



The Impact of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on the Stability of the Middle East: Diplomatic Movements toward Syria as a Case Study

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Abstract: *This study seeks to investigate the historical and present elements that have influenced the development of Saudi-Iranian reconciliation. By examining the immediate impact on the Syrian conflict and the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria, this analysis seeks to understand and predict the future consequences of this reconciliation in the Middle East. The report asserts that the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran will yield favorable consequences for the Middle East, and there are already initial indications of its impact in the Syrian situation.*

Keywords: *Rapprochement, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Middle East, Syrian Crisis.*

Introduction:

The bilateral ties between any two countries are the result of a complex interplay of several causes, encompassing both historical dimensions and contemporary circumstances. The relationships between these countries are directly influenced by internal elements specific to each country, as well as external factors arising from worldwide geopolitical alignments. Political, economic, and religious considerations are influential in shaping the character, structure, and potential of international connections, alongside shared interests. The comprehensive enumeration of variables that establish the frameworks of present and future connections between any two countries is vast and is a significant challenge.

The Iranian-Saudi relations have witnessed numerous fluctuations and turns throughout history, shaping a distinctive form of bilateral ties. The competition for regional leadership remains a broad theme in these relations over time. Although at times they experience conditions closer to natural neighborly relations, more often than not, they descend to the level of general political estrangement, or even declarations of hostility.

The current period witnesses concerted efforts from both Iran and Saudi Arabia aimed at bridging the existing gap in their bilateral relations. The goal is to overcome the state of political estrangement and declared hostility, moving towards normal relations governed by common interests and cooperation on regional issues.

The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement might be interpreted as a manifestation of the regional and international forces influencing the global political environment. This subject will be examined in the present investigation over the course of three chapters. The initial chapter will center on the methodological framework of the study, revisiting the study's issue statement, aims, and significance. Furthermore, it will elucidate the terminology employed in the study, while also examining other research that has investigated the factors of this study.

The second chapter will encompass the historical framework of Saudi-Iranian relations. This issue will be addressed within a specific timeframe, focusing on the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The

relationships between the two countries will be characterized both before and after the Iranian Revolution.

As for the third chapter, it will be dedicated to describing the current state of rapprochement in Saudi-Iranian relations. This will involve studying the reasons and factors leading to this rapprochement and examining its implications for the Middle East. An applied margin will be allocated to studying these effects from the perspective of the Syrian case.

Methodological Framework:

Significance of the Research:

The significance of the current research is manifested on two fundamental levels:

Theoretical Significance:

The significance of the research on Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and its implications is rooted in the importance of both Saudi Arabia and Iran on the international and regional stages. These two nations oversee crucial maritime routes that control the global transportation of oil. Saudi Arabia, producing 10.7 million barrels of oil daily, and Iran, producing 4.2 million barrels daily according to OPEC statistics, play pivotal roles in the global oil market.

Furthermore, the importance is derived from the religious eminence of these nations. Saudi Arabia is the main location for the Hajj pilgrimage, which is undertaken by Muslims from all over the world. On the other hand, Iran is a major center of reference for Shia Muslims, who make up a considerable fraction of the many Islamic sects. The significance of Saudi-Iranian relations extends to their influence on interfaith relations in the Middle East, hence contributing to the regional polarization between pro-Saudi and pro-Iran factions.

Applicability Significance:

The current study has the potential to serve as a novel research contribution enriching the public library in the field of international relations. Researchers in related fields can refer to this study in their own research, benefiting from its insights. Furthermore, delving into the details of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement may contribute to providing a forward-looking perspective on the political situation in the Middle East.

Research Objectives:

The current research aims to achieve the following:

1. Identify the stages that Saudi-Iranian relations have gone through throughout history.
2. Enumerate the factors that have contributed to the maturation of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement.
3. Clarify the implications of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement on the Middle East.

