

## The New Approaches of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy towards Iran (in the light of 2023 Agreement)

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of this research is to examine the new foreign policy of Saudi Arabia (2023) towards Iran based on the Copenhagen School.

**Method:** This research applied analytical-explanatory method. Its data is collected from scientific articles of reputable universities, research institutes, as well as reputable analytical-news websites, including Russian Sputnik news agency, the Middle East Institute's analytical database and articles of Scientific Research Institute of Strategic Studies in Iran.

**Findings:** The findings of this research show that although the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia decreased after the Beijing agreement, and though political and diplomatic channels opened between the two countries, the strategy of Saudi Arabia towards Iran remained hostile.

**Conclusion:** In the four areas of opportunity-threat, according to the background of Saudi foreign policy towards Iran, the Beijing agreement cannot be a channel for strategic cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. But the conditions of the region have become such that Saudi Arabia has greatly reduced its dependence on the United States of America. Saudi Arabia cooperates tactically with trans-regional revisionist powers such as China and regional powers such as Iran.

**Key words:** Iran, Saudi Arabia, Copenhagen School, Beijing Agreement, Tactical Cooperation.

**Article Type:** Research


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## 1. Introduction

During last decade, the Umrah pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia stopped after Jeddah airport inspection officers assaulted two young Iranian pilgrims. Moreover, Hajj Tamattu pilgrimage caused more problems in the relationships between the two countries. The fall of the crane in Mecca as well as the Mina disaster were two events that fueled the enmity between the two countries. During these two incidents, which led to the deaths of hundreds of Iranians, Iran accused the Saudi authorities as being responsible and demanded an apology from them. The attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad, which took place after the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a dissident cleric opposed to the Saudi government, fueled the escalation of tensions between the two countries.

However, Saudi Arabia and Iran the two major regional powers, which are influential in regional and international affairs, held talks in Beijing from March 6 to 10, 2023. The heads of the two Saudi and Iranian delegations signed the joint Chinese, Saudi and Iranian tripartite statement on March 10, 2023, which heralds the beginning of a new phase of relationships between the two regional powers and the resumption of diplomatic relations after seven years of disconnection. And it creates tension. Before this agreement, the parties carried out five rounds of talks, which were inconclusive, and despite the fact that the parties had positive positions, these talks could not reach a stage that would break this atmosphere of distrust between the parties. With the China's mediation, a new opening in the security, political and economic relations between the parties emerged. According to Beijing's Accords, the two countries have pledged to respect the principles of non-interference in internal affairs of each other and respect their national sovereignty. These principles are necessary, but not sufficient. Peace and sustainable cooperation between the two countries require agreement on more principles.

As two Islamic powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia must commit to:

- 1- Consider each other's security as an integral part of regional security,
- 2- Eliminate the illusion of regional hegemony, on the part of the other,
- 3- To create a new structure of security and collective cooperation in the Persian Gulf,
- 4- Turn "non-constructive competitions" in the region such as in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq into "constructive cooperation" to solve crises,
- 5- Cooperate to deal with weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and sectarianism,
- 6- To treat their religious minorities well and grant them full rights,
- 7- Cooperate to reduce tensions between Washington and Tehran,
- 8- Resumption of full diplomatic relations,

In addition, the two parties agreed to implement security and economic agreement which were signed in 1998 and 2001 (Musavian, 2023).

There are two points of view regarding this agreement. Some analysts believe that the Beijing agreement can lower the level of tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and they are generally optimistic about this agreement. They interpret the Beijing agreement in line with Saudi Arabian long-term goals.

Saudi Arabia's current interests are related to the ambitious political, economic, financial, and cultural targets that Prince Mohammad bin Salman has set forth for his country, which are based on two pillars. First diversifying regional and global partnerships to adapt to global systemic changes that will help realize Riyadh's grand plans. Establishing security and political stability to allow Saudi Arabia implement its major projects, especially those outlines in MbS' "Vision 2030," through which Riyadh envisions itself transforming into a regional incubator for finance, business, media, and the entertainment industry. Similar to the role played by the UAE in the past decade, or by Beirut before the Lebanese civil war in 1975. In short, regional and domestic security and stability are vital for Riyadh to be able to implement its strategic goals. Moreover, confidential clauses were inserted into the Beijing Agreement to assure Iran and Saudi Arabia that their security imperatives would be met. (Lllaik, 2023).

On the other hand, some analysts pay attention to the history of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and from this point of view, they do not consider a clear horizon for these two countries. For example, Teitelbaum evaluates the execution of Sheikh Nimr (former leader of Saudi Shiites) by the government in line with confrontation with Iran, to consolidate its spiritual position in the Islamic world (Teitelbaum, 2016). Motaghi considers the lack of three common elements of "norm", "image" and "identity" to be the cause of incompatibility between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the field of cultural issues (Motaghi, 2014), Sharma assumes that the root of the enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia is more. It is due to the identity issues that have intensified since the Iranian revolution and its consequences have gripped the Middle East region (Sharma, 2016). Mohammad Bin Huwaidin believes that the type of ideas, views and mentality of these two countries are security and cultural conflict. (Bin Huwaidin, 2015). Considering these two views, the researcher considers the most important questions that how can the new approaches of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy - which can be understood through China's mediation- towards Iran, be examined and analyzed?

## **2. Research Method**

The main method of the upcoming research is analytical explanatory. The method of collecting information is a library and data collection tools; phishing of books, articles. The data analysis method is also qualitative.

In line with the explanatory aspect of the research, the authors analyzed four political, cultural, cyber and economic spheres in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, using the most important threatening spheres of the Copenhagen school. In addition to scientific books and articles, the authors used reliable internet analysis databases such as "BESA Center Perspective", "Institute for National Security Studies Insight", "Nornews" "Carnegie Endowment for International Peace" and "Sputnik".

