

## Factors Influencing Iran and Saudi Arabia Foreign Policies towards Each Other

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Received 19-02-2022	<b>Abstract:</b> Before the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the two countries' foreign policies were defined under the banner of a bipolar system to preserve US interests in the region and establish a security order. The factors of oil, regional balance, Hajj, non-Arab and Arab confrontation, and the role of political elites in bilateral relations were also discussed. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution with its religious and democratic nature, the Islamic Republic was confronted with the political and religious existence of this country (Saudi). The threatening attitude of Saudi Arabia's regional rivals led them to pursue sometimes contradictory policies based on conservation of the Kingdom of Al-Saud. Thus, influenced by actors and events at three levels: domestic, regional, and international in political, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions, the foreign policies of the two countries have always had the same orientation. But after the Islamic Awakening in the Middle East subsystem and the disruption of the security order in the region, the foreign policies of the two countries has shifted in the other direction. This article introduces the main principles and factors that shape and influence the foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia in both aspects of applied and declared foreign policy. Due to the many ups and downs in the foreign policy process of the two countries and its wide dimensions, the period in question has been considered since the coming to power of Salman bin Abdulaziz. The question that we are trying to answer in this article is what are the factors that determine the foreign policy of the two countries in this period? And how has each factor played a role in the foreign policy of the two countries?	<b>Keywords:</b> Foreign Policy, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, Islamic Revolution, Middle East
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### INTRODUCTION

The history of political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran dates back to the formation of the Saudi government (1929) in Najd and the subsequent visit of an Iranian trade delegation. These relations, especially in the field of foreign policy, have gone through many ups and downs until today. Before the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the two countries' foreign policies were defined under the banner of a bipolar system to preserve US interests in the region and establish a security order. The factors of oil, regional balance, Hajj, non-Arab and Arab confrontation, and the role of political elites in bilateral relations were also discussed. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution with its religious and democratic nature, the Islamic Republic was confronted with the political and religious existence of this country (Saudi). The threatening attitude of Saudi Arabia's regional rivals led them to pursue sometimes contradictory policies based on conservation of the Kingdom of Al-Saud. Thus, influenced by actors and events at three levels: domestic, regional, and international in political, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions, the foreign policies of the two countries have always had the same orientation. But after the Islamic Awakening in the Middle East subsystem and the disruption of the security order in the region, the foreign policies of the two countries has shifted in

the other direction. This article introduces the main principles and factors that shape and influence the foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia in both aspects of applied and declared foreign policy. Due to the many ups and downs in the foreign policy process of the two countries and its wide dimensions, the period in question has been considered since the coming to power of Salman bin Abdulaziz. The question that we are trying to answer in this article is what are the factors that determine the foreign policy of the two countries in this period? And how has each factor played a role in the foreign policy of the two countries?

### Principles and Macro Goals of the Foreign Policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia

To examine the factors affecting the foreign policy of the two strategic countries of the region, it is first necessary to look theoretically at the declared foreign policy of the two countries. Iran and Saudi Arabia each have major principles and goals that will identify the intersections of the two countries' foreign policies and make it easier to explain their foreign policies. By understanding the principles of the foreign policy of regional poles, the basis of their orientations, convergence, or opposition to each other will be determined. Indeed, the domestic politics of Third World countries are mainly influenced by their domestic

politics and it derives from the fundamental principles and goals that are designed and pursued to ensure the national interests of countries and the elites active in the field of foreign policy have made pursuing and achieving these goals the top priority of their activities and movements in the field of foreign policy. These goals can be the introduction of friendly or confrontational action (Aghaei & Ahmadian, 2009). For the above reasons, it is necessary to examine the foreign policy declaration of the two countries.

### **Macro Goals of Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy**

Politicians, political thinkers, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, outlined various principles and goals for Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. Although the policy of declaration and action do not always coincide, however considering the policies of Saudi Arabia and the attitude of the ruling elites, as well as the foreign policy announced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its grand objectives can be summarized in the following four categories:

1. Economic growth and development, preservation of territorial integrity and national sovereignty;
2. Strengthening the Arab-Islamic solidarity with the focus on Saudi Arabia and political and economic support for Muslim minorities;
3. Cooperation with international and regional powers to maintain the status quo and advance the peace process in the Middle East;
4. Maintaining Saudi Arabia's leading position in world oil markets and preventing a sharp decline in prices (Ahmadian, 2014).

The sum of these goals stems from the two basic principles governing Saudi foreign and domestic policy. These two goals are: Protecting the country from foreign disintegration and aggression, and secondly, ensuring internal stability and the continuation of Al-Saud rule. During the years after World War II, relying on these principles and goals, the Saudi government has always sought to lead the region and lead the Islamic and Arab world (See: Nonneman, 2015).

