



Academic Paper

The Prospects of Iranian-Saudi Relations



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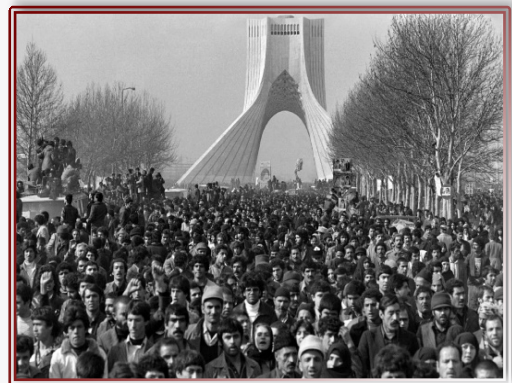
The Prospects of Iranian-Saudi Relations

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

The year 1979 was a major turning point in the Middle East, when strategic transformations brought new features to the geo-strategic scene, which reflected locally, regionally and internationally on the political, economic, security, social and cultural levels. It is sufficient to consider the following features:

1. The Iranian revolution took place in February 1979, and it had a profound role in inciting revolutionary religious sentiment. However, it pushed various parties to instigate the Shiite-Sunni schism on the one hand, and the Persian-Arab schism on the other, and Iran was transformed from a country with strategic relations with the West and Israel, to one of their strategic problems.



2. The first Arab-Israeli “peace” treaty between Egypt and Israel was in March 1979, that is, a month after the Iranian Revolution. It was a severe shock to the political legacy and popular conscience that believed in the postulate of eternal conflict with Israel, based on religious motives and historical rights of Arabs in Palestine. It was a turning point in the Arab perspective of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Normalization and opening embassies with Israel continued in both the Maghreb and Arab Levant, which limited the activity of Palestinian resistance in Arab countries, and paved the way for the expansion of Israeli relations with a number of countries, especially in Africa.

3. Saddam Hussein assumed the presidency in Iraq in July 1979, succeeding Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, five months after the Iranian revolution and four months after the Egyptian-Israeli treaty. This change led to the outbreak of a series of wars between Iraq and several sides; Iran, Kuwait and a Western-Arab alliance, which led to the political instability of Iraq and the entire region, besides the execution of Saddam Hussein.



Saddam Hussein



- 4. Juhayman al-Otaibi's attempted coup in Saudi Arabia (KSA) in November 1979, in the battle that took place in the Great Mosque of Mecca (*Masjid al-Haram*). He claimed the Mahdi's arrival, which accelerated developments on the one hand, and fueled a certain trend in the Islamic political spectrum on the other hand. Consequently, the turmoil in the region increased, not to mention the deepening of security concerns within the Saudi political system itself.



**Juhayman
al-Otaibi**

- 5. The Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, which made the US and the Arab religious movements in particular much closer, although the Soviet Union included six Muslim republics. The Soviet entry fueled the illusion that the conflict was only between people of faith (religions) and atheism (the Soviet Union), rather than a conflict over oil, strategic location and markets. The West and Israel exploited this event to bring regional powers and the Arab society, in particular, into a conflict that would make the Arab-Zionist conflict less central in the map of regional and international strategies. KSA was a fundamental force in pushing and nourishing this orientation.

In each of the previous five transformations, the Gulf position in general, and KSA in particular, was in complete contradiction with the Iranian position, which established a broad conflict between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries on the one hand and Iran on the other hand. The establishment of the GCC in



1981 was not isolated from these phenomena, especially the Iranian Revolution and the Arab participation in the Afghanistan war against the Soviet forces. Each side (Gulf states and Iran) began to fuel the opposition of the other party, however, the conflict between Iran and each Gulf state varied in intensity. The map became more complex with the use of the historical cultural heritage across sects, especially the Shiite-Sunni dualism. The five facts we mentioned intertwined, and thus it was no longer possible to understand the circumstances of regional conflicts without taking them into consideration.

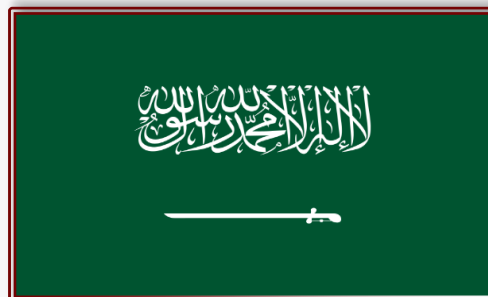
Dispute over the Regional Leader State

The literature on international relations is inclined to a geo-strategic hypothesis stating that one of the factors of regional instability is the competition of regional powers—which are close in strength—over which country will be the central state of the region.² Examining the

situation in the Gulf sub-regional system reinforces this hypothesis, where major regional countries use various tools to prove their centrality in the region, while competing with other regional powers that are close in strength.

