

Iran–Saudi Ties: Can History Project Their Trajectory?

By Emir Hadzikadunic

Abstract

This study examines external realities that Iran and Saudi Arabia have shared throughout their diplomatic history, particularly how the continuity of the specific structural conditions they mutually face within the international and regional order can be instrumental for stability, or instability, in bilateral ties. It explores why each friendly or hostile phase in Saudi–Iranian relations lasted for so long, and examines whether the conditions that created friendly ties can be repeated. It puts forward, in chronological order, the status of great powers in the region, their pole identity and alliance with great powers during multipolar, bipolar and unipolar phases in the international political order, and, finally, their threat environment and corresponding threat perception. It is significant to evaluate how these systems-level factors and determinants outline key pressures on Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as predict the likely course of their relationship in the future.

Introduction

On 24 August 1929, Iran and Saudi Arabia signed the Friendship Treaty, which involved mutual recognition and the establishment of full diplomatic relations. On that occasion, the Pahlavi and Al-Saud dynasties agreed that “inviolable peace and sincere and durable friendship will reign” (Altoraifi, 2012). Over the last 90 years, efforts from both sides to achieve this goal have met with some success. From the early 1950s to late 1970s, the countries concluded other treaties, such as the Commercial Agreement (1953), Agreement over the Islands of al-‘Arabiya and Farsi (1969) or Agreement to Partition Neutral Zone (1978). In sharp contrast to present realities, their foreign policy also converged with regards to Egypt, Yemen, Abu Dhabi, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and Iraq. What began in 1991 as renewed Saudi-Iranian détente extended into another much longer pacifying period that lasted for 17–18 years. The two states signed the Cooperation Agreement (1998), Security Accord (2001) and held Strategic Talks (2006–2007). One may also recall a rare and symbolic gesture, reserved for Saudi Arabia’s closest allies, when King Abdullah cordially greeted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Riyadh Airport in March 2007.

However, in recent times and in some earlier occasions, the Saudi–Iranian relationship has been characterised by opposition on major regional issues. For example, Riyadh backed Saddam Hussein in the bloody Iraq–Iran war from 1980 to 1988. Both sides were also protagonists in the costly “Tanker War” from 1984 to 1988. In February 2008, after a long friendly phase, King Abdullah delivered a strong warning indicating that Riyadh would suspend its relations with Tehran. Since then, their rivalry has gradually evolved into the most enduring security challenge in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region. In particular, the Arab Spring in

Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, and subsequent civil wars in Syria (2011–2019) and Yemen (2015–2019), created new battlegrounds. The unprecedented attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019, which affected global energy markets, have been blamed on Iran.

The question on this 90th anniversary of their diplomatic relations is what common causes can explain and simplify the complex nature of their relations? This study offers three interrelated questions in this regard. First, why have Iran and Saudi Arabia been locked in a fierce struggle? The second relates to the likely prospects for bilateral ties. What comes next? Will ties tend towards the smooth or the rough? The third set of questions concerns the past — why did two rivals collaborate previously? Can what made them friends then happen again?

To answer these questions, this article draws on the structural realist propositions of Oran R Young, Kenneth N Waltz, Stephen M Walt, and John J Mearsheimer. Structural realism presents a systemic portrait of international politics depicting major component units or states according to the manner of their rearrangement (Waltz, 1998). In addition to states whose primary aim is to survive, the international-political system is also composed of a structure which is defined by an anarchical ordering principle and shifting distribution of capabilities. Referred to in this text as an environment or situation, a structure also outlines a set of constraining conditions which prevents states from taking certain actions or pressuring them towards taking others. This generates specific “if-then” statements that can historically be verified. In the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, the following propositions that correspond to specific phases in their bilateral history are offered for historical evaluation. First, if Iran and Saudi Arabia are weaker states and largely associated with a single great power in a multipolar world, then their threat environment and corresponding threat perception will limit their rivalry. Second, if Iran and Saudi Arabia share their alliance with a common great power in a bipolar system, then the tightness of the system will make it difficult for them to oppose each other. Third, if Iran does not follow rules of polarity, the system will penalise it. Fourth, if a sole superpower in a unipolar world is not restrained from its sub-system, then Tehran and Riyadh will find themselves having to be more peaceful than hostile with each other. Fifth, if a sole superpower in a unipolar world disengages from the sub-system within which Iran and Saudi Arabia play an active role, then Iran and Saudi Arabia will find themselves in a situation of competition in a much less constrained environment. Systems-level factors that derive from these statements outline and determine key pressures on Iran and Saudi Arabia. They explain why each specific period in Saudi-Iranian diplomatic history lasted for so long, when and why things changed, and whether these changes will happen again. The historical record of Saudi-Iranian relations and corresponding structural realities also challenge Iran’s long-held official view that regional stability and collaboration with Saudi Arabia is subject to new arrangements of collective security in the Persian Gulf that exclude outside powers in general, and the United States in particular.