Research Problem:

The historical Saudi-Iranian relations have been influenced by various factors that define their character, fluctuating between reconciliation, conflict, and alienation. The examination of political circumstances in the Middle East reveals a notable influence exerted by both Saudi Arabia and Iran in determining the region's policies. The geopolitical division between a coalition aligned with Saudi Arabia and another aligned with Iran has exacerbated the political tensions among the countries in the area. Furthermore, the ambitions of the United States and the Western countries to exert influence over the Middle East by manipulating the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, deliberately fostering hostility between the two nations in order to guarantee the enforcement of Western policies in the region, have added further complexity to the situation. The current research aims to investigate the regional and international trends that have led to the maturation of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, along with other influencing elements. The paper seeks to examine the consequences of this reconciliation in the Middle East, specifically by analyzing the instance of Syria and its repercussions.

Research Questions:**The research aims to address the following questions:**

1. What are the stages that Saudi-Iranian relations have gone through throughout history?
2. What are the key factors that have contributed to the maturation of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement?
3. How will the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement be reflected in the Middle East?

Research Hypotheses:

The research is based on the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1:

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are considered balanced powers at the regional and international levels, where their bilateral relations directly or indirectly impact the overall situation in the Middle East.

Hypothesis 2:

Saudi-Iranian political rapprochement plays a significant role in mitigating regional issues in the Middle East and has a direct impact on its overall state.

Research Methodology:

In order to complete the research procedures, a descriptive approach was adopted, describing the reality of Saudi-Iranian relations in the past and present. Additionally, an analytical methodology was employed to analyze the data of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, aiming to envision the future Middle East based on this convergence.

Previous Studies:

The research literature encompasses various previous studies that addressed Saudi-Iranian relations from different perspectives. In the current study, we will focus on presenting studies specifically addressing the topic of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement to avoid delving into the historical details of those relations.

The Hammurabi Center conducted a study titled: "Variables of Iraqi-Gulf Relations after the Iranian-Saudi Rapprochement - 2023 and Future Prospects - Iraq."

The study aimed to understand the effects resulting from the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement on Iraq's relations with its Gulf neighbors, elucidate Iraq's role in facilitating this convergence, and attempt to predict the future of Iraq's foreign relations following it. The study adopted a critical analytical approach, analyzing news and official statements issued by the Iraqi government and regional governments regarding the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement agreement. The study concluded that the frameworks of Iraqi-Gulf cooperation strengthened after the signing of the Saudi-Iranian agreement on March 10, 2023, in Beijing.

Al-Miyahi (2023) also conducted a study titled 'The Complexity and Chaos of Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Dynamics of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement - Iraq.'

The study sought to find strategies for enhancing the conduct of actors involved in foreign policy in the Middle East and underscore the advantages of fostering closer relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in this context. The study employed a descriptive-analytical methodology to examine the existing data on the Iranian-Saudi understanding agreement. The study determined that the Middle East region is currently presented with a significant chance to reduce elements causing tension, following the resolution of the intricate problems between Iran and Saudi Arabia, both of which hold considerable influence over the stability of the region.

In the study by Saleh (2023) titled 'Prospects of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement and Expected Impacts on the Palestinian Issue – Lebanon'

The study aimed to identify the concrete accomplishments that have emerged as a result of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement agreement. Its objective was to determine the indications of this rapprochement specifically related to the Palestinian issue. The approach employed an analytical methodology to scrutinize claims and analyses related to the rapprochement accord. The analysis determined that the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia will inevitably prioritize the Palestinian issue in Arab and Islamic matters.

And Ali Baba (2023) conducted a study titled: 'Post-Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement - What about the Settlement of the Yemeni Crisis?' - Egypt.

The objective was to predict the future consequences of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement agreement, particularly regarding the Saudi war on Yemen." This was accomplished by utilizing a meticulous analytical methodology by examining all accessible data pertaining to this agreement. The analysis determined that this reconciliation will inevitably result in significant advancements on multiple fronts, including regarding the Yemeni issue.

Prior research suggests that the subject of Saudi-Iranian reconciliation has been the focus of methodological investigation. Research has consistently found that the inherent relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia will inevitably impact the entire Middle East region, resulting in a level of instability in the area.