KSA Centrality

Looking at the GCC countries as a sub-regional system, KSA is the center, as it outperforms the rest of the Council members in terms of population, area, gross domestic product, oil reserves, military power, religious status, and even by its strategic location given that it has land borders with seven countries: Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, the Sultanate of Oman, Qatar and Yemen. It also shares maritime borders with five countries: Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea in the Red Sea; and Iran and Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf.



The Iranian Revolution and other 1979 phenomena caused deep concerns for KSA, but its main strategic goal was to “contain the repercussions of the Iranian Revolution.” Consequently, it supported Iraq strongly during the war with Iran; the Saudi print, audio and visual media focused on the duality of Shiism and Sunnism, and even the notion of “Arabism versus Persianism.” It seems that the growth of religious political trends in Saudi society, in particular, and the Arab society, in general, has triggered deep concerns about their impact on the “centrality of the ruling family” in KSA, in particular, and the Gulf, in general. For the Arab Islamic forces, namely the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement, welcomed the Iranian revolution, specifically in its early days,³ as this movement had its own fans and elite in the Saudi society. These conditions formed the bases of competition between Iran and KSA, and the latter began to see any diplomatic or other activity by Iran an attempt to destabilize it, whether by Iran or its regional allies.

Hence, to the Saudis, the collision between Iran and KSA is based on two considerations: First, Iran threatens the centrality of the Saudi ruling family by spreading the revolutionary Iranian model, which is for the Saudis a model of “exporting the revolution.”⁴ Second, the competition in proving their regional centrality, which was clearly referred to in the Saudi Vision 2030⁵ and the Iranian Vision 2025, as we will explain later. For whoever is able to prove it, will be the most capable of adapting the policies of regional powers to its advantage, and will attract international powers to adapt their policies to its advantage.



Centrality of Iran

There is a clear indication in official Iranian documents and Iranian academic studies that Iran strives to be the “regional power” in the Middle East, employing all its capabilities and building its local, regional and international strategies on that basis, with all its long-term and profound consequences. The “Vision 2025” document of the Iranian Expediency Discernment Council, reinforces this tendency, as it states that Iran aspires to be the leader of the region in 2025.⁶



This Iranian tendency, which has the history of Persian civilization in mind and the Islamic context of revolutionary Shiism, is reflected in the writings of Iranian intellectual elite, who support the contemporary Iranian revolution.⁷

Iran feels that the Western powers, especially since the overthrow of the Mosaddegh movement, work on two options: Either consolidating Iran’s centrality in the region, especially in the Gulf, to their advantage if Iran is closely linked to their strategies and interests; Or they would abort any Iranian effort to become the regional power.

The Iranians are aware and have deep doubts concerning the ability of the Saudi administration to escape US influence, especially in decisions that affect US highest strategic interests. Their conviction is reinforced by the deep US penetration of Saudi state structures, not to mention the US military presence in KSA and the rest of the Gulf states. Moreover, normalization and opening of Israeli embassies in the Gulf states have increased, and the airspace of some of them, including KSA’s, have been opened to Israelis and the crossing of Israeli civil aviation, not to mention the increasing news, in Western and Israeli media, regarding the growing tendency for Saudi-Israeli rapprochement, which Iran considers an undermining of all Iranian tendency to be the regional power.⁸



The Saudi Foreign Minister’s statements that “Mutual respect, non-interference in the two countries’ internal affairs and commitment to the United Nations Charter” must be the core of Saudi-Iranian relations⁹ might indicate the underlying concerns.

The Conflict between the Two Centralities

A review of Saudi-Iranian relations since 1979 indicates the following (see details in Table 1):

The bilateral relations are non-linear, where from 1979 to 2023 (44 years) there were:

- • Complete confusion in the bilateral relations; severing and restoring them. The period of severed diplomatic relations amounted to 11 years, including four years throughout 1987–1991, and seven years throughout 2016–2023. Thus, there was one year of rupture for every four years of restored relations since the Iranian Revolution to the present.
- • Difference in their positions on all regional issues: Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, US, sectarian differences, media wars, and issues concerning pilgrims, etc.
- • Three Iranian presidents, Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami and Mahmud Ahmadinejad visited KSA, while no Saudi king visited Tehran. This means that communication initiatives come from the highest authorities in the Iranian political echelon, while there is a “promise” that King Salman will visit Tehran after the agreement sponsored by China between the two countries.
- • Throughout 1995–2020, Saudi-Iranian trade declined by 19.5% annually.

