

Iran and Saudi Arabia: Navigating the Path to Reconciliation

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DOI: <https://10.71145/rjsp.v3i2.178>

Abstract:

This thesis seeks to cover the shift of relation between Iran and Saudi Arabia from cut throat competitors to moderate competition to some extent cautious competitors. This rivalry is economically based on old and new post-colonial competition over hegemony in Africa and in the Horn of Africa. The Iranian support of Shiite government and revolutionary principles could not be at the same time in tangent with the Saudi Arabian Sunni Monarchy which resulted on proxy battle and conflict in different parts of the Middle East. This paper will therefore aim at critically analyzing the following factors that have led to shift in relations between the two countries; issue of effect of international sanctions on Iran, the mutiny by leadership in the two countries and the other actors, particularly US, Russia and China. In addition to learning about the changes to paradigms of foreign policies and diplomacy due to these external pressures, it also estimates the impacts at the level of platforms for multilateral discussing and channels for secret diplomacy. For this reason, based on the historical, political and economical background, the research, emphasizes how the Iran-Saudi reconciliation may lead to long term changes in the context of the Middle Eastern region. Such kind of the process may lead to the changes of regional affiliations, in stabilization of energy markets and other proxy-war related events etc. Furthermore, it also places an emphasis on the different factors that make it easy for an individual of one culture to associate and interact with an individual of another culture. It then argues how these nations that have for along time been in conflict would come to work for peace and harmony and thereby bringing stability and economic growth of the region after uniting.

Keywords: Post-Colonial, Proxy, Paradigms, Secret Diplomacy, Stabilization of Energy Market

Introduction:

Geopolitically, religiously and culturally, Iran and Saudi Arabia have a centuries — old opposition that extends far beyond these origins and is actually a part of a complex linked conflictual textile. The stages of the engagement dynamics have included overt enmity, covert power play and hesitant contacts. The hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia dates back to the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which follows the type Shi'a Islam, and with its monarchy which is based on another distinct ideology, the Saudi Arabian Sunna. Another reason for the drop of the relationship between the two states is that there is a rivalry for the control of the Middle East, which is a zone of disorder. Like Iran and Saudi Arabia competing for proxies (as opposed to

proxies being for the competition) as in the backing of opposing sides in regional conflicts such as in Yemen or Syria or in the power struggle for control of Lebanon and Iraq (Brill, 2020). The Iran–Saudi relations is not only an academic issue, but is a key part of the present geopolitics. The collision of the two countries is not only confined to their borders and it is closely related to the global problems of the oil market issues, the global terrorism and the superpower alliances. The most impactful event in the case is the time period of the transformation from over the long-term of hostility to the time of reconciliation (Wu, 2023).

In this way, the current situation may alter the Middle East regional order, and as a result of this, the Middle East regional order might trigger waves of changes in the world. Any part of this area should not be overlooked by the researchers, policy makers or the international analysts since it would call for a second look to the less obvious characteristics of the aggravated and multifaceted situation (Lake, 2019).

Statement of the Problem:

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia stand as a multi faceted and difficult problem in that regard for scholars and policymakers, because of its very long-standing historical, theological, and geopolitical facets. While both nations are largely semi homogenous by religion (Iran is Shi'a, Saudi Arabia Sunni), there is over a century of rivalry between the two. This is not just an ideological conflict, but one for the grab of dominance of the region through direct conflicts, proxy wars and militarized coalitions. Things are also complicated further by internal politics in each state as well as the different roles they play at the global level. Neither can they be explained by the traditional accounts of sectarianism or political rivalry. As such, this study designs to critically examine the Iran–Saudi dynamic in a broader interdisciplinary content, covering historical, ideological, economic and strategic elements. Knowing these details is necessary for developing more helpful diplomatic and policy strategies in the Middle East and globally.

Research Objectives:

1. The first one was to study and conduct a critical analysis of the historical context of the Iran's and Saudi's relations Interrogated and unearthed the deep reason for the reconciliation process
2. Critically assessing the impacts and future implications to the Middle East.

