

## Iran and Saudi Arabia from Competition to Détente: Feasibility of Synergy or Re-tension

Parviz Delirpour 

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Payam Noor University, Tehran, Iran, parvizdelirpour@pnu.ac.ir

### Abstract

**Objective:** The history of competition and conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the past 45 years indicates deep ideological, political, economic and cultural differences. Events such as the civil war in Syria and Yemen, asymmetric positions towards the Shiites of Iraq, Bahrain, or the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council show the abysmal discords between the two countries. However, in early 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia reached a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese broker to resume diplomatic relations based on mutual respect for sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. Therefore, the feasibility of synergy between the two countries is the objective of this article, considering the history of their long-standing and deep-rooted differences.

**Method:** This research has been prepared in a descriptive-analytical way using documentary-library sources. The theoretical framework of the article is based on critical geopolitical theory.

**Results:** The findings of the article indicate that the discords between these two countries are deeper and more rooted than the agreement to resume diplomatic relations can provide a basis for synergy or joint efforts between the two countries to solve regional issues and prevent tension in the event of new domestic or regional crises.

**Conclusion:** The fundamentals of foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia are completely divergent and in the event of new crises, it can be expected that the fire of disputes and competition between the two countries will rekindle and new tensions will emerge.

**Keywords:** China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Critical Geopolitics.

**Article Type:** Research


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**Corresponding Author:** Parviz Delirpour

**E-mail:** parvizdelirpour@pnu.ac.ir

## 1. Introduction

Geographical facts have been one of the sources of countries' foreign policy. The geopolitical resources of the conflict will be formed when independence, territorial integrity, national unity / security, and the nation-state core values are linked to the geographical realms. Despite the dramatic technological changes of the late twentieth century, geography is still an influential element in the foreign policy of countries so that especially intense regions such as the Middle East, political systems have to take it into account to the extent that the main data of their foreign policy is influenced by geographical realities.

However, The withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan, the return of the Taliban on one hand and the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the other hand, the rise in geopolitical competition between great powers, the growing multiplicity of interlocking crises worldwide, and the diminishing engagement of Western powers in various conflicts outside of Europe It brought China to new results in the assessment of its relations with the geostrategic region of the Middle East, so that this country tried to distance itself from the traditional approach of non-involvement and prepare to play a basic role in the regional relations of the Middle East, which is also the main goal for Chinese Economic investment and a source of energy supply. Therefore, in 2023, China brokered deal between Riyadh and Tehran

Since the past decades, China has played the role of a neutral actor in the region. But with the gradual withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East, China probably had to protect its interests in the region that Cohen called the shatter belt. So far, China has refrained from strengthening its security-military presence in the Middle East due to political and international considerations, such as the fierce competition of regional powers, but trying to deepen regionalism can be a good option in the face of military presence; paving the way for Iran's officially joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (July 2023) may have been an have been a turning point to integrate this country in regional and international relations under the leadership of China.

This article tries to explain the relations between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the new geopolitics of the West Asian region through a descriptive-analytical method and using structural theory. The main question of this article is How did the geopolitical developments that led the two old rivals of the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to the escalation of competition to the point of a proxy conflict, changed in such a way that the two countries agreed to reduce hostilities and improve relations with the mediation of China? The paper assumes that regional geopolitical elements, as an independent variable, affect the reciprocal ideological enmity, and national security and interests. Therefore, the enmity between the two countries will always remain as fire under the ashes. This article has been done using descriptive-analytical method and documentary study.

## 2. Literature Review

Not much research has been done on the geopolitical factors of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry over the past 15 years. B. F. Salloukh in “*The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East*” does not focus on Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry but examines the role of countries ranging from the Palestinian National Authority to Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc. This paper focuses on the 2003-2003 Arab uprisings and explains their impacts on the relations between the Arab states and between these states and Iran. The paper does not address the new phase of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations from 2015.

B. Aras in “*Authoritarian ‘geopolitics’ of survival in the Arab Spring*” examines how authoritarian regimes in Mena region reacted to the new political condition constructed after the Arab Spring. Aras examines well the geographical arguments of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the new political situation after the Arab Spring, but his study focuses on the two countries' opportunism to exploit the existing situation and some geopolitical elements inherent in foreign policy as well as ideological foundations of their political behavior is ignored.