### 3. Research Background and Innovation

Most of the research that have been written about the root of the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia have given too much importance to the issues of identity and religious war. Ebrahimi writes: Saudi Arabia's foreign policy during the era of King Abdullah and King Salman is based on pragmatic Salafism, the consequences of which are regional containment of Iran and its identity politics (Ebrahimi, 2015).

Berti, and Guzansky believe that the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in recent years can be analyzed on the basis of their sectarian rivalry, geopolitical and political interests, as well as the competition for the leadership of the Islamic world. After the awakening of the Arab countries, the enmity between the two countries intensified and the attempt to spread the wave of Arab awakening to Syria and Bahrain has doubled the proxy wars between them (Berti, and Guzansky, 2014). Alanazi also emphasizes that Iran's behavior after the 1979 revolution shows that it emphasizes sectarianism more than nationalism. This sectarianism can penetrate throughout the region, in addition to strengthening Iran's hegemony in the region it becomes a major threat against Saudi Arabia (Alanazi, 2015).

Finally, Wehrey and colleagues write: After the fall of Saddam in 2003, there were strategic changes in the relations and balance of power in the Middle East. One of the results of this development was new fronts at the regional level and a new alliance with extra-regional powers. Saudi Arabia and Iran, as two regional powers, were not exempt from this rule. Because Saudi Arabia and Iran want to become the leaders of the Islamic world, Tehran considers Riyadh to be the representative and implementer of the United States of America's strategies in the Persian Gulf and the region, and Riyadh is worried about Tehran's excessive influence in the region after the fall of Saddam Hussein (Wehrey et al. 2009).

While the importance of trust-building and regional de-escalation cannot be underestimated, the reality is that there will be many continuities.

Divsallar believes that changes in Saudi-Iran relations. Against the background of classical political and religious rivalry, a militarization of Saudi-Iran relations has been a dominant trend of the last decade. The deal will remain vulnerable to complex challenges caused by such militarization. The Iranian and Saudi military doctrines as well as their key military plans remain intact, meaning militarized. The Saudis will continue to improve their missile defense and anti-drone capabilities by working with the U.S. and other partners. Iran has long viewed this as a threat to the regional offensive-defensive balance. Thus, Tehran will likely continue its effort in launching proper countermeasures, among them improving the offensive capability of its axis of resistance (Divsallar, 2023: 5).

Wenpingv wrote in an analysis: the agreement has facilitated handshaking and peacebuilding between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two regional 'rivals' and 'old enemies'. This effectively eased tensions in the Middle East, and caused the collapse of the Middle East 'anti-Tehran alliance' — which aims to win over Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel to confront and isolate Iran — built during the Trump administration, and major changes have occurred in the Middle East

geopolitics in favour of Iran. China hosted and chaired the talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and issued the China-Iran-Saudi Arabia trilateral joint statement which former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called it “victory in dialogue” and “victory in peace.” This effectively demonstrates China’s role and contribution as a promoter of peace and a bridge builder of dialogue. This diplomatic breakthrough has implications for resolving other global conflicts, including the Ukraine crisis. As the most important power outside the Middle East, the United States -with the withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan in recent years- caused Middle Eastern countries to feel like they can no longer rely on Washington for security guarantees. (Wenping, 2023: 7-8).

In an innovative way, the authors have tried to analyze the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia towards Iran in the light of the latest events between the two countries, and to examine the idealistic aspects of relations in addition to examining the realistic views.

#### **4. Theoretical Topics: The Copenhagen School**

The Copenhagen School, from an ontological point of view, is an intermediate view of reality; emphasis on the active role of the government while paying attention to other actors and interactions and mutual consolidation has a structure and agent (Saadedabadi and Mahroogh, 2013: 115). The Copenhagen school is based on three main ideas: 1) “securitization”, 2) “sectors” and 3) “security complexes”. Securitization questions the core of traditional security and is linked to politicizing an issue. Sectors are a reference to the distinction between social, military, environmental, political and economic security, and the concept of security complexes also addresses the importance of the regional level in security analysis (Ebrahimi, 2014: 15-16).

Contrary to neo-realism, the Copenhagen school lists five types of security: 1) “military security”, which refers to the ability of a country to defend and attack, 2) “economic security”, which refers to economic stability, mass production, proportionate exports, and sufficient financial resources. 3) “Political security”, in the sense that the country is not in danger from a political point of view (foreigners have not made decisions for the people and the fate of the people is in their own hands) and legitimacy (the ruling regime). 4) “social and cultural security” which refers to the ability of a country to maintain social and traditional patterns such as language, tradition, religion, customs, type of clothing, etc. and finally 5) “environmental security” which means the sustainability of the environment animal and plant life and nature around us (Rostami and Naderi, 1394: 171).

Regarding the regional security systems, Nasri writes: The main thesis of Bozan and Weaver is from the theory of regional security. It is based on the assumption that the end of the Cold War was the beginning of widespread insecurities that are rooted in the limitations of realist schools and dimensions of security. In this way, the realist school by considering the government as the only issue of security and the globalist school by considering the international system as the only factor of security have neglected the center of development of the main movements in

the region. Therefore, to provide a proper understanding of the nature and fate of security, it is necessary to pay attention to the structure of the region and the characteristics of countries that are located in certain regions and have similar security dilemmas (Nasri, 2007: 586).

On the other hand, the most important epistemological-methodological debate about the Copenhagen school is its middle position, which can be searched in terms of epistemology. One of Bozan's important criticisms of positivism and post-positivism, which includes a wide range of feminists, postmodernists, and critics, is that they emphasize the material element of security. This school believes that the reality of history is our knowledge, and our knowledge is formed in the community. Contrary to the interpretation of realist positivism, this school does not consider the interaction of humans and political units to be merely material and believes that experience and observation are not appropriate and correct methods for analyzing human behavior, because the willfulness of humans prevents trusting the results of objective and material analysis. (Ebrahimi, 2007: 444).