Table 1: Iranian-Saudi Relations 1979–2023

| Year | Bilateral Relations |
|------|--|
| 1980 | Saudi calls to end the Iraq-Iran war, with implicitly supporting Iraq that later developed into semi-public support, opposed to inflammatory Iranian political literature. |
| 1985 | Iranian accusations that KSA is flooding the oil markets to pressure Iran. |
| 1986 | Foreign ministers of the two countries exchanging visits. |
| 1987 | Confrontations between Saudi security forces and Iranian pilgrims, killing about 400 of them. |
| 1988 | KSA severs its diplomatic relations with Tehran (over the pilgrimage problem). |
| 1989 | Secret talks between the two countries in Switzerland, and Iran’s participation in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Conference in Jeddah. |
| 1991 | Diplomatic relations were restored after approximately 4 years. |
| 1992 | An Iranian trade delegation visits KSA. |



| Year | Bilateral Relations |
|------|---|
| 1997 | Restoring direct flights between the two countries, and KSA's participation in the OIC Summit in Tehran. |
| 1997 | The Saudi Ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs and Interior visited Iran. |
| 1998 | Hashemi Rafsanjani's visit to KSA, and the formation of a joint economic committee headed by the foreign ministers of the two countries. |
| 1999 | Khatami's visit to KSA. |
| 2001 | Signing security agreements between the two countries. |
| 2002 | A second visit by Khatami to KSA. |
| 2006 | KSA hosted a conference in Mecca attended by Sunni and Shiite scholars, who called, in a statement, on Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq to refrain from shedding blood, displacement and destroying mosques or homes. |
| 2007 | President Ahmadinejad's visit to KSA. |
| 2015 | Saudi intervention in Yemen opposed to Iranian support of Houthis, for which Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) pledged later to "work so that the battle is on their side, inside Iran." |
| 2016 | Severing diplomatic relations again. |
| 2023 | Restoring diplomatic relations, pledging to activate security and economic agreements between the two countries, and exchanging visits between their foreign ministers. |

The Chinese Variable in the Bilateral Relations

It is not possible to separate the Chinese role in arranging the recent Saudi-Iranian agreement from the determinants of Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East (or West Asia, as the Chinese call it):

1. Chinese pragmatism: After the death of the Chinese leader Mao Zedong in 1976, and assuming power by the reformist movement in 1978 at the 11th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, a political slogan was introduced, "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." This slogan indicates a clear pragmatic tendency, the gradual disintegration of ideological puritanism, and the gradual tendency towards transforming international relations from zero-sum game to non-zero sum-game, which is evident in the fact that the US is



China's first trading partner despite the depth of the political differences between them. This means that China sought to transform the Saudi-Iranian relationship into a non-zero-sum model (one that does not deny the contradictions but mitigates them by expanding the scope of common interests).¹⁰

- 2. The importance of both KSA and Iran to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for which China needs a secure environment. Both countries occupy a central position in the geo-economic and geo-political dimensions of the Chinese project, especially maritime wise.
- 3. The expansion of Chinese trade with the two countries and its oil dependence on them. According to official Saudi sources, the volume of trade between China and KSA reached about \$106 billion, around 30% increase compared to 2021. This number is equivalent to almost double the volume of US-Saudi trade exchange, which amounted to \$55 billion in the same period, not to mention that China imports a quarter of its oil needs from the two countries (19% from KSA, and 6% from Iran) in 2022.¹¹ In addition, KSA and Iran's accession to the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa group (BRICS) will strengthen these Chinese interests, especially to confront US sanctions and put pressure on the centralization of the dollar in international markets,¹² besides the fact that Iran and China signed "a trade deal reportedly worth up to \$400 billion of Chinese investment over 25 years, in exchange for a steady supply of Iranian oil."¹³



- 4. The discrepancy between the two sides on the issue of Israel: It is in China's interest to expand the scope of the Arab-Israeli relation, because this facilitates the movement within the BRI area, as is the case in the China-Saudi Arabia (Jizan) Industrial Park,¹⁴ although Israel is less eager to welcome the role of China in settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. The KSA perceives the Chinese role more supportive of its hoped-for centrality, especially since KSA has noticed a decline in the status of the Middle East in the US strategy, which may push it more towards China. For Iran, the Israeli-Chinese relationship does not serve its aspiration to achieving centrality, especially in light of the Iranian political discourse supporting military, political and economic resistance against the Israeli occupation. This means that the political distance separating KSA and China in the Arab-Israeli conflict is shorter than the distance separating Iran and China in this aspect.¹⁵