### **Macro goals of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

The tenth chapter of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (foreign policy) states the following Article 152:

"Iran's foreign policy based on the denial of any hegemony and domination, Preserving the comprehensive independence and territorial integrity of

the country, Defending the rights of all Muslims and not committing to authoritarian powers and Peaceful reciprocal relations with non-combatant states (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2001)".

In addition to this principle, there are other principles in line with these goals and principles that guide the mentality and thinking of elites active in the field of foreign policy.

According to the constitution and the basic function and function of Iran, macro goals can be divided into three categories:

1. Economic growth and development, preservation of territorial integrity and national sovereignty;
2. Defending Muslims and liberation movements and conflict with Israel and the West (especially the United States);
3. Establishment of an Islamic society based on Shiite principles (Sari al-Qalam, 1379:).

The first goal in Iran and Saudi Arabia is economic growth and development, maintaining territorial integrity and national sovereignty. This goal in itself is not the basis for any conflict but also can provide the basis for cooperation and closeness between the two countries (Aghaei & Ahmadian, 2009).

Iran's second goal, which includes supporting liberation movements and conflict with Israel and the West, This goal of Iran, despite its appearance, is different from the second goal of Saudi Arabia and provides grounds for conflict between the two countries. Iran supports all liberated movements that have been oppressed and want to change the status quo; thus, at the beginning of its establishment, the Islamic Republic rushed to the aid of Shiite minority movements in the Persian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, supports the Muslims diplomatically, with political and economic support from the government. Iran's resistance to American coercion in Iran's nuclear program is also based on this goal. While the United States is a partner of the Saudi regions and provides their security. On the other hand, Iran's second goal conflicts with the Saudis' third goal of maintaining the status quo. While Iran supports the jihadist movements of Muslims, including in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen; Saudi Arabia seeks to resolve these issues through diplomatic means and mediation based

on its leadership role. Before King Salman, Saudi Arabia tried to present a moderate and mediating image and Iran has made Hamas support and conflict with Israel and the United States part of its foreign policy principles.

The third goal of the Islamic Republic of Iran is to create a Shiite Muslim model in conflict with the second goal of Saudi Arabia that seeks to centralize and lead the Islamic and Arab world and has always tried to introduce itself as a model for the Islamic world. Thus, the ideological rivalry between the two countries leaves less room for compromise and will be based on a zero-sum game. Because the existence of both countries is based on religion. The spiritual and material progress of Iran and being a role model for the Muslim countries is the most important reason for the unprecedented anger and hostility of the Saudis, especially after the nuclear agreement (Ahmadi & Aghaei, 2009).

### **Common Foundations Shaping the Foreign Policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia**

Analyzing the policies and behaviors of political units in the international system requires the study of several variables and components. Examining the causes and sources of an actor's political behavior in interaction with others at the regional and international levels is the result of components and variables that direct the behavior of these actors.

### **Factor of Geography**

Iran and Saudi Arabia have a special position due to their location in strategic regions. The Strait of Hormuz is one of the international waterways and straits that has given the Islamic Republic of Iran a geostrategic position and it plays an important role in the energy security of Saudi Arabia and the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This strait is considered as the only way to access open waters in the Persian Gulf region. Iran can secure this sensitive region from facilities such as the Persian Gulf satellite islands in the mouth of the Hormuz, which provide the geographical location of its territory and also, by strengthening its defense capability in the waters of the Persian Gulf, increase its power to use this strait as a tool in its sacrilege policy (Hafeznia, 2009). But Saudi Arabia, despite its vast geography, is bordered by many countries in the Arab and non-Arab regions, it is geographically fragile. Its confinement in the straits is one of the geographical straits of this country. It is important to note that none of the

straits that surround Saudi Arabia are under the management and control of Saudi Arabia Including the Strait of Hormuz that has the Islamic Republic of Iran and Oman on both sides (Jafari Valdani, 1996). As a result, the country's geographical fragility and reliance on Iran as part of its international communications are among Saudi foreign policy constraints. In a way, Saudi Arabia has been constantly paying attention to Iran and its developments in its foreign policy and it has tried to avoid spreading its differences with these countries (Ajorlou, 2013). Due to its strategic position, Iran has always played a major role in regional interactions and security. On the one hand, this situation has not compatible this situation incompatible with neutrality and isolationism, and it creates a kind of active and extroverted foreign policy. In this way, it will influence Iran's foreign policy and shape its political behavior and on the other hand, the strategic position of the sea, land, and strait benefits from its role and position of superiority (Ezzati, 2002: 85). Due to the forced passage of these pathways and the geo-economics location of this strait (Hormoz), Iran has been able to use it as a lever of pressure and threat. Part of the oil is exported from the Strait of Hormuz and if Iran imposes restrictions on this area, it has always faced the problem of the pipeline for the transfer of oil and gas for export (Agha Razi, 2007). Another factor that plays an important role in improving Iran's geopolitical position, has a wider sea border than Saudi Arabia, which adds to its naval power and control over the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. For this reason, this strait is a good place for a naval power to enter the Arabian Peninsula and its defense base, which is a security threat to Saudi Arabia. Overall, given the threats and challenges posed by geographic data, the two countries have always been driven by cautious policies in this regard and this has not been a source of tension and conflict between the two regional powers in the field of foreign policy.