The Copenhagen school is useful in compiling this research from three dimensions: First, with the middle position of the Copenhagen school in terms of epistemology (considering the principles of realism and idealism), the authors have analyzed the realist spectrum of Saudi foreign policy and its idealistic spectrum. Secondly, based on the Copenhagen school, the authors evaluate the areas of threat and opportunity between Saudi Arabia and Iran in four political, (regional) social, economic and cyber sectors. And third, in the Copenhagen school, the specific conditions of each region determine the regional order. In this sense, the decline of America and the influence of China in the Islamic world and its impact on Saudi foreign policy are considered.

## **5. The Regional Dimension of the Agreement**

In this part, based on the Copenhagen school, we are trying to address the impact of the Beijing agreement on the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, we will examine the pessimistic and optimistic aspects of relations in four regional, social, cyber and economic areas.

### **5- 1. Optimistic Aspects**

On 10 March, representatives of Iran and Saudi Arabia, who had meeting secretly for five days in the Chinese capital Beijing, announced a Chinese-sponsored agreement to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries. Tensions between the regional rival's dates back to more than four decades ago, persisting at lower levels through an earlier period of détente in the 1990s and then heightening in the past two decades. Riyadh formally severed ties with Tehran seven years ago. The countries' effort to mend relations was public knowledge – Iraq and Oman had hosted previous rounds of talks between Iranian and Saudi officials – but China's role in mediating the accord was unforeseen, as was the speed with which the rapprochement has proceeded. The degree to which the Joint Trilateral Statement issued by the three countries augurs a geopolitical

shift that will see China assume a larger role in a region where the United States has long been dominant remains uncertain (International Crisis Group, 2023). The regional rivals committed to reopening embassies in Tehran and Riyadh by May 2023. The deal, brokered by China, also included the implementation of a security cooperation agreement signed in 2001 and a 1998 pact to enhance cooperation on trade, investment, technology, and culture. The Islamic Republic and the Gulf kingdom affirmed their respect for the “sovereignty of states” and “non-interference in internal affairs.” The move marked a significant de-escalation in tensions. For years, the two countries have clashed over regional conflicts, particularly Syria and Yemen (The United States Institute of Peace, 23023).

The fundamental Saudi position is that Iran has no role in the Arab world. This will remain a vector for Riyadh’s enhanced cooperation with the United States and Western powers to move from defense to deterrence against Iran. For the time being, Saudi Arabia is choosing to deal with Iran with a detached pragmatism; essentially, “We cannot get rid of them, and they can’t get rid of us.” Based on this logic, Saudi Arabia is relying on regulated coexistence in the Gulf and a mix of competition and containment in Syria and Iraq (Farouk, 2023). Simon Henderson wrote in the Hill that “the prevailing analysis seems to be that Riyadh has decided to work with Tehran because of the antipathy and lack of support that Saudi Arabia receives from the Biden administration and Democrats in Congress.” He also explained to the Star Tribune why the deal may include Iran quelling militant attacks on Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Robert Satloff wrote that the lack of U.S. action in response to Iran’s recent nuclear progress “was the final straw that convinced Riyadh a dramatic step was in order.” For Saudi Arabia, he argued, the deal’s purpose is “not to shift camps but to diversify sources of security.” Grant Rumley and Henry Rome further argued that cooling the Yemeni civil war was a motivating factor for Saudi Arabia. They wrote, “Iran reportedly agreed to encourage its Houthi allies in Yemen to maintain the current year-long truce...Saudi Arabia has spent millions of dollars defending its territory against Houthi missile and drone attacks.” (Brown, 2023).

## **5-2. Pessimistic Aspects**

With all these descriptions, Tehran and Riyadh continue harboring suspicions of each other. From Iran’s vantagepoint, Riyadh’s partnership with Washington remains a major threat to Islamic World security. (Cafiro, 2023).

### **5-2-1. Struggle with the Islamic Resistance Front in the Islamic world**

Saudi Arabia is one of the allies of the Neo-conservatist system in the region and domination of the region as a regional status for Saudi Arabia depends on competition with Iran [and the axis of resistance] (Bayat and Islami, 2018); Therefore, it has posed threats to all three aspects of the strength of the Islamic Resistance, especially the Islamic Republic of Iran. The struggle against the countries and nations of the Islamic resistance is one of the most important threats.

## **Syria and Iraq**

Since post-Saddam Syria and Iraq have established deep ties with the Islamic Revolution discourse in terms of Islamism and the axis of resistance, Saudi Arabia has pursued a strategy of regime change following the severance of these ties in the first stage and weakening the Islamic Revolution by breaking the axis of resistance. Is (Niakoei and Sotoudeh, 2015: 95-109).

## **Yemen**

Regarding Yemen, Saudi Arabia, which considers the rise of the Houthis as opposed to the security of its regions, confronted this issue with a military campaign against Yemen (Al-Seyed Ghafoor et al., 2015: 145). This opposition is due to the closeness of the intellectual and behavioral aspects of the Ansarullah movement with the visionary foundations of the Islamic Revolution (Khezri et al., 2015: 194).

## **Bahrain**

Also, because of the developments of the Islamic Awakening, Saudi officials, in order to justify the repression of the Bahraini people, state that their military forces intervened to prevent Iranian influence in Bahrain's domestic politics (Dehshiri and Hosseini, 2016: 125-126).

## **Hezbollah**

Also, Saudi Arabia, under pressure from the Arab League and the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization and has always tried to separate Hamas from Iran (Pourhassan, 2017: 33-34).