This article relies on in-depth historical accounts (Safran, 1985; Malek, 1991; Badeeb, 1993; Murray, 2010; Altoraifi, 2012; Banafsheh, 2016) to recognise general patterns of Saudi–Iran ties at different periods. Cordial phases are characterised by stability of political contacts, positive tones and friendly outcomes. On the other hand, a lack of dialogue, verbal animosity and mutual opposition on major regional issues marked tense periods. Based on historical evidence, this study identifies three separate and relatively friendly periods, the first of which evolved in the multipolar world in late 1920s and early 1930s (Appendix 1), the second in the bipolar world from 1946 to 1979 (Appendix 2), and a third which occurred during the unipolar moment in the early 1990s and faded away towards the end of the first presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Appendix 4). This

analysis also identifies two hostile periods, the first of which advanced in the 1980s (Appendix 3) and a second which has continued for the last decade (Appendix 5).¹

Initial Collaboration — British-centric

A low level of observed interactions between Riyadh and Tehran in the 1920s may indicate the unimportance of their relations at this particular phase. In 1924, Iran had displayed minimal interest in the tribal battles between Hashemite and Al Saud over the territory of Hejaz (Banafsheh, 2016). In 1925, Persian envoys had also visited the holy places at Ibn Saud’s invitation and limited their curiosity to the status of Iranian pilgrims and Shia inhabitants in Madinah and Qatif. Details of early diplomatic exchanges are presented in the Table 1 below:

Table 1: Initial Contacts

1925	Abd al-Aziz sought formal Iranian recognition of Najd and Hejaz.
1925	Reza Khan offered Saudi ruler to mediate an end to the siege on Jeddah.
1925	Abd al-Aziz congratulated Reza shah and wished success to new Pahlavi dynasty.
1926	Abd al-Aziz expressed willingness to help Persia restore the desecrated Shi’i sites.
1927	Prince Faisal bin Abd al-Aziz hold discussion with the Persian consulate and observed that Persia might recognize the kingdom in return for basic guarantees for the Shia holy sites.
1927	Iran lodged an official complaint to the League of Nations when King Abdul Aziz signed a bilateral treaty with the British in Jeddah in which he recognized the government of Bahrain.
1928	King Abd al-Aziz reached out to Reza Shah to sign a mutual security pact. His initial proposal was substituted with a nonbinding promise of nonaggression.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Badeeb, 1993; Altoraifi, 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Initial contacts culminated when two states (at that time, the Kingdom of Persia and the Kingdom of Hejaz, Najd and its Dependencies) concluded and signed the Friendship Treaty in Tehran in 1929. In the aftermath of the Treaty, their consuls also accorded reciprocal treatment in accordance with the rules of international law. In 1930, Reza Shah appointed Habibollah Khan Hoveida as his ambassador to the newly-established Embassy in Jeddah. King Abd al-Aziz assigned Rashid Pasha as his representative to Persia and Iraq (Badeeb, 1993). The new friendship was also reflected in the arrival of a naval ship from Persia, newly acquired from Europe. It docked at Jeddah, where the crew was warmly received by the government and the city’s residents (Mohaghegh, 1931; Banafsheh, 2016). Despite limited interest in each other throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, their formal relations remained smooth until a single incident with an Iranian pilgrim in December 1943. As a result, both sides lodged protests and eventually broke off diplomatic ties in March 1944 (Badeeb, 1993). Their diplomatic exchanges from 1925 to 1944 are illustrated in more detail in Appendix 1.

Several factors highlight specific external realities that Iran and Saudi Arabia shared in the late 1920s and early 1930s. First, their foreign and security policies were largely British-centric within a multipolar system in which Iran was generally more suspicious of foreign interference. Both sides relied on the British Residency in the Persian Gulf as an official colonial sub-division to ensure stability along their borders (Banafsheh, 2016). By the time Riyadh and Tehran extended diplomatic feelers in the mid-1920s, the United Kingdom was already deeply-rooted in the system. It had penetrated key regional entities in the Gulf’s southern shores and effectively controlled potentially disputed areas such as Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Arab sheikhdoms (emirates). In this

¹ As the article deals with regularity and repetitions in their relations, it does not discuss unexpected events, minor variations and frictions that actually happen within their largely defined friendlier or hostile phases. For example, it does not discuss Saudi opposition of anti-Soviet Bagdad Pact in 1955 that arose within relatively friendly phase or their shuttle diplomacy in 1985 during dark days of the Iraq-Iran war that happened within relatively hostile phase.

regard, the potential desire of Iran and Saudi Arabia to act independently in these areas and without taking into account British regional interests was largely limited.

