

PRAGMATISM IN SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE YEMENI CRISIS (2011-2019)

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The study aimed at analyzing the pragmatic approaches of Saudi-Iranian relations and their impact on the Yemeni crisis (2011-2019).

Methodology: The study uses a combination of the used decision-making approach and the international system approach.

Main Findings: Saudi-Iranian relations were sometimes pragmatic because they were based on each country's fulfillment of its national interests. This did not change the Saudi and Iranian strategy nor did it lead to loosening US domination over the Gulf region.

Applications of this study: This research can be used for academic purposes for universities, lecturers of political science, researchers, and undergraduate and postgraduate students. Also, it can be used for policy purposes for the decision-makers and politicians.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The phenomenon that existed in Saudi-Iranian relationships and referring to various previous research results, the study regarding the Saudi-Iranian relationship was conducted and presented comprehensively and completely. It is necessary to take into account this topic that can explore the Saudi-Iranian relationship and determine the extent to which topic can contribute to political science researches.

Keywords: *Pragmatism, Foreign Policy, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen Crisis.*

INTRODUCTION

Iran reappeared in the Arab political scene following the US 2003 invasion of Iraq. This was associated with the growing Arab (particularly the Gulf) concern of the Iranian political, security, and economic impact on the Iraqi political scene. This appearance was undoubtedly preceded by a presence in the Lebanese political scene as well as building a strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia. A clear and deep understanding of the Iranian presence nature in the Arab political scene and its development requires research and consideration noting that the Iranian presence counts on the utilization of circumstances formed through different situations and variables and other players rather than Iran alone. Those variants ranged from monitoring and observation to averting the Saudi threat directed to Iran as a beginning, and improving relations, containment, and openness to weakening and forcing Iran to accept reconciliation and negotiation to remove the causes of tension in the region. Although Iranian intervention was evident in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the fall of Sana'a to the Houthi Movement marked the climax of Iranian expansion over the Arabian Peninsula when Saudi Arabia realized the gravity of the situation and began to understand that Iran's role was threatening its role in the Middle East.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia began a military campaign in Yemen to prevent the Houthis allied with Iran from seizing power. Riyadh accused Tehran of using Houthi militants to carry out a military coup. While Saudi Arabia was helping and fighting al-Qaida, Iran was expanding spheres of influence around Saudi Arabia and its northern, eastern and southern borders, forcing Saudi Arabia, in the period 2017-2019, to change its strategy of supporting allies to direct intervention against Iran, by initiating the Operation Decisive Storm. In another context, Saudi Arabia competed with Iran in Iraq, which is a theatre for Iran in providing the latter's needs of electricity, oil derivatives, agricultural commodities, and raw materials. Saudi Arabia sought to achieve its objectives in Iraq through four tactical paths namely: interference with the Shiite political elite, strengthening Saudi-Iraqi relations, religious engagement with these communities, and spreading social goodwill (Clausen, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adel (2011) studied how the political decision is made in Iran, the role of political forces and institutions in the Iranian political system, and studying the Iranian political system as an actual model of the Twelver Shiite thought for the first time in modern times. This study also shows the scope of Arab-Iranian relations development and their impact on Arab national security and averting and differences in those relations.

Rajayiy (2012) addressed Iran's role in the Middle East and its attempts to provoke sectarian conflict in the region through the sectarian groups loyal to it. The study also discusses Arab-Iranian relations, Iranian strategy in the region, the religious belief adopted by Iran and its attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of Arab countries, especially Syria and Iraq. It also shows the sectarian dimension of this intervention as well as Iran's quest to spread its revolution over neighbouring countries. Jibril (2015) demonstrated the political decision-making in Saudi foreign policy because of its strategic and vital position in the region and the world as well as the regional and international role of Saudi Arabia in

light of the challenges facing the region and Saudi Arabia in particular. Researchers have used the systems analysis approach and decision-making approach to reach the common objectives of the study. The study concluded that Iran's attempt to dictate itself on the agenda of the region countries harms relations with the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia.

[Nawfal \(2016\)](#) clarified the nature of the Yemeni and Syrian crises, the direct Iranian interference in both countries, the Saudi-Iranian relationship, and their position towards those crises that affected these relations negatively. In the context of the Yemeni crisis, researchers have addressed crisis background, manifestations, risks, and positions of all parties, especially Saudi Arabia. This study concluded that the Yemeni crisis has affected countries of the region, particularly the Arabian Gulf in terms of politics, demographics, society, and economics. Study of [Hasan \(2019\)](#) found the various risks and threats, and impact on Saudi Arabia and the United States of America and as well as Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, this study illustrates the relations between Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, which are affected by regional and geographical conditions, security challenges, demographic ties, and common interests and the role of both Turkey and Pakistan in solving the pivotal and regional problems of Iran and Saudi Arabia.

