, featuring musical performances on Saudi modern history, drone displays, fireworks, and sound effects, along with the participation of 3,500 performers. King Muhammad bin Salman has allowed concerts and cinemas, and relaxed the guardianship system that gives men significant control over their female relatives. In last month, Saudi Arabia Shura Council, a main advisory body to the government approved a proposal to amend the law regulating the national flag and anthem. However, it is unclear that the change will affect the content of the flag which includes the Islamic profession of faith: 'There is no god but God; Muhammad is the prophet of God' (Yaakoubi, 2022). Prince Muhammad bin Salman intentionally implemented a moderate Islam policy to stimulate economic development and reduce the influence of Iran's revolutionary ideology, because if citizens experience more freedom, they are less likely to be drawn to revolutionary ideas.

## 2. *The Nuclear Issue*

Iran is worried with acquiring safety for the regime and increasing its status in the Middle East. The gaining of an Iranian nuclear capability would reinstate and overturn the planned inequity of the Middle East and assurance Iran regional dominancy (Grumet, 2015). Saudi Arabia worries that it will become a wager in Iran's game to become the sovereign nation in the Islamic World. Regional supremacy and Islamic headship would lastly give Iran with an extraordinary supremacy that other foremost states likely cautious to incite. Competitor state Saudi Arabia is not worried that Iran is going to use the bomb against them, or even that Iran will use the bomb to attack the United States or Israel. Iran latent ambitions for having

nuclear capability are a mission for prestige, regional dominancy, stability and security. Iran sees how America intervened in Iraq that have nuclear weapon exits while Iraq regime did not have nuclear capability therefore it had no longer exist. In 2002, G.W. Bush addressed in his state of Union and includes Iraq in “Axis of Evil” state and after one year of this speech US initiated regime change in Iraq. Therefore, Iran also felt fear about that the US will challenge a government alter in Iran similar to the attained in Iraq. Iran felt the US as a threat since 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran generated a secret nuclear program with the help of China, Russia, and Pakistan, from 1982, through Abdul Qadeer khan propagation network. In 2002, during the Ahmadinejad presidency, the National Council of Resistance confirmed the survival of Uranium enhancement facility and a heavy water reactor. Ahmadinejad regularly said that Iran had the right to practice a nuclear program given the limits of the NPT (Weddington, 2017).

The acquiring of Iran’s nuclear ability becomes a grave problem in relation with the West, especially with US. The international community busy with Iran from 12 years concerning the prospect of Iran’s nuclear capacity. In 2013, alter in the attitude of negotiation was seen. In this year Hassan Rouhani become president of Iran and begin negotiation with the West to eliminate the penalties that weaken Iran’s economy. In 2015, the framework for a final agreement Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was attained by p5+1 (China, US, UK, Russia, France and Germany) and Iran. The JCPOA aim was to limit Iran nuclear capacity in exchange of relief from certain economic sanctions and to pursue civilian energy program which largely affect Iran-Arab world security relations. These two powers would work in their mutual interest in order to bring stability, security and peace in the region. It was important not only for international security and nuclear explosion but for Iran and the immense entire Middle East. If Iran dishonored the provisions and conditions of JCPOA, the penalties will be re-enforced (Weddington, 2017).

The latest nuclear agreement with Iran possibly projected Saudi Arabia’s necessity to expand its possess nuclear plan. Saudi Arabia was considering this deal as providing US “stamp of approval” to Iran’s nuclear program. Because Iran’s major ideological and planned competitor, Saudi Arabia has proclaimed its arrangement to manufacture its own nuclear program with a smallest amount of 16 nuclear reactors as a way to fill this space. Saudi Arabia thinks that it has the assets to obtain nuclear potentialities from an external resource. Because Saudi Arabia has a record of performing covertly in the nuclear field and the making of

Saudi Arabia weapon for the purpose to oppose the Iran's weapon remnants a different and concerning prospect (Grumet, 2015).

### 3. *Saudi-Iran Role in Proxy Wars*

Saudi Arabia and Iran are in a constant struggle for regional supremacy, ambitions to lead the Islamic world, to dominate and influence the neighboring countries like Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon for their economic, military and geopolitical interest. Saudi Arabia and Iran accused each other for charging sectarian hostility by supporting militia in all these countries (Modebadze, 2018).