D. Postel and N. Hashemi in a short paper: “*Playing with Fire: Trump, the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry, and the Geopolitics ...*” report sectarian enmity and conflict in some Mena countries produced by the Arab Spring in which The Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry has played out a central role. The report based on content analysis of the two countries officials has no clear theoretical framework.

A. Tzemprin, J. Jozić and H. Lambaré in “*The Middle East Cold War: Iran-Saudi Arabia and the Way Ahead*” review the factors underpinning the contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran as two the Middle East’s regional powers the shaping of geopolitics in the Persian Gulf. They examine the geopolitics, the ideology of the conflict of identities, and the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, mainly after the Arab Spring, and ignore the evolution of relations between the two states over at least the last twenty years. Therefore, they fail to show relatively fixed elements and goals in their foreign policy.

Comprehensive case studies have been conducted on the proxy war between the two countries in Syria (Al-Saidi & Haghirian 2020), the geopolitics of the Arab Spring (Yorulmazlar, 2016), the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry in Africa (Bahi, 2018), the nuclear program of some Arab countries trying to reach Balancing power with Iran (Bülent, and Yorulmazlar, 2016) and even the scenarios of the Iran-Saudi confrontation in the geopolitical changes that occurred after the Arab Spring (Mena, 2018) .

This article tries to explain the relations between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran in the new geopolitics of the West Asian region through a descriptive-analytical method and using structural theory. The main question of this article is How did the geopolitical developments that led the two old rivals of the Middle East, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to the escalation of competition to the point of a proxy conflict, changed in such a way that the two countries agreed to reduce hostilities and improve relations with the mediation of China? The paper assumes that regional geopolitical elements, as an independent variable, affect the reciprocal ideological enmity, and national security and interests. Therefore, the

enmity between the two countries will always remain as fire under the ashes. This article has been done using descriptive-analytical method and documentary study.

### **3. Critical Geopolitics as Theoretical Framework**

Critical geopolitical theory is actually an anti-geopolitical approach. Due to the negative perception of classical geopolitics after World War II, new geographers practically ignored geopolitics because they believed that this theory served the expansionism of great powers and could be a stimulus for an aggressive foreign policy. During the Cold War, the geopolitical writings were an explicitly strategic analysis closely linked to the foreign and security policies of the great powers (Ó Tuathail 1996; Parker 1998). With the end of the Cold War, the interest in the traditional concepts of geopolitics was revived with a new approach. Critical geopolitics is one of the main branches of social criticism theory and examines international relations. Critical geopolitics has been formed as a continuation of traditional geopolitics, and many factors present in traditional geopolitics are also present in critical geopolitics.

In critical geopolitics, the investigation of "discourses" is one of the elements of interest and has a central role, because in the analytical literature of critical geopolitics, "place" gives way to "space" and by creating a kind of discourse development and sharing, any kind of it affects an idea that is based and limited by "place". According to critical geopolitics, the creation of a common "space" does not depend on the existence of a specific and limited "place", but if the types of discourses are close to each other and follow a similar approach, a common "space" will be created.

Critical geopolitics examines the geographic assumptions and determinations that enter into the formation of global politics (Agnew 2003:2). It seeks to illuminate and explain the procedures by which political actors spatialize international politics, representing it as a 'world' characterized by particular kinds of places (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992:190). This string of analysis approaches geopolitics not as a neutral contemplation of predetermined "geographical" facts, but as a deeply ideological and politicized type of analysis. Avoiding the traditional question of how geography affects or can affect politics, it explores how geographic claims and assumptions function in political debates and political practice. In doing so, it seeks to disrupt mainstream geopolitical discourse: not to study the geography of politics in predetermined, common-sense locations, but to foreground the "the politics of the geographical specification of politics" (Dalby 1991:274). Critical geopolitics is not a well-defined field, but the diverse body of work characterized as such all focuses on the processes through which political practice is linked to territorial definition.

In the framework of critical thinking, countries are not the only legitimate players to understand and to interpret geopolitical concepts, but tackles questions about who produces geopolitical discourses. Critical geopolitics, rather than emphasizing borders and places and official actors (countries), tries to explain discourses close to each other, not in a specific place but in a general space without borders, and unlike traditional geopolitics, it assumes geopolitics is not

simply written in concert with the great powers and then handed over to smaller, relatively marginal countries.