However, the recent developments in Iranian-Saudi-Chinese relations indicate some degree of turmoil. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) project announced by KSA and India in September 2023 to connect India to Europe via KSA, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan and Israel, represents a competing project for



the Chinese BRI. That's why there was a strong US and Israeli welcome to the new project, especially since it is based on building infrastructure in ports, railways and cables for goods transit, energy trade and digital connectivity. IMEC, on the other hand, may cause some Egyptian concerns regarding its impact on the Suez Canal. Indian experts estimate that their country's project will reduce the transit time of goods



between Europe and India by 8 to 12 days compared to transportation via the Suez Canal. There is no doubt that Iran is not satisfied with this project, unlike the Chinese project, particularly since it realizes that there are border disputes between China and India, which caused military clashes in 1962, 1967, 1978, 2018 and 2020, not to mention that Pakistan will be a part of this dispute over the region, due to the depth of its relations with China, KSA and Iran.¹⁶

The Decision-Taking Process in KSA and Iran¹⁷

The decision-making and decision-taking processes differ in KSA and Iran. The two countries are classified as autocracies, according to the democracy ranking models, where KSA ranks 149 and 173, depending on the index, while Iran ranks 155 and 147. However, the power balance in political decision-making and decision-taking bodies of the two countries differs. In KSA, the royal family is the pillar of the political system, and society has no role in choosing the ruler. While in Iran, the Supreme Leader is elected by the Assembly of Experts, whose members are elected directly by the people, and the President of the Republic is elected directly by the people. Other institutions participate, to a certain extent, in controlling and monitoring decision-making in Iran, such as the Expediency Discernment Council, the Guardian Council and the Islamic Consultative Assembly, etc. In KSA, power is in the hands of the royal family (the king and the crown prince, who are determined by the Allegiance Council), which also holds important ministerial positions, about 35% of ministries, such as the ministries of defense, foreign affairs, interior, media, trade, energy, National Guard, and even sports. The Kingdom is divided into 13 administrative regions or provinces, headed by princes, and their deputies are members of Saudi royal family as well.¹⁸ This is while noting that KSA does not have a constitution similar to those of other contemporary states.¹⁹

Motives of the Iranian-Saudi Rapprochement in 2023

Each of the two countries has its own reason to reconcile and so does the Chinese mediator, which will be discussed as follows:

1. KSA

Since the appointment of MBS as Deputy Crown Prince in KSA in 2015, then as Crown Prince in 2017, he has worked to neutralize the competing and powerful figures in the family, and has limited the influence and role of the religious movement, whether Wahhabi or the Muslim Brothers (MB) movement. Then, he provoked his country's strategic ally, the US, with a number of political practices, not to mention the expansion of war with Yemen, especially its north, and the threat to transfer violence to the heart of the Iranian capital, in addition to the tension in his country's relations with Turkey, Qatar, and the MB movement, especially with the Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine.



Mohammed bin Salman

Yet, the outcome of all these policies was not of clear benefit, and was even closer to clear failure, as is evident by KSA's political stability index, ranging between -0.63 in 2015 and -0.58 in 2021,²⁰ which made KSA reconsider all what was mentioned before. Such reconsideration appeared in the Saudi attempts to calm the regional, internal and international environment, the rapprochement with Turkey, and the release of a number of detainees of the Islamic Resistance Movement, then the rapprochement with Qatar and Syria, besides working to reduce tension with the US with a degree of bargaining between the two sides. It was also evident in Saudi rapprochement with Russia on the issue of oil policies through OPEC+, meetings with Russian officials, then with China and the tendency for a negotiated solution with the Sanaa government, in addition to some paths of quiet and hidden normalization with Israel.

KSA also realized that Vision 2030 proposed by the crown prince would remain subject to doubt if tension with Iran continued, because the NEOM project, for example, would not be far from the Yemeni missiles that during the war reached places beyond the specified NEOM area, not to mention KSA's awareness that "the security of the sea lanes"



around it in the Gulf and the Red Sea could be paralyzed with all the resulting economic repercussions.

Accordingly, the Saudi shift towards Iran is not separate from the re-evaluation of KSA's political approach throughout 2015–2022, and the realization that the Saudi development model adopted by the Saudi crown prince is not destined to succeed without “regional security,” which explains the rapprochement with Iran, Israel, Syria and Turkey. Furthermore, this rapprochement with both Iran and Syria and the flexibility with some wings of the Palestinian resistance may be used to “embarrass” these parties regarding the development of Saudi-Israeli normalization, or at least make their criticism of Saudi normalization with Israel less severe, so they would not be held responsible in case of deterioration of their relation with KSA.

Another factor is the growing belief at international, regional and local political levels that the importance of the Middle East to the US global strategy is no longer the same, not to mention that there are indicators that the US is declining internationally in general, and the burdens of its confrontations in Ukraine and with China and North Korea are increasing. Consequently, these provide the Saudi decision with more space to be “relatively independent” from the US.

