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Saudi Arabia and Iran: A Realist Analysis of Power Competition, Proxy Conflicts, and the Struggle for Regional Leadership in the Middle East (1979–2026)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the long-standing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the framework of realist international relations theory. The conflict is understood as a competition for regional dominance in a Middle East where no single power holds authority. Using the theoretical approaches of scholars like Mearsheimer and Waltz, the study looks at how both countries have tried to increase their power relative to each other. Their methods include involvement in proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, military expansion, and forming strategic alliances, particularly as American influence in the region has decreased. The analysis shows that while sectarian differences between Sunni and Shia Islam are often cited, these religious divisions are better understood as tools for political mobilization rather than the underlying cause of conflict. Iran's revolutionary ideology since 1979 and Saudi Arabia's recent assertive foreign policy under Vision 2030 are both explained as strategies to ensure national security and survival. Recent events, such as the fragile diplomatic agreement brokered by China in 2023 and renewed hostilities in 2025, support the realist prediction that competition will continue. The findings indicate that the region will likely remain unstable unless one state becomes clearly dominant.

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1. Introduction

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is one of the most important and long-lasting geopolitical conflicts in the contemporary international system. Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, this rivalry has influenced the political map of the Middle East, contributed to destructive civil wars in Yemen and Syria, encouraged the rise of proxy groups and other non-state actors, and attracted the involvement of major external powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. Although the conflict appears complex because it includes sectarian ideology, historical grievances, and religious competition, its core structure is better explained through the realist theory of international relations than through culture or religion alone.

Realist scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and John Mearsheimer argue that the anarchic nature of the international system forces states to give priority to survival, security, and the accumulation of power. In this view, states act rationally and treat the gains of rival states as potential

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threats to their own security, which often leads to continuing competition, military build-up, and alliance formation. The Saudi-Iran rivalry strongly reflects these features. Both states seek regional leadership, view the growing influence of the other as a serious threat, and have regularly used offensive strategies such as proxy warfare, ideological mobilization, and alliance-building to weaken each other's regional position. This study covers the period from 1979, when the Iranian Revolution changed Iran from a U.S.-aligned monarchy into a revolutionary theocratic state, to 2026, including both the origins of the rivalry and its recent phase of uneasy rapprochement.

2. Theoretical Framework: Realism Theory

2.1 Classical and Neorealist Foundations

Realism is based on three main assumptions: the international system is anarchic, the state is the main rational actor, and power is central to state behavior. Classical realism, especially in the work of Hans Morgenthau in *Politics Among Nations* (1948), emphasized the human desire for power and the constant struggle for domination in international relations. Neorealism, also called structural realism, modified this argument by explaining conflict mainly through the structure of the international system rather than human nature. Kenneth Waltz, in *Theory of International Politics* (1979), argued that international outcomes are shaped primarily by how power is distributed among states, not by their domestic systems or ideological beliefs. Within neorealism, an important distinction exists between defensive realism and offensive realism. Defensive realism, associated with Waltz, argues that states mainly seek enough power to ensure their survival and usually prefer to preserve the existing balance of power once they feel secure. Offensive realism, developed by John Mearsheimer in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), presents a more pessimistic view. According to Mearsheimer, states are not satisfied with limited power; instead, they continuously seek to increase their relative power and, if possible, achieve regional hegemony. From this perspective, the pursuit of power is not simply a sign of aggression but a rational response to a self-help system in which no higher authority can guarantee security.

2.2 Applying Realism to the Saudi-Iran

Offensive realism is highly useful for understanding the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Saudi Arabia and Iran are both regional powers in the Middle East. Although neither is a global power, both possess enough military, economic, and ideological capacity to compete for dominance in the region. From the perspective of offensive realism, both states are rational actors seeking regional hegemony in an anarchic system. Iran's actions in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, as well as Saudi Arabia's more assertive foreign policy under Vision 2030 can therefore be understood as efforts to increase power and prevent outside threats.