In the kingdom of Bahrain Sunni in minority while Shia in majority but deprived, consequently reasoning a sectarian division that is a regular source of division between the populace and regime. In 2011 the Arab spring in Bahrain was broke out, because of the uninformed imprisonment of the opposition, social disparities and the police aggression against Shia activist's fuelled protests around the country. The Saudi kingdom asserted that the demonstration was only the Shia idea which is arranged by evil Iran for the destabilization of the government and threatens the Akhalifa rule. The Bahraini regime called the GCC mutual defense pact after a month of disorder for the purpose to request for support to cease the demonstration. Bahrain insisted that the protest was backed by Iran, which threatened not only Bahrain but every GCC countries (Cerioli, 2018). Iran supported the Bahraini people and trying to interpret the Bahraini uprising against tyrannical regime. Iran wants to represent itself ethically superior to sectarianism and don't differentiate between Sunni and Shia.

In March 2011 Saudi led intervention in Bahrain, when the PSF entered in Bahrain, Iran condemned it and warned Riyadh that Saudi Arabia going on the wrong way and it will must confront severe consequences. Tehran demanded UN involvement in Bahrain for stopping the killing of Bahraini people. The GCC military intervention was opposed by Iran it was not prepared to lead a direct quarrel and don't issue any official order to penalized the GCC, nor cutting diplomatic ties. If the Al-khalifa regime falls then Iran would be able to talk about a better space for increasing Iranian influence. Riyadh had fear in Bahrain that Iran could obtain significant influence if Shia was empowered. The PSF intervention in Bahrain representing that the Saudi kingdom did not require any approval for the intervention, because it informed the Washington after it began the actions in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia wants the supremacy of sunnism, stability of the monarchical regime, empowerment of the GCC, containment of the power of Iran and military leader in the Gulf region (Cerioli, 2018).



In the Arab Peninsula, the Republic of Yemen is the poorest country, which is divided into two countries until 1990 due to tribalism, injustice, corruption, and competition of political elite's etc. The Houthis grow up as a political group in 1990 and in 2004 under the leadership of Hussain Badr al Houthi, which is converted into an arm militia, opposed the administration. Yemen blames Iran of being a strategic associate of the Houthis (Joint Crisis committee, 2020).

In September 2014, the Houthis took over control the national capital in Sana'a, occupied the governmental institutions and arrested Hadi. Hadi was enforced to leave by the Houthis. Hadi escaped to Saudi Arabia, requested military intervention in Yemen to restore his government. In March 2015, Saudi organized the coalition composed of African and Middle Eastern countries that wanted to intervene in favor of president Hadi called Operation Decisive Storm. The main objective of this operation was to ensure the Houthi's influence because this group was remained in control of the capital and supported by Iran (Cerioli, 2018). In the proxy war in Yemen, Iran supported the Shia military Houthis group and Saudi Arabia with other Sunni countries in the region sponsoring the Yemeni government (Joint Crisis committee, 2020). Both states supporting opposite side in Yemen civil war

Yemen has faced civil war since 2015, Saudi Arabia led-military coalition to support the Yemeni government while Iran funded Houthi rebels for expanding sphere of influence. Ballistic missiles fired from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, which were intercepted by Saudi air defense system. The king of Saudi Arabia Muhammad Bin Salman accused Iran for these missiles attack. Saudi authorities claimed Iran supplied missiles to rebels Houthis in Yemen which escalating civil war, While Tehran denied their involvement in this attack (Perrigo, 2017). The Yemen civil war is a battlefield for Saudi-Iran and both have no concern and sympathy with Yemeni civilians. They are engaged in Yemen proxy war for influence enhancement and to balance each other.