2. Iran

The US and European economic blockades have an unequivocal impact on the Iranian economy. Indeed, the volume of Chinese-Iranian trade since 2018 (when severe sanctions were imposed on Iran) has clearly declined.²¹ Also, pressure on Iran has further increased due to internal tensions with some separatist movements in some Iranian regions, tensions among government wings, and the presence of US forces in most Gulf countries, including Iraq. If we add to that the Israeli quest to further encircle Iran through normalization with Gulf states, the development of Israeli-Azerbaijani relations, and the transfer of Israel from the US European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), which includes the Gulf region, the reasons for political stability in Iran ranging between -0.93 in 2015 and -1.62 in 2021 becomes clear.²² This explains the Iranian need—similar to the Saudi need—to reduce the burdens of regional, internal and international pressures, and this includes easing the bilateral relations through an acceptable mediator to both sides. In other words, the general conditions of the two countries have pushed them to “acquiescent adaptation,” which James J. Rosenau defined in his theory of patterns of political adaptation as the process by which political entities adjust their internal structures and processes to cope with changes in their external environment, especially major powers policies, provided that this change does not affect the main structures of the state or its decision-making mechanisms.²³

The Future of Bilateral Relations

The future of the KSA-Iran relations depends on a number of variables that have negative and positive impacts on each other. Thus, basically, cross impact analysis is required to understand the variables that weigh most in determining the paths of this relationship.

By monitoring the political, economic and military behavior of the two countries towards each other, from 1979 until March 2023, when the Chinese announced the restoration of relations with the Saudi-Iranian agreement, we found that the relationship has a mostly negative content in addition to being unstable, as the following table shows.²⁴

Table 2: Nature of KSA and Iran Relations 1979–2023

| Period | Hostile attitudes from one or both parties towards each other | Friendly attitudes from one or both parties towards each other |
|--------------|---|--|
| 1979–1991 | 10 | 4 |
| 1992–2008 | 2 | 15 |
| 2009–2016 | 1 | 16 |
| 2017–2023 | 30 | 2 |
| Total | 43 | 37 |

The table indicates a total of 80 actions between the two sides of which 43 were hostile actions (about 54%) compared to 37 positive actions (about 46%). When comparing the periods in which hostility prevailed, these constitute about 43% of the measured period compared to about 57% for the positive relationship period, which confirms that the relationship between the two sides is non-linear.

From the context of historical relations between Iran and KSA, it appears that the central factors determining the future of the relationship are the following:

- **1. The mental image each side has regarding the other side:** The mental image each side has regarding the other is negative, and an analysis of the media discourse of the two sides clearly reflects this. Such an image does not disappear even in periods of rapprochement, albeit with a relatively less intensity. The mutual image includes that of the leaders of the two countries about each other, and the mental images exchanged between the elites as well as the popular mental image.
- **2. US influence on both sides:** US support of Saudi policies often constitutes a decisive factor in relations between Iran and KSA. US pressure on Iran represents the greatest



obstacle to its international movement, whether economically, politically or militarily, and the Saudi-Iranian relationship could be affected by two factors in the future:

➤ **a. The Iranian-US nuclear agreement:** Resolving this dilemma will reduce the US influence on KSA to put pressure on Iran. Yet, failure to resolve it and the escalation of tension may increase US pressure on KSA to reconsider some aspects of the understanding with Iran. It is noteworthy that the Saudi crown prince linked his country's possession of nuclear weapons to the Iranian approach, when he stated that that should Iran ever obtain such a weapon, Saudi Arabia would "have to get one, for security reasons, for balancing power,"²⁵ without referring to Israel's possession of this weapon.

➤ **b. Change in US leadership:** The position of the Democrats and Republicans concerning Iran differs, not in terms of how Iran is strategically viewed, but in terms of rigidity in dealing with this issue. If Donald Trump returns, calmness will not prevail in the Iranian-Saudi relationship, unlike the case of Democratic administration.



Donald Trump

➤ **3. Chinese influence on both sides:** This factor represents a positive variable due to China's need for both countries on the one hand, and the desire within the two sides to alleviate internal, regional or international pressures on them on the other hand.