### **Factor of Economy**

The economy as one of the most important aspects of the national power of countries plays an irreplaceable role in the regional and international policies of countries. Although the impact of the economy on the foreign policy of countries is not the same, this impact will be even greater, especially in countries with strong economic instruments. Saudi Arabia is one of the activists that always tries to use its oil tools and macroeconomic wealth to achieve its national

interests and goals. The basis of the economy of Saudi Arabia and Iran is the rent received from oil exports. Saudi Arabia is a prime example of a rentier economy. The country's largest source of income came from religious tourism before oil was discovered. With the discovery of oil, oil revenues gradually became the main source of government revenue and religious tourism has largely become a tool for gaining an Islamic face for Saudi Arabia (Jaloud, 2013). Oil rents changed the social and economic image of Saudi Arabia in half a century and Saudi Arabia, lacking effective components of power in the region, turned it into an effective actor in the region (Shokooh, 1390). The Arabian Peninsula, which until the early decades of the 1900s did not have a balance of power with local Arabs, invented and promoted the game at the regional level and with the largest oil reserves, became one of the world's largest oil producers and exporters, used oil rents to trace the components of his foreign power and role (See: Lewis, April 2009). The foreign policy of these countries is largely dependent on the oil economy. Therefore, it can be argued that if the government does not change its current approach to the consumption of oil revenues, which can be referred to as arson and military aggression against countries like Yemen, the country's economy will suffer more in the coming years.

Relying on oil revenues, lack of attention and reliance on social classes, and the lack of a popular base, they are forced to compensate for the fragility caused by the vacuum of the popular and class base by relying on foreign powers. Thus, the foreign policy of such countries is affected by domestic and international economic power. Saudi Arabia has always tried to gain the support of the West, especially the United States, towards the Islamic Republic of Iran to protect its political regime from foreign aggression, sabotage, and military coups. Therefore, the independence of this country has relied to some extent on the powers that import oil and these countries have been able to influence the foreign policy and foreign relations of a country like Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's great allies, such as the United States, are constantly reminded that the Al Saud dynasty will not be able to survive without US military and weapons assistance. Thus, the foreign policy of oil governments depends on the structure of the international system and the global structure of the oil industry and carries restrictions that play a "determining" role in the adoption of oil policies (Mohammadi, 2003). But recently, Muhammad bin Salman announced the reduction of dependence

on oil by unveiling the Saudi vision document. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia seeks to extract other minerals such as uranium, gold, phosphate and convert "Aramco" from an oil company to an industrial complex in the world. One of the perspectives of this document is to educate families to enter the market and diversify the economy, and it remains to be seen how successful Saudi Arabia will be concerning these ideals.

However, Iran is less dependent on oil than Saudi Arabia. But the Islamic Republic of Iran has also had an oil-dependent economy since its inception. Since the beginning of the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the policy of distancing itself from oil and oil revenues has been pursued until today. Iran has been able to remove itself from the ranks of rentier economies by increasing its oil exports to more than 50% and Among the 12 oil countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Iran's economy is the least dependent on oil. However, according to the International Monetary Fund, the share of oil in Iran's GDP is over 10 percent. This means that the Iranian economy owes 10% of its GDP to oil production and exports; and also, 70% of the country's budget is provided from the sale of oil resources. This rate is 29% for Saudi Arabia. Thus, the regional dimension of the economic factor cannot lead to convergence and comparative advantage of the two countries over each other. Because the main income of both countries is through oil. On the other hand, Trade always accounts for a small percentage of their foreign trade, and Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot reach a constructive interaction in this regard. A clear example of the economic conflict is oil pricing, with Saudi Arabia at a time when it saw Iran's policies as contrary to its regional interests or At the behest of its partners, the United States and Israel, it has pushed oil prices into the world market with lower-than-usual prices and increased supply. Saudi Arabia's goal is disrupting the energy market has been to force the Iranians to back down from their regional policies. Saudi Arabia has been losing its oil markets in China, India, and the United States since the signing of the Iran nuclear deal and the lifting of some sanctions, and Iran's re-entry into the market has also jeopardized Saudi Arabia by offering a discount. Thus, the oil-based economy has increased regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia and has been used as a tool to put pressure on the other side.

