

**RESEARCH PAPER****Historical Relation of Saudi Arabia and Iran: An Analysis****¹Arooj Nasir, ²Amber Javed and ³Ansa Asghar**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores historical relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, examining cultural and societal differences, analyzing implications for international organizations, and examining key events influencing the rivalry since the Iranian Revolution. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Saudi-Iranian relations have been characterized by cooperation, competition, and occasional tensions, influenced by religious, ideological, and geopolitical factors, despite shared strategic interests. The study uses historical, descriptive, and analytical methods to analyze data on Saudi Arabia and Iran relations. It incorporates qualitative social science research techniques and secondary sources like expert opinions and official reports. Saudi-Iranian rivalry, rooted in religious, ideological, and geopolitical factors, has led to proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, requiring effective diplomacy and conflict resolution strategies for regional stability. Saudi Arabia and Iran should focus on diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation, humanitarian crises, economic diversification, international mediation, dialogue, and confidence-building measures, involving multilateral institutions for conflict resolution.

Keywords: Iranian Revolution, Middle East, Saudi Arabia**Introduction**

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the most significant and complex dynamics in the Middle East, shaped by a multitude of historical, religious, geopolitical, and strategic factors. This essay aims to dissect the intricacies of their relationship, tracing its evolution from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to contemporary tensions in the region. Through an in-depth examination of key events, proxy conflicts, religious divides, and geopolitical manoeuvres, this analysis seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its implications for regional stability and global geopolitics (Muzaffar, Khan, & Yaseen, 2017; Alam, 2017).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Saudi-Iranian relations were further strained by proxy conflicts across the Middle East. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) emerged as a key battleground, with Saudi Arabia supporting Iraq against Iran. This support was driven by Saudi Arabia's fear of Iranian expansionism and the desire to contain the revolutionary fervor emanating from Tehran. Additionally, the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon, a Shia militant group backed by Iran, heightened Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia perceived Hezbollah as a direct threat to its interests and sought to counterbalance Iranian influence through support for Sunni factions in Lebanon (Al-Thubetat, 2024). Sectarianism has been a persistent source of friction between Saudi Arabia and Iran, exacerbating their rivalry and fueling conflicts across the Middle East. The Sunni-Shia divide has deep historical roots, but it has been exploited and manipulated by both powers for geopolitical gain. Saudi Arabia, as the guardian of Sunni Islam, has sought to maintain its leadership role in the Muslim world, while Iran, as a Shia-majority state, has championed itself as the defender of Shia interests.

The intensifying rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has far-reaching implications for regional stability and global geopolitics. The proliferation of proxy conflicts, sectarian tensions, and geopolitical rivalries exacerbates instability in the Middle East, fueling humanitarian crises, perpetuating cycles of violence, and undermining efforts to achieve lasting peace and security. Moreover, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry complicates international efforts to address pressing global challenges, such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and climate change, as regional actors prioritize narrow self-interests over collective action and cooperation. The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran is characterized by a complex interplay of historical, religious, geopolitical, and strategic factors. The roots of their rivalry can be traced back to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which fundamentally challenged Saudi Arabia's position as the leader of the Muslim world. Since then, proxy conflicts, sectarian tensions, nuclear ambitions, and regional rivalries have deepened the divide between the two powers, exacerbating instability in the Middle East and complicating efforts to achieve peace and security (Khan, Muzaffar & Khan, 2019). Despite occasional attempts at dialogue and cooperation, deep-seated mistrust and conflicting ambitions continue to hinder significant progress towards reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Any substantial shift in their relationship would have profound implications not only for the Middle East but also for global geopolitics, underscoring the importance of understanding and addressing the root causes of their rivalry in order to promote peace, stability, and cooperation in the region and beyond.

Literature Review

Al-Thubetat (2024) stated that despite the deep-seated mistrust and conflicting ambitions, Saudi Arabia and Iran have occasionally engaged in diplomatic overtures and attempts at dialogue. These efforts have often been driven by pragmatic considerations, such as the need to de-escalate tensions during periods of crisis or to pursue shared interests in stabilizing the region. For example, both countries have cooperated in the past to stabilize oil markets and address common security threats, such as piracy in the Gulf of Aden. However, such instances of cooperation have been short-lived and have failed to address the underlying sources of tension and mistrust between the two powers.