Concepts and Terminology

Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement: The term refers to the agreement that took place on 10/3/2023 under Chinese sponsorship, which put an end to the state of estrangement and negative competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹

Middle East: Comprising diverse ethnic and religious groups under the principle of a nation-state, it turns into sectarian and ethnic clusters within a regional confederal framework.²

1- The First Axis: Saudi-Iranian Relations - Their History and Influencing Factors

As mentioned earlier, the political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran will be studied according to significant historical intervals to avoid delving into unnecessary details. The Iranian Revolution that took place on January 7, 1978, represents a historical turning point that had its impact on the Middle East region as a whole. This is due to its contribution to reshaping Iran's political and diplomatic directions, transforming it from a state aligned with American policies into a country with an independent political trajectory.

Section One: Iranian-Saudi Relations Before the Iranian Revolution

Geographical boundaries play a fundamental role in shaping international relations, and this is reflected in Iran's relationship with Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia. The geographical, social, political, and shared interests have historically formed strategic ties between the two countries (Othman, 2002, p.30). However, this picture has not always been positive, as the relations between the two countries have witnessed clear political fluctuations throughout history, transitioning from convergence to competition and conflict (Al-Jubouri, 2000, p.91).

During the Pahlavi era³, relations with Saudi Arabia were marked by intense competition and divergence in views and orientations towards international and regional issues. Conflict became the predominant characteristic of this period, erasing signs of cooperation and closeness between the two countries. In their place emerged conflict, mutual accusations, and ambiguous stances. Shared cooperation between them was limited to cultural and religious aspects within a strategic and

2.1 ¹ Alsadi, Mohammed Hassan (2023). "Objectives of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement Amidst Regional Transformations." *Al-Naba Information Network*, Syria, p. 3.

2.1 ² Al-Rahahla, Ahmed bin Suleiman (2014). "The New Turkish Role in the Middle East Region: Opportunities and Challenges." *Journal of Middle East Studies*, Middle East University, Jordan, p. 43.

2.1 ³ The Pahlavi era: The time period between (1926-1979) that began with Reza Shah Pahlavi's overthrow of Shah Ahmad Maziar Al-Qaraji, leading to the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, and continued until the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

regional framework concerning political and economic relations, fluctuating between ascent and descent from one stage to another. This dynamic serves as an effective factor in elucidating the nature of the trajectory of these relations (Othman, 2002, p.32).

The historical origins of these interactions may be traced back to the initial diplomatic interaction between the "Sultanate of Najd" and "Persia" in 1925. During this time, Reza Shah endeavored to facilitate a resolution between King Abdulaziz bin Saud and Ali bin Hussein, the King of Najd (Al-Humaidawi, 2015, p. 403). Nevertheless, Reza Shah's annexation of the Arabian region simultaneously drew away Abdulaziz bin Saud's focus, as it had detrimental effects on the Arabian Gulf area, given its Iranian expansionist aspirations. Although Reza Shah expressed a strong desire to cultivate robust ties with Saudi Arabia, ongoing difficulties between the two nations persisted due to divergent stances on the Arab Emirates and Bahrain. In addition, Iranians asserted their control over Bahrain, and a disagreement arose regarding the ownership of islands in the southern Gulf, namely Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa Island. Notwithstanding these disparities, the situation did not evolve into a substantial confrontation. During that period, the Iranian government expressed its disapproval of the Jeddah Treaty, which was signed by Britain and Saudi Arabia on May 20, 1927. The contract, particularly Article 6, mandated that Ibn Saud abstain from meddling in the affairs of the Gulf Emirates, such as Bahrain, as a result of their affiliation with Britain via specific treaties. Reza Shah perceived this as a rejection of Iran's regional entitlements and lodged a formal complaint with the League of Nations at that time (Strang, 1983, p. 239).

Nevertheless, the political communication line remained open between the two countries. Reza Shah (Habibollah Khan Heydari) was sent as the first Iranian envoy to Saudi Arabia to attempt political understandings with the Kingdom. The political relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached their peak during the second half of the twenties with the signing of a Friendship Treaty in Tehran in August 1929.

Later on, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran expanded with the aim of coordinating positions regarding the British occupation of the Arabian Gulf. This culminated in a visit by the Iranian Shah to Saudi Arabia in 1958, intending to coordinate stances between the two parties regarding the Baghdad Pact, the Lebanese Civil War, and other issues. This visit provides indications of the cooperative relations between the two sides during that period (Badawi, 1994, 29).