Importantly, offensive realism does not require states to openly seek conquest or territorial expansion. Instead, it suggests that states try to prevent the rise of rival hegemony, expand their influence, and shape the regional environment in ways that improve their own security and relative power. Saudi Arabia and Iran have both behaved in this way by using proxy groups, asymmetric strategies, and alliance politics as tools of power accumulation. Within this framework, sectarianism, especially the Sunni-Shia divide, is better understood as a strategic instrument than as the main cause of conflict. Both states use sectarian narratives to strengthen their claims to leadership in the Muslim world and to attract regional allies.

The idea of the security dilemma is also central to this case. A security dilemma arises when one state takes measures for its own defense, but the rival interprets those actions as offensive and threatening. This dynamic is clearly visible in Saudi-Iran relations. For example, Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni opposition groups in Syria and Iraq was intended to limit Iranian influence, but Tehran interpreted these actions as hostile encirclement. In response, Iran increased its own support for proxy actors, which then deepened Saudi concerns. This cycle of action and reaction has become one of the main structural drivers of the rivalry.

3. Historical Origins: From Twin Pillars to Rivals (1924–1979)

3.1 Pre-Revolution Relationship

Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran were not natural enemies. Both were monarchies, both were aligned with the United States during the Cold War, and both were major oil-producing states with overlapping economic interests. Under the Nixon administration's "Twin Pillars" policy, Saudi Arabia and Iran functioned as the two main partners of U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf. In return for helping preserve regional order and counter Soviet influence, both received substantial military and economic support from the United States.

Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran followed a secular, modernizing, and pro-Western foreign policy that was generally compatible with Saudi interests, even though some tensions existed over Gulf sovereignty and oil pricing. The two states did compete for regional influence, especially in relation to Iran's claim over Bahrain until 1971 and the Shah's wider ambition to make Iran the leading Gulf power. However, these tensions remained manageable because both states shared broad strategic interests and operated under U.S. mediation. In this period, the condition for intense rivalry had not yet fully emerged.

3.2 The 1979 Iranian Revolution

The Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in February 1979 marked a major turning point in regional politics. In realist terms, it was a structural shock. It changed Iran from a status quo state into a revolutionary and revisionist power that openly rejected the existing regional order, challenged the legitimacy of Gulf monarchies, and aimed to export its revolutionary ideology throughout the Muslim world. From a realist perspective, the key issue was not ideology alone, but the emergence of a powerful state that no longer accepted the previous balance of power.

Khomeini's government challenged Saudi Arabia in several ways at the same time. It questioned the religious legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy and its claim to guard Islam's holy sites. It also encouraged Shia communities across the Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq, thereby creating fears of regional destabilization. Saudi Arabia saw these developments as a direct threat to its survival and responded by expanding Sunni religious influence, supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988, and cooperating with the United States to contain Iranian power.

The 1987 Mecca incident brought Saudi-Iran relations to a critical low point. During the Hajj, clashes between Iranian pilgrims and Saudi security forces resulted in numerous deaths, after which Iran severed diplomatic relations. Khomeini declared that Mecca was under the control of "a band of heretics," while Saudi Arabia presented the Iranian leadership as unfit to claim any religious legitimacy. Although this confrontation was framed in religious language, it was driven by political and strategic concerns, and it shaped the future pattern of the rivalry.

4. The Iraq War and the Rise of the Shia (2003–2011)

4.1 Impact of the 2003 U.S. Invasion of Iraq

If the Iranian Revolution of 1979 began the Saudi-Iran rivalry, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq greatly intensified it. The removal of Saddam Hussein destroyed the strongest Sunni Arab barrier to Iranian influence in the region. The rise of a Shia-led government in Baghdad, supported by Iranian-linked parties and militias, gave Iran direct strategic access to the Arab heartland. From an offensive realist perspective, Iran's response was rational because it used the power vacuum created by the invasion to expand its influence through Iraqi Shia actors and the IRGC's Quds Force.

Saudi Arabia viewed these developments with serious concern. The rise of what Jordan's King Abdullah

II called the “Shia Crescent,” stretching from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut and Hezbollah, appeared in Riyadh as a form of strategic encirclement. In response, Saudi Arabia increased its support for Sunni political actors in Iraq, including financial backing for Sunni tribes and, according to various accounts, assistance to Sunni insurgent groups. These competing interventions in Iraq became the model for later proxy struggles in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain.