➤ **4. The relationship with Israel:** Although KSA has begun to take some symbolic measures for normalization with Israel, the hesitation to continue would encourage Iran, which opposes any form of normalization with Israel. Although most Gulf countries (except Kuwait) practiced some or all levels of normalization, Iran did not express to these countries more than its traditional opposition to normalization. Rather, trade relations between Iran and the UAE increased after the Emirati normalization with Israel, even though UAE now ranks 16th among the 126 countries that have trade relations with Israel.²⁶

➤ **5. The sectarian rift between the two countries:** This cultural and historical variable formed a focal point in the cultural discourse in the two countries, although its intensity was higher in KSA than Iran. This was concluded in a previous study through analyzing the content of religious discourses in the two countries.²⁷

➤ **6. The outbreak of disputes between the two countries:**

Since the Middle East has the highest levels of instability among other regions of the world,²⁸ it is normal for this to be reflected in the relations between the two countries. The latest manifestation of this is the dispute over al-Durrah field in the Gulf waters between both Kuwait and KSA on the one hand, and Iran on the other hand.²⁹ There



are also the latent issues of conflict, such as the issue of the three islands with the UAE, which could resurface in relations with Iran.

➤ **7. Change in the leadership of the two countries:**

Although the Supreme Leader in Iran has the most weight in strategic decision-making, the orientations of the Iranian presidents regarding the relationship with KSA in particular vary and leave a small impact. Since the outbreak of the Iranian revolution until now, eight presidents and two supreme leaders have assumed the presidency of Iran, without a strategic shift in the mega-trend of the Saudi-Iranian relationship. Also, four kings have assumed the leadership of KSA, but none of them made a strategic shift in the relationship with Iran. Rather, after Prince Muhammad bin Salman's rise to power in 2015, KSA adopted more hardline views on Iran. However, the Saudi field shortcomings in the confrontation left its impact on the directions of the Saudi state in the past three years. Therefore, based on the historical pattern of bilateral relations, the death of King Salman (88 years), or the death of Iranian Leader Ali Khamenei (84 years), may lead to some tactical changes in the relations, rather than strategic ones.

➤ **8. Levels of coordination in international organizations:** This factor seems to summarize the underlying trends in the two countries. The consensus within OPEC or (OPEC+), the position on the Ukrainian war, the rapprochement with China, or the rapprochement in BRICS policies even before accepting KSA membership this year, all indicate important rapprochement steps, even if they were due to internal pressures in both sides.

➤ **9. The economic conditions of the two countries:**

The KSA Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is six times that of Iran and thus its economic prosperity is distinctly higher than Iran's.³⁰ Iran is ahead in the index of fairness of income distribution, while KSA is ahead of Iran in the human development Index.³¹ However, the Research and development (R&D) expenditure of Iran is higher than KSA's.³² This means that the internal pressures in the



economic and social fields are almost similar in terms of the impact of the sub-indicators on the local community.

Based on the above, a matrix of all indicators can be formed, while putting weights for each, to determine if the bilateral relations would continue to develop or would decline in the next five years.³³

Table 3: Weights of Variables Governing the Saudi-Iranian Relations

| Indicator | Weight of Indicator (1-3) | Continued development of bilateral relations | Decline of bilateral relations |
|---|---------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Mutual mental images | 2 | | 2 |
| US influence | 3 | | 3 |
| Chinese influence | 2 | 2 | |
| Relation with Israel | 2 | | 2 |
| Sectarian rift | 1 | | 1 |
| Outbreak of disputes (bilateral, regional or international) | 2 | | 2 |
| Leadership change | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Coordination in international organizations | 1 | 1 | |
| Economic conditions of the two countries | 1 | 2 | |
| Total | | 6 | 11 |

⇒ The table shows that:

- ① 1. The most powerful variables in the decline of relations between the two countries are the US influence and normalization with Israel. These two factors constitute about 45% of the total indicators that have a negative impact on the bilateral relations.³⁴ It is sufficient to note that the US military has between 30 and 34 thousand troops of its ground and air forces, and naval and marine forces in the region, justifying their presence by several reasons, including:³⁵
 - a. Controlling Iranian behavior: The US considers Iran an ally of Russia and China, has nuclear ambitions, a threat to Israel and instability factor in the Arab region through proxy groups, especially in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. It also has ties to some Shiite groups in the Gulf countries, in

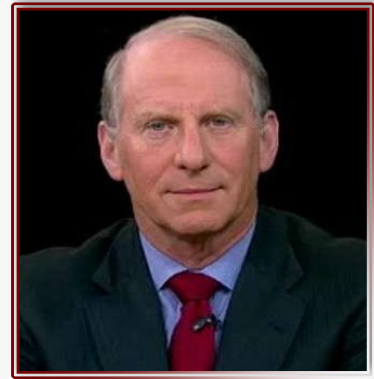
addition, there are concerns about Iran's attempts to influence the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz, which affects energy prices, especially after the Ukrainian war that had and still has an impact on this strategic market, particularly the market of US allies.