Discourses shape our perception and understanding of reality and the world. Therefore, human perception and understanding is always discursive and therefore relative (Howarth, 1377: 158). In critical thinking, states are not the only legitimate actors to recognize and interpret geopolitical concepts, but the perceptions and expectations of policymakers towards international alignments and relations should be paid attention to. Therefore, critical geopolitics, rather than choosing to interpret borders and places and official actors (countries), emphasizes discourses close to each other, not in a specific place, but in the general space without borders. Thus, in contrast to traditional geopolitics, regions are formed from this new point of view, based on the ruling discourses in the intersubjective space of national policymakers.

Critical geopolitics that rose in the late 1970s following the French school of post-structuralism, while rejecting the assumptions of classical geopolitics before World War II and even North-South ideas such as Wallerstein's ideas, considered the development of specific geopolitical identities for different regions of the world suspicious and instead Resorting to concepts such as the symbolism of power and material political and geographical aspects tends to destroy the contexts of classical geopolitical discourse, and in a parallel way with classical ideas, it does not consider geopolitics as a mere study of the geographical features of states' power. While classical geopolitics forms a part of imperialist knowledge by trying to establish a link between land and politics, critical geopolitics analyzes the domestic and foreign policies of countries. By studying critical geopolitics, it is possible to analyze the arguments and mental backgrounds of foreign policy makers. Two important assumptions of critical geopolitics researchers are 1) understanding political geography requires understanding the social activities of government policymakers with regard to international politics; 2) The geopolitical arguments of governments are always based on the mechanisms of the historical global system, and their power is mainly the result of their position in the global capitalist economy, so the government that excels in the global economy becomes the legislator of the global system (Reynolds, 1993: 397).

Using constructivist theory, we can explain why the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia have changed from a "competitive" stance to a "hostile" one. As a form of "reflectivist" critique of the scientific approach to the study of social sciences, constructivism was initially developed as a mostly interpretive "meta-theory," The major thesis of constructivism is that the international system is "socially constructed," that is, "consists of," as Chernoff explains, "the ways in which human beings think and interact with one another. Constructivism considers international politics as a sphere of interaction which is shaped by the actors' identities and practices and influenced by constantly changing normative institutional structures (Chernoff, 2007: 68). It maintains that states' goals, either material / objective such as ontological security and economic development, or immaterial / subjective such as international recognition and standing, are generated by their social corporate identities or how

they view themselves in relation to other actors in the international community (Griffiths, 2008: 52).

Due to the ideological differences, both countries have had different perceptions of the revolutionary, political, security and even economic and social events of the region and surrounding countries to the extent that it has led to tension, conflict and geopolitical challenges in many cases. In the 2000s, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have become more complicated and tense than the last two decades of the 20th century. (Veicy, 2019:230).

The geopolitical changes taken place in West Asia over the past two decades as a result of the US invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam in 2003 and anti-government protests in the Arab world have strengthened the Islamic Republic of Iran's position, influence and role-playing in the region.

The Middle East based on Cohen terminology is a complex region with opportunities and threats, the change of alliances and alignments of power in which can create a very fragile situation. Despite the predominantly Muslim majority, the region is highly religiously and ethnically heterogeneous, with different religious sects, traditionalist and modernist tendencies, or a combination of both, as well as interests, emergence of regional superpowers such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia with conflicting interests which have strategic relations with superpowers, are the elements that have made the region a shatter belt. Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially after the events of the Arab Spring, feared each other's ambitions and entered into a proxy war in the region to protect their real or imagined geopolitical

By recognizing real geopolitical interests to realize national interests and therefore strengthen their geopolitical importance, countries thus define their grand strategy so that they can achieve the most success in achieving national interests with the least challenge to rivals. On the other hand, imaginary or unrealistic geopolitical interests may lead to the countries self-isolated. Countries that spend their resources on unrealistic geopolitical interests have not actually laid the groundwork for sustainability but formed a non-dynamic, non-adaptive system gradually heading towards entropy.