The British regional dominance and common identity of Iran and Saudi Arabia with the British pole reduced the phenomenon of cross-cutting relationships among different axes of conflict that usually exist in the multipolar system (Young, 1968, 371). As other great powers played a secondary role in the Persian Gulf, the number of great-great power dyads (two-way relationships) was reduced, which is generally a more stable situation, according to Kenneth N Waltz (2010, 136). Such an environment could hardly generate serious discontinuity in the power relationship between the British Empire on one side and Iran and Saudi Arabia on the other. Any attempt to break this continuity would have resulted in serious trouble. The case of Nazi Germany is illustrative in this regard. Berlin made limited but successful attempts to increase power projection in Iran in the late 1930s and early 1940s. As expected, this gave rise to security tensions, which resulted in the forced abdication of Reza Shah, the swift occupation of Iran by British and Russian troops, and inactive relations with Riyadh. Saudi Arabia avoided such issues, as Abd al-Aziz asked the Germans to leave his country in 1941.

Despite the relative calm of the early phase, Iranian claims over some territories and boundaries along the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf existed. For example, it lodged an official complaint with the League of Nations when Abdul Aziz signed a bilateral treaty with the British in Jeddah and recognised the government of Bahrain in 1927 (Badeeb, 1993). This claim is an example of what happens when Saudi Arabia hitches itself onto a dominant great power at the expense of Iranian national sentiment. It also revealed possible power imbalances and a structural dichotomy in which Iran was perceived to be a stronger regional actor than Saudi Arabia because of its sense of cultural superiority and deeper historical roots. In this case, however, Iran could not take on Saudi Arabia or Great Britain over the status of Bahrain or project power externally because, as suggested by Mearsheimer (2001, 37), behaviour is influenced not only by what states want, but also by their ability to realise these desires. Unlike the situation today, Iran was far weaker and vulnerable in the 1920s and 1930s. As a result, Reza Shah began the process of modernising the Iranian military and standing up an army. He was also consolidating his power domestically after declaring himself as a new Iranian shah in 1925.

The early phase of Saudi-Iranian relations and related structural realities in their sub-system could be used to assess their present-day options as well as forthcoming scenarios. With a multipolar system likely to take hold sooner rather than later, single great power dominance in the regional sub-system is growingly more difficult to sustain. Besides the US, other big powers have also enlarged their military footprints. For instance, Russia has been using the naval facility in Tartus (Syria) for decades, and local airfields since 2015. In 2017, China formally opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, on the strategically situated route to the Suez Canal. As part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, India also initiated defence cooperation with Oman in 2018, which allowed its navy to use Oman's port of Duqm. These features of an extended sub-system would potentially increase the number of relationships which cut across different axes of conflict. A system with four great powers has six great-great power dyads. If we add the two minor powers of Iran and Saudi Arabia, then the number of dyads will also multiply. The question also remains if Iran and Saudi Arabia will share their pole identity in tomorrow's multipolar system, in which the United States, China, Russia, India and, possibly, some European alliance play an active role. If Tehran and Riyadh come together, their threat environment will improve and their hostility will likely decrease. If we assume that Iran shares a pole identity with China or Russia, and Saudi Arabia continues to ally with the United States, the tensions between the two sides is likely to continue. Their ability to project power beyond their borders will also influence matters. Today, Saudi Arabia has a stronger economy than Iran and can afford a larger military budget, which is already six times the size of Iranian military

spending. Iran has a larger population (estimated at 80 million), a bigger military (an estimated 350,000 active duty soldiers) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (estimated at 125,000 members), including the Quds Force, which commands Iran's foreign military operations and relations with client allies in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. If Iran wants to pursue offensive behaviour and regional hegemony, it is more likely to do so within a multipolar system. As argued by Mearsheimer (2001, 340), multipolar systems are less firmly structured than bipolar ones. In such systems, both major and minor powers usually have considerable flexibility, which increases the likelihood of conflict. Therefore, the conditions that made Iran and Saudi Arabia sign their Friendship Treaty in 1929 are unlikely to be replicated. Instead, the factors at play now are more likely to further cloud bilateral relations.