Iran's recognition of "Israel" in 1960 had negative implications for its relations with Saudi Arabia. However, after Iran explained its stance to the Arab League, emphasizing its legal commitment not to recognize Israel and refraining from diplomatic exchanges, once this issue was resolved, the Kingdom resumed its regular ties with Iran. This continued until the Islamic Revolution in Iran (Zarkali, 1982, 44).

The Iranian-Saudi relations after the Islamic Revolution in Iran have undergone multiple stages and shifts. To provide a clear overview of these stages, they will be divided into three sub-stages:

The first stage: From the Iranian Revolution to the death of Khomeini

Saudi Arabia adopted contradictory policies in dealing with the Iranian Revolution during this stage. Publicly, the Kingdom expressed support for the Iranian Revolution. In response to a question from the editor-in-chief of the Lebanese magazine "Al-Safir" on February 25, 1980, about the relations between his country and the new government in Iran, Prince Fahd Abdul Aziz stated (Al-Safir, 1980): "We have no problems with Iran at the moment, and we are entirely comfortable in this regard, unlike what we were during the days of the Shah. The main concern of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is to ensure the stability of Iran, as it is a Muslim and friendly country." This sentiment was echoed by many Saudi officials, indicating the stability of Saudi-Iranian relations with the new Iranian government (Jassim, 1981, 64).

On the other hand, the Kingdom directly opposed the Islamic Revolution in Iran, openly showing hostility towards it. This was driven by Saudi Arabia's desire to prevent the spread of the revolutionary ideology beyond Iran's borders. Consequently, the Kingdom opened its doors to U.S.

forces stationed in Iran, claiming they were working in Saudi oil companies. It also allowed the United States to expand the number of its military aircraft at the Dhahran Airbase. Moreover, Saudi Arabia worked to prevent Iran's representative from explaining Iran's new official stance at the 10th Arab Summit in Tunisia in 1979 (Badeeb, 1994, 30).

The second stage: From Khomeini's death to the beginning of the reformist era (Mohammad Khatami)

This stage witnessed fluctuating relations between the two parties. Sometimes there was improvement, and at other times, relations sharply deteriorated. Secret talks were held between the two sides in Geneva in 1989, and Iran attended the Islamic Summit Conference in Jeddah in the same year. Additionally, Saudi Arabia opened the door for pilgrims to perform Hajj (Qaraqoush, 1996, 81).

However, regional and international events had an impact on Iran's foreign policy during this period. The entry of Iraqi forces into Kuwait in 1990, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the emergence of the United States as a sole superpower in the world contributed to a noticeable transformation in Iranian-Saudi relations, moving from ideological confrontation to a level of covert war between them (Al-Khazaz, 2003, 18).

By the year 1995, Iranian actions aimed at countering American influence in the region began, marked by an armed attack on the American training center for the Saudi National Guard and the bombing of Khobar in 1996. Saudi Arabia directly held Iran responsible for these incidents (Bin Jado, 2000, 263).

The third stage: From the beginning of the reformist era to the period before rapprochement

This stage witnessed several developments and critical points that had their impacts on the mutual relations between the two parties. Notably, Iranian thinkers and politicians became convinced that the idea of exporting the Iranian revolution to neighboring countries was impractical. This realization contributed to an improvement in relations between the two sides, with forms of economic and cultural rapprochement becoming apparent. Flight connections resumed between the two countries, and several understandings and agreements were signed.

However, Iranian-Saudi relations began to rapidly deteriorate after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003. The New Middle East project and the ensuing chaos began to unfold, with the United States deliberately exacerbating tensions between the two nations, creating a state of animosity. Consequently, Iran transformed from a neighboring state with historical ties to Saudi Arabia into an existential threat that posed a general threat to the Gulf countries, with Saudi Arabia being the first at risk (Al-Kawaz, 2007, 39).

Disagreements between Saudi Arabia and Iran covered various issues, including differing stances on the Syrian crisis and the war in Yemen. This resulted in diplomatic and media escalations from both countries (Al-Saadi, 2012, 14).