#### **4. Saudi Arabia-Iran Relations; Competition Escalation**

Geopolitical interests are spatial and geographical complementary beyond the borders of the country with natural and human characteristics that are real or imagined. Persian Gulf with proven oil reserves of 728 billion barrels, representing 55 percent of the world's oil reserves at the end of 2006 (strausscenter.com, 2021) is at the heart of geopolitical competition for emerging economic powers such as China and India, as well as the West, which need energy security to maintain their economic competitiveness and accelerate growth. On the other hand, even the major non-oil producing countries of West Asia are of great importance in the global power equations due to their proximity to geostrategic regions such as the Red Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Strait of

Bab al-Mandeb. . Geopolitical “chokepoints”<sup>1</sup> such as the Strait of Hormuz, which carries 21% of the world's petroleum liquids consumption, (eia.gov, 2019) the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal, waterway that carries 12 percent of the world’s maritime trade (Mercogliano, 2021) add to the region's importance. Hence, the rivalry of regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia in this part of the world, called the Shatter belt by Saul Cohen, could potentially affect global stability.

After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran and Saudi Arabia clashed in terms of identity: ethnically, non-Arab / Arab, religiously, Shiite / Sunni, ideologically, revisionist / conservative, and externally, actively isolationist / unionist. Saudi Arabia was one of the most important Arab countries among the others supporting Saddam Hussein in the war against the Islamic Republic of Iran, but with the end of the Iraq-Iran war in 1988, and the Second Persian Gulf War (Iraq invasion of Kuwait which was a direct threat to its Arab neighbors) relations with Riyadh-Tehran were on the path of de-escalation and compromise for sixteen years between 1989-2005. De-escalation did not mean the elimination of competition, but competition in important areas continued, although the two countries refrained from violent confrontation of any kind.

#### **4.1. US war against Saddam Hussein**

Iraq, a state with a geopolitical dilemma, a favorable geo-economic position, ethnic and religious diversity, has been ruled by authoritarian regimes since 1950s. Ethnic-religious divisions along with socio-cultural divisions, especially the activation of historical, ethnic, religious and tribal ruptures that followed the US military invasion of Iraq in March 2003, provided a very conducive environment for militant groups to confront with the central government (Al Qarawee, 2016; Bianco, 2020).

The fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship and the rise of a Shi'ite-dominated government in Iraq sparked a rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The government change in Iraq, while reducing Saudi influence as a Sunni representative in the region, created a new state identity in Iraq that not only has not considered itself the "enemy" of Iran but also as the Shiite minority in the Arab Middle East considered it as his natural ally. Therefore, in shaping power structure in Iraq, I.R.I has been more effective than any other government in West Asia.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, while exacerbating previous problems, fundamentally changed the geopolitics of the Middle East and brought about changes in the attitudes and national interests and attitudes of regional actors. On the one hand, the Ba'athist regime as one of the most influential regional powers was eliminated and on the other hand, Shiites and Kurds entered the Iraqi power structure; these created new opportunities to increase Iran's weight and regional importance. Also, the new political tremor provided a fertile ground for formation and expansion of disaffected Salafist groups backed by

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1 .A chokepoints are “vulnerable point of congestion along a route” (Bailey and Wellesley, 2017), or “narrow channels along widely used global sea routes, some so narrow that restrictions regulate the size of the vessels that can navigate through them” (Kosai and Unesaki, 2016)

conservative Saudi-led regional governments, making it difficult for Iran to gain regional hegemony.

#### **4.2. The Death of King Abdullah and King Salman's Rise to Power**

The highest foreign policy decision-maker in Iran is the supreme leader and in Saudi Arabia is the king. However, ups and downs of relations between the two countries during the reign of King Abdullah have been influenced by factors ranging from domestic elements such as change of presidents in Iran to regional ones such as the US invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. However, since Sept. 11, 2001, a continuous cooling of relations between the two countries has happened.

The US The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 had unprecedented effects on the Middle East geopolitics. The overthrow of Iran's two longstanding enemies on its western and eastern borders meant, according to Saudi officials, an increase in Iran's regional power. The emergence of Iraq's Shi'ite-led government was unpleasant to Saudi Arabia; its embassy in Iraq "only reopened in December 2016 after being closed since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait more than 25 years ago" (bbcnews, 28 August 2016).

However, the 2010 Arab uprisings ushered in a new round of contests in Iran-Saudi relations that increased the extent of mistrusts. Nevertheless, prior to King Salman's ascension to the throne, the two countries tried to prevent escalation and direct confrontation.