Research Questions:

- 1) How have the rivalry and the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia been marked?
- 2) How do the ever changing dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia shift items in the puzzle of regional geopolitics?
- 3) Second, what are the main domestic politics considerations of Iran and Saudi Arabia that have propelled towards rapprochement?
- 4) What have been the effects of international influence and global geopolitics in altering the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

Research Gap:

In the first place, there is a void in current scholarship on Iran–Saudi Arabia relations in the form of a thorough and critical review that goes beyond the common biases and shallow interpretations. All of the existing studies tend to cast the relationship in terms either as a purely sectarian divide or as a straightforward struggle for regional dominance. The reductionist approach to also oversimplifies it a relationship in evolution and dynamics that is influenced by many variables, including historical legacy, politics individual and domestic, economic interests and all things broader geopolitically (Lynch, 2018).

Furthermore, the importance of external behavior is over emphasized without properly investigating the internal variables. Between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the role of the domestic politics, (i.e. the role of political leadership styles, public opinion and internal governance structures) in shaping their foreign policy decisions has been under researched. However, studies of their bilateral relations often fail to examine the impact of global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China or global trade arrangement like oil markets and international trade agreements (Zaiter 2020).

Secondly, there is a dearth in the literature with respect to conduct of a thorough evaluation of the most recent diplomatic developments. This rapprochement is not explored in detail as to how it will occur. While notable progress has been made over the past couple of years to bring about a dialogue and diplomatic engagement, there have been no systematic efforts to understand how these talks can impact peace in the region, economic stability, and counterterrorism strategies (Tabatabai, 2021).

In view of these gaps, therefore, a finer and more multi dimensional approach is necessary to understand the Iran–Saudi relations. This approach should be grounded in such a combination of the domestic, regional and international dynamics of one of the most important bilateral relations in the Middle East.

Research Methodology:

This is a critical research study mainly using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and deconstruction methods. The tools are especially useful for pulling apart the intricate relationship of rhetoric, ideology and power involved in the Iran–Saudi Arabia relationship. By using CDA, this research will examine embedded ideological and structural power through political communication, official speeches, state issues statements etc. By using this method, it will determine how narratives are being constructed, disseminated and used strategically by both the state to serve its interest in regards to its geopolitical interests. The study attempts to go beyond surfaces and to look at ambiguities and contradictions and the silences that are ignored in traditional analysis (Fligstein, 2018) by using deconstruction.

The nature of the methodology deliberately disassociates itself from binary interpretations of the relationship and focuses instead on exploring the derivatives along with the layers of the complexities of the relationship. Due to this approach, it enables a less stem and more diverse reading of the events, strategies and political discourse within which are hidden the points of view that are often overshadowed by the mainstream analytical platforms.

In order to reduce bias and provide a balanced view, the study will use a large body of data from various sources. They include national documents from Iran and Saudi Arabia, such as foreign policy briefs, defence strategies and economic policy papers. This will trace shifts in official rhetoric across the states and also help examine how each state goes about its relations with key bilateral and regional issues. The knowledge of how strategic thinking and planning change over time, how it adapts to internal or external forces (Zaiter, 2020) is possible from these sources.

In addition, the research will also assess media content in Iranian and Saudi state run news outlets in order to identify how conflict narratives are constructed and delivered in each country. The analysis of this media will help explain how the portrayal of the country by the state informs the public's opinion and those who live outside the country. Additionally, the secondary materials used by the study will include peer reviewed academic articles, think tank reports, and expert

commentaries to supplement these primary sources. These will be critically evaluated so as to situate the research study's findings within a broader scholarly discourse and identify its new contribution. This methodology achieves a multifaceted and holistic understanding of Iran–Saudi relations by incorporating multiple data sources that are analysed using a critical voice. Emphasis on discourse and meaning-making ensures that this study takes note of what is said, as well as how it is said, including underlying assumptions and implications that are key to understanding this sensitive and crucially important geopolitical relationship (Saunders, 2019).

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical argument of this study is based on Critical International Relations (IR) Theory and supplemented with Postcolonial Theory in order to examine the intricate interactions of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The distinction with Critical IR Theory is, however, that it moves away from traditional framework like realism and liberalism with their propensity to view the international relations mainly through the optic of state power, national self interest and material capabilities. Contrary to this, Critical IR focuses on historical, social and cultural surroundings as the factors conditioning state behavior and the foreign policy. This approach understands that politics of global matters depends not only on power and rules rather on making ideas, identity, and discourses (Saberfard & Kabiri, 2019).