2- The Second Axis: Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement and Its Impacts

Diplomatic rapprochement, from a political science perspective, does not emerge from a vacuum; rather, it is a product of historical accumulations and shared interests. Additionally, it results from stage-by-stage developments that contribute to its maturity and implementation. This is evident in the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement, which was not a spontaneous declaration but rather a consequence of political and economic opportunities. There was also a mutual desire between both countries to end the prolonged political estrangement that had persisted for more than seven years, particularly in 2016. During that year, Saudi Arabia executed a death sentence that included 47 individuals, among them the activist and Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. The Iranian public responded with a series of protests, including the burning of the Saudi Consulate building in Mashhad and the Saudi flag (Al-Akhḍarī, 2018, p. 204), marking a significant turning point in bilateral relations (Ahmad, 2021, p. 29).

2-1 Factors Contributing to the Maturation of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement

As mentioned earlier, the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia was not a spontaneous development; rather, it was the result of diligent diplomatic efforts that began in the form of secret negotiations between the two parties since 2021. The factors that contributed to the maturation of this rapprochement can be summarized as follows:

The timing of the agreement

The agreement between the two parties came during a phase in which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was reorganizing its political landscape, both domestically and regionally. Saudi Arabia's vision for this period revolves around dismantling and resolving tensions in the region with several regional countries, transforming these relationships into a state of coordination and cooperation. Examples of this include the improvement of Saudi-Turkish relations and the openness to economic projects between the two parties (Al-Joulani, 2023, 8).

This vision is also based on ending the Kingdom's previous policy of relying solely on the American pole in international politics. Instead, it adopts a policy of having multiple allies, evident in positive relations with both China and Russia. This is particularly noticeable during the Russian-Ukrainian war, where the Kingdom rejected American dictates regarding compensating the European market for Russian oil subjected to European-American sanctions (Saleh, 2023, 6).

The decline of the American role in the region

The withdrawal of the United States from Iraq signaled the beginning of a decline in American influence in the region. This was accompanied by the growing influence of Russia and China. This was evident in the continuous failure of the United States to issue international resolutions allowing direct intervention in the Syrian conflict. Meanwhile, Russia directly participated in the war against armed terrorist organizations in Syria. Saudi Arabia perceived these indicators of decline, leading to a political shift towards openness to all political players in the Middle East (Sajee, 2023, 23).

The New Saudi Era

The ascension of Mohammed bin Salman to the Saudi crown prince position marked an unprecedented shift in the kingdom's policies, both domestically and internationally. Bin Salman's vision for cultural and civilizational openness was accompanied by a commitment to resolving disputes with neighboring countries and disengaging from problematic issues that the kingdom was directly involved in.

Chinese Mediation

Chinese efforts to foster understanding between Iran and Saudi Arabia represented a crucial turning point in this matter. China's international influence on both political and military fronts allowed it to play a fair mediating role. Additionally, it served as a reliable guarantor for both parties to implement the terms of the understanding.

2-2 Reflections of the Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement

In the Middle East (The Case of Syria)

As soon as the initial text of the Iranian-Saudi understanding emerged, its effects on the political landscape in the Middle East began to manifest. The rapprochement between the two countries sets a limit to the prevailing tension in the region for over a decade, providing an opportunity to discuss regional issues from the perspective of shared interests rather than conflict. The unspoken Iranian-Saudi rivalry in the region has contributed to numerous regional tensions, with the Syrian crisis being a major manifestation of these conflicts.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, contradictions in the Saudi-Iranian stance became evident. Saudi Arabia adopted an openly adversarial position against Syria, manifesting through media incitement, political estrangement, and support for armed groups fighting against the Syrian national forces (International Institute for Iranian Studies, 2023, 6).

Iran, on the other hand, represented a strategic ally for Syria during the crisis, offering political, economic, and military support, including direct engagement in battles against armed terrorist organizations on Syrian soil (Fadel, 2023, 16).

With the first signs of Iranian-Saudi understanding, the paths of reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria have emerged. This occurred through a series of direct or indirect negotiations between the two parties, culminating in the reopening of the Syrian embassy in Riyadh and the initiation of the restoration of the Saudi embassy in Damascus.

The invitation of the Syrian president to attend the Arab summit in Riyadh was a significant indicator of the return of normal relations between the two countries. Therefore, we can say that the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement has directly influenced Saudi-Syrian relations. This is expected to have future implications for resolving the Syrian crisis through diplomatic means.

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