METHODOLOGY

To address the Saudi and Iranian roles and their relationship to the Yemeni crisis, from a research point of view, and the role of both countries towards it in light of regional and international circumstances, patterns and dimensions in the region, the following approaches will be adopted to study the political phenomenon, and analyze international relations concerning the Saudi and Iranian countries. The approaches are:

Decision-making approach: it focuses on the external political decision-making process as a basis for an interpretation of international relations and foreign policy of each country. It comprises the human and inhuman environment, country area and resources, geographical location, value system, homogeneity between population, public cultures, national identity, beliefs, feelings, the behaviour of society, and external environment ([Al-Hamdani, 2004](#)). The components of the decision-making approach are divided into the internal environment, human and inhuman environment, society, country area and resources, geographical location, value system, homogeneity between population, public cultures, national identity, beliefs, feelings, and behaviour of society. The external environment includes factors such as indirect actions and reactions of other countries, geographical environment, states, societies, cultures, races, economic factors, trends of the value system in society, and the decision-making process. It also comprises a flow of clear and accurate information to decision-makers, roles, and goals ([Al-Khawaldeh, 2014](#)). This approach can be utilized in explaining some external phenomena that concern Saudi-Iranian relations and determines the position of decision-makers in both Saudi Arabia and Iran towards the Yemeni crisis and the scope of the impact made by both the internal and external environment in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

International relations system approach: the study relies primarily on testing its hypothesis based on an international system analysis approach that draws upon a central concept i.e. the system as the main unit of analysis. We can define the system as a set of elements that are functionally linked regularly including reciprocal interaction and independence and thus the political system becomes a state of communication between parts ([Al-Menoufi, 1987](#)). Components of this approach are the external relations of countries rely upon the systematic explanation of external behaviour. In other words, the external relations of any country should be addressed as a mobile system runs through an interaction between a set of functional parts toward a state of interdependence. This system accomplishes a basic system of external political relations represented in making and implementing external decisions to achieve the goals it aspires to. The foreign policy system runs within a framework of a composite environment, including internal and external parts embodying the overall surrounding conditions ([Easton, 1977](#)).

The researcher tries to benefit from the systems approach concerning the internal and external environmental study of Saudi Arabia and Iran and the impact of that environment on the Yemeni crisis. In his context, environment refers to the internal, regional and international environment, which can be considered as inputs that formed the system environment, and extent of the system's response to this environment and outputs enabling the decision-maker to utilize advantages and avoid disadvantages.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Saudi-Iranian Relations 1979-2019

Since 1998, the Iranian-Gulf relations have witnessed a remarkable advance at all levels, most notably the improvement of Iranian-Saudi relations, which resulted in the conclusion of economic and security agreements as well as the significant improvement in Bahraini-Iranian relations that ended an era of suspicion and doubt between the two countries such as the case with other Gulf countries.

Saudi-Iranian relations have been characterized by political, ethnic, and sectarian differences throughout history. In the period leading up to the so-called Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran were sometimes tense and cold. In 1943, relations between the two countries were severed when Saudi authorities executed an Iranian pilgrim after accusing him of throwing dirt on the Kaaba and insulting the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions. Saudi-Iranian relations were restored in 1946 but quickly suffered tension when the Shah's regime

recognized Israel in 1950. In general, the Saudi-Iranian relation before the Iranian revolution was tense. However, in the period from 1957-1967, Iran converged with Saudi Arabia against Egypt in its war in Yemen.

Nevertheless, Saudi-Iranian relations were soon strained by Iran's intention to annex Bahrain after Britain withdrew its troops, as Saudi Arabia supported Bahrain's independence in 1971 after a UN referendum in Bahrain ([Commins, 2010](#)). The Islamic Summit Conference held in Tehran, the Iranian capital, in December 1997, was a turning point for a new chapter in Iran's relations with Islamic countries. One of Iran's main objectives of this conference was to create an atmosphere of trust in its relations with the Islamic world, especially the neighbouring countries in the Gulf region. The Saudi government also welcomed the policy of de-escalation. It was a great opportunity for the rapprochement of both countries and new steps were taken to enhance the political, economic, and cultural relations between the two countries. The participation of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, who was then crown prince, in the summit, represented a new chapter of relations between the two countries. The visit of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, Chairman of Expediency Discernment Council, to Saudi Arabia from February 21 to March 6, 1998, also had a clear impact on strengthening relations between both countries.

During the visit, areas of cooperation in trade and economic fields were discussed. It was followed by a visit by the Saudi foreign minister to Tehran in 1998 when the two foreign ministers signed a comprehensive cooperation agreement ([Ditto, 2013](#)). To illustrate the pragmatic nature of Saudi-Iranian relations following the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran, it is necessary to examine the origins of both parties' foreign policy. These represent the basis of the dispute, bitterness, future competition, or supposed cooperation of the two countries. It is noted that several matters formed starting points, stages, and objectives for the Iranian foreign policy, especially in the early years of the Iranian revolution, including ([Ditto, 2013](#)):

1. Striving for the establishment of a global Islamic government.
2. Resistance, refusal of surrender, and domination.
3. Defend the vulnerable and liberation movements.