Jalal, Khan, and Pitafi (2023) discusses the recent process of rapprochement and normalization of relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran, two opponents in the area, following a protracted period of hostility and conflict. The study looks at a number of factors that led to this important event, such as the series of talks that took place in Baghdad, the mediation efforts of China and Oman, and the shifting geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. It goes on to detail the agreement's implications for the local community as well as the international community, outlining the possibility of cooperation, peace, stability, and expansion. The study will also support how the aforementioned agreement between the two erstwhile foes has affected Middle Eastern politics.

Mason (2014) discuss about the proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen. He said that these conflicts had significant consequences for the region. They have prolonged the duration of the civil wars, increased civilian casualties, and exacerbated humanitarian crises. Additionally, they have heightened sectarian tensions and fueled extremism, contributing to broader instability in the Middle East. The involvement of external powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, has complicated efforts to find peaceful resolutions to these conflicts. Despite occasional diplomatic initiatives, the proxy wars continue to rage on, with devastating consequences for the people of Syria and Yemen, and ripple effects throughout the region.

Ghasemi and Nasehi (2019) examines that the political crisis in Syria has led to various policies adopted by regional and trans-regional actors, including Turkey and the United States. The crisis is significant for both countries and the world, with any transformation impacting their interests. Turkey and the United States have always been

involved in the Syrian crisis, based on their interests. However, the US' support of Kurdish groups in Syria has led to a conflict of interest between Turkey and the US. This study investigates the presence of the US in Syria, the support of Kurdish groups, and the reactions of Turkey and Iran. The findings suggest that the US's support of Kurdish groups in northern Syria has led to a conflict of interest between the two countries.

Zehraa, Fatima, and Khan (2018) examine the factors that have influenced Iran and Saudi Arabia's strategies in the Mideast region, focusing on the US factor and their political objectives. It examines the recent gulf between their status and the hindrances and possibilities between them. The growing relations and foreign policies of these countries are leading to a greater change in the Mideast region. Globalization has made it impossible for any country to live in isolation. The research provides a clear picture of the recent gulf political situation, which is leading to a significant change in scenario. The two Middle Eastern countries have different priorities and objectives for regional peace and stability, making this qualitative study helpful in determining their objectives in resolving political unrest and security issues.

Sadeghi and Ahmadian (2011) stated that the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, led by the Shi'ite ulema, significantly changed the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The article examines the bilateral relations between the two countries since 1979, arguing that their rivalry in critical fields has affected their relationship. The contest between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been limited, allowing for a gradual reduction of tension and cooperation expansion in the late 1990s. However, the détente period ended abruptly after the 9/11 attacks, particularly the U.S. occupation of Iraq. The authors suggest that adopting a positive, proactive approach and relying on confidence-building measures can help diffuse ongoing tension and mutual suspicion, leading to the promotion of mutually beneficial policies and measures. Despite differences and difficulties, the authors believe that the two sides have the potential to explore practical ways to define shared interests, goals, and objectives.

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The research examines the historical relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran from 1929 to 2014, focusing on key events that have shaped their relationship. The study aims to provide a clear understanding of events over almost a century and explain how and why Saudi-Iranian relations developed, focusing on the diverse triggers that resulted in amicability or resentment. The objective is to uncover ways to improve this important regional bilateral relationship, ensuring the stability and security of the wider region. The study highlighting the impact of the Iranian revolution on the relationship. The second chapter discusses the Iran-Iraq War and its impact on Saudi-Iranian relations. The third chapter discusses the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which brought Saudi Arabia and Iran together to contain a common threat, the Saddam regime. The fifth chapter details the impact of reformist rule in Iran after 1990, leading to a period of rapprochement that brought the two countries closer together, contributing to improved relations. The sixth chapter provides a historical account of events and regional issues that affected Saudi-

Iranian relations from 2001 to 2014. The study concludes that Saudi Arabia has not changed its stance on Saudi-Iranian bilateral relations from 1929 to the present, but regime changes in Iran, from secular to conservative, have resulted in significant changes in Iran's position and policy concerning bilateral relations (bin Khaled al-Saud).