### **5-2-2. Strengthening Terrorism**

Saudi support for takfiri and terrorist groups in the region in the face of these threats is also important. In a 2012 report, Deutsche Welle described Saudi Arabia as the largest sponsor of terrorists in the world (Mirzaei and Davand, 2015: 79). "In 2006, Saudi Arabia created al-Qaeda in Iraq at the behest of the United States to prevent strong ties between Iraq and Iran," Al-Alam quoted Tim Anderson as saying in a Canadian newspaper. (Al-Alam News Agency, November 20, 2015). On the other hand, the organizational and institutional threats of Saudi Arabia against the Islamic Resistance Front in the form of "Persian Gulf Cooperation Council", "Persian Gulf Union", "Arab Coalition" and "Islamic Military Coalition against Terrorism" and ... can be mentioned (Noor Alivand, 2017: 23-25).

### **5-2-3. Normalization of Relations with Israel**

The normalization of relations with Israel is also one of the threats of Saudi Arabia against the axis of resistance. Increasing Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon, from the perspective of the Saudis, is an increase in Iran's influence in the region and its greater determinism in the Arab-Israeli equations (Sotoudeh and Khazaei, 2016: 71-72). That is why Anwar Eshghi, director of the Jeddah



Center for Strategic Studies, stated that the country has common interests with the occupying regime in Jerusalem. "... Saudi Arabia will launch a plan that will encourage Arab countries to normalize [relations] with Israel; "It will have a positive impact on its (Israel) relations with Egypt and Jordan." (Fars News Agency, June 6, 2016).

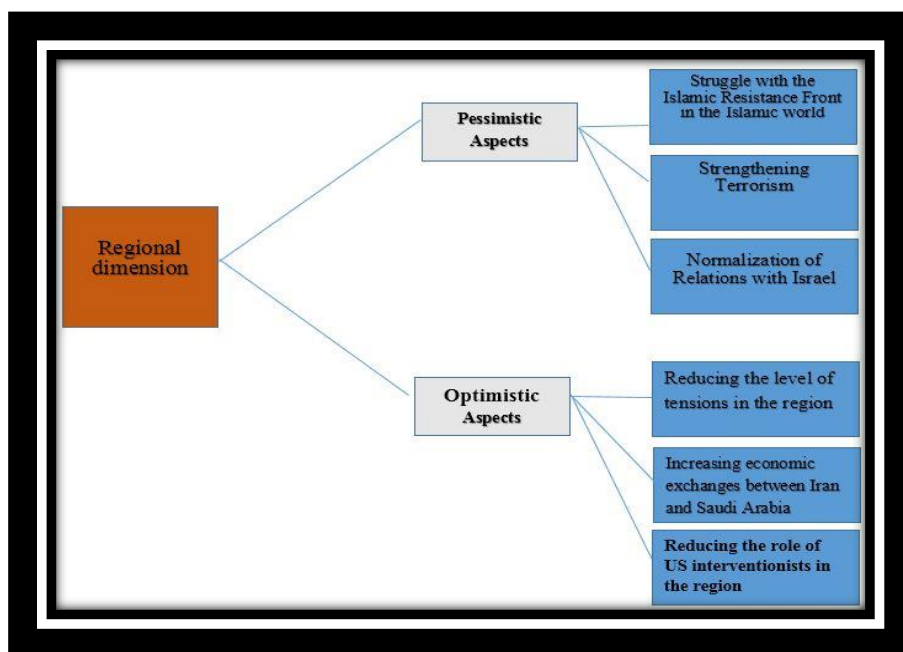


Figure No. (1) - Optimistic and Pessimistic Regional Dimensions of the Beijing Agreement

Source: Created by the Authors

## 6. The Economic Aspects of the Agreement

### 6-1. Optimistic Aspects

Examining the record of Bin Salman's activities in recent years in the framework of the Vision 2030 document, which was announced in 2016 as the country's development roadmap, shows plans to reduce Riyadh's dependence on oil and diversify the Saudi economy and develop service sectors. Bin Salman's initial point of support in this direction was the investment, technical and security support of the West, but Saudi Arabia's involvement in regional security crises and deep spending voids, including the Yemen war, made the Saudi crown prince change his course. To describe it more precisely; The West not only did not provide the security required for the realization of this vision document for Riyadh, but also created many crises and security challenges which imposed heavy costs on Saudi Arabia itself. Accordingly, although Saudi Arabia has maintained its interactions with the West, it is looking for new dimensions of

regional and global diplomacy with a multilateral perspective, which is reflected in the increase in orientation towards China and Russia and the change in Saudi Arabia's approach towards Iran (Ghaderi, 2023).

On the other hand, a non-aggression pact can be a way to further strengthen the political-security dimension of normalization, which is likely to remain the major focus for now. Despite a flurry of ideas, there are few chances that Riyadh and Tehran could strengthen ties through non-security areas, such as trade, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange, in the short term. Riyadh has other thoughts though and reports indicate that it has no intention of seeking "exemptions" from U.S. sanctions. For the kingdom, providing major economic concessions to Iran when no strategic shift in its nuclear and regional policies has occurred would cost it the leverage it has over Tehran. Thus, it is unlikely that non-security areas can serve as the basis to make normalization sustainable (Divsallari, 2023).

## **6-2. Pessimistic Aspects**

The most important economic threats to the Islamic Republic of Iran are:

### **6-2-1. Oil Threats**

Saudi Arabia has always used oil weapon in its confrontation with Iran; so that during the imposed war, Saudi Arabia increased its oil production to about 10 million barrels a day (Pourhassan, 2017: 35-36). "In the wake of Washington's withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran, we emphasize Saudi Arabia's commitment to supporting the stability of the oil market in the interests of producers and consumers," the Saudi energy minister said in recent years. (Tasnim News Agency, May 10, 2016). Saudi Arabia has taken additional steps to slow Iran's efforts to increase its oil exports: in the past few weeks, it has banned carriers of Iranian crude from its waters and has cut its oil prices to European customers by 35 US cents a barrel, specifically targeting Iran's prospective market. The kingdom has also considered further raising its oil production, flooding the market to weaken its main competitor. Iran, meanwhile, has been offering discounts to its customers in Asia, selling its oil at 60 cents below Middle East benchmark prices, aiming at undercutting Saudi Arabia (Bassiri Tabrizi, 2016).