When we apply this framework to the Iran–Saudi relationship, those states' deeply embedded and entrenched narratives, ideologies, and perceptions concerning one another become clear and illustrate how they affect the way those states interact with each other. Instead, it goes beyond good versus evil renditions of rivalry based on material interests and explores how identities and past experiences of each state influence their policies in the region. In this sense, this theoretical lens is significant in unpacking how mutual perceptions and political discourses produce ongoing tensions and attempts at reconciliation with the people of the towns and villages of southern Lebanon (Nakhavali, 2022). Other than that, Postcolonial Theory facilitates the deconstruction of Iran–Saudi relations through the lens of historical colonialism and cultural imperialism. This theory critiques the enduring impact of colonialism on contemporary political, economic, and cultural structures. This argues that even in this era of postcoloniality the state behavior is shaped by the postcolonial condition and with particular reference to regions such as the Middle East that have been profoundly affected and impacted by imperial rule. Through Postcolonial Theory, it is possible to determine how colonial heritage impacts state identity and sociopolitical evolution processes, as it does with their narratives of national history, and foreign policy decisions (MacGillivray, 2019).

In this research Postcolonial Theory helps in framing how power differential historically and cultural interventions of colonial powers have forged the present day regional dynamics. It provides a deeper look into the ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia to influence and lead in the region, esp. in regard to how both states assert themselves in the post-Imperial global order.

Critical IR Theory and Postcolonial Theory comprise a whole analytical framework. Critical IR Theory provides a way of deconstructing the role of ideologies, narratives and discursive power in defining the behavior of states and Postcolonial Theory complements this with important context of the historical and cultural legacies that influence politics in the Middle East at present. The tandem approach combines theoretical abstraction and specificities of time and geography into one theoretical journey and therefore, a more colorful and comprehensive understanding of Iran and

Saudi relationship can be drawn, than what the dominant geopolitical narrative in simplicity can determine (Kinasih, 2019).

Literature Review:

In particular, the body of literature on Iran–Saudi Arabia relations is extensive and has covered the wide range of themes such as historical, sectarian and regional conflicts and power disputes, as well as international geopolitical dynamics (Saberfard & Kabiri, 2019). The discourse of the current academic literature on conflict resolution in this regard is critically interpreted by means of this review. Much of the scholarship revolves around the Sunni–Shi'a divide as the main factor in understanding Iran–Saudi relations. Without question, differing religions underlie much of the tension, but this explanation too often reduces much of the complexity of the region's politics and the reality that this is a multi dimensional rivalry.

Most analyses depict Iran–Saudi relations as a zero sum game for regional hegemony and take their relationship for granted as one about power contestation for its own sake, assumed to be one based on realist assumptions. One aspect of this view is centered on the competitive, strategic goals, and conflict which it can provide to the organization, at the exclusion of the subtler facets of diplomacy, cultural exchange, and economic interdependence. In addition, this model usually overlooks times when both countries have put aside sectarian ambitions to focus on shared interests (Keynoush & Wastnidge, 2022). Such oversights highlight the necessity of a different but better analysis that incorporates both confrontation and cooperation.

The extent to which the domestic political landscape of both Iran and Saudi Arabia actually plays a role within foreign policy decisions is a somewhat critical gap in the literature on this subject. While a few studies show some consideration of role of internal factors, in the form of leadership style, public sentiment and social transformations or economic challenges, but for the most part the role of internal factors is not given due consideration. The fluctuating dynamics of Iran–Saudi relations are vital for these internal dynamics to be given due attention in any serious academic inquiry (Gillani, 2024).

In addition, there is a great dearth of research on the recent diplomatic thaw between the two countries and these emerging opportunities of rapprochement. In an era where the regional and the international are changing, with more pressures of economic, security, and global alignments in place, the need for more nuanced and forward looking analysis is urgent. For both work of a scholarly and policy making character, it is essential to understand how recent developments may redefine this long standing rivalry (Zaiter, 2020). While there is substantial current literature on many aspects of the Iran–Saudi relationship, there is an underlying bias and analytical gaps in the current literature. The inclination to resort to sectarian or realist narratives pushes aside other forms of influences such as domestic politics and changing global realities. To gain a sounder comprehension of this crucial bilateral relationship these factors need to be investigated in a more thorough and critical approach that integrates them. Closing these gaps would offer meaningful insights to academics in their activity, and generate fresh perspectives conducive for diplomats, analysts and other stakeholders dealing with Middle Eastern affairs (MacGillivray, 2019).