The paper discusses the historical competition between ideological and pragmatic approaches in Iran's foreign policy, focusing on the domination of ideology after the Islamic revolution and its role in Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia. It also examines the superiority of the pragmatic approach after the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the gradual changes in Iran's foreign policy from 1989. The study also examines the role of the new approach in re-establishing and improving the Iran-Saudi Arabia diplomatic relationship, which was severed in 1988 and limited cooperation. The study concludes that despite primary cooperation and agreement, peaceful relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were unable to be maintained due to bilateral and regional problems (Amiri, Samsu, Khorshidi, & Piri, 2010).

The political crisis in Syria has led to various policies adopted by regional and trans-regional actors, including Turkey and the United States. The crisis is significant for both countries and the world, with any transformation impacting their interests. Turkey and the United States have always been involved in the Syrian crisis, based on their interests. However, the US' support of Kurdish groups in Syria has led to a conflict of interest between Turkey and the US. This study investigates the presence of the US in Syria, the support of Kurdish groups, and the reactions of Turkey and Iran. The findings suggest that the US's support of Kurdish groups in northern Syria has led to a conflict of interest between the two countries (Ghasemi, & Nasehi, 2019).

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Economic Competition

Saudi Arabia and Iran are significant players in the global oil market, both being major oil producers. Their economic competition extends beyond oil to other sectors as well. Both countries compete for dominance in the oil market, often engaging in strategies such as adjusting production levels to influence prices and market share. This competition is driven by their desire to maintain economic stability and leverage their oil wealth for geopolitical influence. Despite oil, Saudi Arabia and Iran also want to dominate markets as well as essential resources like natural gas, petrochemicals, and renewable energy. They make significant investments in diversification and building up their infrastructure in order to boost their economic clout both domestically and globally. This economic rivalry reflects broader geopolitical tensions between the two countries and has implications for global energy security and market dynamics (Alsultan, & Saeid, 2016).

Competition in the Global Oil Market:

- Saudi Arabia and Iran vie for dominance in the global oil market by adjusting production levels and pricing strategies.

- Saudi Arabia's decision to increase oil production to maintain market share, leading to a decline in oil prices, which in turn affects Iran's oil revenues (Alsultan, & Saeid, 2016).

Diversification Efforts

- Both countries are investing in diversifying their economies beyond oil, aiming to reduce reliance on oil revenues and strengthen other sectors.
- Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative, which aims to diversify the economy by investing in sectors like tourism, entertainment, and technology.

Control Over Strategic Resources

- Saudi Arabia and Iran seek to control and influence strategic resources beyond oil, such as natural gas, petrochemicals, and renewable energy.
- Iran's efforts to expand its natural gas production and exports, seeking to establish itself as a major player in the global gas market (Alsultan, & Saeid, 2016).

Regional Economic Influence

- Both countries compete for economic influence in the region through trade partnerships, investments, and infrastructure projects.
- Saudi Arabia's investments in infrastructure projects in neighboring countries like Egypt and Jordan to strengthen its economic ties and influence in the region.

Global Trade and Investments

- Saudi Arabia and Iran engage in global trade and investments to expand their economic reach and secure access to key markets, resources, and technologies.
- Iran's negotiations with international companies to attract investment in its petrochemical industry, aiming to modernize and expand its production capacity.

Impact on Regional Stability

- The economic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran can have implications for regional stability, as competition for resources and markets can exacerbate tensions and conflicts in the Middle East.
- Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran escalate due to their competition for influence in countries like Yemen and Lebanon, leading to proxy conflicts and geopolitical instability.

International Relations

- Their economic competition also shapes their relations with other countries and international organizations, as they seek allies and support for their economic agendas on the global stage.
- Saudi Arabia's partnerships with countries like the United States and China for economic cooperation and investment, aimed at bolstering its influence and economic power internationally (Alsultan, & Saeid, 2016).

Religious Alliances

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have cultivated alliances with regional and international powers to advance their interests and increase their influence in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's Regional Alliances

Saudi Arabia has strong ties with the United States, which provides security assurances and military support to the kingdom. It also maintains close relationships with other Sunni-majority countries in the region, such as the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt, and Jordan. These alliances are often based on shared security concerns and a desire to counter Iranian influence in the region (Chubin, & Tripp, 2014).