### **6-2-2. Sanction of Iranian Companies**

The next threat is the embargo on Iranian companies. After Saudi Arabia sabotaged the stabilization of crude oil prices in the post-Jcope era, we are witnessing the restriction of the activities of Iranian businesses in Dubai and the banning of Mahan air aircraft from Saudi airspace and preventing Iranian tankers from entering Saudi and Bahraini waters (Fararo News Agency, June 30, 2016).

### **6-2-3. Restrictions for the JCPOA**

In this regard, we can refer to limiting the economic effects of Jcpoa. Saudi Arabia has played an important role in secondary sanctions against Iran in an effort to reduce Iran's enjoyment of the benefits of the nuclear deal and has offered oil discounts to its Asian and European customers (Dunya Eqtesad, September

29, 2016). At Ben Salmann's behest, Saudi companies and businesses with major German companies such as Siemens and Bayer will also be suspended due to Germany's stubborn defense of Jcpoa. Saudi Arabia, which has extensive trade with the Germans, is very unhappy with Germany's insistence on maintaining Jcpoa (Eqtesadnews, June 26, 2016).

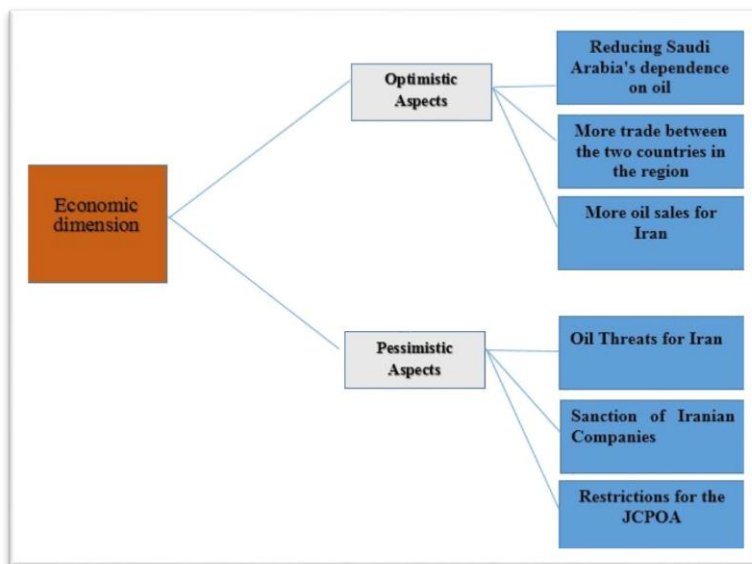


Figure No. (2) - Optimistic and Pessimistic Economic Dimensions of the Beijing Agreement  
 Source: Created by the Authors

## 7. Cyber and media aspects of the agreement

### 7-1. Optimistic Aspects

According to information leaked from the agreement of the parties, one of the issues that was agreed upon by both sides was that the two countries stop the media war against each other. If we monitor Iran's domestic media, we can see that the attack of Iranian media on Saudi Arabia has reduced to zero, as well as the attack of official Saudi media on Iran. After the agreement, Iran shut down several television channels that were operating against Saudi Arabia with Iran's support in Beirut and London under the pretext of lack of funds. Iran International also announced that it moved from London to Washington due to security issues (Abshenas, 2023).

The relationship of some Persian-language media with the Saudi government is mainly in three forms: either they are managed directly under the government, or some Saudi statesmen and princes are shareholders of these media, or in other cases, the government supports these media indirectly. However, some of these media, including websites and virtual pages attributed to Saudi Arabia, which are

composed of anti-Iran editorials, are trying to continue the former practice, albeit with less intensity. Before the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Persian-language network “Iran International” was one of the media whose shares belonged to some Saudi government officials. Saeed Kamali Dehghan explained the affiliation of this network and some other Saudi media in a report in the Guardian newspaper. This network was considered a terrorist network by the Ministry of Intelligence of Iran due to its security dependence on foreign intelligence services and the official attempt to reproduce chaos and civil war in Iran to finance themselves through the Zionist regime. A look at some media such as Al-Arabiya Persian, MBC Persian, Wasal, Sharq al-Awsat Persian or Independent Persian shows that their agents are moving to other Persian-language media or creating new media with smaller capabilities, but it goes without saying that still some prominent media figures are still present in these networks and produce content in opposition to Iran (Khabaronline, 2023).

## **7-2. Pessimistic Aspects**

The most important cyber threats to the Islamic Republic of Iran are:

### **7-2-1. The Transformation of Iran's defense and academic Institutions as Cyber-Aggressive Institutions**

The transformation of Iran's defense and academic institutions as cyber-aggressive institutions is one of the threats to securing cyber discourse. According to Siboni and Kronefeld, one of the institutions that has increased Iran's offensive capability in cyberspace is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. A 2008 study by the Tech Defense Research Institute estimated that about 2,700 specialists were employed in the Revolutionary Guards' cyber warfare program, with a budget of about \$ 76 million (Siboni & Kronenfeld, 2012, b) In this regard, Kagan and Stiansen believe that Sharif University of Technology is one of the Iranian academic centers that threatens international cyber security. (Kagan & Stiansen, 2015: 31) In this regard, the transformation of Iran's cyber capabilities in the development and completion of nuclear threats noted. In October 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta openly warned that the United States would soon face a cyber-harbor attack. According to him, in this regard, there is no scenario more immediate and potentially more dangerous than the Iranian nuclear crisis (Berman, 2013). Therefore, the governments of the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia should prioritize the space governing Iran's cyber activities (Siboni & Kronenfeld, 2012, a)