Findings:

1. Since the 1970s, Iran and Saudi Arabia have had long-standing rivalry which has moved towards cautious diplomacy and limited cooperation.
2. But no doubt, diplomatic overtures and softer rhetoric alike have been worked over by economic sanctions, especially on Iran.

3. Following vision 2030 on one hand and the volatility in oil market on the other, Saudi Arabia has to look for regional stability as a part of its modernization economic plan.
4. More pragmatic and flexible foreign policy approaches have been brought by leadership changes in both countries.
5. Diarmuid Martin, the archbishop of Dublin, stated that backchannel diplomacy has produced results in the setting of trust and reconciliation without pressure from the public or media.
6. Both the U.S., China, and Russia, externally, have made this reconciliation both simple and hard.
7. Formal and informal diplomatic interaction has been made available through forums like UN, OIC and GCC.
8. This has achieved in at least some degree a reduction of the binary sectarian narratives thereby opening space for strategic thinking which is more complex and inclusive.
9. However, the de-escalation has already begun to influence other regional conflicts such as those in Yemen or Syria, although it happens more gradually.
10. Current regional as well as global energy security dynamics can be influenced by the potential for reconciliation to change regional alliances.

Conclusion:

The process of reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia would and should symbolize a new page in Middle Eastern politics, as an end to decades deep rooted hostility between the two regional powers. For a variety of reasons ranging from economic necessity, changing leadership priorities, international pressure and geopolitical realignments, this change has been brought about. The words Sunni and Shi'a once formed a binary sectarian narrative no longer apply—do not, or at least do not only—in the sectarian narrative of mutually strategic interests. Though the differences remain stark, both countries were realizing that uninterrupted rivalry harms both regional stability and domestic development.

International sanctions, fluctuations in oil prices and internal socio political problems have forced both Iran and Saudi Arabia to adopt more of a pragmatic foreign policy. Saudi Arabia's plans to diversify its economy through Vision 2030 rewards regional stability while Iran's desire to reintegrate into global economy serves as shared incentive for regional stability. Additionally, the leadership has also played a critical role in shifting side, with both sides being more open to diplomatic engagement.

The path and pace of the reconciliation have been influenced at various times by the external actors (in particular the United States, Russia, and China) both by fueling tensions and by participating in the low profile backchannel negotiations and multilateral forums. The UN, OIC, and GCC have been shown to be useful places for dialogue (even if the results are incremental), and they serve as platforms for such activity. This has allowed both sides to carry on communication in backchannel diplomacy and with informal negotiations while the official channels or when one or the other has been in public hostility.

However, this process remains fragile and management has to be very careful. But it also forms a strategic chance to reshap not only bilateral relations but the entire security architecture of the Middle East. Should it continue, it could yield big cuts in proxy wars, fresh sources of economic cooperation, and a reconfiguration of power in the area.

Recommendations:

- By using UN, GCC, and OIC platforms to sustain and broaden multilateral dialogue, the process of institutionalizing diplomatic engagement can be achieved.

- Prompt bilateral economic projects such as joint energy and infrastructure projects to increase interdependence.
- To encourage cultural and religious exchanges, and academic exchanges, to foster a grassroots-level understanding between people and reduce public level animosity.
- It will keep backchannel diplomatic communications alive in order to minimize crises and prevent escalations discreetly.
- Creating cordial diplomatic and humanitarian suppurations in proxy conflict zones to facilitate the peacebuilding efforts.
- Encourage the parties to negotiate through neutral mediators (Oman or international organizations) who would keep relevant balance.
- Create joint counter terrorism strategy and the mechanisms of intelligence sharing to boost trust and cooperation.
- Work towards aligning their economic diversification efforts to foster collaborative growth in sectors such as renewable energy, technology etc.
- Change the way that media narratives are told in order to have a balanced media coverage and not provocative sectarian media narratives in state controlled outlets.
- A peace process with an unwavering aim to build equally strong commitment to peace and security of all actors involved must be inclusive and therefore include civil society and non government actors in confidence building measures.

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