



SECURITY PROJECTIONS IN THE RECONCILIATION OF RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

Alwi Akbar^{1*}, Yon Machmudi¹, Naufal Fikri², Yusril Ihza Mahendra³

¹School of Global and Strategic Studies; Universitas Indonesia; Indonesia

²International Relations, Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang; Indonesia

³International Relations, Universitas Gajah Mada; Indonesia

*email: Alwi.akbar@ui.ac.id

Abstrak

Arab Saudi dan Iran menggambarkan rivalitas tinggi di kawasan Timur Tengah, dengan pertarungan ideologi, persaingan pertahanan, dan memunculkan proksi-proksi di negara kawasan. Keduanya mengalami eskalasi konflik fluktuatif selama beberapa dekade belakang, eskalasi itu memuncak ketika Iran memutuskan hubungan diplomatiknya dengan Arab Saudi pada tahun 2011. Setelah bertahun-tahun, pada akhirnya menyepakati rekonsiliasi dan perbaikan hubungan diplomatik, terutama dalam hal keamanan. Cina memainkan peran besar sebagai penengah dalam proses rekonsiliasi ini, menggeser peranan politik keamanan yang telah lama dikuasai terutama oleh Amerika Serikat. Hal ini mendasari tujuan penelitian ini untuk menganalisis pengaruh rekonsiliasi hubungan antara Arab Saudi dan Iran terhadap stabilitas kompleks keamanan Timur Tengah. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) dari Buzan & Wæver digunakan untuk menganalisis sekaligus memproyeksi dinamika hubungan kedua negara ini terhadap keamanan kawasan Timur Tengah secara keseluruhan. Metodologi penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif eksploratori untuk memperluas jangkauan analisis implikasi keamanan Timur Tengah, setelah adanya perbaikan hubungan kedua negara ini. Artikel ilmiah, berita, dan analisa pengamat kebijakan luar negeri, menjadi sumber utama dalam pembahasan. Ringkasan hasil dari pembahasan ini adalah rekonsiliasi Arab Saudi dan Iran memunculkan potensi stabilitas jangka panjang, namun tantangan terbesarnya ada pada konsistensi dan pihak kelompok pihak ketiga seperti Houthi.

Kata Kunci: Arab Saudi, Cina, Iran, rekonsiliasi, Regional Security Complex Theory

Abstract

With ideological battles, defense rivalries, and the rise of proxies in regional countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran represent the pinnacle of rivalry in the Middle East region. Both countries have had a history of volatile conflict escalation over the past few decades, culminating in Iran's severance of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in 2016. After many years, they finally agreed to reconciliation and improvement of diplomatic relations, particularly in the field of security. China has played an important role as a broker in this reconciliation process. This has shifted the role of security policy, which has long been dominated by the United States. This paper aims to analyze how the Saudi Iranian rapprochement affects the stability of the Middle East Security Complex. We use the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) of Buzan & Wæver to analyze and project the dynamics of the relationship between these two countries on the security of the Middle East region. The research methodology uses an exploratory qualitative approach to broaden the scope of the analysis of the security implications of the Middle East, after the improvement of the relationship between these two countries.

Keywords: China, Iran, reconciliation, Regional Security Complex Theory, Saudi Arabia

Introduction

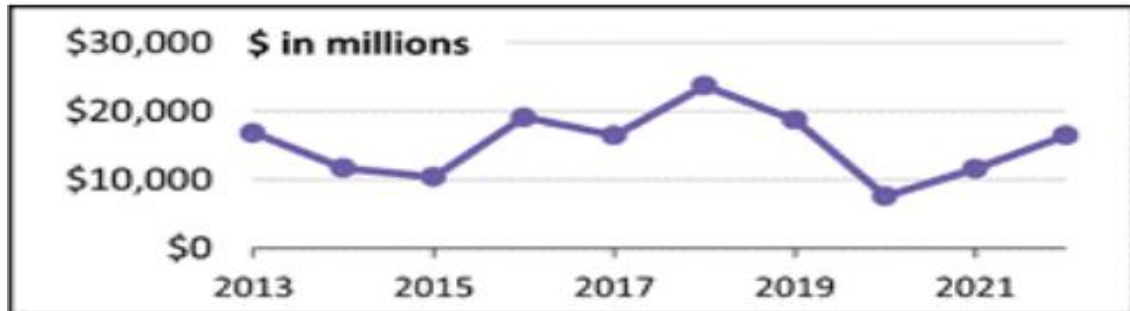
Saudi Arabia and Iran had a long rivalry, particularly the records of the conflicts. These both countries always bring fast flowing dynamics in the region. One of the things that distinguishes these two countries and is a contributing factor to the friction between the two countries is the difference between the Sunni and Shia groups. These groups shape how the country identifies its strengths, and it also influences the map of competition between them. Particularly when Iran made a massive turning point in ideology and government system in 1979, and changed as a Republic Islam of Iran (Hwang, 2024). Moreover, Saudi Arabia and Iran have geopolitical interests that escalate the conflict between the two countries, one of the most famous through proxies. Proxies from Saudi and Iran have been around for a long time, most famously when there was an Iraq - Iran war and Iraq's annexation of Kuwait which resulted in the United States being involved in the conflict (Alsmadi, 2024). The involvement of the United States brings another dynamic to these countries and the region as a large landscape, proximity with Saudi Arabia in economic (oil and gas) relations to the detriment of the Iranian global oil market (Alsmadi, 2024).

However, the difference in systems and ideologies even at that time was still a barrier to long-term relations, with Saudi Arabia using a royal system based on Wahhabi, while Iran with its Shah system, coupled with their interest in staying close to Britain. This resulted in the relationship between the two countries being in a cycle of suspicion and a desire to bring each other down (Jalal et al., 2023). Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia experienced peak tension in 2016, when Saudi Arabia decided not to establish diplomatic relations with Iran, after an Iranian mob attacked Saudi Arabia's embassy and consulate in Tehran. The Iranian mob was protesting against Saudi Arabia's decision to execute a Shia figure in Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (Rahman, 2023).

Recently, a new chapter in relations has been opened between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023. With this rapprochement, both countries would start again, mediated by China. China has started to put down the dominance of the United States in the Middle East region, particularly with a number of economic deals with other countries in the region. Saudi Arabia, in fact, has a great goal to achieve internal economic stability with the Saudi 2030 program, and China has a perfect reputation in making deals in the economic sector in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Algeria, and the United Arab Emirates

(Hwang, 2024). China itself has spent \$284.3 billion in 2021 for investment in the region, compared to the U.S spent in the region was valued approximately \$144 billion (Barrios et al., 2023).

Figure 1 - China Investment and Construction Projects



Source: Congressional Research Service, 2023

This proves that China is slowly taking over the reins of economic dominance in the Middle East compared to the United States. One of the reasons why Iran and Saudi Arabia finally accepted China's presence as a mediator in the reconciliation process is that in addition to the opportunity for more flexible economic cooperation agreements than the United States, regional security considerations remain a top priority for both countries. Particularly on issues with Israel and the security of the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Iran consider that if they can secure the Gulf sub-region, it can reduce the United States' access to military development there and protect the resources that have always been targeted by the superpower (Rahman, 2023). The reconciliations would be the new phenomenon and different dynamics when these countries could meet the enmity after a decade and China's attempt to challenge the superpower domination in the Middle East.

The goal is clearly to achieve security stability between the two countries, as well as to impact the region, whose economic interests will be realized in the future. Meanwhile, China also has its own agenda in subverting the domination of the United States at least in the economic field. The previous table image has clearly shown the main reasons why the Saudis and Iranians opened their arms to China in the process of restoring diplomatic relations. This reconciliation will certainly lead to projections, particularly in the field of security, on the stability of the Middle East as a whole.

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has certainly been discussed by many observers and academics. The dynamics and escalation of conflict between these two countries often become the initial premise of the development of not only the

domestic area but also affect how the Middle East region is formed, at least in the past decade. In the context of our analysis, it will explain at least the history of the dynamics of these two countries.