The ambitious Crown Prince eagers to modernize a conservative monarch who has big dreams and has already begun major reforms: a grand plan to diversify the oil-dependent economy. He's started an ambitious **reform** program such as significant women's rights reforms, attempts to limit the influence of powerful religious institutions and plans to build new industrial cities in the desert and open an opera house in Riyadh (Crowcroft, 2017). These ambitious modernist programs show a dramatic change in the Saudi domestic and foreign policy approaches to present a more pro-Western image in the minds of the domestic and foreign public; this in itself can raise Iran's conservative regime concerns. The new Saudi rulers, especially Mohammad bin Salman, who announced in the spring of 2017 that Middle East insecurity should be extended to Iran, with a strongly anti-Iranian posture are going to counter the regional influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran by attacking Yemen, the poorest Arab country in the Middle East, and by leveraging the power of proxy groups in other places, such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Three years after asymmetric war with the Houthis, Saudis have also begun to normalize relations with Israel that as the Saudis have said; its main reason was to counter the Iranian threat.

#### **4.3. Iran's nuclear program**

Iran's nuclear program has been one of the influencing agents on Saudi-Iranian relations. Saudi Arabia has always opposed the nuclear capability of Iran. Iran's acquisition of nuclear power could upset the balance of regional power. Although almost all countries in the region are concerned about Iran's nuclear ambitions,



only Saudi Arabia and Israel have been the most vocal. On November 7, 2007, the Saudi king said that Iran had declared its nuclear program peaceful, in which case he saw no justification for escalation, confrontation and challenge, which only made issues more complicated (Reuters, November 7, 2007). Riyadh welcomed the deal during the reign of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, but at the same time stretched its regional engagements to confront Iran's growing clout.

On July 14, 2015, The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was reached by Iran and the P5+1 (China France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The nuclear deal was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231, adopted on July 20, 2015 together with the European Union. The JCPOA was the culmination of 12 years' international effort as well as the Obama administration's top foreign policy priority. Nevertheless, this deal lasted a little over a year and on May 7, 2016, US President Donald Trump officially pulled out the JCPOA and announced the return of unilateral US sanctions.

The agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5 + 1 coincided with the accession of King Salman, who had a more hostile attitude toward Iran's intentions in the region. So the kingdom welcomed President Trump's decision and Saudi Foreign said "Iran used economic gains from the lifting of sanctions to continue its activities to destabilize the region, particularly by developing ballistic missiles and supporting terrorist groups in the region" (Reuters, May 8, 2018). Saudi Arabia has used the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program to strengthen "Iranophobia" and reinforce its regional allied bloc although The Wall Street Journal reported that Western officials have concerned about nuclear cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in building a facility to extract yellowcake from uranium ore, a significant change in Riyadh's civilian nuclear program. (Strobel, Gordon and Schwartz 2020: L.A: 7/21/2022).

#### **4.4. Arab Spring**

The beginning of anti-government protests in the Mena region in December 2010, while changing the geopolitics of power in the West Asian region, also brought The Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy conflict to a new stage, the most important feature of which is changing the structure of relations from "competition" to "hostility". Reaching a new chance to expand regional influence, Iran considered these protests as an "opportunity" and therefore called it an "Islamic awakening" that could result in the emergence of pro-Iranian, Shia-dominated governments. So, Iran tried to activate its role as a key player in the regional equation. On the contrary, from the perspective of Saudi conservative foreign policy, these protests were seen as "threats" that could upset the balance of power in the Mena region and push instability within its borders, so it assumed a new role in the leadership of repression of public protests. This new role became serious when a month after the wave of Shiite protests against the Al-Khalifa Sunni government, Riyadh sent troops to Bahrain in March 2011 with the help of its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council to suppress the Shiite protesters. For many, the Bahraini archipelago is the epicenter of the geopolitical and sectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and

Iran (Mabon, 2013). The most important factor leading to Saudi military intervention in Bahrain was the possibility of the "domino effect of the overthrow of the Bahraini government by the Shiites" (Nuruzzaman, 2013). Subsequently, Saudi-Bahraini defense agreement signed in 2012.

