

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE IRAN–SAUDI ARABIA RIVALRY FOR REGIONAL INFLUENCE

Abstract

In the Middle East, where numerous states aspire to exert influence and achieve regional dominance, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia holds particular significance. This discord stems from several key factors. In addition to historical confessional and ideological differences, the dynamics of this relationship and, consequently, the balance of power in the region are also shaped by another crucial factor: the United States and its policy toward both actors, as well as the region as a whole. The Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry traces its origins back to 1979, when the Islamic Revolution in Iran gave rise to a new, hostile regime and fundamentally altered the existing status quo in the region. However, the competition between the two countries for regional leadership became more pronounced after 2003, when the regime change in Iraq enabled Iran to begin expanding its influence across the region. Accordingly, this article examines U.S.–Saudi Arabia relations and the political approach toward Iran from 2003 to the present, under successive U.S. administrations. It explores how these policies have significantly influenced the regional rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran for strategic dominance. Over the past two decades, the shifting approaches of the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations toward both their ally Riyadh and their adversary Tehran have had tangible consequences for the balance of power in the Middle East.

Keywords: *The United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Middle East, the Balance of Power*

Contemporary relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are characterized by rivalry and mutual distrust, a dynamic that traces its origins to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Following the revolution, Iran's new political-religious regime positioned itself as an alternative model of Islamic governance, challenging the legitimacy and leadership of the Saudi monarchy in the Muslim world. In addition to the historical confessional and ideological differences between the two countries, there are other factors that influence shifts in the regional balance of power and contribute to the advancement of either side in the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry. One such factor is the United States and its policies in relation to Saudi Arabia and, conversely, in its approach toward Iran.

The aim of this article is to examine the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry for dominance in the Middle East and to assess the influence of the foreign policy orientations of successive U.S. presidential administrations on the regional balance of power. The period under review begins in 2003 and extends to the present day, as this year marks a pivotal turning point in the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry. The U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003 significantly altered the regional security landscape, creating a power vacuum that triggered intensified

competition between the two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, each seeking to expand its influence in the post-Saddam Middle East.

Despite a strategic partnership that had developed over decades, Saudi Arabia did not endorse the United States' decision to intervene in Iraq in 2003. The Kingdom feared that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would facilitate the expansion of Iranian influence - a concern that proved justified. Although President Bush designated Iran as part of the so-called "Axis of Evil" and imposed sanctions in 2003 due to its nuclear program, Iran's regional influence continued to grow.

The formation of a Shiite-led government in Baghdad contributed to the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq, which in turn provoked dissatisfaction in Saudi Arabia, including tensions in its relations with its American ally. Iran's position also improved in Lebanon, where Hezbollah further strengthened following the 2006 war with Israel. Additionally, Iran extended its support to Hamas in Palestine, while maintaining established ties with the Assad regime in Syria. Overall, Bush's policy in the Middle East indirectly contributed to shifting the regional balance of power in favor of the Shiite regime, thereby intensifying the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry for dominance.

A broader shift in regional dynamics followed the foreign policy priorities of the Barack Obama administration, whose strategy called for a change in the approach taken by Bush in the Middle East. However, this shift also involved a reassessment of policies regarding Iran. Obama recognized that Iran's continued development of its nuclear program would strengthen the Shiite regime, potentially prompting an Israeli attack. Such a scenario could trigger a retaliatory response from Iran, escalating into a new military conflict in the region involving U.S. allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia. To prevent such an outcome, the Obama administration emphasized diplomatic containment of Iran. This approach culminated in several years of negotiations that resulted in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. On one hand, the wave of the 'Arab Spring' and, on the other, the lifting of sanctions and Iran's emergence from international isolation enabled Tehran to maintain and even expand its influence in the Middle East. The Democratic approach to Iran's nuclear program provoked dissatisfaction among the Saudis, especially given that the negotiations between American and Iranian officials in Oman were conducted secretly, without Saudi knowledge.

U.S. policy in the Middle East, particularly in relation to Saudi Arabia and Iran, underwent a significant shift following the election of Donald Trump as president. During his first term, U.S.-Saudi relations reached a new level of strategic engagement, signaled early on by Trump's decision to make Riyadh the destination of his first official foreign visit. A key pillar of the renewed U.S.-Saudi partnership was the pursuit of a shared policy aimed at countering Iran. In 2018, the Republican administration's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and the reimposition of sanctions were intended to exert pressure on Tehran and contain its regional ambitions. Despite facing significant economic hardship, Iran continued to apply pressure on its adversaries through the use of proxy forces. This approach culminated in a 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure, which was widely attributed to Iranian-backed actors. In Washington, there was a noticeable reluctance to become actively involved in the crisis, particularly in terms of providing a direct military response to defend a strategic ally. This hesitation prompted a reassessment of foreign policy in Riyadh. Saudi leadership came to recognize the necessity of both diversifying its

alliances and reducing its overreliance on the United States, shifting instead toward a more balanced regional approach—including a recalibration of its stance toward Iran. Instead of pursuing the initially declared joint anti-Iranian strategy, the Saudis opted to initiate a cautious diplomatic approach toward Tehran.

The Biden administration viewed Saudi Arabia as one of its key regional allies, including within the broader strategy aimed at countering Iran. However, unlike its predecessor, the administration adopted a more cautious and selective approach. This shift was most evident in the Biden administration's decision to limit U.S. military involvement in Saudi Arabia's campaign in Yemen. Moreover, the new administration adopted a distinctly different approach toward Iran. The United States' restrained policy created a strategic vacuum and underscored the need for a new regional policy framework. The decline in American support prompted Saudi Arabia to shift its focus from open confrontation with Iran toward the normalization of relations. This shift culminated in the 2023 agreement signed in Beijing, brokered by China. As a result, it can be argued that between 2021 and 2024, under the Biden administration, U.S.–Saudi relations shifted from a framework of strategic entanglement to one increasingly shaped by the logic of political realism. After an initial period of distancing and appeals to human rights, geopolitical realities compelled the allies to resume cooperation. However, the conditional and context-driven nature of Biden's support—particularly regarding the Yemen war and oil production—prompted Saudi Arabia to adopt a new political vision, which entailed embracing a revised regional architecture without direct confrontation with Iran. The Iranian economy, weakened by international sanctions, gradually impacted the country's foreign policy. The erosion of Iran's regional influence became even more pronounced under the new, incumbent U.S. administration.

Developments during Donald Trump's second term as president indicate a shift in the regional balance of power in the Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry, favoring the latter. Trump's first official visit to Saudi Arabia and the agreements announced during that trip signaled a deepening of the bilateral partnership. However, unlike the period from 2017 to 2020, considering Saudi Arabia's relatively more autonomous strategy, Riyadh is likely to prioritize maintaining a course of de-escalation with Iran. Furthermore, regional developments have supported Saudi Arabia's new policy. Israeli military operations significantly curtailed the positions of Iran's ally, Hezbollah, in Lebanon, while the potential overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria presented Riyadh with a new opportunity to restore 'Arab influence' in the region and position itself as a regional leader.