When looking at the escalation of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is often indicated that the direction of the dispute is mostly part of the ideological warfare between the two, in other words, caused by the main actors of each country. This is not entirely wrong, however the dynamics between the two are brought about based on how Iran and Saudi Arabia see their respective military power maps (Naghizadeh, 2025). As the dominant countries in the region, their rivalry goes beyond balancing material power such as the number of troops and complete weaponry. However, Iran and Saudi are transferring these material advantages to their proxies, interestingly this will depend on the willingness of third parties to support this (Naghizadeh, 2025).

Other observers' arguments suggest that Iranian and Saudi intensity will decrease when no longer focused on the influence race over their proxies in the Middle East (Naghizadeh, 2025). This opinion also states that third parties such as the United States and Russia, which dominate in the region, are no longer needed. However, this does not mean that either Saudis or Iranians have eliminated the role of the third party. The focus on economy and security is vital to avoid dependence on the West and balance power amidst tensions between the United States and China (Hwang, 2024). China is really playing a big role in the Middle East, its role as a mediator in the reconciliation process brings a new dynamic to regional security, although in recent years it has mostly made economic investments.

Speaking of China's role as a mediator in reconciliation, it is not surprising that this can happen in the midst of the West's enormous contribution to this region. China's role can be seen as a confidence boost for the Saudis and Iranians themselves, in that this reconciliation will no longer depend on the United States and can balance the regional and global order (Bilal et al., 2024). It also had a very significant impact when the reconciliation was announced, and China's role was a bit of a surprise. This Chinese surprise will lead to a map of geopolitical competition and a state of multipolar shift (Zorri, 2023).

Some of the facts from various academic sources, the purpose of this discussion is to provide an in-depth perspective understanding of the projections on the implications

of Iran-Saudi reconciliation for the inter-state, as well as the overall regional impact. Therefore, the opinion that if Iran and Saudi Arabia carry out the rapprochement consistently without any internal or external disturbances, this reconciliation will have positive security implications. Because in our argument, Iran-Saudi relations will have a stabilizing effect, particularly in preventing further escalation of the proxy conflict. It becomes very interesting how the real projection of the Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement will be in creating security stability between the two countries and the implications for the region as a whole. This change is also a challenge in itself aimed at maintaining regional stability, coupled with third-party intervention.

Theoretical Framework

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan & Wæver, posits that states within a specific region are deeply interconnected in terms of security and threats, forming distinct security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). These interactions are shaped by geographical proximity, historical dynamics, and political structures, which collectively define regional security patterns. The closeness of states within a region plays a crucial role in the processes of securitization, where an issue is framed as a threat by political elites or other securitizing actors, and desecuritization, where an issue or actor is no longer perceived as a threat requiring immediate action (Behnke, 2006). By focusing on regional security rather than purely national or global frameworks, RSCT highlights how security threats and policies tend to cluster within particular geographical areas, leading to specific patterns of cooperation and conflict among states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The regional security complexes emerge through patterns of *amity* (friendship) and *enmity* (hostility), the *balance of power*, and geographical pressure (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). While internal factors such as political stability and economic strength contribute to a state's security posture, regional security dynamics are also shaped by external influences. The concepts of *penetration* and *overlay* describe how global powers can intervene in regional security affairs, altering the balance of power and affecting the stability of existing security complexes. This suggests that regional security is not solely determined by internal factors but also by the broader global security environment. Consequently, RSCT serves as an analytical framework that links internal regional

conditions, interstate relations, and global influences in shaping regional security dynamics, providing a comprehensive understanding of how security interactions unfold at multiple levels (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

RSCT examines security dynamics at four primary levels, each contributing to the broader understanding of regional security. First, the **domestic level** focuses on a state's internal vulnerabilities, such as political stability, economic resilience, and national identity, which influence how it perceives and responds to security threats. Second, **state-to-state relations** analyze the interactions between countries within a region, including alliances, rivalries, and diplomatic engagements that shape regional security dynamics. Third, **interaction among regions** considers interregional relations, particularly in cases where economic ties, migration patterns, or geopolitical shifts lead to changing levels of interdependence and security concerns. Finally, the **role of global powers** explores how major international actors, such as hegemonic states or international organizations, exert influence over regional security structures, either by stabilizing or exacerbating tensions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

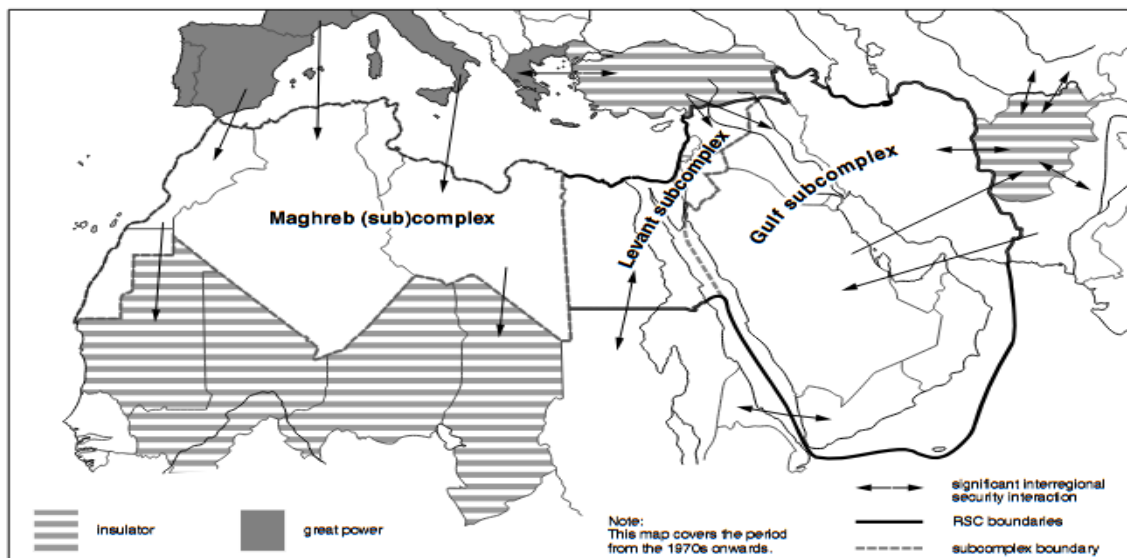
Additionally, RSCT identifies four key variables that define a regional security complex. **Boundary** establishes the physical and geopolitical limits separating security complexes. **Anarchic structure** emphasizes that a security complex consists of autonomous units interacting within a system. **Polarity** reflects the distribution of power and rivalry patterns within the region, including external influences. Finally, **social construction** highlights *amity/enmity* dynamics and securitization/desecuritization processes shaped by historical, political, and social factors. Through these variables, RSCT underscores that regional security is not solely determined by power distribution but also by the social constructions among actors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Based on the four key variables, an established security complex can undergo three possible transformations. **Maintenance of the status quo** occurs when no significant structural changes take place, and existing security dynamics remain stable. **Internal transformation** involves fundamental shifts within the security complex, such as changes in the anarchic structure due to regional integration, alterations in polarity caused by disintegration or power shifts, and modifications in *amity* and *enmity* patterns resulting from ideological shifts or regime changes. **External transformation** refers to changes in the boundaries of a security complex, either through expansion when two complexes

merge or contraction when a single complex fragments into multiple autonomous entities. These transformations influence regional security dynamics and interactions with global security structures.

Buzan & Wæver, in their book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, outline the division of regional security complexes (RSCs) in the post-Cold War era. They categorize the global security structure into six distinct RSCs: North American, South American, European, Post-Soviet, Southern African, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian. Each RSC consists of states that are deeply interconnected in terms of security dynamics, where threats and policies are primarily shaped by regional interactions rather than global influences.