Second Friendly Phase — Shared Polarity

The in-depth historical account of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the 1950s points to a systemic recurrence of friendlier behaviour for three bipolar decades. The strength of their collaboration in the first decade was expressed in different arenas, such as converging Saudi-Iranian interests in Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew King Farouk in the socialist-republican coup; Saudi Arabia's dispute with Abu Dhabi over the Buraimi oasis in 1956; joint support for Jordan when revolts threatened the continuity of the Hashemite monarchy in 1958; and preventing a socialist coup in Lebanon in 1958. In the 1960s, Iran and Saudi Arabia founded Opec and OIC with other states, and established the Arab-Iranian Friendship Organization. Iran also supported Saudi Arabia in a proxy war against Egypt in Northern Yemen from 1962 to 1965. In 1969, the two states also signed the Agreement over the Islands of al-'Arabiya and Farsi, while in the 1970s, Iran and Saudi Arabia were twin pillars of the US axis and were the closest of allies. They exchanged high-level visits, contained Iraq's aggressive aspirations, and supported other pro-Western governments, such as Oman, against internal revolutionary elements. It is also illustrative that Iran declared a week of mourning when King Faisal was assassinated in 1975 (Badeeb, 1993; Banafsheh, 2016).

The dominant structural force that prevailed through the three decades or so of close bilateral ties is the bipolar world order of the time, and the fact that both sides allied themselves with the United States. Their alliance with Washington was certainly a result of proximity, or lack thereof. As argued by Steven M Walt (1985, 36), the Soviet Union was the largest power on the Eurasian land mass and posed a greater threat to the states on or near its borders. The US, by contrast, was sufficiently distant from them to be a relatively less significant threat. Mearsheimer (2001, 340) argued that the general closeness of states aligned to each pole in the bipolar system made it difficult for minor powers within it to oppose each other. He also maintained that both great powers would seek to prevent fighting between their own minor-power allies. As the bipolar system affected the regional sub-system, it explains why Iran and Saudi Arabia opposed other revolutionary states that identified themselves with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Iran and Saudi Arabia feared their rivals among Arab nationalists, socialists or communists far more than they feared each other. This fear was great enough that it not only drew Saudi Arabia, a Wahhabi Islamist state, and Iran, then a nationalist and pro-secular Shia state, together, but also made them more receptive to Islamic political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. As Iran and Saudi Arabia accepted American dominance, they complemented each other and set aside issues that could have split them, including the sectarian divide.

In this era, one may ask why Great Britain's decision in December 1968 to withdraw its forces from the Gulf by 1971 did not disrupt the friendly ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Faisal bin Salman al-Saud (2003, Preface vii) argued that the lengthy British Imperial presence guaranteed stability in the Gulf and delayed the rise of historical, political and territorial disputes among countries on both sides of the waterway. By that logic, the

British withdrawal should have created a power vacuum which Iran and Saudi Arabia would have naturally been interested in filling. Iran’s parliament, for example, declared Bahrain the country’s 14th state in 1957, while Saudi Arabia had longstanding border issues with Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, and Kuwait.

That it did not is down to several factors. First, the collapse of Pax Britannica in the Gulf region did not affect the bipolar nature of the international system. Great Britain was not a superpower, but either a great or middle power in decline, depending on one’s view. At the same time, the international system remained strongly allied with the Gulf sub-system. Second, Iran and Saudi Arabia were closely aligned with the US, the overwhelming power in the region, and were strong building blocks in American policy of containing the Soviet Union. Third, their positions elevated them to more important roles in the region, making them the guardians of regional stability in 1972. So eager was the Shah for their mutual leadership role that he boldly informed the US that it could set aside its role of Persian Gulf protector for as long as it wanted, because Riyadh and Tehran were prepared to do the job (Alikhani, 1975–76; Banafsheh, 2016). Both countries also benefited from the situation by increasing arms purchases from the Americans, leading to a ten-fold increase in US weapons exports to them (Banafsheh, 2016). Details of the collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Iran in this period are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Saudi-Iranian Collaboration in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s