Iran's Regional Alliances

Iran has forged alliances with Shia-majority countries like Iraq and Lebanon. In Iraq, Iran has significant influence over political factions and militias, some of which have close ties to Tehran. In Lebanon, Iran supports Hezbollah, a powerful Shia militant group that plays a significant role in Lebanese politics and has engaged in conflicts with Israel (Mason, 2014).

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Comparison of Both Countries Alliances

Aspects	Saudi-Arabia	Iran
Key Ally	United States	Iraq
Regional Alliances	GCC countries Egypt, Jordan	Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia Factions in Iraq
Basis of Alliances	Security Cooperation, Economic Ties	Shared Religious and Sectarian ties
Strategic Objectives	Countering Iranian influence, Regional Stability	Expanding influence in the region, Countering Saudia-Arabia
Impacts	Shape regional dynamics, Influence conflicts	Maintain regional influence, Challenge Saudi dominance

These regional alliances contribute to the broader geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East and shape the balance of power in the region. They often exacerbate tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as they compete for influence and seek to counter each other's alliances. Additionally, these alliances have implications for regional stability and the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, as they can either fuel or mitigate tensions depending on the interests and actions of the parties involved (Alsultan, & Saeid, 2016).

Security Concerns

The area has seen military buildups and interventions due to perceived security concerns between Saudi Arabia and Iran, escalating tensions and igniting an arms race. Both nations have made significant investments in their armed forces because they see each other as the main dangers to national security. This entails obtaining cutting-edge armaments and defensive systems in order to thwart prospective aggression and establish authority. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and Iran have supported opposing forces in crises around the Middle East, extending instability in the area. Tensions are increased because military backing is frequently provided to proxy organizations in these missions. The ensuing weapons race between the two countries heightens regional instability and increases the probability of conflict (Mason, 2014).

Perceived Security Threats

Saudi Arabia and Iran perceive each other as significant security threats due to their geopolitical rivalry, religious differences, and competing regional ambitions. This perception has led both countries to adopt defensive postures and pursue military buildups to deter potential aggression.

Military Build-ups

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have invested heavily in military capabilities, including the acquisition of advanced weaponry, technology, and defense systems. This arms buildup is driven by the desire to maintain a military advantage over the other and to assert dominance in the region. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has been a major purchaser of arms from countries like the United States, while Iran has focused on developing its indigenous defense industry (Mason, 2014).

Regional Interventions

Perceived security threats have prompted Saudi Arabia and Iran to engage in regional interventions, supporting opposing factions in conflicts across the Middle East. In Yemen, for example, Saudi Arabia leads a military coalition supporting the internationally recognized government against Houthi rebels aligned with Iran. Similarly, in Syria, Saudi Arabia has supported rebel groups fighting against the government, which is backed by Iran. These interventions exacerbate tensions and prolong conflicts, further destabilizing the region (Chubin, & Tripp, 2014).

Contributing to the Arms Race

The ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran contributes to an arms race in the region, as both countries seek to outmatch each other in military capabilities. This arms race is fueled by the acquisition of advanced weaponry and defence systems, as well as the development of indigenous military technology. The proliferation of arms increases the likelihood of conflict escalation and exacerbates regional instability (Mason, 2014).

Impact on Regional Stability:

The escalation of military build-ups, interventions, and the arms race between Saudi Arabia and Iran have profound implications for regional stability. Heightened tensions increase the risk of miscalculation or inadvertent conflict, posing a threat to peace and security in the Middle East. Additionally, the ongoing conflicts fueled by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran have resulted in humanitarian crises and widespread suffering for civilians in affected countries (Chubin, & Tripp, 2014). Overall, the perceived security threats and subsequent military actions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have exacerbated tensions, contributed to regional instability, and intensified the arms race in the Middle East.

Diplomatic Maneuvering

Despite their longstanding rivalry, Saudi Arabia and Iran have occasionally participated in diplomatic initiatives aimed at de-escalating tensions and finding common ground on certain issues. These diplomatic manoeuvres have typically occurred in response to external pressures, regional crises, or efforts by third-party mediators to facilitate dialogue between the two countries.