Figure 2 - The Middle Eastern RSC



Source: Buzan & Wæver, (2003)

This research focuses on the Middle Eastern RSC, which is further divided into three subcomplexes: the Levant (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria), the Gulf (Iran, Iraq, Gulf Cooperation Council), and the Maghreb (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara). Each subcomplex has its own unique security dynamics influenced by historical, political, and strategic factors (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Therefore, this study will primarily analyze their interactions, particularly in the context of conflict, normalization, and its broader implications for Middle Eastern security.

This research will utilize state-to-state relations and regional interactions as the level of analysis, as it is essential to examine the dynamics of Iran-Saudi Arabia bilateral

relations to understand the conflict between the two states and the subsequent normalization of their ties. Additionally, analyzing the impact of this normalization on the stability of the Middle East is crucial. Furthermore, this study focuses on the variables of polarity and social construction, as polarity effectively explains the conflict dynamics not only between Iran and Saudi Arabia but also within the broader Middle East, including the role of external actors. Meanwhile, the social construction variable is necessary to elucidate the shift in Iran-Saudi Arabia relations from enmity to amity, as well as the processes of securitization and desecuritization involved.

RSCT serves not only as an analytical tool to explain the impact of the Iran-Saudi Arabia normalization but also as a framework for predicting potential dynamics in their relationship and the overall security stability of the Middle East. As two of the most influential states in the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia have significant potential to contribute to regional stability through cooperation. A more in-depth analysis of these dynamics will be presented in the results and discussion section.

Methods

This qualitative research study emphasizes depth and richness in the social context, employing a constructivist and interpretive methodology to explore the questions of what, why, when, where, who, and how (5W1H) behind social interactions and behaviors, rather than merely quantifying issues (Lim, 2024). To achieve this, we adopt explanatory analysis as a method for identifying and assessing causal relationships between dependent and independent variables (causality). The core idea revolves around a set of mechanisms proposed to exist between cause and effect, requiring any coherent account of causality to specify the means through which effects are exerted (King et al., 1994). For data collection, this study applies a document-based research approach, drawing from various documented sources, including academic literature, policy reports, international news, and other relevant materials, to ensure a comprehensive and well-informed analysis.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's Dynamics Relationship

Because Saudi Arabia supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were marked by extreme animosity during the 1980s. Saudi Arabia gave Iraq a lot of financial and logistical support to help combat

Tehran's expanding power because it saw the Iranian revolution as a destabilizing force. Tensions escalated as the war went on and Saudi Arabia stepped up its support as Iran advanced into Iraqi territory. With Iran attacking Saudi vessels in the Persian Gulf and both countries indirectly participating in the Tanker War, the conflict went beyond the battlefield. When the Saudi Air Force shot down an Iranian fighter jet close to Saudi offshore oil facilities in 1984, it was a significant military conflict. Economic policies also played a part, as Saudi Arabia purposefully raised its oil production in 1986 in an effort to depress world prices and undermine Iran's economy. After hundreds of Iranian pilgrims were killed in violent clashes during the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca in 1987, relations reached a breaking point. Due to this tragic event, Saudi Arabia placed an economic embargo on Iranian imports and severed diplomatic ties with Iran in 1988 (Hadzikadunic, 2019).

The early 1990s witnessed a change in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran toward diplomatic engagement. In 1991, the two countries reestablished diplomatic relations, elevating their ties to the ambassadorial level. The newly appointed ambassador of Iran to Saudi Arabia, for his part, stressed the need for cooperation, calling the two countries the backbones of the Muslim world. Subsequent high-level meetings included a notable direct exchange Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah at an Organization of Islamic Cooperation stage (OIC). In this time, bilateral trade was revived, flights were restored, and Iranian pilgrims were able to go back to the Hajj, indicating a temporary thaw in bilateral relations. Although this *détente* was a sign of progress, underlying tensions remained, and with both countries continuing to view each other as regional competitors (Hadzikadunic, 2019).

In the late 2000s, the tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran was rising again due to growing geopolitical rivalries and security concerns. From the Saudi leaders' perspective, Iran's increasing regional power could not be tolerated, specifically in Iraq after the 2003 US invasion, and in Bahrain in 2011. The Saudis accused Tehran of supporting the protests of the Bahraini Sunni monarchy, and therefore, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily to support the ruling government (Hadzikadunic, 2019). which was a Shia led government. The conflict between the two countries further escalated in 2011 when the United States accused Iranian operatives of plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, which was confirmed by Saudi Arabia, Iran as a direct

security threat. The diplomatic relations have become very poor, and all the joint ministerial and economic cooperation has ceased. By the early 2010s, Saudi Arabia and Iran were again caught up in a vicious cycle of rivalry that would not only define the relationship between the two countries but also the politics of the Middle East region (United States Institute of Peace, 2023).

It got worse in 2012 when protests broke out in the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, where the Shia minority demonstrated against discrimination. Riyadh accused Tehran of stirring up the protests and increased the existing tensions between the two countries over Saudi domestic issues. In 2012, the Iraqi Shia militia group al-Mukhtar launched cross-border mortar attacks on Saudi territory, and Riyadh had its suspicions that Iran was involved. Economic disputes also fueled tensions as Saudi Arabia offered to pay for the loss of Iranian oil sales, which was targeted by U.S.-led sanctions, a move Iran did not like. In the economic and diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Prince Turki Al Faisal, a supporter of these sanctions, only added more pressure (Hadzikadunic, 2019).

Table 1 - Saudi Arabia - Iran Relations 2013-2023

Years	Saudi Arabia - Iran Relations in 2013-2023
2013	Iran alleged Saudi Arabia for the explosion near the Iranian Embassy in Beirut on 19 November.
2014	Iran and Saudi Arabia clashed over the new government in Iraq.
2015	- Saudi Arabia begins a bombing campaign in Yemen against the Houthis who ousted President Hadi from power. Riyadh claims the airstrikes are a response to Iranian support for the Houthis - The Hajj stampede escalated tensions between Riyadh and Tehran due to the deaths of a large number of Iranian pilgrims.
2016	- Saudi Arabia executed prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. The Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Tehran was set ablaze. - Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry announced that it cut diplomatic relations with Iran.
2017	- President Trump visited Riyadh. He echoed the Saudi view that Iran was to blame for all the region's troubles. - Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Qatar. Riyadh criticised Qatar's relations with Iran. - Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accused Iran of an act of "direct military aggression" by supplying missiles to rebels in Yemen.

2018	Saudi Arabia's crown prince Muhammed bin Salman talked about pushing back a dangerous Iranian threat. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif accused Saudi Arabia for aggressive behavior in the region.
2019	The US and Saudi Arabia alleged the Iranian side for the unprecedented drone attack on the largest Saudi petroleum processing plant.
2020	• Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal urged the international community to extend the arms embargo on Iran • King Salman condemned Iran for spreading "chaos, extremism and sectarianism" across the Middle East and urged a "comprehensive" worldwide solution to prevent it from obtaining weapons of mass destruction.
2021	Saudi Arabia and Iran held various bilateral and regional meetings to ease tensions in the Middle East region.
2022	Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib warned Saudi Arabia against interfering in Iran's internal affairs. Iraqi officials said Iranian authorities refused to meet with Saudi diplomats during anti-government protests, blaming Riyadh for the unrest.
2023	Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to restore diplomatic ties seven years after severing relations.

Sources: Hadzikadunic, 2019; United States Institute of Peace, 2023

From 2013 to 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran will have been embroiled in a diplomatic war, one which has only intensified their existing political and military conflicts. Tensions spiked in 2013 when Iran accused Saudi Arabia of plotting an explosion near the Iranian embassy in Beirut. In the next year, the two nations perhaps fighting over their influence regarding the formation of a new government in Iraq further ignited their rivalry. What happened escalated in 2015 when Saudi Arabia opened a bombing campaign in Yemen to strike the Houthi rebels which Riyadh blamed Iran for supporting them. Furthermore, the tragic Hajj stampede, which led to the death of tens of Iranian pilgrims, also deepened the hostility between the two countries. In 2016 Saudi Arabia executed the prominent Shia cleric Nimr a — who led to violent protests in Tehran and the Saudi embassy being set ablaze. Later, Riyadh cut diplomatic relations with Tehran, a major setback for ties between the two. (Hadzikadunic, 2019).