Spread and advocate Islam, especially the School Ahl al-Bayt "People of the House". Moreover, Imam Khomeini has continuously stressed the matter of establishing a united Islamic nation. Saudi Arabia has pursued the following foreign policy objectives to achieve its national interests: Focusing on its leading role concerning the policy of the Islamic world, particularly the Arab countries. Seeking a united Islamic and Arab world and obtaining the Arab world support to maintain its interests.

1. The effort to spread and advocate the Sunni doctrine.
2. Counter spread of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and maintain the status quo.
3. Containment of extremism in the region and the Islamic world ([Al-Hamad, 2016](#)).

Accordingly, after 1979, Saudi-Iranian relations can be divided into several stages:

Stage I: 1979-1982

This period was characterized by monitoring the situation in Iran without expressing its views. Saudi Arabia adopted a negative position towards Iran since the Islamic revolution, as Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries planned to ward off the Iranian threat, which led Saudi Arabia to implement a policy of patience and pause. During this period, the Saudi-Iranian relation has been complicated and complex. Competition between the two countries over the gulf and some Arab countries was the focal point. The success of the Iranian revolution in 1979 marked a turning point, which in turn imposed consecutive changes in the relationship between Tehran and Riyadh. Those influenced the change of the internal and external conditions of the two countries resulting in a direct impact on the relations.

The complex development and change in regional, Arab, and international situations enhanced those changes. Although these objectives were pursued by Iran and Saudi Arabia at this stage, the relationship was marred by competition and contradiction in the eighties of the last century. On one hand, Saudi Arabia adopted a policy of maintaining the status quo and confronting every new power or authority in the region and could not normalize its relations with the Iranian revolution due to its eagerness to change the status quo in the region. On the other hand, Iran has employed a policy of mass media attack on Saudi Arabia affected by its revolutionary nature and tended to implement its plan to spread its revolutionary ideas in Saudi Arabia and all countries in the region.

It was noted that Saudi Arabia lacked a tangible policy towards Iran, as its stated policy was unclear. Saudi officials refrained from expressing their clear views on the Iranian revolution and focused on investigating the controversial issues of Iran. Meanwhile, they sought to put obstacles in front of the Iranian revolution to prevent exporting its ideas to other Arab countries ([Asadi, 2002](#)). Hence, it can be said that the Iranian Revolution and the Gulf War were among the most important variables that escalated tension between the two countries at this stage.

Stage II: 1982-1986

Saudi Arabia adopted a political duality policy, as it combined a policy of attack with diplomatic relations. Saudi Arabia aimed at drawing the attention of Iranian officials so it allowed Iranian pilgrims to perform a pilgrimage, thus improving the dual relations.

It also supported the mediation committees to end the Iraqi-Iranian war to establish security in the region. Meanwhile, the Saudi government ordered Saudi security forces to engage with Iranian pilgrims, provided financial, political, military, and security assistance to the Iraqi regime during the war, arguing that the region's balance and security depend on Iran's loss ([Al-Hamad, 2016](#)). We also note that the Saudi intentions towards Iran were motivated by the Shah's fall in 1979, which served as a US strategic base for implementing its policies and plans in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia sought to play this role thereafter in return for curbing Iranian expansion and influence in the region due to its fear of the Iranian revolution spread and domination over countries of the region and expanding its influence. The feared situation was accomplished later when Iran could control the capitals of four Arab countries namely Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria.

Stage III: 1986-1989

At this stage, Saudi Arabia failed to confront and force Iran to accept reconciliation and negotiation, and declared its hostility towards Iran. In terms of politics, Saudi Arabia gradually sought to weaken the Iranian revolution to contain it and suppress it to accept negotiations and reconciliation. Saudi Arabia was heavily encouraged by its military capability and the presence of the US and foreign naval fleets in the region ([Kazemi, 2001](#)). In April 1989, successive events led to the severance of diplomatic relations between the two countries. This resulted in increased attention and prioritized the military dimension in the process of strategic planning for both countries due to its importance in achieving the desired balance. It was a manifestation of the repercussions of the regional and international environments and has been continuously an area of interaction.