However, such diplomatic efforts have been characterized by their short-lived nature and limited success. Ongoing conflicts, deep-rooted distrust, and divergent strategic interests have often undermined these attempts at reconciliation. Despite occasional gestures of goodwill or agreements reached through diplomatic channels, the underlying tensions and animosities between Saudi Arabia and Iran have persisted, overshadowing any progress made in diplomatic engagements (Alam, 2017).

Overall, while there have been sporadic attempts at diplomatic manoeuvring between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the enduring rivalry and complex geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East have made sustainable reconciliation elusive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical backdrop of Saudi-Iranian relations prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 laid the foundation for a complex and enduring rivalry characterized by a blend of cooperation, competition, and tension. The divergent religious, ideological, and geopolitical ambitions of both nations contributed to a multi-faceted rivalry that has shaped the Middle East for decades. Following the revolution, this rivalry intensified, leading to proxy conflicts, diplomatic tensions, and economic competition that further destabilized the region. The Sunni-Shia divide, exacerbated by historical grievances and geopolitical rivalries, became a central fault line in the broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry. This divide manifested in proxy conflicts in various regional hotspots, including Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, where both powers supported opposing factions to advance their interests. Additionally, economic competition, particularly in the global oil market, further fuelled tensions as both countries vied for dominance and sought to leverage their oil wealth for geopolitical influence.

Furthermore, the alliance dynamics shaped by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran present a complex challenge for international organizations and alliances operating in the Middle East. Effective diplomacy, mediation, and conflict resolution strategies are essential to navigate this landscape and promote regional stability and cooperation. Addressing humanitarian concerns arising from proxy conflicts, such as the situation in Yemen, requires coordinated efforts from international organizations. Diplomatic engagement, advocacy for humanitarian access, protection of civilians, mediation of peace negotiations, and long-term reconstruction efforts are essential to alleviate the suffering of affected populations and promote sustainable peace and stability in the region.

Overall, the cultural and societal disparities between Saudi Arabia and Iran contribute to complex dynamics in international relations, with implications for alliances, conflict resolution, regional stability, and humanitarian efforts. Effective diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and a commitment to addressing underlying grievances are crucial for managing and mitigating these challenges in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran both oppose extremist groups like ISIS, but their rivalry complicates international counterterrorism efforts. This rivalry limits cooperation, fuels proxy conflicts, diverts resources, perpetuates sectarian tensions, and contributes to regional destabilization. Effective counterterrorism strategies require addressing underlying geopolitical tensions and promoting cooperation among all stakeholders in the region.

Recommendations

Engage in Diplomatic Dialogue: Both Saudi Arabia and Iran should prioritize diplomatic engagement and constructive dialogue to address underlying grievances and resolve conflicts peacefully. Direct communication channels and multilateral forums should be utilized to foster mutual understanding and trust-building measures.

Promote Regional Cooperation: Regional actors, including neighboring countries and regional organizations, should play a proactive role in promoting cooperation and conflict resolution. Initiatives such as confidence-building measures, joint economic projects, and security dialogues can help mitigate tensions and build a foundation for stability.

Address Humanitarian Crises: International efforts should focus on addressing the humanitarian crises resulting from proxy conflicts, particularly in Syria and Yemen. Providing humanitarian aid, supporting peace negotiations, and facilitating the delivery of essential services to affected populations are essential for alleviating suffering and promoting stability.

Encourage Economic Diversification: Both Saudi Arabia and Iran should prioritize economic diversification efforts to reduce dependence on oil revenues and strengthen resilience to external shocks. Investing in non-oil sectors, promoting innovation and entrepreneurship, and enhancing regional economic integration can contribute to long-term stability and prosperity.

Enhance International Mediation: The international community, including major powers and international organizations, should play a proactive role in mediating conflicts and promoting peaceful resolutions. Diplomatic initiatives, mediation efforts, and peacekeeping operations can help de-escalate tensions and facilitate dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as other regional actors.

Promote Dialogue and Diplomacy: Encourage sustained dialogue and diplomatic engagement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, facilitated by neutral mediators or international organizations. Despite past failures, continuous efforts at communication are essential for building trust and finding common ground on regional issues.

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