The tension feud continued in subsequent years, with Iran accusing Saudi Arabia of regional destabilization, and *vice versa*. U.S. President Donald Trump visited Riyadh in 2017, bolstering Saudi accusations that Iran was behind regional unrest. That year, Saudi Arabia cut ties with Qatar because of its close ties to Iran. Things escalated in 2018 when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared war on Iranian influence and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif railed against Saudi aggression. Tensions reached a

high-level in 2019 when the US and Saudi Arabia pointed fingers at Iran after a drone strike on key Saudi crude oil site. A year later, Saudi King Salman accused Iran of spreading extremism and called on the international community to stop Tehran from acquiring WMD. During this time, Riyadh was a constant advocate for stronger action against Iran, particularly with respect to its armaments (Hadzikadunic, 2019).

Over the 2010s, there were many years of conflict, however, in the early 2020s, the conflict resolution efforts began to pick up. In 2021, Iran and Saudi Arabia held multiple diplomatic discussions that resulted in the creation of agreements to promote regional stability. However, in 2022, Iranian authorities rejected diplomatic outreach by Saudi Arabia in 2022, accusing Riyadh of meddling during domestic anti-government protests. Although we have seen some setbacks in 2022, both nations agreed in 2023 to bring their diplomatic relations back after a seven-year freeze. This indicates a possible change of the gears towards the cooperation and the reduction of the conflicts in the region. The resumption of diplomatic relations in 2023 shows that both nations have realized that it is necessary to communicate with each other in order to address issues and preserve long-term stability in the region (United States Institute of Peace, 2023).

Saudi Arabia and Iran's Reconciliation Process

After a period of tension, particularly in 2016 when diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed, three years later the two countries are also considering reconciling their relationship. One of the triggers was Saudi Arabia's and Iran's realization that their regional security stability was faltering in the wake of proxy wars in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen (Baghernia, 2024). Of course, this is due to the proxy conflict created by Saudi Arabia and Iran over the past dozen years at least. Iraq took the initiative to hold meetings with these two countries, as well as several countries such as Turkey and other Levant sub-regions in order to show its commitment to suppressing the conflict between Iran and Saudi (Baghernia, 2024).

The meeting resulted in a positive response, and following on from the previous discussions one month later, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announced Iran's desire for bilateral talks in Riyadh and Tehran, despite a return to tensions when the Houthis claimed to have attacked Saudi Arabia's oil bases (Baghernia, 2024; Motamedi, 2023). In the meeting, the security sector became a special concern for both of them,

because as a country that has considerable power in the region, there needs to be a special strategy and agenda in dealing with the challenges of Middle Eastern dynamics (Motamedi, 2023). Given that although Saudi Arabia has capability to support its defense level, and has cooperated with several countries, specifically China (Baghernia, 2024), but the focus of Saudi Arabia itself is also centered on economic development at least the Saudi 2030 program is a significant process of progress from Saudi (Baghernia, 2024). Saudi Arabia is targeting the development of the non-oil economy to increase from 16% to 50% (Baghernia, 2024). Iran has increased its motivation to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, one of which considers that the Persian Gulf sub-region must be controlled by the regional state itself (Rahman, 2023). Then Iran itself is still wary of the increasing military power of Saudi Arabia, because there is still an element of power competition coupled with the increasingly close relationship between China and Saudi Arabia in the economic field, then Iran's move to open up with reconciliation becomes a rational reason (Baghernia, 2024).

As mentioned earlier, the focus of reconciliation between the two countries is centered on security, particularly its impact on the Middle East region. The ongoing events between the Palestinians and Israelis, coupled with the dynamics of the United States in the region, have added to the political uncertainty. Plus, other motivations in the economic sector, making the urgency of this reconciliation even higher. The proxy conflict in Yemen, in particular, has become an important agenda for both countries in an effort to reduce decades of armed tension (Magdy, 2023). In the process of reconciliation for both Saudi and Iran, accelerating the resolution of the Yemen conflict is the priority when improving this relationship (Magdy, 2023). The projected outcome of this reconciliation for the security of the Middle East is to reduce conflicts other than Yemen, namely Iraq and Lebanon, which are also the result of the Sunni and Shia rivalry conflict (Rahman, 2023). This is one of the important contents of the reconciliation, but the Saudis and Iranians understand in order to survive long in good diplomatic relations, other sectors such as the economy are also crucial in long-term plans.

Saudi Arabia and Iran made massive movements to be able to immediately carry out a program of improving political and security relations, at least in the short term these two countries made an agreement to reopen the embassies in each country in the capital (Musofa, 2023). The first step was already taken by Iran on June 6, 2023 when Saudi

Arabia was finally able to reopen its embassy in Tehran (Musofa, 2023). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia followed suit in September 2023 to open the Iranian embassy in Riyadh (Fajri & Cahyani, 2023), marking a new beginning for both Saudi Arabia and Iran in terms of the political sphere. This certainly has an impact on the reaction to the overall situation of the Middle East, not least on the security field. Security ties between the two have continued 30th November 2023, when the Chief of Staff of Iran's armed forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri had intensive communications with Saudi Arabia's Minister of Defense Khalid bin Salman Al Saud (Liangxiang, 2024). During the talks, they indicated their intention to promote bilateral ties in terms of military security and more intensive regional security engagement (Liangxiang, 2024). Given that the region is still considered vulnerable to conflict both outside and within the region, even the spark of the Middle East conflict originated from Saudi Arabia and Iran itself. This process is essential to demonstrate a strong will and commitment to strengthening regional security, without over-reliance on a single power.

The process of improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran itself is inseparable from the mediating role of this reconciliation, and the role in the region can be said to be quite surprising at least for the Western world. China has been exerting influence over the region slowly disrupting the dominance of the West, in this case the United States which has been doing it for years. In the context of this reconciliation process, China has actually been doing so since March 2021 in terms of economic cooperation or what the program is called as the Belt Road Initiative or BRI (Baghernia, 2024). However, China also realizes that many Middle Eastern countries are still politically unstable due to proxy conflicts originating from Saudi Arabia and Iran (Baghernia, 2024). China's position is very strategic in fulfilling national interests in terms of its foreign policy in the Middle East, even though what it does is certainly not easy. On April 9, 2021, China made its first contact in the context of Saudi and Iranian reconciliation efforts which took place in Baghdad, Iraq (Baghernia, 2024). The process continued in December 2022, China and the alliance of Gulf states or GCC conducted a summit to support the efforts of the three countries to improve relations as soon as possible and China has played a mediating role since then (Baghernia, 2024). Differentiating China from the United States in its handling of the Middle East region is its "unstinting and unbiased" economic approach to all countries of the region (Bilal et

al., 2024). It is inevitable that China's foreign policy with the BRI program becomes a "savior" for countries that can be said to be less economically stable or can be an alternative without certain political restrictions. In contrast to the United States, particularly towards Iran, it is still concerned about the security politics and certain ideological restrictions imposed by the US. It is one of the strong reasons why Iran may welcome this reconciliation brokered by China (Bilal et al., 2024).

Key Drivers of Reconciliation: Economic, Domestic, and Geopolitics

Reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is driven by economic, domestic, and geopolitical factors. Economically, both nations understand that regional stability is crucial for trade, investment, and energy markets. As two of the world's largest oil producers, prolonged tensions between them could cause oil price volatility and disrupt the global energy supply. Saudi Arabia, the largest economy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, has a GDP of over USD 1 trillion and a population of more than 30 million. With the second-largest proven oil reserves and a heavy reliance on the oil sector—which makes up about 40% of its GDP—its economy remains vulnerable to fluctuations in global energy markets (focuseconomics, 2025). Meanwhile, Iran has faced economic challenges in recent years due to sanctions and commodity price volatility, leading to a decade-long stagnation that ended in 2019/20. A sharp decline in oil exports has placed significant financial strain on the government, pushing inflation above 40% for four consecutive years (World Bank, 2022).