Syria has been the closest ally of Iran. Iran examining the 2011 popular unrest in Syria with significant anxiety. The Alawite minority Islamic sect comprised the Syrian leadership, and members of the Alawite community consist of only about 10% of the Syrian population. It has a tyrannical regime remained in power for about 40 years, under two presidential government. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria was the only one country that provided diplomatic and figurative support to Iran during Iran-Iraq war. Syria is a secular Ba'athist state and totally different in governmental structure from the Islamic state. Both of these states are distrustful of the US, and Iran apparent willingness to support Syria in any future confrontation with Israel. Tehran wanted to

discourage future Israeli attacks on Syria. Throughout the presidency of G.W. Bush, Iran and Syria were pushed together by the merciless hostility of the US the only Iran was selected an “Axis of Evil” state. Both states supported Hamas and Hezbollah for the purpose to confront Israel. Syria supported Iran on all key issues (Terril, 2011). Iran supported the Al-Assad regime and Saudi Arabia supported the protesters by giving funds to them for the falling of Al-Assad regime. Syria was become a battle ground for proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran has much concern in the Syrian civil war: the first interest was to protect the Assad regime as it provides the best opportunity for Iran in getting supremacy in the region. The second interest of Iran was to limitize the role of Israel and keep it aside (Joint Crisis committee, 2020).

Iraq is a main concern for Saudi and Iran after the fall of Saddam Hussain and both of them want to maintain good relations with Iraq. Iraq is a Shia dominated country therefore Iran enhances its relations with Iraq while Saudi Arabia has not improved its relations with Iraq because of Prime Minister Nouri-al-Maliki and many other leaders have stressed relations with Saudi Arabia (Terril, 2011). Iranian president Ahmadi-Nejad visited to Iraq in 2008, this was the first visit of the Iranian president to Iraq. In this visit a diversity of business accords were signed which enhance the bases of their financial ties. At that time Iran was one of the largest in Iraq’s building and manufacturing zone. Iran support Shia militant groups with weapons and trained them through elite Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Al-Quds Force against US troops. In these militia organizations Iran worked with Muqtada al Sadar (Sadar Movement), Jayash al Mehdi, Asaib al Haq and Kata’ib Hezbollah. During the Iraq national election of 2010, Saudi Arabia visibly preferred secular Shia leader Dr. Ayad Allawi, he led a political coalition gracious to Sunni Arab interest. In this regard Saudi widely funding to Dr. Allawi, Prime Minister Maliki was got angry about the influence and funding of Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab countries to Dr. Allawi, on the other hand Ayad Allawi criticized the Iranian interference in Iraqi politics (Terril, 2011).

The March 2010 election was questionable and underlined the truth that Iraq deeply ruined due to the ethnic and sectarian division. Ayad Allawi condemned Prime Minister Maliki for failing to defend the Iraqi interest in relation with Iran. The Iranian military intervened in Iraqi Kurdish village and attacked them, and sidetracked water from rivers flowing into Iraq therefore the pro-US Awakening Council re-establishing links to the Sunni rebellious organization Al-Qaeda as a means of alteration against the crude Shia majority government. Sectarian issue remains serious in Iraq; it was a point of anxiety for both Saudi and Iran.

US opposing the Iranian influence in Iraq but following the removal of US armed forces from Iraq, it becomes impossible for Saudi Arabia to remain inactive, because Saudi Arabia might rely on US to oppose Iran without looking for to use its own pressure. Furthermore, after the withdrawal of US forces the US became helpful and encouraging of Prime Minister Maliki while the Saudi official intensely mistrusts on him (Terril, 2011).

Lebanon is a weak and small state in Middle East, which is influenced by international and regional countries. Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Syria and US played different role in Lebanon. Iran has a well-built connection with Hezbollah which is designated by US as terrorist organization. Hezbollah constantly keep representative in the parliament of Lebanon. Iran gives generous financial aid to Lebanon through Syria. Saudi Arabia also began funding for reconstruction after the war of 2006. The Israeli military intervened in Lebanon against Hezbollah. The Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was able to fight against the Israeli military. The 33-day war was ended without achieving their objectives (Terril, 2011). Iran was helping and encouraging Hezbollah against Israel while Saudi Arabia blamed them for accepting the Israeli challenging strike. Saudi Arabia blamed Nasrallah for the death of 1,100 Lebanese, \$ 3.5 million value of spoil the Lebanese economy and 10,000 home destruction in the war. Saudi-Iran indirectly fighting against each other for their own interest (Terril, 2011). Saudi-Iran should collectively work for the liberation of Palestine. Saudi Arabia is the US top ally; therefore, Saudi Arabia needs to convince US to stop backing Israel from inhuman cruelty. But Saudi-Iran is in constant power struggle and both states seek to affirm their religious, economic and military influence in the region. For the hegemony and influence enhancement Saudi-Iran engaged in proxy conflicts.