4.2 Power Maximization through Proxy Warfare

Proxy warfare is essential to understanding the Saudi-Iran rivalry through realism. It allows states to expand influence, contain rivals, and protect regional interests without bearing the full cost and risk of direct military confrontation. Iran has built what many analysts call the “Axis of Resistance,” a network of non-state actors that includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, the Houthis in Yemen, and several Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Through the IRGC’s Quds Force, Iran provides these groups with money, training, weapons, and strategic direction, allowing Tehran to challenge Saudi and U.S. influence in multiple arenas at the same time.

Hezbollah is one of the clearest examples of this strategy. Iran is estimated to provide Hezbollah with around \$700 million to \$1 billion each year, making it one of the best-funded non-state military groups in the world. Iran began building ties with Lebanese Shia communities after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when it sent around 800 Revolutionary Guards through Syria to recruit and train Hezbollah fighters. Over time, Hezbollah developed from a local resistance group into a highly capable regional military organization involved in Syria and also in training allied militias in Iraq and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia has followed a different form of proxy strategy, but the underlying logic is similar. Rather than building a tightly organized transnational network like Iran, Saudi Arabia has mainly relied on state alliances, financial support for friendly governments, and backing for Sunni opposition groups. In Syria, for example, Saudi support for rebel groups was driven not only by sectarian concerns but also by the larger goal of limiting Iranian influence in the Levant. Much of the support for Syrian rebels moved through Jordan, while Saudi and other clerics issued fatwas that gave religious legitimacy to the struggle against the Assad regime.

5. Intensification of Proxy Conflicts and The Arab Spring (2011–2020)

5.1 The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 significantly changed the political order of the Middle East and reshaped the strategic setting in which the Saudi-Iran rivalry developed. The collapse of long-standing authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, along with the outbreak of civil war in Syria, created major power vacuums that both Saudi Arabia and Iran moved quickly to exploit. After 2011, the region was also marked by a relative decline in U.S. influence, especially in Syria, and by Russia’s growing involvement in regional conflicts. These developments created new opportunities for both Riyadh and Tehran to expand their influence.

From the perspective of offensive realism, the Arab Spring can be understood as a classic case of states taking advantage of power vacuums. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia acted as rational states seeking regional dominance in an anarchic environment. The uprisings gave each of them an unusual opportunity to reshape the regional balance of power in its favor. Iran moved quickly to support the Assad regime in Syria, which was a central pillar of the Axis of Resistance, by sending Quds Force commanders, thousands of military advisers, and Shia fighters from across the region, including Afghan Hazaras of Liwa Fatimiyoun and Pakistani Shias of Liwa Zaynabiyoun. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, supported Sunni rebel groups with money, weapons, and ideological backing, seeing the Syrian war as a chance to weaken the Iran-Syria alliance and reduce Iranian influence in the Levant.

5.2 The Yemen War: Route to Proxy Conflict

The Yemen war, which escalated sharply in 2015 after the Houthis captured Sanaa, became the most

important and destructive example of the Saudi-Iran proxy rivalry. The Houthis, a Zaydi Shia movement that had been fighting the Yemeni government on and off since 2004, removed the internationally recognized government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi during the September 2014 uprising, with support from Iran. Saudi Arabia viewed the Houthis as an Iranian proxy located directly on its southern border and responded by launching Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015, leading a broad Arab coalition to restore the Hadi government and reverse Houthi gains.

The Yemen conflict clearly reflects the offensive realist idea of denying rivals strategic depth. For Iran, Houthi control of Yemen created an important strategic position near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a key maritime route through which about 4 million barrels of oil pass each day, and also gave Iran's allies the ability to threaten Saudi territory with missiles and drones. For Saudi Arabia, Iranian influence in Yemen represented a dangerous form of encirclement, with Iran already active to the north through Iraq and to the west through Syria and Lebanon, and now potentially to the south through Yemen. In this context, the Saudi intervention, although costly and ultimately inconclusive, can be seen as a rational attempt to counter a serious strategic threat.