### **The Factor of the Political Elites**



Foreign policy decision-makers depend on the degree to which governments are democratic and undemocratic in determining, defining, and setting foreign policy goals. Decision-makers have unique personal characteristics whose decisions and choices influence political orientations. In Saudi Arabia, the king is the center of the political process. He is both the owner and the ruler. The tribal structure and patriarchy of Saudi society are also crystallized in its foreign policy. The effects of the government being tribal can be considered in the interests of the superior tribe, namely Al-Saud, and the personalization of foreign policy in the interests of the Al-Saud family (Stansely, 2015). The instrumental elites - the House of Saud - influence political realities more than the bureaucracy. In other words, in the competition of the high-level elites of the Arab systems with the bureaucracy that drives domestic and foreign political decisions, the elites have the upper hand as tools (Asadi, 2012).

Tribal-oriented patriarchy and the transfer of tribal structure to the state level indicate that in the study of Saudi foreign policy, special attention is paid to the king's preferences. In other words, foreign policy has been and is the exclusive domain of the king. Even with advisers and influential variables that may influence the king's approach and policies, this does not diminish the king's centrality in foreign policy. (Stansely, 1393). This is evidenced by the coming to power of Salman bin Abdul Aziz. Since the beginning of his reign, we have witnessed fundamental changes in the division of power in the House of Saud and a change in political orientations in the field of foreign relations. He takes an extremist approach to the conservatism of former Saudi King Abdullah. King Salman is an ambitious person. In a revolutionary move, he brought about revolutionary changes in his governing body and, contrary to the tradition of succeeding Abdul Aziz's sons, replaced his half-brother Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz with his nephew Muhammad bin Nayef. Adel al-Jubeir also replaced the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Saud al-Faisal, a veteran and conservative Saudi foreign minister. Gaining power for young politicians could change Riyadh's conservative policies. Frederick Wehrey, senior fellow at senior Middle East program at the Carnegie, believes that King Salman's doctrine has a military approach to regional conflicts and that the most important component can be seen in Saudi intervention in Yemen (Frederic Wehrey, 2016). Unlike the former officials of this country, King Salman's new team does not act in any

expedient and restrained manner and they are trying to make fundamental changes in the goals and approaches of Saudi foreign policy (Mazaheri, 2016). Salman Doctrine has a pessimistic view of Iran and considers the Islamic Republic to be the main cause of many political and security problems in the Middle East. The basis for the formation of this doctrine is to prevent the increase of Iran's influence. According to King Salman, the strategic need of Saudi Arabia in the new situation is to blame Iran (Arem, 2016).

Observers and analysts believe that the main reason for these changes; that is, the country (Saudi Arabia) has failed in the regional arenas, including Iraq, Lebanon, and, above all, Syria and it has moved from the stage of confrontation with Iran to the stage of siege by Iran. The ruling political team seeks to increase its influence in the region against Iran. Therefore, King Salman and his circle changed Saudi Arabia's macro approach to the world from a state of passivity to activity and activism (Mirkoushesh *et al.*, 2015). The departure from the traditional strategy of conservatism to an aggressive actor in foreign policy has been adopted at the discretion of the political elite. In the time of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, it pursued its strategic priorities through military and financial support from those involved in the conflict. But the direct involvement in the war against Yemen and the formation of a coalition with the same goal is a change in the Saudi military doctrine. Thus, the shift in political orientation from a conservative foreign policy to conservative and active aggression has led to an increase in terrorism inside and outside Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the influence of Iranian individuals and political elites varies according to their defined position. According to Article 57, "the operation of the three forces is carried out under the supervision of the Supreme Leader". This supervision is done to prevent the contradiction of decisions with the general principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran. But in the field of practice, decision-making in Iran's foreign policy is defined in terms of the duties of the executive branch. The type of influence of the personalities and political elites of the Islamic Republic of Iran is different from the purely authoritarian government of Saudi Arabia. The personal involvement of political elites is different in how to make policies, how to implement policies and decisions, and prioritize goals (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2012). The mental model of the political elites of the two countries, especially Saudi Arabia, is based on "national self-

centeredness." Relying solely on the capabilities and interests of their own country, the elites ignore the other side and seek to elevate their regional position and international prestige.

### **The Factor of Racial Differences (Arabs and Non-Arabs)**

The two ideological areas of Saudi Arabia versus Iran in the region should be examined in the context of Arab-non-Arabs and Sunni-Shiite. The racial difference between Persians and Arabs is another issue that has always been the point of intersection between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Since the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Arabs have engaged in a form of xenophobia against non-Arabs. On this basis, the ethnocentric view of the Arabs towards themselves and others has spread a kind of pattern of friendship and enmity between them and non-Arabs. Before the revolution, relations between the two countries were problematic, with both Iran and Saudi Arabia recognized in the Western bloc as US representatives in the region. At this time, if the Pahlavi kings placed special emphasis on the history of pre-Islamic Iran and the glory of pre-Islamic Iranians; Arab nationalism, led by Egypt, had also been a unifying factor for the Arabs. The rise of religious differences as two Shiite and Sunni factions dusted off the 1400-year-old rivalry that existed before Islam between Arabs and Persians (Aghaei & Ahmadian, 2009). Some analysts believe that Saudi Arabia sees Iran as trying to increase the power of a Persian state, not an Islamic state, and what is really at stake is the conflict between the Persian and Arab governments, not the Sunni and Shiite governments ([www.iht.com](http://www.iht.com)). Under the control of Arab, non-Arab, Shiite, and Sunni historical debates, Saudi Arabia considers the Islamic Republic of Iran as a hypothetical enemy in the region with a different identity. A clear example of this kind of sectarian view in supporting Saddam Hassan has been the confrontation of an Arab country with a non-Arab nation. In the last decade, the renaming of the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Gulf has been considered as an example of sectarian confrontation with Iran (Koushki & Hosseini, 2013). The Iranophobia project, which was introduced after the Islamic Revolution, has found meaning in this context of the regional elements and components that threaten Iranian otherness. In this way, cultural, political, and economic relations and other relations between the two countries around the central sign of fear of Iran are meant. In other words, the countries of the Persian Gulf have tried to establish the animosities