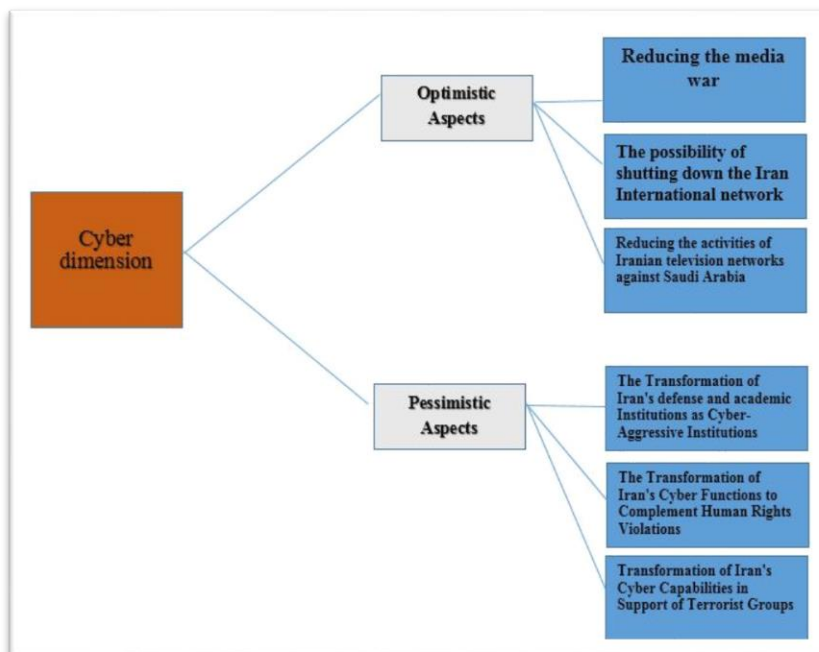
### **7-2-2. the Transformation of Iran's Cyber Functions to Complement Human Rights Violations**

The transformation of Iran's cyber functions to complement human rights violations is another threat. The Financial Times notes in an article that most of Iran's cyber capabilities were the result of the country's efforts to control and monitor the Green Movement's opposition to the “flawed 2009 elections” (Jones, 2016). The Islamic Republic views cyberspace as a tool to restrain its citizens (Eisenstadt, 2016)

### 7-2-3. Transformation of Iran's Cyber Capabilities in Support of Terrorist Groups.

Finally, we can point to the transformation of Iran's cyber capabilities in support of terrorist groups. As Cilluffo writes: Iran's achievements and malicious software can be given to their trusted ally, Hezbollah (Cilluffo, 2013). Aitel also believes that according to Iran's experience, the Hamas cyber group can not only protect itself, but also is able to threaten Israel's financial, energy and military infrastructure in the future (Aitel, 2015).

Figure No. (3) - Optimistic and Pessimistic Cyber Dimensions of the Beijing Agreement



Source: Created by the Authors

## 8. Social and Cultural aspects of the agreement

### 8-1. Optimistic Aspects

Saudi Arabian authorities believe that there is a possibility that the political and economic pressures make the Iranian system prefer the political discourse over the religious discourse. And probably the Iranian regime has come to believe that the agreement with Saudi Arabia will eliminate the internal crises or make them less colorful; And it is expected that following this agreement, Iran's ideological discourse will end or at least its intensity will be reduced, which will bring security and stability to the entire region (International Institute of Iranian Studies, 2023).

On the one hand, the reduction of regional tensions will reduce both Iran's security costs and the other side's security costs. Iran and Saudi Arabia are neighbors, and the two neighbors need to have a good and peaceful relationship

with each other. Therefore, they should have great commercial, economic and cultural relations with each other. At least they should have peaceful relations so that their costs are reduced and actors such as America, Russia, China and Israel who play a role in the region and small actors such as ISIS and... Who have interests in regional conflicts do not take advantage of the gaps. And don't mobilize one against the other. The leaders of the two countries should take necessary precautions and consider the national interests. Tribal and religious policies, on the one hand, and extremism policies, etc., on the other hand, should be abandoned and the national interests of the two countries should be looked at, not ideological conflicts, tribalism, and religious issues (Mohibali, 2023).

## **8-2. Pessimistic Aspects**

Based on the background of the research, the authors believe that the analysis of Saudi cultural threats against Iran is difficult, regardless of its political strategy in his country and the Islamic world. Iran phobia, anti-Shiism, media propaganda and the promotion of Wahhabism are among the most important Saudi cultural threats against Iran.

### **8-2-1. Iran phobia and anti-Shiism**

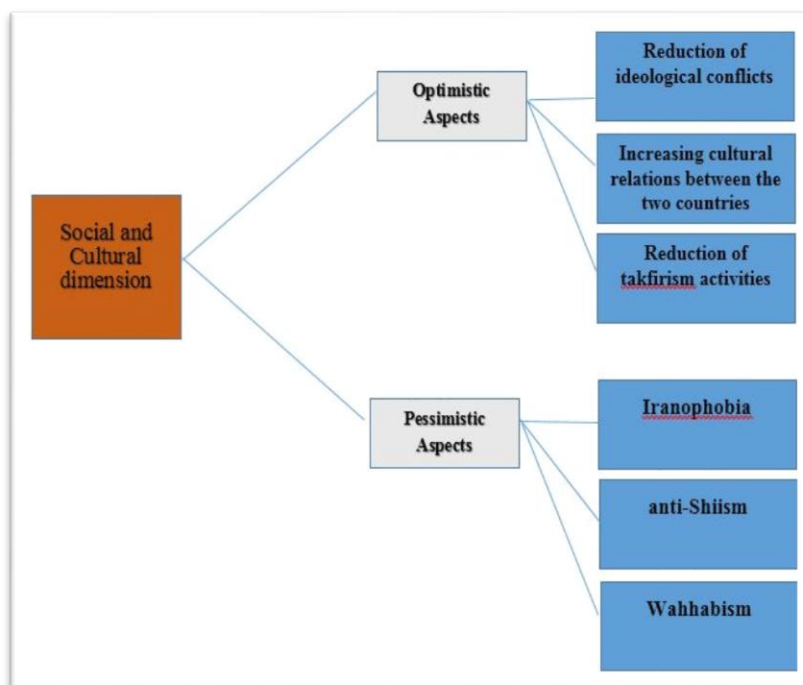
Saudi Arabia has tried to pursue this goal by using various tools and methods in the direction of Iran phobia in the region. For example, the Ministry of Culture and Information of Al-Saud has distributed a book containing anti-Shiite ideas in the primary schools of Saudi Arabia. This book excommunicates Shiites and considers them a warning sign for Muslims (Nour Mohammadi and Kazemi, 2015: 106). Also, Saudi-backed Wahhabism and Takfiri Salafis are considered the most important potential threat to Shiites in the Islamic world, considering Shiites infidels.