The conflict then developed into a long proxy war in which both sides used indirect and asymmetric methods to pursue their strategic goals, worsening an already severe humanitarian crisis. The Houthis developed advanced drone and missile capabilities with Iranian technical support, enabling them to strike deep inside Saudi Arabia. This included the September 2019 attacks on the Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, which temporarily disrupted about 5 percent of global oil supply. These attacks showed Iran's ability to use proxy actors to target Saudi Arabia's core economic interests while still maintaining a degree of plausible deniability.

5.3 Syria

The Syrian civil war became the most complicated and multi-layered arena of the Saudi-Iran proxy conflict. It involved not only Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also Turkey, Russia, Israel, Qatar, the United States, and many non-state armed groups. Iran was fully committed to preserving the Assad regime because Syria was essential to the land corridor connecting Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Losing Syria would have seriously weakened the Axis of Resistance and reduced Iran's ability to project power toward Israel and across the wider region. For this reason, Iran sent General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC's) Quds Force, as well as thousands of Iranian personnel and allied Shia fighters into the Syrian conflict.

Saudi Arabia's position in Syria was also shaped primarily by strategic calculations. Its support for Syrian opposition groups was driven not only by sectarian concerns but also by the broader aim of limiting Iran's regional reach in the Levant. Saudi leaders understood that Iran's presence in Syria strengthened Tehran's regional position and reinforced its relationship with Hezbollah. As a result, both Saudi Arabia and Iran treated Syria less as a humanitarian tragedy or democratic uprising and more as a zero-sum geopolitical struggle over the regional balance of power.

In the end, the survival of the Assad regime with Russian and Iranian backing marked a major strategic success for Iran and a corresponding failure for Saudi Arabia. Iran's readiness to spend very large amounts of money, estimated in the tens of billions of dollars through direct military spending and economic assistance, reflected the offensive realist view that states will bear heavy costs to stop rivals from dominating strategically important areas.

5.4 Iraq: The Contested Area

Iraq may be the most structurally important arena in the Saudi-Iran rivalry. After 2003, Iraq's political system came to be dominated by Shia-led governments, powerful Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces, and deep Iranian political, economic, and cultural influence. This gave Iran an unprecedented level of access to the Arab heartland. Iranian influence in Iraq operates through many channels, includ-

-ing alliances with Shia political parties, investment in Iraqi markets, religious and cultural links with Shia shrines and seminaries, and the military role of the PMF, which became formally integrated into the Iraqi state after the ISIS crisis.

Saudi Arabia has found it difficult to offset Iran's influence in Iraq. After years of limited engagement, Riyadh reopened its embassy in Baghdad only in 2015 and has since tried to rebuild relations with Sunni and moderate Shia actors, invest in Iraqi development, and encourage Baghdad to move somewhat away from Tehran. However, these efforts have had only limited results. Iran's geographic closeness, sectarian ties, and long-term investment have given it a major structural advantage in Iraq. From an offensive realist perspective, Iraq remains the clearest case of Iran successfully turning a regional power vacuum into lasting influence.

5.5 Lebanon and role of Hezbollah

Hezbollah in Lebanon is perhaps the most advanced and effective component of Iran's proxy network. Created with Iranian assistance in 1982 after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah gradually developed from a local resistance movement into a regional military actor with capabilities that rival those of many states. Iran provides Hezbollah with major financial support, advanced weapons such as precision-guided missiles, and strategic direction through the IRGC. Hezbollah's military arsenal, estimated at more than 150,000 rockets and missiles before the 2024 conflict with Israel, has given Iran a strong deterrent against possible Israeli or U.S. attacks on Iranian territory.

For Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah represents a double challenge. It is both a tool of Iranian influence in Lebanon and the Levant, and a force that weakens the authority and sovereignty of Arab states. Saudi Arabia has responded by designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, encouraging Arab states and political actors in Lebanon to distance themselves from it, and using the Gulf Cooperation Council to limit its regional role. The 2017 incident in which Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation while in Riyadh, widely seen as the result of Saudi pressure, demonstrated how far Saudi Arabia was prepared to go in order to confront Iranian influence in Lebanon.