between Persia and the Arabs by using the method of highlighting and marginalization. By highlighting the elements of Iranian identity, they have injected them with the meaning of fear (Kazemi, 2012).

### **Factor of Ideology**

Ideology is more or less evident in the foreign policy of all countries. Even the ideology of realism has overshadowed US foreign policy and act in the national interest. This is true in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran. If we consider the element of identity - ideology - as an explanatory variable - not as the main cause - directing the goals and interests in foreign policy, In this case, this variable expresses Saudi Arabia's foreign policy in certain periods, that is used by the situation of Saudi Arabia in the field of foreign policy and it has been used as a justification for domestic policies, a tool for achieving goals abroad and defining identity for oneself and other Muslim countries in the region. Using ideology, this country seeks to brand itself as the leader of the Islamic world. According to King Salman in the vision document of Saudi Arabia until 2030, the first pillar of this document is the rank and position of the Arabian Peninsula in the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia intends to use its religious prestige as the heart of the Arab world and the Islamic world to take the lead (Ghazi, 2016). Gaining such a position in the regional and international arena can also strengthen the foundations of domestic legitimacy. Because Wahhabism is based on "otherness" (Shi'ism), the Saudis seek to maximize security when they feel threatened by military or identity threats from others. Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the country's foreign policy is "counter-threat diplomacy." Because the nature of the threats that Saudi Arabia is facing today has changed and taken on the nature of identity (Ataiee, Mansouri Moghaddam, 2013). These identity threats have become more pronounced since the beginning of popular protests in the Middle East, After the Islamic Awakening, and Saudi Arabia took a clearer and sharper stance than the countries with a Shiite population in the Persian Gulf region, that constitutes about 70% of the region's population (Mousavian, 2013). This country throughout its history, whenever it has faced ideological threats and feelings of extinction, has highlighted its identity borders (Ibrahim, 2008). We have witnessed this practice during the spread of Pan-Arabism and the Shiite religion. The victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran intensified the alienation of Saudi Arabia. The Al-Saud dynasty

saw its ideology of the government in jeopardy and from the very beginning pursued a policy of alliance and coalition in support of the Iranian opposition. Like supporting Iraq during the eight years of the imposed war, the killing of Iranian pilgrims in 1987 led to the severance of ties between the two countries.

In Saudi Arabia, we are dealing with a state religion; because according to the division made between Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab (Al-Sheikh) and Muhammad ibn Saud, religious affairs are entrusted to Wahhabi scholars, and political affairs are entrusted to Al-Saud. So Saudi religious policy abroad is part of their foreign policy. No country like Saudi Arabia uses its religious policy to advance its political goals that part of it is due to the existence of the two holy shrines and the Hajj and Umrah ceremonies. In contrast, Iran is a country that the theme of the government is the religion of Islam, and democracy also shows its appearance and organization. In other words, Iran has established a kind of balance between the republics and Islamic<sup>1</sup>. The ideological aspect of Iran can be explicitly stated in Iran's foreign policy. In such a way that religion is not as a legitimizing tool but as an identity derived from the religious culture of Shiites and the official religion of the nation that it has also crystallized in foreign policy. The religious identity of Iran's foreign policy has been strong and weak during the time of each of the presidents. But the fixed principle shapes the interests of the Islamic Republic. Because it is the identity that gives people a role, and these roles determine the interests and interests shape the political behavior of individuals internally and externally. Thus, it can be said that the ideological nature of Iran's foreign policy behavior in the region is the same as national interests. The Islamic Republic has aligned the national interests and materials of the Islamic world. Concepts such as the export of the revolution, the support of Muslim liberation movements that have been oppressed by the government, Opposition to the presence of the United States in the region (West Asia), especially after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani by this country (USA) and this like in Iran's foreign policy; Saudi Arabia felt threatened by Iran and together with the Gulf states, it established the Gulf Cooperation Council to increase cooperation, especially in the field of security. There is also an ideological difference between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the crises of

Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Because it continues to train and financially support terrorists and issue fatwas to incite Wahhabis in other countries in the region against their central government and propagating the teachings of Wahhabism to create a common identity and culture for Muslims to expand Saudi influence by reducing the influence of Iran and the axis of resistance and restricting rival ideologies is at the forefront of Al Saud's foreign policy in the region.