#### *4. Role of External Player: US Allied VS US Opposed*

After 9/11 attacks US directly involved in Middle East politics. In 2003, US intervened in Iraq in the banner of war and terror and continued its presence in Iraq until the end of 2011. US re-assured its allies like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Syria and Yemen for their protection and achievement of their interest in Middle East (Byman & Moller, 2016).

The chief objective of the US in Middle East was to uphold manager of the region's vast petroleum possessions. Throughout the late 1960's and 1970's there were much debates in congress about their economic interest in Middle East. Therefore, US build stronger relationship with Arab monarchies, since it was in the territories that the big oil deposits were to be found (Primakov, 2009).

US and Saudi Arabia aligned on the issues of counter terrorism, nuclear proliferation and regional security. After 9/11 Saudi Arabia stopped fundraising by private groups that don't directly terrorize Saudi security like Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Taliban, Hamas, and completely depend on US to provide movable intelligence to Saudi complements. Saudi Arabia felt pleasure to have intelligence relationship with US. US also supported Saudi Arabia on the ground of Yemen and Syrian issue. In the issue of regional security, involves the suppression of Iranian nuclear ambitions and to minimize the influence of Iran in the Arab countries. After the withdrawal of US from Iraq, the Saudi official was feared about the Iranian influence in Iraq and likely the US-Iranian contract would leave them alone in the cold war. Saudi leadership said that Washington needs to highlight that the withdrawal from Iraq does not meant withdrawal from the Gulf. But the US administrations do not continue its assurance (Gause, 2011).

When the JCPOA was signed, it had begun a new era of cooperation between US and Iran, Saudi Arabia was fearful about their relations and thinking that it would leave Saudi Arabia alone in regional conflicts. Saudi Arabia worried about the Iranian nuclear program and shared its concerns with US outspokenly and indirectly that it's essential to obtain their own nuclear prevention capability if faced with Iranian nuclear capacity. Quickly Washington wants to make clear to Saudi Arabia that the nuclear proliferation is a sensitive issue; it would basically change their relationship with US, destabilize the region and eventually reduce their own security (Gause, 2011). The Pentagon notified congress of a 10-year has awarded Saudi Arabia \$ 60 billion weapons package and connected technological support to strengthen Saudi Arabia against Iran (Wehrey, 2012).

In May 2018, the Trump government extracted from the JCPOA nuclear agreement of 2015, declaring that the deal did not concentrate on wide variety of the US apprehensions about the Iranian performance and it will not eternally prevent Iran from mounting nuclear program. In 2016, US pursued maximum pressure like imposing economic sanctions, and in 2019 US designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard corps (IRGC) a Foreign Terrorist Organization (Zanotti, 2021). Saudi Arabia supporting the fighters against the Assad regime whiles the bilateral relations between US and Saudi Arabia was under stress. US quickly took action to demolish the tension in the Persian Gulf, but had not punished the Assad government in Syria which was the culpable crime opposed to humankind (Mahmood, 2016).

US supported Saudi Arabia logistically and intelligently because US thinking that a Sunni Muslim strength is the best manner of tackling and consequently destroying the Islamic States (Henderson, 2016).

On 2 January 2020, US murdered the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qasim Sulaimani in Iraq. He was an influential and dominant person in Iran; therefore, US felt threat from him. Major General Qasim Sulaimani was the motivating force behind the external military operation of Iran and maintains movement to keep the Assad regime stable in Syria (Thomas et al., 2020).

On 10 January 2020, president Trump in an interview said that Sulaimani was involved in planning large scale attacks on four embassies while Secretary Esper said that he did not see any specific intelligence that representing threat. US administration argued that the killing of Sulaimani was an effort to discourage future Iranian violence. In its first reaction of Sulaimani demise, Iran launched numerous ballistic missiles targeted two military bases of Iraq where US forces are positioned but no losses reported by US and Iraqi militaries. Iranian reaction could take numerous forms like activating militia force to attack US forces deployed in Iraq, Syria, targeting oil production facilities etc. On 10 January 2020, US announced new sanctions on Iran. Many observers believe that US-Iranian confrontation will create a most hybrid warfare that probably enduring strategic dynamics in the Persian Gulf (Thomas et al., 2020).