### **8-2-2. Wahhabism**

Wahhabis do not accept Shiites as one of the Islamic religions and in their view, the concept of Shiism is sometimes equal to the concepts of infidelity (Seyednejad and Siraj, 2012: 119-118). Therefore, the martyrdom of Shiite religious leaders can be examined in this regard. For example, the Saudi criminal court sentenced Nimr al-Nimr to death by sword and crucifixion in public for acting against national security. He was executed on January 2, 2016 (Payam-e-Aftab news website, 26 October 2014).

In this regard, the media derived from the ideology of Wahhabism is indirectly in line with the governmental idea of the Saudi political system. The objective manifestation of the efforts of the Saudi media is to deepen and try to reveal more of the internal gaps in the Islamic world, especially between Sunnis and Shiites (Mirdeghan and Shaukati Moghrab, 2013: 170-171). In addition to promoting Wahhabism in West Asia and the Indian subcontinent, Saudi Arabia seeks to propagate this heretical sect through cultural diplomacy and in the guise of protectionist behavior in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and [South America] (Arab Ahmadi, 2015: 101).

Figure No. (4) - Optimistic and Pessimistic Social and Cultural Dimensions of the Beijing Agreement



Source: Created by the Authors

## 9. Consequences of the Beijing agreement

The deal has far-reaching political implications, from diminishing US interests in the region as well as China's influence through economics and soft power.

### 9-1. the decline of the United States in the Islamic world

Abdulbari Atwan wrote, quoting an Arab diplomat close to Riyadh, that Sullivan traveled to Saudi Arabia at least twice secretly and openly, and in the first trip, he waited for several days to meet with Mohammed bin Salman, and when bin Salman devoted only a few minutes to this meeting, he did not receive any response to his tempting proposals as well as his request to stop political and economic relations with the China-Russia axis and suspend relations with Iran. Saudi Arabia no longer needs America because its star is on the decline and its leadership in the world has destroyed, it has faced numerous defeats in most places, especially against the Russians in Ukraine, China in East Asia and the African continent, and the humiliation of its government. It has reached a point where it has resorted to Henry Kissinger, who is more than 100 years old, to improve its relations with China, create differences between it and Russia, and find a mediator to get out of the war in Ukraine. Saudi Arabia does not need a joint defense agreement with the United States, especially after the United States disappointed Ukraine after entering the war and did not send a single soldier or

aircraft carrier there to prevent the fall of its five eastern regions by the Russian army and support. In addition, the United States was committed to supporting Saudi Arabia during the Yemen war through the 1945 agreement that Roosevelt signed with King Abdulaziz Al Saud. But it took out all the Patriot's firepower and the highly advanced THAAD missile defense system (Atwan, 2023).

## **9-2. Strengthening China's presence in the Islamic world**

In fact, China has stepped into a new territory by mediating the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In other words, Beijing is now ready to enter the field of diplomatic activism and political influence in world affairs. On the other hand, due to China's economic and military power, that country has reached a level of credibility from a political point of view that the countries of the world are also ready to accept China's more active role in the international system. Now, China's negotiation and mediation capability has pushed that country to take responsibility for taking a role in the international system. Since 2013, with the inauguration of Xi Jinping and the gradual reduction of the hegemonic role of America in the international system, China has come to the conclusion that to secure its national interests, it has to abandon the conservative policy of Deng's ambiguity.

## **10. Conclusion**

Analysts have always had a pessimistic view of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran based on ideological conflicts. Even though in 2023, with the mediation of China, the two countries have agreed on various political and security fields. The other group of analysts, with an optimistic view based on recent internal developments in Saudi Arabia, regional developments and the decline of the power of the United States and increase of China's influence in the region, believe that these two countries can strategically cooperate in the regional order.

Regarding the new foreign policy of Saudi Arabia towards Iran, there are two pessimistic (realistic) and optimistic (idealistic) analyses. Copenhagen school is the best theory that can analyze this agreement in terms of epistemology and identifying areas of threat and opportunity (regional, cyber, economic and socio-cultural) in the form of optimistic and pessimistic spectrums.

With an optimistic view of the agreement, after years of tension, the governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia reached an agreement to restart relations between the two countries with the mediation of the People's Republic of China. The Iranian delegation, headed by Admiral Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, met and discussed with the Saudi Arabian delegation, headed by Mosaed Bin Mohammad Al-Aiban, Minister of Interior and National Security Advisor. After five days of negotiations, the two sides reached several agreements. No official document has been released regarding the terms of their contract. In a joint statement, they only announced that the two countries want to resolve various disputes through dialogue and diplomacy in the atmosphere of brotherhood. They



also recognize the principles and objectives of the United Nations Charter and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as well as various international conventions and norms. Their agreement included the re-establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of embassies in both countries. The foreign ministers of the two countries will meet soon to finalize the agreement.