6. Alliance Formation and External Power Involvement

6.1 The U.S.-Saudi Axis

An important part of the Saudi-Iran rivalry is the role played by external major powers, especially the United States and, increasingly, China and Russia. Their interests, resources, and strategic commitments have strongly influenced the regional balance of power. Realist theory, especially Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat approach, suggests that states align with outside powers against those they consider most threatening, based on factors such as overall power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and perceived aggressive intent. Saudi Arabia's partnership with the United States has been the foundation of its security system since the 1945 meeting between Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz aboard the USS Quincy. Under this arrangement, Saudi Arabia received security protection, including U.S. support against external threats, in return for stable oil access and cooperation on regional security matters.

However, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has become more complicated because of changes in both regional and global politics. The Obama administration's 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, the JCPOA, was viewed in Riyadh as indirectly legitimizing Iran's regional position and created serious tension between Saudi Arabia and the United States. By contrast, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and its maximum pressure policy toward Iran were much closer to Saudi preferences.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia has pursued a strategy of hedging by expanding relations with China, now its largest oil customer, and by cooperating with Russia on energy matters through OPEC+.

This reflects offensive realist logic: Saudi Arabia is trying to increase its strategic flexibility and reduce overdependence on any single great power, thereby improving its autonomy and relative strength.

6.2 The China-Brokered 2023 Saudi-Iran Agreement

The March 2023 agreement brokered by China, under which Saudi Arabia and Iran restored diplomatic relations after a break since 2016, was a major diplomatic event that challenged many assumptions about the future of their rivalry. The agreement, negotiated in Beijing after direct talks between Saudi and Iranian officials, included commitments to reopen embassies, reduce hostile media activity, and cooperate in lowering tensions in Yemen and other areas. From the perspective of realist strategy, China's mediation served its own interests by protecting energy supplies from both countries, expanding its influence in the Middle East, and presenting itself as an alternative diplomatic power to the United States.

However, within a year, it became clear that the situation remained complicated. The agreement appears to have encouraged some early concessions, including Iran's apparent willingness to reduce Houthi attacks on Saudi territory, but the deeper causes of rivalry were not resolved. Iran continued advancing its nuclear program, its proxy networks remained active, and the Gaza war that began in October 2023 introduced fresh pressure into the regional system. Saudi Arabia was already involved in fragile negotiations with the Houthis to reduce violence in Yemen, and Houthi missile and drone attacks on Israel, as well as on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, threatened to weaken those efforts.

From an offensive realist perspective, the 2023 détente is better understood as a tactical adjustment than as a fundamental transformation of the rivalry. It reflected immediate pressures on both sides, including Saudi Arabia's desire to focus on Vision 2030 and Iran's need for economic relief under sanctions. Its durability depends on whether both states continue to see it as useful to their short-term interests. Yet neither side has made the core concessions on nuclear policy, proxy forces, or regional influence that would be necessary for a genuine strategic realignment.

7. The Nuclear Dimension

7.1 Iran's Nuclear Program as Perception of Existential Threat

No issue illustrates the realist logic of power maximization in the Saudi-Iran rivalry more clearly than Iran's nuclear program. In offensive realist terms, nuclear weapons are the strongest possible guarantee of survival because they provide the most reliable deterrent against external attack or regime change. Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability can therefore be understood as a rational strategy within a self-help system in which outside security guarantees are uncertain and adversaries are powerful. For Saudi Arabia, however, a nuclear-armed Iran would fundamentally alter the regional balance of power by creating an asymmetrical rivalry in which Iran possessed the ultimate deterrent.

This is why Saudi leaders have signaled that they may seek the same capability if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. Mohammed bin Salman stated in a 2018 interview that Saudi Arabia would attempt to acquire a nuclear weapon if Iran developed one.

This possibility points to the danger of a wider regional proliferation chain. Saudi Arabia's nuclear position is not only rhetorical. The kingdom has been developing civilian nuclear infrastructure, studying the feasibility of uranium enrichment, and resisting U.S. demands for a strict commitment not to pursue weapons-related capabilities as part of civil nuclear cooperation.