Saudi Arabia regional policy is shaped by vision 2030 which focuses on economic diversification and the growth of new sectors. Saudi Arabia avoids conflicts with neighboring countries, to protect investments and reforms. On 13 June, 2025, Israel attacked Iran, Saudi Arabia publically condemned Israel hostility. Saudi Arabia takes care of Iranian pilgrims until they return to their native country. US aircraft launched airstrike on three nuclear facilities of Iran. The war initiated by Israel, while the strikes marked Washington entrance into conflict. In retaliatory action Iran launched airstrike on the US al-Udeid airbase in Qatar. In 2025, the 12 days war between Iran-Israel, Saudi Arabia with other gulf states remained neutral. In April 2025, Saudi Arabia's defense minister Khalid bin Salman visited Iran, meet with the Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei, urged Iran to pursue diplomatic relations with US to avoid further escalation (The Unit for Political Studies, 2025).

China viewed vision 2030 a prospect for deeper collaboration with Saudi Arabia, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiatives. Both states committed to improve environment to support investment in Kingdom (Arab News, 2018). Saudi Arabia established a platform to strengthen global industrial partnership which attracts investors, along with supporting the strategy of growing non-oil exports. Saudi-Russia has

investment alliance which has grown-up from \$491 million in 2016 to \$3.28 billion in 2024; it indicates the increasing economic partnership (Marshad, 2025).

The meeting held in Beijing on 6 April 2023 for the restoration of Saudi-Iran diplomatic ties and to de-escalate their tensions. This was the first formal meeting between the foreign ministers of Tehran-Riyadh in a span of seven years. Important points of the China-brokered agreement were; the re-opening of their embassies and initiating additional collaborative measures. Eventually the détente between them could help to stabilize the region (Orr & Yaakoubi, 2023). China's contribution in brokering rapprochement shows that US could be replaced by China's positive and neutral role in Middle East.

### Findings

- i. Sectarianism is strategically used by Saudi-Iran to expand their influence, form alliances and to strengthen their position in regional conflicts. Although Iran ideologically opposed monarchies, it pragmatically supported Assad's secular regime to secure regional influence and maintain a strategic corridor to Hezbollah. Saudi-Iran have played role in proxy wars in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and supported opposite sides for influence enhancement that it would badly affect the regional security and integrity.
- ii. The nuclear ambitions of Iran and Saudi Arabia function primarily as a deterrent mechanism, which intensified hostility because both perceiving it as a strategic threat which exacerbating a security dilemma and competition for regional influence.
- iii. External pressures such as US influence on Saudi Arabia discourage cooperation with Iran, because US considered Iran's nuclear capability as existential threat to Israel and support Saudi Arabia to counter Iran. Another factor is US purchasing oil from Saudi Arabia at favorable prices. Therefore, the bilateral cooperation between Saudi-Iran can reduce US influence in the region.
- iv. The initiatives of Crown Muhammad bin Salman include the moderate Islam policy and the vision of 2030, which reflects focus on economic development; to protect the trade routes like the Strait of Hormuz from closure in order to maintain energy markets stable. Saudi Arabia avoids direct military involvement in Middle Eastern affairs and remains neutral, focuses on diplomatic

engagement because military involvement is very costly, e.g. Saudi Arabia neutral role in the 12 days war in 2025 between Iran-Israel. In moderate Islam policy and initiatives efforts are made to limit sectarian influence while encouraging economic development and modernization. The moderate Islam policy may also cause tension with Iran because it weakens the appeal of revolutionary ideas but this tension is far less serious compared to the confrontations of the past military involvements e.g. In 2011 Saudi led intervention in Bahrain.