1969	Iran and Saudi Arabia signed the Agreement over the Islands of al-‘Arabiya and Farsi...
1969	Faisal turned for help to the shah to counter south Yemen’s air raids in Saudi Arabia. Shah ordered round-the-clock flights for two days to deliver military equipment.
1969	Mutual support of Iran and Saudi Arabia to establish the OIC.
1969	Iran dropped its claims to Bahrain.
1971	Iranian military took control of three small islands claimed by both Tehran and Abu Dhabi. Saudi Arabia, the US and Kuwait provided Iran with backdoor assistance at the UNSC to thwart the case.
1971	Iran and Saudi Arabia joined Egypt and Morocco in the Afro–France Safari Club. It was a code name for an elite intelligence force formed to support anti-communist regimes.
1972	A high-level visit by Iran’s ministry of finance to S. Arabia. Two states expanded joint investments.
1973	Iraq pulled out from seized border post near Basra fearing from Saudi–Iranian reprisal force.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Badeeb, 1993; Altoraifi, 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Given this, the best conditions for collaboration between Iran and Saudi Arabia will likely be derived under a system in which there are two opposing blocs and Tehran and Riyadh were aligned with a common one. Such a bipolar system may be established again if China continues its rise and no other great powers emerge. If so, China may become the most dominant power in East Asia and a peer competitor to the United States at the same time. This competition will probably extend to other strategic areas, including, naturally, the Persian Gulf. These geopolitical realities will underline the interconnection between the international order on the one hand, and the regional one on the other. The factor that would determine future relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is whether they align with the same power: If they do so, they will share an identical threat perception, regardless of other factors which may create friction in ties. If the opposite happens, then both sides will find themselves naturally opposed to each other. A third possible scenario is that one side becomes a great power ally, while the order charts an independent foreign policy — this particular scenario was the reason both sides were hostile towards each other in the 1980s.

The Turning Point in 1979

The idea that the 1979 Islamic Revolution inaugurated a new foreign policy direction in Iran is largely accepted. It is also conventional wisdom that domestic change in Iran essentially acted as a spark for enmity between Iran and Saudi Arabia — the new Islamic Republic essentially opposed an old Saudi monarchy’s claim to the leadership of the Muslim world. However, it is important to make a clear distinction between domestic and systemic forces. It is important to recognise that hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia did not begin immediately after the Revolution. The exile of Shah Reza Pahlavi on 16 January 1979, the return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Tehran on 11 February 1979, the abolishment of the monarchy, and the imposition of a new ideology did not impact ties from the outset. In July 1979, Iran’s first post-revolutionary Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, received a Saudi delegation, and both sides expressed a hope that ties would improve. Saudi Arabia’s King Khalid also called the revolution a beginning that would lead to further closeness and understanding, and Prince Fahd claimed great respect for Iran’s new leadership (Azimi, 2001–2002; Banafsheh, 2016). Besides, Iran’s provisional revolutionary government kept up a dialogue with the United States, which Saudi Arabia was strongly allied with. Bazargan and his Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi held a meeting with US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in Algiers in early November 1979.

But as the theory holds, the introduction of a new threat to the existing order will result in a change to the status quo, and this turning point arrived on 4 November 1979, when 52 American diplomats were taken hostage at the US Embassy in Tehran. With this act, the Islamic Republic of Iran completely abandoned its alliance with the Americans, one that was shared with Saudi Arabia. It is not coincidental that in that same month, sectarian riots in the Saudi eastern province of Al-Sharghiya erupted. It was during this time that Ayatollah Khomeini argued that “...the Islamic world must turn to Iran’s leadership to win its freedom and independence” (Parsi, 2007). Tehran also ignored the Soviet pole, initiating a new foreign policy — “Neither East, nor West — but the Islamic Republic!” In this respect, Iran showed little sensitivity to the limits imposed by the international system (Walt, 1996, 264). Its departure from the previous order generated enormous pressure on it and Saudi Arabia to alter their patterns of peaceful and collaborative behaviour. More specifically, a new sub-regional order, of which Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq were the most important components, became partially disconnected from the international bipolar order. There were thus three elements in this new order: A revisionist and pro-Soviet Iraq, a pro-American Saudi Arabia, which preferred the status quo, and an Iran that remained tied to neither. At the same time, none of these regional actors was a potential hegemon.