### **The Factor of Media Diplomacy**

Media diplomacy is one of the most important issues in foreign policy, the importance of which has increased in recent decades among the policies of the international community. The Middle East, meanwhile, is one of the most important and turbulent regions in the world, where the debate between the powers of the region has a long history. Iran and Saudi Arabia are two important countries in the region that have made every effort to outdo each other in all areas of competition. In the last four decades, due to the importance of media diplomacy and activities in the field of communications and media, they have tried to be fully productive in this field to protect their national interests and to protect and promote national interests in the field and they have taken steps to protect and advance national interests in the diplomatic field. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, "the strategy of exporting the revolution" became one of the important goals of this country; therefore, communicate with its foreign audiences through audio-visual media. One of the most important foreign media in Iran is Al-Alam News Network; which is a 24-hour broadcaster for presenting and analyzing special and political news. Also, the press and newspapers have been active at the regional rather than international level. With the important developments that have taken place in the Arab world, especially after the "Islamic Awakening<sup>2</sup>" (2011), the Arab powers have also realized the importance of media tools in the field of public opinion and diplomacy. In this regard, Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in major Arab media such as Al-Arabiya, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, and Al-Akhbariya, as well as its official news agency; It has sought to have a major impact on public opinion and increase its regional influence, and the financial contracts of publishers close to Muhammad bin Salman (Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia) have shown the country's relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Religious Democracy

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<sup>2</sup> Arab Spring

with these news media. In return, Iran has tried to repel Saudi media attacks (Such as spreading rumors and spreading fake news) through media diplomacy.

### **The Factor of Regional Crises**

The Middle East is experiencing tremendous change. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia calls itself the leader of a school of thought called Wahhabism and it considers Iran to be the most important ideological and intellectual rival, which is the center of the Shiite sphere. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran also considers itself the leader of the world's Shiites. Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq are under Iranian influence, and there is a military conflict in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq with the extremist groups. The Saudi military offensive against the Yemeni Houthis, who are allies of Iran, has left many casualties and paved the way for the growth of extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL. In Syria, also, Saudi Arabia failed to oust Bashar al-Assad. Saudi Arabia has been able to have a better position (in appearance) only in Bahrain by spending its credit. Although there is unstable peace in Lebanon and Bahrain, this peace can be shattered. (Der Spiegel, 2016). Iran's nightmare from the moment of the victory of the revolution in this country has overshadowed the dream of Saudi Arabia being centered in the region; thus, many Western experts interpret Saudi Arabia's behavior in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen as an obvious enemy of Iranian regional influence (See: Sadjadpour, 2016). The feeling of danger from Iran's significant influence in West Asia and the imbalance of power in the region, and the danger of separatist tendencies by the Shiites of Saudi Arabia can be considered as the main cause of regional conflicts between the two countries. Therefore, the tip of the attacks is on the Islamic Republic, which seeks to establish stability in the region that has been seen in recent years, especially in the crisis in Syria and Iraq and the fight against terrorism (Takfiris and ISIL). In this regard, Saudi Arabia took many destabilizing measures (Obvious interference in Lebanon's internal affairs, including forcing Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign outside this country and openly supporting the Lebanese and Iraqi unrest in 2019) to change the status quo and return to the situation before the rise of Iran's regional power. As mentioned, the clash of interests between the two countries in Palestine and Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen have been exposed. As an example, some of these regional conflicts will be examined.

### **Factor of Iraq**

Before the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003; Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq were the three major powers in the Persian Gulf region that formed a regional balance. For this reason, the foreign policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia with Iraq before and after the US military invasion are different. Since the founding of Saudi Arabia in 1929, relations with Iraq have been defined as hostile and under the banner of two blocs, the West and the East. Relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia were fraught with mistrust and rivalry before the fall of Saddam. However, the Saudis saw Iraq as a state that played a balancing role against Iran. But the victory of the Islamic Revolution (1979) in Iran and the eight-year imposed war (1980-1988) led the two countries to reduce differences by imagining a common threat. After the end of the war, Iraq's relations with Iran gradually came out of a condition crisis. On the one hand, Iraq tried to invade Kuwait in 1991, and on the other hand, it tried to solve its problems with Iran. In this way, Iraq attempted to re-establish diplomatic relations with Iran. Also, hostility and mistrust in Saudi-Iraqi relations increased after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Saudi Arabia provided its military base to the United States to invade Iraq and participated in UN sanctions against Iraq (Ebrahimi, 2004). The relative ups and downs in Iraqi-Saudi relations occurred at a time when Iran's foreign policy toward Iraq before the fall of Saddam was relatively stable due to geopolitical variables. The US military invasion and presence in Iraq undermined one of the pillars of power in the Persian Gulf region and a new order was formed in this region. Iran and Saudi Arabia each tried to shape their order and support their countries and allied groups according to their interests and goals. In other words, Iraq was a critical point in the foreign policy of the two countries to reach a possible understanding or confrontation. The change in the political structure of Iraq after the fall of Saddam displeased Saudi Arabia for two reasons: First, for the first time in the Persian Gulf sheikhdom, citizens of an Arab country were able to participate in their political destiny as a regional model. The second was to increase Iran's influence and reduce Saudi Arabia's influence in this country and the region. Some Saudis believe that Iran is trying to strengthen the Shiite character of the Iraqi people in the face of their Arab identity to gain an advantage in the Arab-Iranian conflict. Perhaps the reason is the establishment of a new Iraqi government based on religious principles