Tensions between the Shiite population of al-Hasa (Hijaz eastern province) and the Saudi family date back to the late 18th century when Muhammad ibn Saud, the son of the dynasty's founder, adopted the teachings of Muhammad ibn Saud and used them to legitimize his rule. He and his successors, under the banner of war against the infidels and deviants, sought territorial expansion to the east. So the Shiites of al-Hasa resisted. Wahhabi militants in their attacks often destroyed the shrines and holy places of various Shiite sects; including in 1802 in one of these raids the holy city of Karbala was attacked and looted, the shrine of Imam Hussein was damaged, and many civilians were killed. These events left a painful memory in the collective minds of the Shiites. (Adrahtas, 2021; Bengio, 2014; Steinberg, 2008). So, to the Saudis and other GCC member states with varying degrees, Iran represents a near-existential threat. Centuries of ethnic-religious enmity between Iranians and Arabs have manifested in both official and popular perceptions. The recent history of Iran's meddling in the Persian Gulf - which it considers its own natural sphere of influence - has provoked both anger and fear in Arab states (Seikaly, 2011: 5).

The wave of protests and civil unrest that swept the Arab world showed common pains and the destinies of the Arab countries; two rival blocks formed in the Arab World. Although Iran and Saudi Arabia never enter direct war but their proxy players lined up in sectarian queues to back Tehran or Riyadh in their spheres of influence.

Middle East, where they support many destructive wars and conflicts between the opposing sides. The then Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir "Iran's history is full of negative interference and hostility in Arab issues, and it is always accompanied by destruction," (bbc.com; 4 January 2016).

The 2010s marked the beginning of a new era in Iran-Saudi relations; the death of King Abdullah and the occurrence of the Arab Spring created new opportunities and threats for the two countries to gain more influence in the region and turned the relations between the two countries from rivalry to conflict. The two events finally led to proxy wars in countries plagued by insurgency and instability such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

#### **4.5. Proxy Wars: A Crucial Geopolitical Change in the Middle East**

Like most states, especially in shatter belts of the world, regional antagonists in the Middle East justify their actions as a necessary and effective response to defend against acute security threats. Most of the states that Iran considers its rival or enemy are located in West Asia, such as Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The Arab Spring has made a significant impact on the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, providing new opportunities for Iran and Saudi Arabia to test their chances for changing the coalition in the affected countries such as Yemen, Syria, Libya and Iraq; a confrontation that led to a proxy war between the two

countries. Syria might be considered as the main battleground which the changing balance of the involved forces has played a decisive impact on the outcome of the contentions.

While the common interests of Iran and Syria are largely the result of hostility to Israel for their own reasons, the Syrian civil war atrocities created new opportunities for Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to pursue their own national interests. The alignment of Iran and Russia in this war has been out of mutual sympathy and even despite the influential role of the Iranian ground forces in determining of the civil war fate in favor of Bashar al-Assad, the Russian approach has tended to value a capacity to cultivate good relations with all actors. Iran incurred various costs for this war, including colossal material one. Iran's actions in the Syrian civil war revealed several specific goals for the country:

- Ensuring that Bashar al-Assad's regime remains in power to ensure the freedom of action of the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force and other affiliated militias such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Afghan Fatimids in Syria, for the ultimate goal of confronting Israel;
- Expelling Sunni extremists out of Syria thereby strengthening the Shiite power belt from Afghanistan to Lebanon;
- Recouping predominantly operational investments to justify achieving the strategic goal of confronting Israel by achieving a military or operational base (Katzman, 2015; Nower, 2017; Smyth, 2015; Weiss and Hassan, 2016).

In February 2014, Mehdi Taeb, a senior Iranian cleric, head of the Ammar base underlined the magnitude of Syria to Iran in stark terms, saying it is a “strategic province for us (...) If the enemy attacks us and wants to take either Syria or [the Iranian province of] Khuzestan, the priority is to keep Syria,” he said. “If we keep Syria, we can get Khuzestan back too, but if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran” (Blanford, April 27, 2015).

Saudi-Syrian relations have long been fraught with tensions. Saudi Arabia resented Syria's involvement in Lebanon's internal affairs as Iran's most important ally. After the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, a close friend of the late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, Syria was blamed for the assassination (Haran, 2016, 5). In the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War Iran accused Saudis of giving Israel ‘strategic’ Intel (TOI staff and AFP, 2016). Saudi called Hezbollah's actions “unexpected, inappropriate and irresponsible acts (The Associated Press, 16/07/2006).