Stage IV: 1990-2019

During this stage, Saudi-Iranian relations have been cold despite Saudi reservations about Iran's assistance to Iraqi opponents in the Shaabaniya uprising in Iraq that occurred in March 1991. No doubt that circumstance has created and contributed to a policy of openness at the level of Iranian foreign policy and thus Iranian presidency focus on the principle of de-tension in Iranian foreign relations. Therefore, circumstances on the regional and international arenas such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the following wars, curbing Iraq's strategic role after the war, and removing Iraq as a regional power, led to a political vacuum. In such circumstances, Iran proceeded to persuade the Gulf Arab states to accept it as a strategic partner and fill the vacuum created by Iraq.

Thus, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Riyadh became more inclined to the idea of Western contribution to Gulf security. It ended the policy of security alliance with great powers. To achieve such purpose, Saudi Arabia managed to store large quantities of Western weapons in its territory and intensified military-security cooperation with Washington utilizing training and conducting joint military exercises, as well as granting the United States some facilities in its military airports, with no objection to the security arrangements made by some GCC countries with some great powers ([Saleem, 1994](#)).

During the reign of Iranian President Mohammad Hashemi in the mid-1990s, the situation was covered with a change of policies, especially after the meeting between him and the then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz in Islamabad in 1997. This was a positive turning point in bilateral relations. Saudi Arabia announced its cooperation and agreement to hold the 8th summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Tehran, opening a new chapter in bilateral relations. The meeting between President Khatami and King Fahd in 1999 also testified to the creation of a more favourable atmosphere for the bilateral relations. King Fahd believed that their relationship was at its best and highest status. When analyzing the Saudi-Iranian relations during the period of Iranian President Hashemi Fenjani and then Mohammad Khatami, we find that both sought to open and establish new relations based on good neighbourliness and cooperation, especially in the reign of Khatami, who adopted the approach of this new relationship based on the idea of a dialogue of civilizations, religions, and peoples and thus openness to the world, especially the Arab world and its geographical neighbours.

Accordingly and as noted, the Saudi-Iranian relations witnessed further openness, development, and cooperation, which has been translated into many mutual visits by officials from both countries at the highest levels. This relationship was culminated in concluding a security agreement in 2001, during the visit of the then Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz to Iran, which constituted, in its essence, the highest visit of a Saudi official to Iran after decades of estrangement. The pilgrimage seasons marked difficult junctures for the Iranian-Saudi relation, which played a major role in straining and intensifying that relationship, even in the best conditions of relations between the two countries.

However, that good relation changed quickly and tuned to be a fierce competition after Gulf War III 2003 ([Asadi, 2002](#)). This conversion started with Saudi Arabia's position to counter the Iranian role in the Arabian Gulf in particular and the Arab region in general. Riyadh has moved in public to reshape the map of conflicts in the region, after the emergence of pro-Iranian Shiite parties in Iraq and control over all the parts of the country and thus the expansion of Iranian influence

in the region. Saudi concern increased when the conservative Ahmadinejad rose to power in Iran and his intentions to develop Iran's nuclear program. Regarding the nuclear program of Iran, Saudi Arabia did not hide its fears despite the Iranian reassurance that this program is peaceful. Saudi Arabia also warned Iran that everyone will pay for it. It also confirmed that although it does not mind, as a major country in the region, obtaining a peaceful nuclear program by Iran, it has many declared and undeclared fears that this program will shift to military use and thus the emergence of a new nuclear power in the region ([Al-Khobar, 2019](#)).

In this way, Saudi-Iranian relations were staggering between openness, estrangement and tension, which culminated in Operation Decisive Hazem Storm in 2015, in which Saudi Arabia led an Arab alliance including the UAE and many Arab countries, albeit symbolically, against the Houthi movement in Yemen and for supporting political legitimacy. The Houthis obtained control of all organs of Yemini state and successively launched a coup against Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi; the consequences of which still have repercussions on every country in the region and concerning that crisis. To further complicate the crisis in Saudi-Iranian relations, on January 2, 2016, Saudi Arabia executed Shiite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and 46 other Sunnis on terrorism and incitement charges ([Melhem, 2016](#)). Many demonstrations occurred in Iran to condemn the execution and consider as an attack on Iran. As a result, Iranian demonstrators burned the Saudi embassy in the Iranian capital, smashed its facades, and attacked its employees, removed the flag, and stole its properties. In another demonstration, protestors attacked the Saudi consulate in Mashhad.

As a result, Saudi Arabia severed all relations with Iran, followed by many Arab and Muslim countries. Thus, we believe that the Saudi-Iranian relations have been governed at this time by many difficult security and political issues, although the official speech of both sides focused on general cooperation and convergence matters for the interests of the region and the Islamic world.

Role of Some Arab Crises In Saudi - Iranian Relations

In this section, the researcher reviews two important crises: the Syrian crisis and the Iraqi crisis;

The Syrian Crisis

Regarding the Syrian crisis as a model for the Iranian foreign policy under President Rouhani, the objective analysis of such a topic is possible according to geopolitical vision and perceptions. The Syrian-Iranian alliance was fundamental, although Saudi Arabia considered it an anti-sectarian hostile alliance based on regional visions, perceptions, and interests against Saudi interests in the region. Indeed, Saudi Arabia related such alliance as intellectual and ideological capabilities and constants, exposing the region to political shocks due to the extent of that relationship and Iran's participation in the Russian-Iranian war in cooperation with the Syrian regime against the Syrian people.