With Saudi Arabia pursuing its Vision 2030 strategy to diversify its economy and Iran struggling with financial difficulties, both countries see normalization as a necessary step toward long-term economic stability. Among the many challenges in implementing Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, one of the biggest obstacles may be Iran (Saab, 2023). To ensure the success of this plan, Saudi Arabia must neutralize potential threats through both deterrence and diplomacy. Following the restoration of diplomatic relations, Saudi Arabia's Finance Minister, Mohammed Al-Jadaan, stated that Saudi investments in Iran could happen "very quickly" (Uppal & Yaakoubi, 2023). This approach can be seen as a strategic move by Saudi Arabia to engage its traditional rival in a more cooperative manner. On the other hand, Iran expects the reconciliation to open a new chapter for trade and investment, helping to alleviate its dire economic conditions caused by strict U.S.

trade and economic sanctions (Thomas Beard, 2023). Saudi Arabia could serve as an alternative economic partner for Iran within the region, facilitating trade and investment opportunities that may aid Iran in improving its economy.

China's involvement in the talks underscores the critical role of economic interests in this reconciliation effort. In 2023, when China hosted Iran and Saudi Arabia in Beijing, Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and Chinese Foreign Minister, asserted that *"...the Middle East should no longer be a geopolitical arena of great powers, and the fate of the region should be in the hands of the people"* (Global Times, 2023). He further proposed strengthening Saudi and Iranian relations by fostering collaboration and expanding engagement across key sectors, including economic development, trade, security, and cultural exchange. Beijing likely chose to mediate as part of its broader strategy to solidify China's status as a global power, positioning itself as an alternative to Western-led conflict resolution mechanisms. Brokering a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia provided China with a strategic opportunity to project its growing international influence while leveraging its extensive economic and political ties to the Middle East (crisisgroup.org, 2024). Furthermore, the anticipated regional stability resulting from the resolution of this long-standing conflict is expected to create a more conducive environment for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, enhancing economic cooperation and facilitating large-scale infrastructure development across the region.

Beyond economic considerations, domestic and geopolitical factors have also pushed Iran and Saudi Arabia toward reconciliation. For Iran, this move represents a shift toward greater openness, a strategy its leaders call *"heroic flexibility."* The term has been used to justify diplomatic negotiations that could help stabilize the country. As Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei once said, *"I am not against proper political moves in diplomacy. I believe in what was named many years ago as 'heroic flexibility'"* (HaghighatNejad, 2013). This shift is happening at a time when Iran is facing serious internal challenges. One of the biggest crises is the wave of protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, which lasted around 100 days and drew significant international attention and support. Iranian security forces, including the military and law enforcement, cracked down on demonstrators, resulting in more than 500 deaths. While the protests were suppressed, the government's response raised serious doubts about the legitimacy

and future stability of the political system. At the same time, Iran's economy is under immense pressure. The national currency, the rial, has lost 55% of its value over the past year, largely due to U.S. sanctions and ongoing political unrest. The depreciation has driven inflation to record highs, particularly affecting food prices, and adding to the government's growing challenges (Shahidsaless, 2023). Therefore, reconciliation with Saudi Arabia is more than just a diplomatic move, it is an opportunity for Iran to reshape its global image and appear as a more open, less authoritarian state.

For Saudi Arabia, the restoration of relations with Iran is expected to mitigate the expansionist threat posed by the latter, which has long supported the Houthi rebels in the Yemen conflict against the Saudis (Shahidsaless, 2023). The kingdom is also facing a succession crisis, as many within the ruling Al-Saud family and a significant portion of the Saudi population question Mohammed bin Salman's legitimacy as heir to the throne. After King Salman took power in 2015, Muqrin bin Abdulaziz was removed as crown prince, and Mohammed bin Nayef, once a leading contender for the throne, was forced to step down. Meanwhile, Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, another potential successor, was imprisoned. While these internal power struggles seem to have settled within the royal family, the bigger challenge remains, which is convincing the Saudi people that the monarchy still holds legitimate authority, particularly in an era where democratic ideals are gaining influence. Despite this, Mohammed bin Salman has managed to tighten his grip on power by eliminating potential rivals.

From a geopolitical perspective, the normalization of relations between these two major powers represents a promising step toward regional stability (Liangxiang, 2024). Both nations have come to recognize their crucial roles in managing regional crises. Iran acknowledges that without Saudi Arabia's involvement, it cannot effectively resolve conflicts in critical areas such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. In this regard, Tehran understands that it cannot unilaterally address these challenges or eliminate the sources of ongoing tensions. Consequently, cooperation with Riyadh has become a strategic necessity. Furthermore, for Tehran, an agreement with Saudi Arabia holds strategic significance in countering threats from Israel. Although the United States has actively promoted the normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, such an outcome is unlikely to materialize in the near future. King Salman has firmly established the resolution of the Palestinian issue as a prerequisite for any normalization efforts with

Israel. Additionally, Bin Salman has reiterated that the Palestinian cause remains a matter of great importance for the Saudi people (Omidi, 2023). Based on this, it can be concluded that the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is not only a pragmatic policy decision but also one that offers substantial benefits, not just for the two nations involved, but for the broader stability of the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia-Iran Reconciliation and Its Impact on Middle East Regional Security Stability

Mapping Power Relations in Middle East

This section will try to explain the mapping of power in the Middle East region. This region is not only rich in energy resources, but also a meeting point for various interests of the world's major countries. Behind all the conflicts, alliances, and diplomacy that occur, there are Therefore, many actors are involved in this region including major countries such as the United States, China, and Russia. These countries position themselves on the geopolitical map of the Middle East region by bringing their respective interests (Wasser et al., 2022). Each of these powers pursues a different strategy, depending on their long-term objectives and political alignments. As a result, the Middle East has become a theater of complex interactions and often overlapping agendas.

The United States has quite influential power in the Middle East region. This is because the United States has established close relations with the Gulf countries for decades including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman which are important partners for the United States (Gulf Research Center, 2022). Not only as partners in the economic sector, but also in the energy sector, which is also due to considerations of regional security. This closeness has been formed for a long time and continues to be maintained until now. In fact, many of these partnerships have developed into strategic alliances, involving not only government institutions but also private sectors and multinational corporations.

The United States also has cooperation in the military and security fields in several Gulf countries, which have US military bases at a number of strategic points in the Middle East region (Wallin, 2018). In addition, cooperation in arms sales further strengthens America's position as the main ally of the Gulf countries in facing various regional dynamics that often change rapidly. These military ties have been instrumental in

ensuring the presence of American power projection in the region. It also provides the U.S. with a geopolitical advantage when responding to crises in the wider Middle East.

On the other hand, China is also one of the major countries that has a strong influence in the Middle East (Yazdanshenas, 2024). China uses a strong economic cooperation approach, as well as infrastructure development cooperation. This is related to one of China's major projects, namely the Belt and Road Initiative, in which China collaborates with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman to strengthen trade relations and energy supplies. This shows China's dependence on oil and gas from this region, so they need to maintain their power by being more active in strengthening relations with Middle Eastern partners. China's economic diplomacy is also complemented by cultural and technological exchanges, which add depth to its engagement strategy in the region (Yazdanshenas, 2024).

Unlike the United States, which tends to cooperate with only a few countries, China has more partners. This can be seen from China which has a fairly close relationship with Iran, a country that is often ostracized by the West and the United States (Scita, 2022). Through strategic economic cooperation, China helps Iran survive the impact of international sanctions, thus providing an alternative solution for Iran to stay connected to the global economy even under the pressure of sanctions. China's pragmatic stance allows it to bridge relationships even with countries considered controversial by Western powers, thereby expanding its influence across different blocs (Scita, 2022).