Iran's nuclear program therefore remains one of the main reasons the rivalry continues. It creates a serious threat that Saudi Arabia cannot easily answer through conventional military means, pushing Riyadh toward both external balancing through ties with the United States and Israel and internal balancing through its own nuclear hedging. This dynamic shows how Iran's search for greater security can produce countermeasures that make the region even more unstable, which is exactly the kind of security dilemma described by offensive realism.

8. Foreign Policy and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

8.1 Saudi and Offensive Realism in Practice

The rise of Mohammed bin Salman as Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler from 2015 marked a new phase of assertiveness in Saudi foreign policy that closely fits offensive realist expectations. Under his leadership, Saudi Arabia launched the intervention in Yemen, imposed the blockade on Qatar between 2017 and 2021, pressured the Lebanese prime minister, and adopted a much more active regional security approach. This activism was not limited to balancing Iran. It also reflected a wider effort to shape the regional order in a way that would strengthen Saudi leadership.

Vision 2030, Mohammed bin Salman's broad program of economic and social reform, also has a major geopolitical dimension. By reducing dependence on oil, expanding military capabilities, and presenting Saudi Arabia as a central and responsible regional power, Vision 2030 aims to strengthen the kingdom's claim to leadership in the Arab world. In this sense, Saudi strategy has moved from a mainly defensive model, based on containing Iran through alliances and proxy competition, to a more offensive model of building national power and strategic autonomy.

This shift is consistent with Mearsheimer's argument that regional powers seek hegemony whenever conditions allow. Saudi Arabia is trying to use favorable strategic opportunities to increase its power and influence, even if that means accepting short-term costs in exchange for long-term regional advantage.

9. The 2023–2026 Phase: Contested Détente and the Persistence of Structural Rivalry

9.1 The Gaza War

The Gaza war that began in October 2023, after Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, became the first major test of the Saudi-Iran détente brokered by China. The war revealed both the usefulness and the fragility of the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran. Saudi Arabia, which had been engaged in U.S.-backed discussions with Israel over possible normalization, including a U.S. security guarantee and civilian nuclear cooperation, suspended those talks after October 7. For Iran, the war created an opportunity to test the readiness and coordination of its proxy network, including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Iraqi militias, against Israel and U.S. interests.

Even so, the détente proved more resilient than many observers expected. Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers met several times after October 7 and reaffirmed their commitment to the 2023 agreement. Saudi Arabia also signaled that it would not permit its territory or airspace to be used for military action against Iran, while at the same time intercepting Houthi drones. This reflected a careful Saudi strategy that aimed to preserve the benefits of détente while maintaining independence and demonstrating military resolve.

9.2 Structural Determinants of the Persistence of Rivalry

By 2026, the main structural causes of the Saudi-Iran rivalry remained unresolved. Iran continued to advance its nuclear program, while reports from the IAEA indicated ongoing enrichment and more limited access for inspectors. Although the Axis of Resistance had been weakened by Israeli operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2024 and by the fall of the Assad regime in Syria later that year, it still retained important strength in Yemen and Iraq. The Houthis also continued to control significant parts of Yemeni territory. At the same time, the basic asymmetries between Saudi Arabia and Iran in military power, economic resources, and alliances had not disappeared. From a realist point of view, the present stage of the rivalry can be described as a contested *détente*. This means a period of limited de-escalation driven by short-term interests rather than a true reconciliation. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran appear to believe that direct conflict would be too costly for their current domestic priorities. Saudi Arabia needs regional calm to advance Vision 2030, while Iran needs to manage sanctions and preserve deterrence. However, these temporary shared interests do not resolve the deeper struggle for regional hegemony that has shaped the rivalry for decades.

Realism suggests that if structural conditions change, such as Iran nearing nuclear breakout, Saudi Arabia moving further toward normalization with Israel, a shift in U.S. regional commitments, or changes in China's strategic posture, the current balance could quickly collapse into renewed escalation. In that sense, the 2023 rapprochement should be understood as a pause in a continuing rivalry rather than its final settlement.