Saudi Arabia, which wants to be recognized as the leader of the Arab world, sees regime change in Iran's closest ally as his favor so he turned the main supporter of armed the Syrian opposition fighting under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) umbrella. In arming the Syrian opposition, it shares common interests with Qatar, the UAE, as well as Turkey. As a result, Syria faced “unusual threats” but despite the hefty losses, not only the opposition is on the verge of collapse, but also the Syrian regime has grabbed a superior position.

Yemen has been another arena for the Iran-Saudi proxy war although Yemen's War is a so complex with many different actors that Iran or Saudi Arabia are unable to offer an exclusive solution to it. In fact, Saudi Arabia's discords with

Yemeni groups date back to before the 1979 Iranian revolution but with the Arab Spring and the fall of Yemen's strongman, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the opportunity arose for both countries to intervene in Yemen in an effort to establish a government aligned with their interests. Today, Yemen is divided between the Houthi movement which controls the north of the country and the Saudi-led anti-Houthi coalition backed by Western and GCC allies that President Abdo Robo Mansour Hadi is cobbling together. (Louis, 2015, 1). Also, Saudi Arabia has pursued a policy of support for Sunni religious sects close to Wahhabism to block the Shiite elements ascension to ranks of political power. (Burke, 2012, 10) But this policy also had an opposite effect, helping to radicalize the Houthi movement. (Popp, 2015, 2)

In recent decades, the Zaydi ideological movement in opposition to Wahhabi ideology, not exclusive to Yemen, has emerged in the southern parts of the peninsula. Hence, it was necessary for Saudi Arabia, Shiism as its ideological otherness to intervene in the Yemeni civil war. (Salisbury, 2015, 3-4) Saudi leaders knew if the Shiites close to Iran come to power in Yemen, the balance of regional power would be upset to the detriment of Saudi Arabia (Fallah, 2012, 208)

Iran sees Yemen strategically important, as a kind of Islamic awakening (the Iranian authorities' preferred phrase for the Arab Spring), an opportunity to reduce the West influence in the region. Hence, Iran is particularly sensitive to Saudi interference in the course of Yemen's domestic political developments to put pro-Saudi currents such as Salafist groups involved in the Yemeni conflict into power. So Ayatollah Khamenei said "Today, the Yemeni people are enduring the most severe tortures from the Saudi government and its allies and the United States - its supporters - but know that the Yemeni people and Ansarullah will surely win; They will not fail ... The only way is resistance, and what has embarrassed America and its allies today, who resort to nonsense, resort to wrongdoing, is the resistance of the Muslim nations, and this resistance will work." (farsi.khamenei.ir, 2018-10-26 last access 2021-7-15).

## **5. China's brokerage in de-escalating relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia**

In Chinese foreign policy literature, terms like "soft balance" and "hard balance" are found a lot. In his 2014 article, one of the famous Chinese researchers, Liu Feng can be seen as the same "institutional balancing" with the help of which he tried to develop and deepen the main meaning of the power balance policy. According to his argument, the traditional concept of the balance of power needs to be modified, and the traditional understanding of it (which prefers the balance resulting from hardware to the politics resulting from soft power and cultural capital) does not make the real logic of creating a balance possible. According to Liu, the soft balance of hegemonic power does not balance with the strengthening of its power position, and therefore it does not change the hegemon's behavior or the existing power structure (Feng, 2014: 26-39). Such an approach in the literature used by Chinese officials and regional experts can

indicate the formation of a new school of Chinese international relations theory to deal with complex regional issues such as the Middle East.

Since the past decades, China has played the role of a neutral actor in the region. But with the gradual decline of the United States' presence in the Middle East, especially after the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power, China had to act to protect its interests in the region, which Cohen called the fragile belt. So far, it has been clear that China, based on political and international considerations, has refused to have a security-military presence in the Middle East, but trying to deepen regionalism can be a good option over military presence.

Actually, Beijing has been very careful not to get too involved in the security-military issues of the Middle East, so it has not taken any role in reducing the geopolitical tension in the Middle East, perhaps one of the important reasons for that is the belief that Beijing's intervention can change the political equations and it upsets the balance of power and causes new crises in the region. In addition, since Mao's time, unlike the former Soviet Union, which sought to export communist ideology, it believed in the establishment of communism in a single country and has remained on this position. A position now reinforced by a world that is increasingly regionalized.