Not only the United States and China are big countries that have power in the Middle East, but Russia also holds quite a strong influence. Russia has a cooperative relationship with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, through the OPEC+ mechanism which aims to regulate world oil production and prices (Ulrichsen et al., 2022). Russia also has several cooperations in the defense sector which show Russia's interest in maintaining its influence in the Middle East region. Its involvement is part of a broader foreign policy goal to reassert itself as a global power, particularly in regions where Western influence is dominant.

The relationship between countries looks quite strong, namely the relationship between Russia and Iran, where both countries have the same tendency when dealing with western countries on various issues. Russia and Iran have military cooperation and support in the development of nuclear technology, which shows how close their strategic

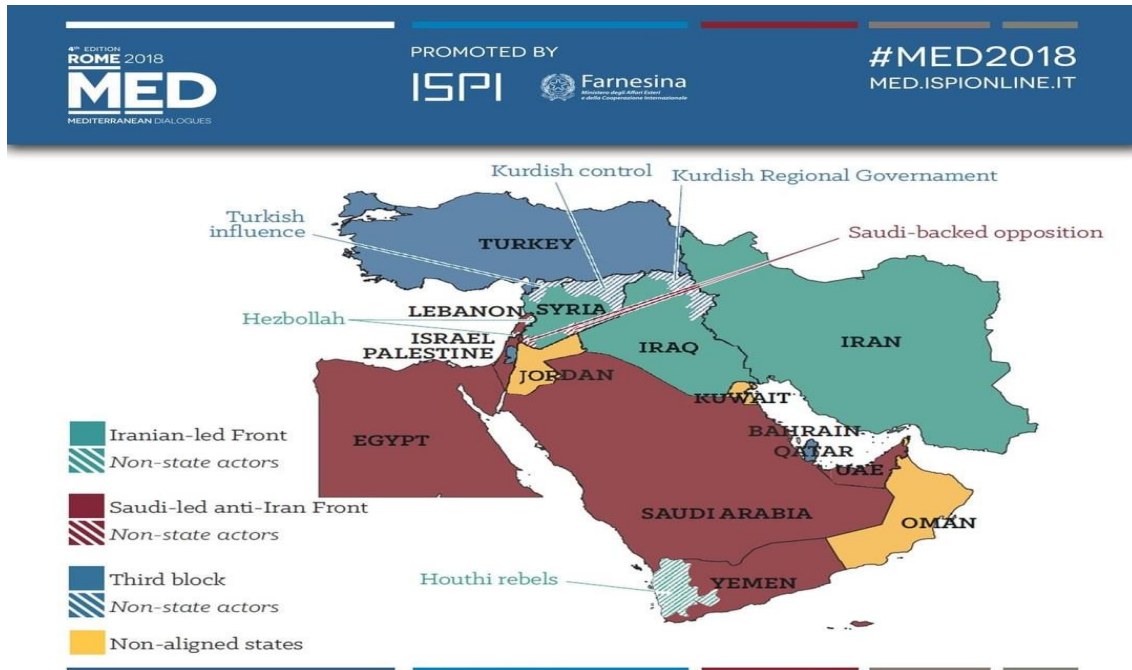
relationship is (Mil-Man & Kovchegin, 2025). Their partnership is also strengthened through joint involvement in regional conflicts, where both countries support similar political groups or regimes.

Looking at the map of the power of the United States, China, and Russia in the Middle East region, this region is not only filled with the power of Saudi Arabia and Iran but also becomes an arena for the balance of power of big countries. This phenomenon seems to create camps between countries which will be explained in more depth in the next sub-chapter. The interplay of these powers has reshaped the political landscape of the Middle East, making it one of the most contested and strategically sensitive areas in the world.

Identifying the Amity-Enmity Dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Iran

This section will explain the shift in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran from previously enmity to amity after the reconciliation of relations. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran before the reconciliation were marked by many conflicts that originated from ideological, geopolitical, and historical differences. Saudi Arabia is the leader of the Sunni majority countries, while Iran is a country with Shiite power which is often on the opposite side in many regional conflicts in the Middle East. These two countries create two different camps which are also seen from their responses in providing support to various actors in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been going on for years, not only direct conflict but also involved in proxy conflicts. Therefore, in the Middle East region, particularly the Gulf region, there are two large opposing camps, namely the Saudi Arabian camp and the Iranian camp as can be seen in the picture below.

Figure 3 - New Alignments in The Middle East



Source: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 2022

Based on the image above, there is a division of political power in the Gulf region into four main blocks. The first block, the Iranian-led Front, is led by Iran and includes Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shiite groups in Iraq, who together oppose the influence of the West and Saudi Arabia. Then, there is the Saudi-led Anti-Iran Front consisting of countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and parts of Yemen, which seek to contain Iran's expansion in the security sector. The third block is countries such as Turkey and Qatar which form their own forces with pragmatic foreign policies. The last block is non-aligned countries such as Oman, Kuwait, and Jordan who choose a neutral position (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 2022).

However, in this study we argue that after the reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran occurs, in the future it will blur the barriers between the camps, thus making the Gulf region more stable. This is a phenomenon called the shift from enmity to amity, where Saudi Arabia and Iran restore diplomatic relations, reopen embassies, and engage in political dialogue have been major steps in reducing conflict. While this does not mean that both sides are in complete agreement on their approaches, the commitment to maintaining open communication suggests that they are entering a more pragmatic rather than confrontational phase of their relationship. This is the starting point for a relationship based on shared interests, not ideology.

Although this is the beginning of a better relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, there is still the influence of the big countries that maintain their influence. In general, Saudi Arabia maintains good relations with the United States, China, and Russia. Then, Iran also cooperates with Russia and China and still has tensions with the United States. This relationship does not reconcile all actors involved, and there are still opposing strategic interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran. For example, on the nuclear issue, influence over regional organizations, and energy dominance. However, rather than direct conflict, the relationship is now shifting to a more controlled strategic competition, where caution and political calculation dominate rather than open aggression.

Saudi Arabia and Iran have shown positive efforts to expand their cooperation to multilateral forums, such as BRICS and OIC. Both countries have become permanent members of BRICS, which can open opportunities for economic cooperation with other member countries and become a forum to discuss various matters in a broader and collective context (Shokri, 2024). Likewise, both countries actively participate in the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) by discussing various issues and cooperation with other Arab countries (Keynoush, 2024). This shows the desire of both parties to manage differences in a more inclusive space, to ease bilateral tensions and create regional stability.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are taking steps to prioritize regional stability and economic interests over maintaining ideological rivalries. This dynamic reflects the new political reality in the Middle East, where major powers in the region are beginning to recognize the importance of cooperation to address global challenges. This process from enmity to amity will have a positive impact on both countries and of course on the stability of the Gulf region.

Interdependence between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Domestic Security, Reducing U.S. Dominance, and Deterrence against Threats to Israel)

The Saudi and Iranian rivalry is part of a "cold war" in the Middle East region that has caused instability, particularly leading to proxy conflicts in sub-regions such as the Gulf and the Levant. One example of a case where the conflict involved both countries directly or indirectly was the war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia was concerned that the Houthi group, which at the time almost dominated the Yemeni territory, would happen to their country

and was considered a threat (Tzemprin, 2015). Moreover, with the entry of the Arab Spring, the conflict escalated even more, coupled with Iran's role in supporting the supply of weapons to the Houthis, complicating the situation of relations between the two countries (Tzemprin, 2015). After decades of interminable regional cold wars, the Saudis and Iranians realized that their resources would be depleted in terms of material resources, and should focus more on economic development, which could provide security stability in the region (Jalal et al., 2023). Hence the importance of this reconciliation for the two countries that have been consistently escalating the conflict, to finally think of long-term solutions not only for the Saudis or Iranians, but other regional countries that are directly affected by the dispute.