- b. Reassuring the Gulf states regarding any internal or external threat and emphasizing that the decline in the importance of the Middle East in the US strategy does not amount to abandoning these countries.
 - c. Transferring Israel from EUCOM to CENTCOM, which includes the Gulf, is an effort to reassure Israel further.
 - d. Trying to influence and curb the growth of Chinese and Russian relations with the region.
 - e. Supporting and protecting separatist forces, so as the US would keep zones of influence, especially the Kurdish minorities in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey.
 - f. Ensuring that the US does not lose the military market in this region. The US has supplied the GCC countries with about 64% of their military imports throughout 2018–2022.
- ② 2. The relationship with China represents the most positive aspect of strengthening Saudi-Iranian relations, and the weight of the indicator is 2 out of a total 6 points, or approximately 33%.
- ③ 3. The internal factors have less impact on bilateral relations than international and regional factors. This means that the positions of US and Israel have the greatest impact on the KSA-Iran reconciliation, which may be affected by three factors:
- a. The death of King Salman, who seems less interested in deep normalization with Israel compared to the crown prince.
 - b. China's pragmatism and the development of Chinese-Israeli relations bring China closer to the Saudi position if dispute erupts again.
 - c. Not ruling out the "Machiavellian" tendency of MBS, which was confirmed by Western researchers who studied his psychological structure and stages of development. They confirmed that he repeated to them his opinion that "his role model is Machiavelli," and his political career since 2015 reinforces this belief according to various Western references.³⁶ This means, from a US point of view, that the possibility for his "withdrawal" from previous positions is not excluded, especially in light of the extreme weak US confidence in the stability of his vision concerning KSA's strategic relations,



where in US opinion polls, only 20% of Americans have confidence in MBS “to do the right thing regarding world affairs,” while in Israel, it was 6%.³⁷ Indeed, the president emeritus of the US Foreign Affairs Council Richard Haass called in an article for the necessity of distinguishing between MBS and KSA, and for reducing dealings with bin Salman by influential US sides, yet without the US explicitly calling for the prince’s departure. He asserts that MBS “has placed his own future in jeopardy, and other members of the royal family will come to understand that US and western support for him cannot be taken for granted. It is up to the Saudis to sort out their succession.”³⁸



Richard Haass

- 4. The future probabilities according to the previous measurement indicate that the sum of the weights of the relationship indicators is 17 (6 + 11), which means that the probability of the continuation of the historical pattern, instability, in the relationship between Iran and KSA is 64.7%.
- 5. If we take into account that the history of bilateral relations has seen fluctuation on the one hand, and the predominance of periods of communication at a ratio of 33 to 11 (as we explained in table 1) on the other hand, it indicates that the diplomatic relations would continue, but with the outbreak of disputes in the medium term, i.e., 3-5 years.
- 6. The black swan variable (the least likely and most influential variable): such as the occurrence of radical change in the leadership of the two countries, the outbreak of a new international or regional conflict in or near the region, or a complete settlement of major conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict..., which may change the previous scene, although it is less likely compared to other indicators.



The Most Likely Scenario

Various studies regarding the relationship between the structure of the international system (unipolar - bipolar - multipolar) and the structure of the regional systems (one regional central power, two central powers, or multiple centers of power in the region) indicate that the Middle East region is the most penetrated region in the world by the polar international powers.³⁹ Thus, the relationship between the regional powers depends on the nature of the structure of the international system as the following table shows:

Table 4: Impact of the World Order Structure on the Relations of the Regional Central Powers: Iran and KSA

| World Order Structure | Connection of central regional powers to one superpower | Connection of central regional powers to competing superpowers | Remarks |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|
| Unipolar | Predominance of a peaceful relationship between regional powers | Revolution in Iran was not clearly linked to superpowers until after 2003. | Saudi-Iranian relations in 1929–1980 were linked to the relationship with Britain, and later with the US. In 1991 (the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Kuwait crisis), tension between KSA and Iran decreased to confront Iraq. |
| Bipolar | Predominance of a peaceful relationship. | Predominance of competitiveness in regional relations. | In a fleeting period during World War II, Iran leaned somewhat towards Nazi Germany. In the period after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, rapprochement began gradually and slowly with Russia and China. |
| Multipolar | Predominance of a peaceful relationship. | Predominance of regional competition | After the rise of China, and the emergence of India (2000–2016), there was rapprochement between KSA and Iran, and Obama announced “Pivot to East Asia” strategy (2012), and not indulging in Middle East wars (2016). |

The previous table shows that in certain cases, multipolarity is good for regional stability, i.e., when there is concurrence of alliances between the regional powers and the superpowers (which means an alliance with the superpower itself). In our case, the regional powers interconnected with the competing superpowers, which made the model of regional competition dominate the cooperative model. Accordingly, Saudi-Iranian relations depend (whether in development or decline) on a number of determinants:



- 1. KSA moving away from the US while deepening its ties with Asian powers, especially China, India and Russia.