10. Sectarianism in Saudi-Iran Relations: A Realist Reassessment

One of the central debates in the study of the Saudi-Iran rivalry concerns the role of sectarianism, especially the Sunni-Shia divide. Constructivist scholars often argue that these identities are a basic cause of conflict and that the deep theological and historical divide between Sunni Wahhabism and Shia Twelver Islam makes confrontation almost inevitable. Realist scholars take a different view. They argue that sectarianism is mainly a political tool used by states to justify claims to authority, mobilize domestic support, and build regional alliances.

The available evidence supports the realist interpretation. Saudi Arabia sees Iran as promoting Shia influence in a largely Sunni regional environment, while Iran sees Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi orientation as an obstacle to broader Muslim unity. Yet both states use religious identity in ways that closely follow political interests rather than purely theological beliefs. Saudi Arabia has cooperated with non-Sunni actors, including Western Christian powers and, more recently, Israel, when strategic circumstances encouraged it to do so. Iran has also supported non-Shia groups, including Sunni Hamas and earlier the Sunni Taliban, when this advanced its regional goals.

For this reason, sectarianism should be understood as a force multiplier rather than the root cause of the rivalry. It intensifies the conflict, makes compromise more politically costly, and helps both states recruit allies and proxies. But even if the two states shared the same religious orientation, the rivalry would likely continue because its deeper cause lies in the structural struggle for regional power in an anarchic system.

11. Implications for India

11.1 India's Energy Security Dilemma

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has important consequences for India's energy security, especially given India's deep strategic and economic interests in the Gulf region. India depends heavily on oil imports from the Gulf, with Saudi Arabia and Iraq historically serving as major suppliers and Iran also playing an important role before U.S. sanctions restricted that relationship. The proxy conflict in Yemen, Iran's repeated threats to disrupt shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, and Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping since 2023 have all directly threatened the stability of India's energy supply lines and increased transport costs.

India has responded by following a policy of multi-alignment. It has tried to maintain strong relations

with both Riyadh and Tehran without openly siding with either one. This approach reflects realist logic at the state level because it allows India to preserve flexibility, protect its interests. Any reduction in Saudi-Iran tensions, including through the China-brokered détente, serves India's interests if it contributes to more stable energy markets. At the same time, the continuing structural instability of the Gulf remains a serious challenge for India's long-term energy planning.

Conclusion

When viewed through offensive realism, the Saudi-Iran rivalry appears to be a structurally driven struggle for regional hegemony that is likely to continue as long as the underlying conditions of the Middle Eastern regional system remain unchanged. Both states act as rational players seeking to maximize power in a self-help environment. Their use of proxy wars, alliances, sectarian narratives, and competition over strategic resources should therefore be seen not as unusual behavior but as expected outcomes of the structural pressures around them. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 created the foundation for this rivalry by introducing a powerful revisionist state into the regional order, and later developments, including the Iraq War, the Arab Spring, the rise of Mohammed bin Salman, and the Gaza war, deepened the rivalry without changing its essential nature.

The 2023 détente brokered by China is an important diplomatic development because it has temporarily lowered the risk of direct confrontation and reopened space for diplomatic engagement. However, from a realist perspective, it does not amount to a true settlement of the rivalry. The main structural drivers remain in place, including competing claims to regional leadership, Iran's nuclear ambitions, active proxy networks, and the absence of a credible regional security framework. The future of the détente depends on both states continuing to believe that cooperation serves their immediate interests, and that calculation may not last indefinitely.

The most important contribution of realism to this debate is that it shifts attention away from the ideological and sectarian surface of the conflict and toward the deeper structural forces that shape state behavior. States do not act primarily because of the identities they claim or the beliefs they express, but because of the material realities of power and security in an anarchic system. Unless the Middle East develops a regional security structure capable of managing the Saudi-Iran security dilemma, whether through a Gulf concert system, an outside security guarantee, or a negotiated power-sharing arrangement, this rivalry is likely to remain a defining feature of Middle Eastern politics. In that sense, the crisis in the region is likely to continue because both states remain engaged in a long-term competition for regional supremacy.

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