Currently, Saudi Arabia has been focusing on developing its economy since 2015 when the government launched the Saudi Vision 2030 program. Although Saudi Arabia is considered the most powerful force in the region, in fact, Saudi Arabia itself recognizes the important urgency in the field of security in addition to defense or the strength of the armed forces (Liangxiang, 2024). This long-term program began with King Salman's concern that oil power was no longer relevant as a bargaining chip in his foreign policy for the future, a major shift that led to a progressive approach to soft diplomacy that impacted the economy as well as culture, education and society (Berni, 2023). On the other hand, for Iran itself, reconciliation is not just about de-escalation and being able to refocus on the economy, it is also a maneuver to balance the power of the Middle East region (Jalal et al., 2023). In other definitions, the Iranian side still pays attention to defense power as a top priority, in contrast to Saudi Arabia which has slightly shifted its priority to the economic sector as a soft diplomatic approach. Iran's approach is still to use armed force at least as a security political bargaining chip in the Middle East (Jalal et al., 2023). However, Iran is also pursuing other interests in addition to the hard diplomatic approach, one of which is that in 2022 a meeting will be held to ensure that the Iranian people have more opportunities to visit Mecca, for participation in the Hajj pilgrimage (Jalal et al., 2023). In addition, of course, Iran maintains its position as a trading partner with China to escape the pressure of economic sanctions from the United States. This is seen as a pragmatic move to avoid being overshadowed by allied countries, while at the same time expanding its security policy maneuvers by encouraging the existence of security groups, particularly in the Gulf.

Regardless of the security interests of both the Saudis who prioritize soft power to stabilize the region and Iran with ambitions to change the Middle East order to be more inclusive without much external interference, this agreement ultimately puts trust in China to secure its economic position to no longer depend on the United States. It concludes that even in terms of security politics, this reconciliation has had an impact on the United States, which has had a diminished influence in the region for decades.

The reconciliation efforts between Saudi Arabia and Iran pave the way for these two countries to lead the stability of the Middle East region, which is known to be complicated and provide surprising dynamics. There is only one major obstacle for these two countries to achieve such stability, and that obstacle is Israel. Israel is the biggest threat to the region when it invades the Palestinian territories and annexes unilaterally. It destabilizes the Middle East as a whole, in terms of security and the historical value of Palestine. The improvement in relations between the Saudis and Iranians has certainly been taken into consideration, particularly when it comes to Israel. It is common knowledge that the Saudis are often linked to the Abraham Accord, which contains reconciliation and recognition of Israeli sovereignty.

Israel, on the other hand, despite having secured several Middle Eastern countries in the Abraham Accord, is a little worried by this reconciliation. This is because not only is the Saudi and Iranian rapprochement a diplomatic failure for Israel, but it also demonstrates a lack of confidence in Iran's commitment to regional stability (Jcookson, 2023). Iran has always been considered to bring security issues, specifically against Israel through several militia groups, one of which is Hezbollah. On the one hand, in Israel's view, it is considered a threat to the region with the nuclear issue, resulting in economic sanctions against Iran from the United States (Jcookson, 2023). In terms of political diplomacy, as mentioned earlier that with this reconciliation, the position of the Abraham Accord will be disrupted legitimacy, specifically Saudi Arabia has not been included in the list of agreements to be the biggest failure so far that Israel has gotten, particularly the great potential obtained if Saudi Arabia wants to recognize Israel's sovereignty (Mohnblatt, 2022).

Meanwhile, Riyadh views that this reconciliation will further help the flexibility of its political maneuvering in the region, specifically towards Israel. So far, although there are no significant signs of recognizing Israel's sovereignty, at least the reconciliation with

Iran is a firm statement that the Saudis will "lead" regional change and stability, not outsiders such as the United States or Israel (Jalal, 2023). Challenges must be faced by the Saudis when it comes to ensuring a commitment from Iran to be able to provide mutual stability, and specifically the process of resolving the issue of groups such as the Houthis can provide a certain way for stability to be realized.

Therefore, it can be concluded that both Saudi Arabia and Iran have the same interest of stability, namely through China to help the reconciliation process with the economy as the ultimate goal. Politically, security is a top priority for both countries, particularly the impact of conflict escalation on other regional countries such as Yemen. The improvement of this relationship also affects the interdependence relationship between the two countries with China, in the face of US dominance and the threat of Israel. Saudi and Iranian interdependence at least boost confidence and answers the pressure of the Abraham Accord's side.

Efforts to Enhance Security in Saudi Arabia and Iran and Their Impact on the Gulf Region

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 seems to focus more on the economic aspect of how they manage the government, not relying on oil sources as the main revenue for the state budget. However, this does not mean that defense is not a top priority in the vision, as according to the PWC report the country is the largest importer of US weapons from 2015 to 2019 by 73% (Hindash & Salem, 2021). In the report, there are indeed large budget increases from year to year, such as in 2023 alone the defense budget shot up by 19.38% (Hindash & Salem, 2021). Specifically with the vision program for 2030, it is not surprising that there will be another increase in the defense budget along with Saudi Arabia's efforts to increase Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), then the projection until 2030 will reach 50% for defense alone (Hindash & Salem, 2021). This is certainly a major commitment and an important statement on how Saudi Arabia is positioned to be the strongest in the Middle East region or at least in the Gulf sub-region. The plan until 2030 in the security sector is also a form of political pressure on other Gulf states besides Iran, mainly Yemen in an effort to resolve conflicts and potential groups that threaten the region (Ardemagni, 2024).

Saudi Arabia on paper is still one of the strongest in the Middle East, this indicates that the country is trying to repair the impact of the conflict with Iran and its proxies. However, the Saudis are still pursuing the political path of diplomacy, particularly stabilizing regional security well, particularly through dialogue within regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The reconciliation also changed the dynamic of the organization, although the classic challenge has always been the cumulative lack of cohesion among member states. However, at the end of 2023, the GCC formalized a document called "GCC's Vision for Regional Security" which contains the organization's vision on security issues from terrorism and nuclear threats (Qaed, 2024). Furthermore, the document emphasizes that no country should provide financial support to militant groups that are considered a threat (Qaed, 2024). It does not specify which countries and groups are being referred to, but it indirectly refers at least to Saudi Arabia and Iran. The biggest challenge in the context of reconciliation is the long-term commitment and consistency of these two countries in terms of the GCC collective, as well as the diplomacy undertaken so far.

One of the attempts to fulfill Saudi Arabia's role in the GCC is that during the reconciliation process Iran agreed to prevent the delivery of weapons and drones to the Houthis, and the Saudis agreed to ban aerial surveillance in the Iranian region (Jalal, 2023). Meanwhile, Iran also conducts political diplomacy with Saudi Arabia with the principle of "neighbors first", not just a mere statement because basically in the process of improving relations, Iran's thinking at that time was to think about the stability of the country through good relations with its neighbors (Cafiero, 2024). Iran's priority after this reconciliation is to build trust with Saudi Arabia as a short-term step through diplomatic talks, and then the most important thing is to relate to the groups namely Hezbollah and Houthi carefully. It is important for Iran to keep up the momentum, because one of the external consequences that must be maintained is China's trust as the arbiter of this reconciliation. China is a good option for Iran in terms of economy, sanctions from the United States will torment Iran even though it has survived very well so far (Jalal, 2023).

Conclusion

This reconciliation, as explained earlier, will have an impact on the general situation of the region, in addition to the effects it will have on each of the state actors involved. At least the projected improvement in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran opens

opportunities in terms of stability and a specific decrease in the intensity of proxy conflicts. The Yemen conflict is most often mentioned in the spotlight of relations between these two countries. The initial agreement mentioned earlier at least brought new progress in improving relations. Nevertheless, the Houthi group in this case is a big test for the Saudis and Iranians, because it is possible that a sudden escalation will emerge and shake the existing agreement (Jalal, 2023). The projection for reconciliation in the long run is still a great potential, particularly since China's role as a mediator brings fresh dynamics. Yet concerns about the region's fragility in terms of maintaining consistent political stability over the long term need to be considered.