Iran believes that the nature of the political relations in which Syria works as the main means to support the Islamic resistance and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine. Thus, it is difficult to imagine that there can be a change like this relationship (between Iran and Syria) ([Wakim, 2011](#)).

In many situations, Iran has also stressed its support for the ballot boxes in Syria to solve the Syrian crisis, but Saudi Arabia firmly believes that Iran interferes in organs of the Syrian state even in the elections. Moreover, Iran will not be satisfied that another regime governs Syria other than the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on one hand. It becomes clear that Iran believes on the other hand that there is no solution in Syria away from the Iranian factor, as evidenced by the Geneva Conference on Syria, which ruled out Iran's participation based on the desire of the US and Saudi Arabia, which was affirmed at the end of the conference. What happened later has revealed how serious the decision-maker is Iran emphasized and maintained the Iranian-Syrian alliance.

The constant in politics is changing (neither friend nor enemy is permanent) in the context of political actions in the world. However, Iran wanted to prove to the world through its foreign policy, especially in the Syrian crisis, that it would not compromise its relations with a friend. Moreover, the Iranian decision-maker always thinks of maintaining and upgrading such a relation to a strategic alliance. Unlike other countries, including the United States, it will not trade their interests for an Iranian alliance with Syria.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad explained the same in many situations that the Syrian-Iranian relations are not subject to settlement in the south or the north, nor do they subject to international temptations and one-upmanship. Such a relationship shall not be subject to impact in the international bazaar. During the Arab Spring 2011-2019, Saudi Arabia has tried to lure the Syrian regime to leave such alliance through many fields. However, it seems that the link between Iran and Syria was greater than all the Saudi temptations, which strengthened the regional position of Iran even in talks on its nuclear program as well Trump administration's attempts to sit for negotiations with Iran to reach a solution regarding US sanctions on Iran over its nuclear file.

The Iraqi Crisis

In the case of Iraq, the situation is quite different. Saudi Arabia's strategic objectives and interests have agreed to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime since the early 1990s despite being the world's largest supporter of President Saddam Hussein's war with Iran from 1981-1988, Gulf War I, to prevent Iran's expansion into the region.

No doubt that both Iraq and Iran are pivotal countries in the Middle East. The nature of the relationship between them determines the shape of the entire region. Despite their common interests, the Iranian-Iraqi relation was not correlated, especially after the overthrow of former President Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.

Such a relationship has witnessed instability at times against some problems at other times due to the geographical overlap between the two countries. Thus, political events and changes have shown that Iraq's emergence as a sound, strategic, and integral power in the region is in the interest of Iraq and the region (Iran in particular). If Iraq is a fragmented and separated country, the Iraqi and regional parts will be subject to political shocks and downfalls, as believed by the Iranian viewpoint. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is contrary to the Iranian viewpoint. It believes that the emergence of Iraq as a strategic power in the region will rid the region of Iran's sectarian, political, and military ambitions, and a weak Iraq will serve Iran's strategic interests. As proof of this, Iran was one of the first regional countries to declare its support for the Iraqi people after the fall of the regime of former President Saddam Hussein in 2003 and even cooperated to some extent with the United States to achieve that goal. After 2003, Iraq worked hard to activate its political and economic relationship with Iran, where coordination between Iran and Iraq on some regional issues has led to concluding several agreements and memoranda of cooperation.

Since 2003, the Iraqi approach has changed as Iraq, which became backed and supported by the United States and Iran, has been eager to move away from problems even in the most difficult circumstances. The new regime began to reject the existence of the People's Mujahedin of Iran, which opposes the Iranian regime. Saudi Arabia has refused to exclude this organization from Iraq, which was hosted by former president Saddam Hussein.

On one hand, Iran, as some analysts believe, has become open to the new political system in Iraq. Those relations have continued despite the objection of Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf countries to some aspects, especially concerning the incomprehensible position of Iraq towards Iran's position on the Yemeni and Syrian crises. On the other hand, the new Iraqi regime, after 2003, played a major role in bringing the Western-Iranian views closer leading to Iran+5+1 Negotiations in Baghdad.

Alternatively, President Rouhani considers that the Iranian-Iraqi relationship is strategic, calling for cooperation, on many occasions, between Iran and Iraq to achieve the interests of both the Iranian and Iraqi peoples, and removing the effects of previous hostile actions under former president Saddam Hussein. He also called for the development of economic relations and infrastructure between the two countries (Pound & Jack, 2004). Therefore, it is expected that Iran's policy with Iraq will not change, especially with the events of Mosul in June 2014. Iran has provided assistance in all its forms to support Iraq in its war with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant "ISIS".