that are in line with Iran's national policies. Iraq is inclined to Iran because of its strategic weight, as a stronghold, has changed the balance of power in the region in a new way (Ardakani Zakani, 1390). Accordingly, the rise to power of the Shiites in Iraq complemented a crescent of Shiite spheres of influence that included Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; in other words, not only in Iran, Shiites in the form of the Islamic Republic and Lebanon as a powerful and progressive movement, but also in Iraq and Syria, have a decisive position in the region (Pourahmadi, 2004). Saudi Arabia is currently seeking to disrupt political stability and the current political structure (for example October 2019 riot) by supporting terrorist groups and exporting terrorism to the country. Also since the rise to power of Iran, and the subsequent assassination of Martyr Soleimani and the rain rocket of the US military base of Ain al-Assad in Iraq (In the initial response to the assassination of General Soleimani), the decline of US power - Saudi Arabia's largest ally - has begun in the region. Thus, the most important component of Saudi Arabia's hostile foreign policy toward Iran in Iraq has been a geopolitical confrontation.

#### **The Factor of Yemen crisis**

The Yemeni crisis is another important regional crisis that plays a major role in the balance of power in the region, especially in the context of Saudi foreign policy approaches. Whereas the Saudi government considers the Arabian Peninsula to be its first foreign and security policy axis, it will consider any unintended change that opposes its interests in the Yemeni area as a serious threat and will react stubbornly to it. While Iran has always supported the unity of Yemen, Saudi Arabia has tried to bring to power stream dependent on itself (Saudi) led by Mansour Hadi. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia always tries to show Ansarullah as the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ansarullah, on the other hand, has gained public acceptance and legitimacy from various religious and ethnic groups in Yemen and has taken the lead in the revolution and in countering the Saudi military aggression. In such an atmosphere, the defeat of Saudi Arabia from the Yemeni resistance has fueled this process (Especially after Aramco was targeted by Ansarullah), and Saudi Arabia considers itself a loser in the battle against Iran. Thus, from Saudi Arabia's point of view, Iran seeks its sphere of influence in Yemen, and the most important tool for Iran's influence in Yemen is the Ansarullah (Al-Houthi) movement; that

through it, Iran can expand its presence and influence in Yemen. Therefore, Saudi Arabia must confront Ansarullah in any way possible, and if it falls short in Iran against Iran, the way to influence will be paved for Iran. In this regard, to suppress the Ansarullah movement launched a military operation called "Decisive Storm"<sup>3</sup> in Yemen and with arms and logistics support, countries such as Sudan, Morocco, and Jordan began bombing the Ansarullah positions.

#### **The Factor of the Bahrain crisis**

Bahrain was affected by a wave of popular protests in the Arab world at the beginning of the Islamic Awakening (Arab spring) but, it quickly became a scene of confrontation between regional and trans-regional actors, including the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia views Bahrain as the Achilles heel of its internal developments. Bahrain, with its majority Shiite population, is adjacent to the Shiite cities of Saudi Arabia (Al-Ehasaa and Qatif), which are also important oil-rich cities in Saudi Arabia. Any change in the power of the Shiites can provoke the Shiites in Saudi Arabia therefore, Saudi Arabia considers the security of Bahrain as its security and the security of the Persian Gulf because the Saudi elites believe that any Arab Uprising may destroy the Bahraini monarchy. Also, Saudi Arabia under pressure from Wahhabi muftis and in its interests, brought in 1,000 troops to save the Bahraini royal family. The Saudi move was accompanied by the tacit and explicit support of the Persian Gulf monarchies and was aimed at countering popular protests by Shiites in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia seeks to deploy its military forces following the annexation of Bahrain to Saudi Arabia (Mousavian, 1393). In particular, the protests that have taken place in the country in recent years are making things more difficult for Al-Saud. Therefore, the foreign policy approaches of Iran and Saudi Arabia to the crisis in Bahrain are opposite. From the beginning, the Islamic Republic of Iran stressed the need for the government to pay attention to the rights and demands of the people, and also strongly objected to the entry of Saudi and Emirati forces into Bahrain. Because this is contrary to preserving the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of Bahrain. On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran did not intervene in the Bahrain crisis. Only after the beginning of internal and spontaneous popular protests in this country, which emerged due to its dissatisfaction and long-term context;

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<sup>3</sup> In Arabic: "عاصفة الحزم"

stressed the need for a peaceful solution to the crisis through political means.