### **Recommendations**

1. Sectarianism masks geopolitical rivalry therefore the GCC and Iran should promote a regional security forum to address security concerns collaboratively without sectarian framing. Saudi-Iran should end proxy wars by engaging in regional peace talks and committing to non-interference. They should join humanitarian initiatives which can help to rebuild trust reinforce regional stability.
2. Saudi-Iran should hold dialogues and adopt cooperative measures to manage the nuclear issue and resolve regional security. Both of them could adopt a deterrence mechanism similar to US-Soviet détente, confidence building measure and transparency, as practiced during the cold war, it can reduce misunderstandings.
3. Saudi-Iran should hold direct dialogue through OIC, GCC plus Iran, which can provide neutral ground for addressing conflicts, to reduce relies on US mediation. By focusing on shared interest such as energy, counter terrorism, regional security which can also create pathways for sustainable cooperation in Middle East.
4. Saudi-Iran should prioritize diplomacy over rivalry because stability in their relations directly reflects in the gulf security and Middle East stability.

### **Conclusion**

Saudi-Iran just seeking national interests and are constantly in power struggle.

Their rivalry demonstrates that sectarianism is less an issue of theological doctrine and more as a tool of political strategy. They use sectarian narratives just to consolidate internal legitimacy, mobilize regional allies, and validate interventions in proxy wars.

External actors, particularly US played an active role in intensifying their rivalry. By strengthening polarization and align with one side (Saudi Arabia) while sideline the other (Iran). If Saudi-Iran converged and strengthening their bilateral cooperation, then US will have to seek another pretext to pursue its strategic interests in the region.

Saudi-Iran played active role in perpetuating proxy wars throughout the region for consolidation of influence. This ultimately destabilized fragile states far more than Saudi-Iran themselves. Fragile states facing violence, prolonged insecurity and fragmentation.

Saudi King Muhammad bin Salman adopted the moderate policy which shifted the Saudi-Iran relationship from open hostility towards measured diplomacy, while fundamental competition remained. Saudi-Iran faces regional economic competition; therefore, Saudi Arabia took initiatives to build up its economy through oil exports, regional infrastructure projects, and trade partnership to attract foreign investors. Saudi Arabia moderate policies indirectly challenge Iran's religious and regional influence, which creates potential tension between them, because Iran implements a strict Shia religious and political framework, while Saudi Arabia promotes a moderate Sunni Islam. The Saudi moderation policy will increase the interest of western allies in Saudi Arabia which ultimately decrease Iran's relative influence in the Middle East geopolitics. Under the moderate Islam policy, citizens enjoy more freedom which reduces public interest in revolutionary movements, which contributes to strained relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The 2025, 12 days war between Iran-Israel significantly changed regional dynamics, encouraging Middle Eastern countries to take into account negotiation and talks. The war highlighted shared risk to the regional economic stability, security, and political influence, which heightened the need for swift diplomatic measures. Therefore, Saudi Arabia foreign minister held meetings with international counterparts to facilitate a ceasefire and attend meetings directly with Iranian counterpart to pursue diplomatic solution. Saudi Arabia successfully remains neutral but challenges existed. One of them is the closing of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran. This will have severe economic implications for Gulf States. It is a pivotal strait because significant fraction of the world's oil and gas export passes through it, which making it a critical point.

Saudi Arabia's building economic ties with China and Russia in the sense of trade and investment, which indicates that Saudi Arabia is seeking partners beyond its traditional allies like US and European



Union. Saudi Arabia foreign policy sees to improve ties with US, China and Russia and not to completely rely on US. It shows a balancing relationship with regional power (Iran) and international power, to not completely standing with the West against Iran.

### Future Implications

If Iran-Saudi rivalry continues, it is likely to empower non-state actors; it could escalate violence and fuel terrorism which turned the region in cycles of insecurity.

China is leveraging economic influence and diplomacy while avoiding aligning with any faction. e.g. China mediated between Saudi-Iran in 2023 to restore their diplomatic ties, both of them reached on the decision to reopen their embassies within two months, closing a seven years diplomatic rift. US did not facilitate rapprochement between them therefore China successfully mediated between them. Its mean China is emerging a neutral power, competent of replacing US as a pivotal broker in Middle Eastern affairs. Just like, the US withdrawal from Iraq, Saudi-Iran struggle to enhance their influence in Iraq, filling the power vacuum left by Washington.

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