In this framework, the Iraqi political system stressed the need for Iran's participation in the international counter-terrorism coalition, and its insistence on making Iran a member in such coalition (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2015). Although the United States considered Iran an advocate of terrorism and even an axis of the evil country. In politics, no variable is constant. It is no secret that the field rhetoric, developments, and movements of both countries in all respects, especially diplomacy, and under the guidance and action of active countries in the world, led by the United States, may foreshadow a broad confrontation, probably a military, which will have a disastrous role on the entire region and will have unpredictable results.

Iranian Presence in the Arab Mashriq and Its Impact on Saudi Foreign Policy 2003-2019

Under President Hassan Rouhani, Iran has adopted a balanced approach towards the Gulf States. Before winning the 2013 elections, he declared that he is keen to turn the "animosity" with Saudi Arabia into mutual respect, pointing out that Iran aspires to have good official relations with all countries neighbouring countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. It was noted that Rouhani positively dealt with key regional issues such as homeland security and Gulf security, which later turned out to be an old friend of Saudi Arabia due to his positive role in many security files and coordination with Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990s. However, the Arab Gulf states have expressed increasing concern as a result of the Iranian-American rapprochement during the era of US President Obama. Moreover, some Arab-Iranian relations were characterized were not good nor bad in full based on their relations and interests. These relations relied on the strategic situation, especially their approach towards Syria, as noted above, the relation with Lebanon, Jordan, Oman, Algeria, and other countries on one hand, and the cold or tense relation with Saudi Arabia on some occasions on the other hand.

Iranian Presence in the Arab Region

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stressed that Iran is determined to build best relations with Islamic countries, Saudi Arabia has a special position in Iranian politics, and it is possible to establish good and developed relations between the two countries, as Saudi officials have a positive view towards the current government in Iran (Ditto, 2013). It was also noted that Iran has returned strongly to the Arab political scene after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Such return was linked to the concern of the Gulf and Arab countries of the Iranian political, security, and economic presence in the Lebanese scene without repeating this presence in the Iraqi scene, as well as building a strategic relationship with Syria. There was a clear and profound understanding of the evolved and serious Iranian presence in the Arab political scene. Therefore, the following facts should be carefully addressed:

1. The Iranian political presence is based on investing in conditions formed through different variables and other players rather than Iran. The presence in Lebanon relied on international recognition of sectarian diversity and scope as well as a presence in Iraq.
2. The Iranian presence in the Arab political scene varies according to geopolitics or scope of closeness concerning the Iranian political situation in Iraq. This is different for Iran and its Arab neighbours concerning influence in Syria, which is not a neighbouring country of Iran.
3. The time frame of political events and variables is a decisive factor in understanding the Iranian political presence in the Arab political scene. The Iranian presence in 2003, 2011, or 2019 is different. Before 2003, the Arab position towards Iran was divided. Most Arab governments adopted an intense approach while Arab public opinion was positive, especially concerning its support for the resistance of Israel and its opposition to the United States. After 2003, the official position, especially from Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan, continued to be negative, towards Iran, but it approached the Arab public opinion, particularly in light of Iran's strong attachment to the sectarian dimension in its foreign policy ([James, 2013](#)).
4. The nature of the domestic political scene and the political militarization of Iran starting as of 1991, and increasing after 2005. It tended to link the Arab Spring to the Islamic revolution in Iran using the Islamic awakening movement. The approach was completely different and even against the desire of those demanding change, especially in Syria.

However, Saudi Arabia's animosity with Iran increased after 2003 with Saudi concern over possible military developments in the nuclear program of Iran and international community tolerance in dealing with the Iranian nuclear file compared to the situation with Iraq, in line with the statements of the late Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal in 2005 that the United States presented Iraq to Iran on a gold plate, which was evident in the growing Saudi concern ([Hill, 2017](#)). The Saudi-Iranian relations entered a real fall with rising President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power. His term witnessed the dominance of the Revolutionary Guards on the political scene, and his policy aroused the ire of Riyadh. Moreover, the United States was seeking to coordinate with Iran's neighbours to curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons, especially the nuclear program of Iran. However, it tended to weaken the Saudi role since 2003 despite the Saudi political and non-political support Washington has enjoyed for its policy in the region ([Ehteshami, 2014](#)).