- 2. The change of KSA-Iran relations from being within diplomatic niceties to significant increase of trade volume and mutual investments, and the decline of sectarian promotion.

- 3. Enshrining multipolarity in the international system strengthens Saudi alternatives of international relations.

- 4. The level of regional stability determines the Saudi-Iranian relationship, as regional turmoil impacts bilateral relations, noting that the Middle East is one of the most unstable regions in the world.⁴⁰

- 5. The continuing decline of US position in adapting the international system and its interactions.

- 6. The possibility of KSA joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which has security and economic implications) enhances the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement, after both joining the BRICS.



- 7. KSA's realization that its economic projects and the implementation of Vision 2030 depend on regional stability, which explains the Saudi tendency to reconcile with regional states and its attempt to balance its international relations.

We have pointed out, in the previous pages, that the probability of a relapse in the KSA-Iran relations is approximately 64%, and given that decision-making process in Iran is more institutionalized than KSA, the most likely scenario (internally) is closely linked to MBS's mostly inconsistent tendencies, which reinforces fears of setback return in Saudi-Iranian relations in light of two possibilities:

- 1. If KSA keeps moving away from the US, while deepening its ties with other powers, the US, by virtue of its penetration into the Saudi internal environment, will either work to make a change in the Saudi authority commensurate with its goals (some writings repeat the model of King Faisal historically⁴¹), or restrict the Saudi movement internationally and regionally to force KSA to withdraw from its conciliatory stance with Iran, where Iranian-Saudi relations will deteriorate again. This means the support of Iran and KSA to their proxy groups is a major indicator of the how the Iranian-Saudi relationship would develop (i.e., Iran would abandon the axis of resistance in the region, and KSA would abandon the



Arab forces opposed to Tehran and its allies). However, so far the regional scene indicates otherwise.

- 2. If KSA continues to rely on US support and normalization with Israel, this may lead to the return of tension in Saudi-Iranian relations that occurred in 2016–2023, especially if Saudi-Israeli relations go beyond diplomatic and commercial levels, where they would have “military and security coordination and activity,” as happened with the UAE.

Accordingly, applying the lead time technique⁴² of future studies on our case, based on the general path of 2015–2023, indicates the following:

- a. The lead time in the Saudi political system is 3–5 years after the death of King Salman, and the time period of the “lead time” extends successively as long as the current king remains alive, because the king’s survival provides more opportunity for the crown prince to disrupt structural changes in the Saudi political authority opposed to him, especially in the internal environment; while the ability to make changes is less in the regional environment and much less in the international environment, which makes the Iranian-Saudi relationship hostage to this dimension in the immediate time frame.
- b. One of the basic pillars of the crown prince’s project is Vision 2030. It includes broad developments based on reducing dependence on oil exports out of total Saudi exports, and raising “the share of non-oil exports in non-oil GDP from 16% to 50%.”⁴³ Despite the passage of more than 7 years after the announcement of the plan (April 2016), that is 50% of the lead time, the share of oil exports in total Saudi exports according to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics in 2016 was 81.5%, then it became 77.2% in January 2022 and increased to 78.1% in January 2023. In December 2022, non-oil exports (including re-exports) decreased by 6.7% compared to January 2022.⁴⁴ This means that the lead time of the plan does not move linearly towards its stipulated goals, and the progress in the structure of Saudi economy in the most important export sector is less than 9%, despite the passage of half the period of Vision 2030. If this context continues, the plan will not accomplish more than 17–18% of it its end, which may prompt a return to competition and conflict with Iran to absorb the repercussions of the internal faltering, if the path of Vision 2023 remains this slow.



- c. Saudi Vision 2030 has mainly economic content, but economic reform cannot develop and have sufficient impact without political reform. However, aspects of political reform in Saudi future planning are almost absent. This is evident in the democracy index of KSA, whose score remained stable between 2015 (when MBS took over as crown prince) and 2019 at 1.93 out of 10, and there was a slight improvement in 2020 (it became 2.08). This means that the improvement over eight years is only 0.15%, which is less than the average Middle East score during the same period.⁴⁵ When looking at confirmed executions according to Amnesty International reports, we find that during the period 2015–2022 (when MBS dominated the Saudi political scene), the “average” ranking of KSA globally in number of executions was 3rd and 4th.⁴⁶

Iran’s global ranking in that respect does not differ from the Saudi, which means that the two states have centralized systems. This, ultimately, curbs flexibility in strategic decision-making and increases instability in the region, which would reflect on the inter-relations of regional countries, including Iran and KSA.

Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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