The two countries agreed on the activation of joint agreements and the exchange of delegations from the two countries to develop relations in various fields, including economic, commercial and investment fields, conducting negotiations of specialized delegations in order to resume direct flights and facilitating the issuance of visas for the citizens of the two countries. Iran and Saudi Arabia reopened their embassies and agreed to reestablish Umrah for Iranian citizens.

On the other hand, if we have a realistic analysis of the history of Saudi foreign policy towards Iran, Saudi Arabia has been one of the countries that took the largest number of threats against Iran. However, political science and international relations researchers have not investigated and analyzed these areas in a specific and regular context. Therefore, researchers have started using Copenhagen school of thought to solve this shortcoming. The authors have identified four high-risk areas (regional, economic, cyber and cultural threats) for the Islamic Republic of Iran from Saudi Arabia.

In the field of regional threats, Saudi Arabia has entered a new phase of its macro-militant strategy against the Islamic Revolution in the internal conflicts of Iraq and Syria. In fact, since Syria in the early 21st century has established a deep connection with the discourse of the Islamic Revolution in the dimension of Islamism and the axis of resistance, Saudi Arabia's strategy of regime change is to cut these ties in the first stage and in the next stage to weaken the Islamic Revolution. In Iraq, after the Shiites gained significant weight in power relations after the fall of Saddam, and established close ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia seeks to eliminate these groups. One of the threats that Saudi Arabia has towards the axis of resistance is the establishment of political relations with Israel. In the era before the so-called Arab Spring or Islamic Awakening, the Middle East was divided into two axes of compromise and resistance, not only regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but in almost all issues. Islamic Republic of Iran, as a manifestation of the discourse of the Islamic Revolution in the field of international relations, a focal country in alliance with Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Hamas and Islamic Jihad formed the axis of resistance. At the opposite side in the axis of compromise with the Zionist regime, the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, Jordan and Egypt are present in alliance with America, and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were considered the main centers in the axis of compromise.

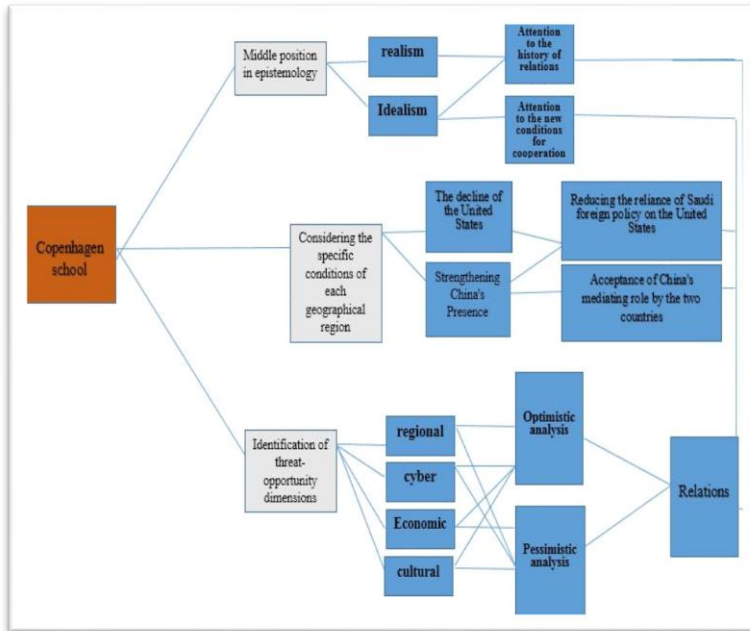
In the economic field, relying on the huge oil revenues, Saudi Arabia has made extensive extortion in the regional and international arena and has made oil a tool to encourage or punish countries or international institutions. Saudi Arabia has always used oil weapons in its confrontation with Iran in such a way that during the war between Iraq and Iran, in addition to providing Iraq's war expenses, it increased its oil production to about 10 million barrels to replace Iranian oil. After

failing to convince countries to sign the nuclear agreement with Iran, Saudi Arabia has always tried to prevent Iran's economic development. The kingdom has mobilized its allies in the Persian Gulf to ensure that after the lifting of sanctions against Iran, the path of Iran's opening to the world economy will not be paved. According to Bloomberg, after the JCPOA, the Saudis obstructed the agreement on the stabilization of crude oil prices because this action might lead to Iran gaining a larger share in the oil markets. In addition, Iranian businessmen in Dubai are complaining about the ever-increasing restrictions. Iranian businessmen complain that although Dubai has always had close relations with Iran, recently business permits for Iranian nationals are not easily renewed there. In addition, Iranian citizens have difficulty obtaining residency in Dubai, and bank accounts are subject to more scrutiny.

In the field of cyber threats, examining the sources of the strategic model indicates that Saudi Arabia and its neoconservative allies are trying to, securitize Iran's cyber discourse in the fields of defense, academia, human rights, and so on. Finally, in the field of cultural threats, Saudi Arabia excommunicates Shia from Wahhabi religious channels, and they always seek to remove Shia religious leaders. The media that are the propagandists of Saudi Arabia's policies are also trying to further divide Shia and Sunni through debates such as the Shia crescent and present Iran as the only representative of the Shia minority against the Sunni majority led by Saudi Arabia.

The most important consequence of this agreement is the reduction of the influence of the United States and increase of China's influence in the Islamic world. Washington was shocked by the unexpected and extensive change in Saudi Arabia's policy regarding Iran and China. While the White House was trying to reduce the effects of the announcement of the Beijing agreement and changing the position of the Arab coalition, the director of the CIA expressed Washington's dissatisfaction with the political independence of Saudi Arabia and the Arab coalition from Washington. William Burns said after the meeting with the officials of Saudi Arabia that the US government has not yet digested the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the issue requires the US to review its equations in the region.

Figure No. (5) - The New Approaches of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy towards Iran (2023)



Source: Created by the Authors

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