Position of Both Iran And Saudi Arabia Towards The Yemen Crisis

The reality of the Yemeni crisis

The Yemeni crisis is the result of numerous accumulations of policies adopted by previous governments, political power, and tribes alike. Other subjective and objective factors, in which the Yemeni internal affairs and abroad factors interacted, contributed to the development of this crisis and formed a framework for the current crisis. In particular, the exacerbation of the sectarian dimension could be depicted in the political conflict between the government and the opposition as well as among the opposition itself, specifically between the so-called "Houthis" and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform and its allied forces. The two sides worked directly as active members of the Yemeni People's Revolution, which began in 2011 and ousted former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. However, the current causes of the crisis can be traced back to 2011 when protests broke out calling for the ousting of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Such protests were covered with risks of the civil war because the regime tended to reject all popular demands and to use excessive violence against demonstrators ([Lackner, 2019](#)).

Saudi Approach Towards the Yemeni crisis

When Yemen witnessed months of mass revolt and protests in 2011 against the regime, Saudi Arabia supported its former ally, Ali Abdullah Saleh, before playing an important role in shaping a transitional political formula through the Gulf initiative under which Saleh gave up presidency. Prince Sultan had been in charge of the Yemeni file since the sixties of the last century and headed a special committee on the affairs of Yemen. Following his death, Saudi Arabia's policy towards Yemen was troubled due to the decline of its relations with Yemeni Congregation for Reform and al-Ahmar Clan, Sheikhs of Hashid tribes, the largest Yemeni tribes. This was due to the development of the Saudi position on the Muslim Brotherhood file, especially in Egypt, which led to the interest of Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has faced the threat of Houthi expansion on its western and southern borders. Following the ascension of King Salman to the throne, calls for a review of Saudi Arabia's policy in Yemen were raised. This led to waging war on Yemen, which is still on-going under the title "Operation Decisive Storm" in 2019. Despite this intervention and war, the Iranian influence increased in Yemen through the Houthis' control over most organs of the Yemeni state, which in turn posed a threat to Saudi Arabia and the countries of the region. Therefore, this threat required Saudi Arabia and GCC's involvement to solve the Yemeni crisis, restore stability, and get rid of the Iranian influence in Yemen ([Al- Muwadaa, 2015](#)).

Iran's Approach Towards the Yemeni crisis

Iran has supported the Houthi group since its inception through charities and non-governmental organizations. According to Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and other reports, Iran has also invested in militarily and security aspects for the Houthis through training in Iran and Lebanon as well as launching a dedicated channel broadcasted from the southern suburb of Beirut ([Juneau, 2016](#)).

Some experts believe that Iran's main objective in Yemen is to be a soft state that Iran can use to curtail the role of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. This will ensure a strategic influence on Bab-el-Mandeb. To achieve such purpose, Iranian support was not limited to the Houthis, but also Ali Salem al-Beidh, who calls for the secession of the south and owns Adan Live TV broadcasting from south Yemen (Al- Muwadaa, 2015). On the other hand, the nuclear agreement signed by Iran in mid-June 2015 with the 5+1 Group, permanent Security Council members and Germany, raised the Saudi Arabia's concerns before the start of 2016, which opened to the impact of the conflict after Saudi Arabia executed the Shiite sheikh Saudi Nimr al-Nimr (Mamadkul, 2017).

Pragmatism was manifested in the Saudi-Iranian conflict in Yemen through instability and chronic conflict between the two countries, which allowed Iran to expand in Yemen, Syria and South Lebanon as soft areas, according to the Iranian perspective, in which it could achieve its pragmatic interests. When Saudi Arabia adopted the same thought, Iran has made more regional gains. The features of strengthening Iran's role were also evident after the nuclear agreement with the G5 +1 in mid-2015, as it owns pragmatic, ideological, and military capabilities. Although this agreement limited Iran's nuclear ambitions, it supported its security and lifted sanctions enabling it to implement its pragmatic regional ambitions through new and anticipated resources (Farideh, 2015). Due to the sectarian and political differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially in the period following the execution of the Saudi Shiite Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in January 2016 and Iranian interference in Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, a fundamental strategic understanding is likely ruled out, since the differences were deepened in the period 2016 to 2019 over Yemen. Saudi Arabia is unwilling to relinquish its leadership role in the US-led regional bloc, especially after the election of US President Donald Trump in 2016. The United States mobilized all its capabilities against the Iranian tide in the region, which includes other countries such as Egypt and Jordan, within the framework of the US roadmap of the Middle East and the interests of the US and its allies (Hussein, 2017).

On the other hand, in the face of Iranian expansion, Saudi Arabia has proceeded to consolidate its relationship, which was originally established on a pragmatic basis. Although Saudi-US relations are close, some suggest a decline especially after the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the headquarters of his country's consulate in Turkey, and the Saudi military operation in Yemen from 2015 to 2019. There are other reasons including geopolitical changes such as the emergence of China as a strong competitor to the United States as well as the significant decline in oil prices, which changed the situation in the Middle East upside down. Iran may converge with the United States while US pressures on Iran may have resulted in the economic inflation witnessed in Iran. Through the severe economic sanctions, Trump wishes to bankrupt the Iranian regime and reduce its prestige in the region and the world, primarily to serve Israel's security. As a result, the United States used Iran to impose pressure on Saudi Arabia to obtain more Saudi investment funds and gains and achieve pragmatic interests by defending Saudi Arabia for money. This was evident during the period 2017-2019, after the inauguration of Trump. This pragmatic approach continues to this day.