Although the volume of China's economic exchanges with Iran is not so high compared to the other Middle Eastern countries, the relationship with Iran is of high political importance for China, because it has a decisive influence on the geopolitics of the Middle East. A conflict between Iran and one of its neighbors can jeopardize the stability and as a result China's ambitious plans in the region such as BRI. Therefore, China is not very interested in the progress of Iran's nuclear program and even prefers that Iran does not become a rival nuclear power. Although Iran is important to China as a potential challenge to the US military presence in the region and the role it can play in diverting US attention from the South China Sea region to the Persian Gulf, the escalation of tension in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf is not in China's favor, and therefore China's mediation in the process of detente between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be evaluated from this point of view<sup>1</sup>.

On Feb. 21, 2023, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released the "Global Security Initiative" (GSI) concept paper, which declares that Beijing will promote the political resolution of regional conflicts by encouraging the countries involved to resolve their disputes through dialogue and communication (Yazdanshenas & Saleh, mei.edu, April 5, 2023 ).

The fact that the agreement was signed after two years of difficult negotiations and diplomatic relations were restored in July 2023 is promising. But it cannot be expected that old rivals will become intimate friends with the opening of diplomatic relations. There is a lot of mistrust and there are too many points of friction to tackle and compromise.

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1. Detente, to Kissinger, 'is not a condition in which all problems are solved, but a process by which points in dispute are resolved and potential crises are anticipated and avoided' (Kissinger, 1974: 144).

Saudi Arabia, which with the ambitious economic and social programs of Muhammad bin Salman, has taken a step towards a new modernization program since the second half of the 2010s, is more motivated by desire to advance its relations based on economic and political calculations, but the motivations of the Islamic Republic of Iran are mainly driven by ideological-regional agendas so the latter will have less adaptability to such calculus. In this regard, only the inspiration to create an alliance with China will be able to bring about a change in Iran's inducements.

According to the Beijing agreement, the two countries have agreed to resolve their differences through dialogue, respect each other's sovereignty, and not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. They have also agreed to cooperate in certain areas in their bilateral relations. In addition, they have expressed their commitment with China to promote regional and international peace and security (setav.org, L.A: 7/16/2023).

Before China's entry, some regional countries such as Iraq, Oman and Qatar had tried to mediate between the two countries. Although the two countries had taken concrete steps in the past two years, their efforts to resolve this tension had failed, and it was only with China's involvement and guarantee that the two countries reached a stable agreement. Therefore, China's successful mediation between two Middle Eastern countries is a significant development with regional and global implications.

## **6. Conclusion**

Pragmatism, not love pushed Iran and Saudi Arabia to resume diplomatic relations after years of hostility. Tehran and Riyadh realized that dialogue is the only viable way to reduce tensions and more escalating hostilities will not serve the national interest of either.

Iran believes that the agreement with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, mediated by China, can help deepen relations with Beijing and confront the United States efforts to act as "security role" in the region. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia wanted to end the war in Yemen and the missile attacks on its country. It also does not want to become an arena of competition between the United States and China rather to prevent from being targeted in the event of out breaking hostilities between Iran and Israel.

Chinese discourse underpins the shifts in Chinese foreign policy in which hard or soft balancing is increasingly becoming a feature of a "geo-politicised" regional policy. This geostrategic regional policy with regard to Iran shows that China is gaining influence there at the expense of the United States.

China's foreign policy discourse is based on creating a balance in specific geographic regions sensitive to its interests, such as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, thus it can be called "geopoliticized" regional policy.

This regional policy towards Iran and Saudi Arabia in a situation where American influence is declining can increase the political-geopolitical weight of China, which is becoming the world's first economic power. China, like any other

major trader or investor in this region, needs regional stability and harmony in order to promote national interests.

On the other hand, the foundations of foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia are completely divergent. While Iran has a revolutionary ideology in its foreign policy, Saudi Arabia mainly has a combination of political, economic, cultural and ethnic interests in its foreign policy and will be the main regional rival of the Islamic Republic of Iran in all these aspects. Therefore, reconciliation and joint efforts of the two countries will be a difficult and ambiguous process in the long run. The differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia are too deep-rooted to become a regional alliance even with China's brokerage.

In the meantime, only Iran's view of China as its strategic ally (of course, very controversial) can guarantee the implementation of this partnership in the medium term, although it is not clear, for example, in the event of a serious regional crisis in any of the countries in this area, how the positions of Iran and Saudi Arabia can be moved to close ones far from confrontation, competition and even conflict.

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