References

- Ardemagni, E. (2024, November 11). *Khalid bin Salman's Rising Influence in Saudi Defense Reforms* | ISPI. ISPI. Retrieved April 19, 2025, from <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/khalid-bin-salmans-rising-influence-in-saudi-defense-reforms-190141>
- Beard, T. (2023, December 13). *Iran and Saudi Arabia Edge Towards Closer Economic Ties*. Economist Intelligence Unit. <https://www.eiu.com/n/iran-and-saudi-arabia-edge-towards-closer-economic-ties/>
- Behnke, A. (2006). No Way out: Desecuritization, Emancipation and the Eternal Return of the Political - A Reply to Aradau. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 9(1), 62-69. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800070>
- Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cafiero, G. (2024, December 3). *Security Dimensions of the Saudi-Iranian Détente*. Arab Center Washington DC. Retrieved April 21, 2025, from <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/security-dimensions-of-the-saudi-iranian-detente/>
- crisisgroup.org. (2024, June 13). *Great Expectations: The Future of Iranian-Saudi Détente* | Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/b92-great-expectations-future>
- Fajri, D. A., & Cahyani, D. R. (2023, April 9). Pejabat Arab Saudi Tiba di Iran, Tindak Lanjut Pemulihan Hubungan Diplomatik. *Tempo*. <https://www.tempo.co/internasional/pejabat-arab-saudi-tiba-di-iran-tindak-lanjut-pemulihan-hubungan-diplomatik-199907>
- focusconomics. (2025, January 30). Saudi Arabia Archives. *FocusEconomics*. <https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/saudi-arabia/>
- Global Times. (2023). *1st Meeting of China-Saudi Arabia-Iran Trilateral Joint Committee Concludes; MidEast should 'no longer be a Geopolitical Arena' for Great Powers—Global Times*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303744.shtml>
- Gulf Research Center. (2022, 08 1). *U.S.-GCC Relations*. Gulf Research Center. <https://www.grc.net/documents/630b45fda9a5cUSGCCCountryprofilenew.pdf>

- Hadzikadunic, E. (2019, October 22). *Iran–Saudi Ties: Can History Project Their Trajectory?* – NUS – Middle East Institute. NUS – Middle East Institute. Retrieved March 2, 2025, from <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/publication/insight-215-iran-saudi-ties-can-history-project-their-trajectory/>
- Haghighatnejad, R. (2013). *What Does Khamenei Mean by “Heroic Flexibility?”* <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/60119/>
- Hindash, A., & Salem, S. (2021). Localisation in Military Industries: A Perspective on Industrial Development in Saudi Arabia’s Defence Ecosystem. In PwC.
- Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale. (2022, February 22). *New Alignments in the Middle East*. ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/new-alignments-middle-east-33532>
- Jalal, I. (2023, April 5). *China and the Saudi-Iran Rapprochement: Implications for Yemen*. Middle East Institute. Retrieved April 18, 2025, from <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-and-saudi-iran-rapprochement-implications-yemen>
- Jcookson. (2023, April 21). *Is Saudi-Iran Reconciliation Threatening the Future of Israeli Normalization?* - Atlantic Council. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/is-saudi-iran-reconciliation-threatening-the-future-of-israeli-normalization/>
- Keynoush, B. (2024, May 16). *Riyadh and Tehran use OIC to mend ties, but its sway is limited*. Middle East Institute. <https://mei.edu/publications/riyadh-and-tehran-use-oic-mend-ties-its-sway-limited>
- Liangxiang, J. (2024). Consolidating the Reconciliation Between Saudi Arabia and Iran. *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*. https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/consolidating-the-reconciliation-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran/
- Liangxiang, J. (2024, August 18). *Saudi-Iranian Reconciliation and How Can it be Strengthened* - Middle East Council on Global Affairs. Middle East Council on Global Affairs. https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/consolidating-the-reconciliation-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran/
- Magdy, S. (2023, March 12). *Iran says Deal with Saudi Arabia will help end Yemen’s War* | AP News. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-conflict-iran-saudi-arabia-deal-ceasefire-ea60d5e873f4122f31c9429f7884dfcb>
- Mil-Man, A., & Kovchegin, D. (2025, March 1). *Iran-Russia Nuclear Cooperation*. The Institute for National Security Studies. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/iran-russia-nuclear-cooperation/>
- Mohnblatt, D. (2022, March 29). *Greater Iranian Threat Brings Abraham Accords Countries Closer, experts say - the media line*. The Media Line. <https://themedialine.org/by-region/greater-iranian-threat-brings-abraham-accords-countries-closer-experts-say/>
- Motamedi, M. (2023, June 17). *Saudi, Iran Foreign Ministers meet in Tehran amid Warming Ties*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/17/saudi-foreign-minister-arrives-in-tehran-amid-warming-ties>
- Omid, A. (2023, October 4). *What are the Drivers and Implications of Reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia?* Middle East Monitor. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231004-what-are-the-drivers-and-implications-of-reconciliation-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>

- Qaed, A. A. (2024, May 10). *The GCC's Joint Security Vision: Reading between the Lines*. Gulf International Forum. <https://gulfig.org/the-gccs-joint-security-vision-reading-between-the-lines/>
- Rahman, M. A. (2023, March 20). Rekonsiliasi Arab Saudi-Iran Ubah Peta Timur Tengah. *kompas.id*. Retrieved April 18, 2025, from https://www.kompas.id/baca/internasional/2023/03/20/rekonsiliasi-arab-saudi-iran-ubah-peta-timur-tengah?open_from=Search_Result_Page
- Saab, B. Y. (2023). *Saudi Arabia's Deterrence Options against Iran*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep53003>
- Scita, J. (2022). China-Iran Relations Through the Prism of Sanctions. *Asian Affairs*, 83(1), 87-105. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/03068374.2022.2029060>
- Shahidsaless, S. (2023, April 5). The Domestic Factors Driving Iran-Saudi Reconciliation. Stimson Center. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/the-domestic-factors-driving-iran-saudi-reconciliation/>
- Shokri, U. (2024, January 2). *Iran Becomes a Member of BRICS, With Hopes and Challenges*. Iran International. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/brazil-announces-indonesia-as-new-member-of-brics/articleshow/117007423.cms>
- Ulrichsen, K. C., Finely, M., & Krane, J. (2022, October 18). *The OPEC+ Phenomenon of Saudi-Russian Cooperation and Implications for US-Saudi Relations*. Rice University's Baker Institute. <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/opec-phenomenon-saudi-russian-cooperation-and-implications-us-saudi-relations>
- United States Institute of Peace. (2023, January 6). *Timeline of Iran-Saudi Relations*. The Iran Primer. Retrieved March 2, 2025, from <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2016/jan/06/timeline-iran-saudi-relations>
- Uppal, R., & Yaakoubi, A. E. (2023, March 15). Saudi Arabia could Invest in Iran 'very quickly' after Agreement—Minister. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-investment-iran-could-happen-very-quickly-after-agreement-minister-2023-03-15/>
- Wallin, M. (2018, July 1). *U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East*. American Security Project. Retrieved April 16, 2025, from <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Ref-0213-US-Military-Bases-and-Facilities-Middle-East.pdf>
- Wasser, B., Shatz, H. J., Drennan, J. J., Scobel, A., Carlson, B. G., & Crane, Y. K. (2022, 2 2). *Crossroads of Competition China, Russia, and the United States in the Middle East*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA325-1.html#citation
- World Bank. (2022). *Overview-Islamic Republic of Iran* [Text/HTML]. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview>
- Yazdanshenas, Z. (2024, May 1). *China's Growing Role in the Middle East*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/zypern/21228-20240730.pdf>