RESULTS

Continuation of the Iran-Saudi conflict does not benefit both countries because it will lead to further destruction of Yemen and disturbances in the region. The Houthis' continued control over organs of the state, the intensification of the armed conflict, and the widening cycle of violence may push the situation in Yemen to further destruction and disturbances in the region. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Yemen led to open political-economic-military conflict, the collapse of state institutions, and domination of chaos, which led to the current civil war. Continuation of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran worked as an incubator and a fertile environment for increasing the influence of new forces in the country such as Ansar Allah and Al Qaeda. The Saudi-Yemeni rivalry led to separation and division of some areas of Yemen on regional or sectarian bases, especially Saada in the north and Aden in the south. The poor Saudi-Iranian relations led to the Houthis' insistence on imposing their control over the state by force, refusal to respect the authority of sovereign institutions, and denial to return to the democratic path, which negatively affected Yemen. The pragmatism was manifested in the periods of political calmness and stability between Saudi Arabia and Iran to further revive the economic and cultural relations between both countries. In brief, The Houthi rebellion and their rapid expansion to the south have caused Saudi concern because they considered this to be an indication of the escalation of Iranian and Houthi targets simultaneously. Thus, instead of Saudi Arabia views the Houthis as a tolerable force in the north, it considered them as a major threat to its interests, so it rushed to work by forming an Arab-international alliance that seeks to restore Yemen, and with it regain its influence in the Gulf region. The support of the countries allied with it, led by Egypt and Pakistan, in addition to the support of Western countries such as the United States and France, for the military campaign led by Saudi Arabia, to greatly enhance the position of Riyadh, especially since Iran is engaged in more important issues, particularly the nuclear file and the Syrian crisis, and therefore It can retract the Houthis if it concludes that their situation is weak, especially as Iran's relationship with the Houthis is more pragmatic than ideological.

CONCLUSION

Iran is a vital country in the Middle East, a geographic and historical neighbour with a significant strategic position. Neither country in the region can eliminate the other. The main problem between Iran and Saudi Arabia is pragmatic rather than sectarian due to Iran's tendency towards expansion and domination. Obviously, -power supremacy entices all forces in loose areas and weak countries. Iran's approach and role could have happened through other parties such as

Turkey that also has an ambition of expansion in the region. However, it seeks to achieve such objective through understanding and dialogue with countries of the region. It is noteworthy that the issue of Iran as considered by the Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, is trying to achieve its influence in the region by threatening to use the logic of force. Means of understanding are not adopted in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. However, the problem in dealing with the Iranian project has two dimensions: firstly: the national dimension in the historical context i.e. revolutionary nature, in which the Safavid dimension and sectarian difference are highlighted. Secondly: the sectarian dimension, which is strongly present in the Iranian pragmatic policy. Its relations and alliances are inclined in this direction. In dealing with Iran, it is not required to abolish it or deal with it as an enemy. It is only needed to deter Iran to deal with Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region as a neighbour country not based on an approach of domination. Eventually, its pragmatic approach will result in understanding and regulating relations with its neighbours.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This current study is mainly focused on the pragmatism in Saudi-Iranian relationships and its impact on the Yemeni crisis, specifically in the period (2011-2019). This study can be replicated to ascertain an investigation of the impact of the pragmatism of Saudi-Iranian relationships in the Middle East region. The year (2011) was set as the starting point of the study and the year (2019) as the end of the study to monitor the latest updates on the international, regional and political relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in light of the international circumstances and changes. The reason for choosing (2011) as the beginning of the study is the events of the Arab Spring that emerged at the opening of this year and spread to most Arab countries including Yemen. The researcher chose (2019) because it enables him to obtain and benefit from available information, facts, data, and documents concerning the developments of the Yemeni crisis, especially following Operation Decisive Storm led by Saudi Arabia, which marked the end of the study. Another limitation of this study is that it is primarily conducted to examine the pragmatism in Saudi-Iranian relationships, but future studies might be able to replicate this research in more diverse on the impact of Saudi-Iranian relationships on Middle East countries. In brief, conducting further studies on Saudi-Iranian relations, as this would benefit the study. Conduct more in-depth studies on the Yemeni issue by narrowing the negative gap between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Also, study the unified security strategy of the Arab countries, especially; Yemen. Finally, reconsider the foreign policy of both countries and recognizing that the tension between them will lead to further interventions by the great countries, especially the United States that only cares for protecting its strategic interests.

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