### **The Factor of the Syrian civil war**

The Syrian civil war has been the scene of confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia since its inception in 2011. Traditionally, Saudi-Syrian relations have not been close and there has always been some kind of competition between the two countries. Syria's high influence in Lebanon and its alliance with Iran have never pleased Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Syria is of great importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Syria was one of the first countries to recognize the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 revolution, and was one of the few Arab countries not to support Saddam's regime in the "Iraq-Iran war". Another dimension of Syria's importance to Iran is its policy of confrontation with the Israeli regime, which has strategically placed the Syrian government alongside Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas as part Axis of resistance. Syria has been a strategic ally of Iran in the region for the past 42 years (after 1979). That is why the Syrian crisis is a security issue for Iran. Iranian political elites have officially stated that the Syrian crisis can be resolved only through the political process (Hamitaran, 2012). The victory of the Syrian opposition and the removal of Bashar al-Assad and their government from political power would cause Iran to lose one of its most important allies in the region and weaken the position of the resistance against Israel. It is very difficult to analyze how Iran is helping Hezbollah and Hamas without considering the role of Syria. For Iran, the risk of Syrian instability includes at least part of the loss of its ability to influence the Arab-Israeli conflict, its militant Palestinians and its Shiite allies in Lebanon, and in particular of Hezbollah (See: Nerguizian, 2012). In this case, the position of Hezbollah and subsequently Hamas will be endangered and Iran's influence in the region will be reduced and Iran's security issues will become more complicated. Contrary to Saudi Arabia's approach to the Syrian crisis, it is using the potential of jihadist Wahhabis as opponents of the Saudi government outside the borders to increase its influence and advance its policies in the region.

### **The Factor of Iran's Nuclear Program**

The progress of Iran's nuclear program and the evolution of the nuclear fuel cycle have always been followed with concern and pessimism by the Saudis. The Saudis see Iran's acquisition of nuclear technology as another strategy to disrupt regional order and increase Iran's influence in the

region. This country adhered to the hostile policies and sanctions of the P5 + 1 before the approval of the JCPOA. Although the Saudis formally declared a neutral stance, the Saudis considered Iran's nuclearization a security threat. After the nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia tried in every way to boycott JCPOA. For this purpose, she even agreed to cooperate and be close to Israel and the Iranian opposition (Including the Rajavi group). Accordingly, Saudi Arabia raised concerns about the JCPOA agreement. Saudi officials are concerned that Iran may have reached an agreement with the United States on nuclear activities. They believe that Iran and the United States may be able to reach agreements in other areas, and that Saudi Arabia, in the eyes of the United States, may not have its former position as a regional ally. Since the beginning of the series of Iran nuclear talks with the P5 + 1, which also took place in the presence of the United States; Saudi Arabia sought to find other alternative powers to reduce its dependence on the United States. Its closeness to the regional powers of Turkey and the Zionist regime is interpreted in this regard.

### **CONCLUSION**

The history of political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran dates back to the formation of the Saudi government (1929) in Najd and the subsequent visit of an Iranian trade delegation. These relations, especially in the field of foreign policy, have gone through many ups and downs until today. Before the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the two countries' foreign policies were defined under the banner of a bipolar system to preserve US interests in the region and establish a security order. The factors of oil, regional balance, Hajj, non-Arab and Arab confrontation, and the role of political elites in bilateral relations were also discussed. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution with its religious and democratic nature, the Islamic Republic was confronted with the political and religious existence of this country (Saudi). The threatening attitude of Saudi Arabia's regional rivals led them to pursue sometimes contradictory policies based on conservation of the Kingdom of Al-Saud. Thus, influenced by actors and events at three levels: domestic, regional, and international in political, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions, the foreign policies of the two countries have always had the same orientation. But after the Islamic Awakening in the Middle East subsystem and the disruption of the security order in the region, the foreign policies of the two countries has shifted in

the other direction. In general, this article showed the dimensions of regional security, differences in oil supply and pricing in OPEC, and support for takfiri movements and the export of terrorism from Saudi Arabia in the Syrian crisis, the Iranian nuclear case, and the issue of Hajj. The principles, goals, and foundations of the foreign policy of the two countries indicate a competitive and conflicting relationship in the region. If regional dimensions have a greater role in determining the conflicts and differences between the two countries; In fact, the perspective and picture that can be presented of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy based on Wahhabi identity will be the continuation of confrontational policies with countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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