It was a perfect situation for “buck passing” — a phenomenon that is widespread in a multipolar order, and when threatened states do not share a common border with more aggressive ones (Mearsheimer, 2001, 267–268). In such cases, the impetus for endangered states to change their behaviour is more powerful and explains why Saudi Arabia backed revisionist and anti-imperialist Iraq against Iran, with whom Riyadh does not share any land border. The forces for the status quo, the argument goes, would look for opportunities to pass the buck — get someone else to do the heavy lifting in order to contain the threat. (Mearsheimer, 2001, 269). Saudi Arabia simultaneously feared both Iran and Iraq, the only two countries strong enough to project power in their immediate neighbourhood. The United States also had reason to pass the buck. It wanted to punish those which showed little respect for the rules of polarity, or opposed American dominance, which both Iran and Iraq did. One may also argue that it was in Washington’s interest to have both countries involved in a protracted and deadly war. Henry Kissinger’s famous line, “it’s a pity both sides can’t lose”, is illustrative in this particular case. Iraq was a perfect “buck-catcher” in the regional sub-system. It was a radical and revisionist Arab state with a powerful military power, and also antagonistic towards Iran. It was also a key component in the order within which Iran and Saudi Arabia opposed each other.

It is not difficult to find historical validation for this argument. Stephen M Walt (1996, 18) argued that revolutions add to the pressures that lead to war by shifting the balance of threat and giving states reason or opportunity to go to war. The Iranian Revolution increased the pressure on neighbouring states and shifted the regional order and threat balance between Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. A few months before Iraqi aggression on Iranian territory, President Saddam Hussein initiated the Pan-Arab Charter in Baghdad on 8 February 1980. The key provision in this charter declared that should Iraq go to war with a non-Arab state, other Arab countries must rally behind it. The charter provided perfect cover for Saudi intentions. On 13 February, led by Prince Nayef, Saudi Arabia inked the charter, believing Iraq to be the only credible deterrent against the proliferation of Iran’s revolution (Banafsheh, 2016). Brzezinski, the US National Security Adviser, also said that Iraq played a central role in containing Iran. His statement was made despite provisions in the Pan–Arab Charter that rejected foreign interference in the region (Safran, 1985).

Thus, the Saudi–Iran hostility in 1980s did not happen in vacuum. Tehran’s departure from the existing order generated an enormous amount of pressure on both states to significantly alter their behaviour. Iran abandoned friendly connections with Saudi Arabia, which maintained an active and strategic relationship with the US, while the Saudis limited friendly connections with Iran because of its messianic refusal to abide by the existing order. It also viewed Iran’s export of revolution as a potent offensive threat. These new forces led to the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in January 1981. They also explain other hostile events that recurred throughout this phase, as presented in the Table 3 below:

Table 3: Saudi-Iranian Hostility in the 1980s

1980-88	Saudi Arabia supported Iraq against I. R. Iran. It provided US\$24.8 billion plus logistical support.
1981	Iran abandoned talks with Riyadh to end the war with Iraq.
1981-82	Saudi Arabia increased financial aid to Iraq as Iran repelled Iraqi aggression and advanced into Iraq.
1984	Iran attacked Saudi vessels in the Persian Gulf.
1984-88	Iran and Saudi Arabia were indirectly involved in the Tanker War.
1984	The Saudi Air Force downs an Iranian F-4 fighter over Saudi offshore oil facilities in the Gulf.
1986	S. Arabia decided to increase oil production to bring prices down and pressure Tehran.
1987	Hajj incident. Tehran reported that 400 Iranian pilgrims were killed.
1988	Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Iran in April.
1988	Saudi Arabia bans imports of Iranian products.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Altorai, 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Today, the United States and Saudi Arabia are again interested in buck-passing as Iran adopts a more hegemonic regional posture. What has changed is that Iraq cannot take on the role it did in the 1980s, considering its weakened state and the fact that Iran has a good measure of influence over it. The irony now is that Saudi Arabia could be the perfect buck-catcher. It has a relatively strong military, and is already jostling with Iran for regional primacy. This may mean a repeat of what happened in the past — ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia will become extremely challenging as the rivalry heats up, and the situation could escalate into direct conflict at some point.

Third Friendly Phase — Iraqi Factor and Unipolar Caution

On March 18, 1991, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati held an extensive dialogue with his Saudi counterpart, Prince Saud al-Faisal, in Muscat, Oman. *The New York Times* quoted him as saying: “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have reached understanding on solving all problems between

them and restoring diplomatic ties within the next 48 hours.” The following month, Velayati also paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia and discussed with Saud al-Faisal issues of Gulf security, economic cooperation and Hajj disputes. At this meeting, Saud al-Faisal described the role of Iran in regional affairs as important (Alsultan and Pedram, 2016). This development was a huge step, even though it only amounted to a state of détente, not rapprochement (Altorafi, 2012, 179). It is highlighted with other important outcomes and encounters in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Turning Point in Early 1990s

1991	Riyadh and Tehran upgraded their bilateral relations to the ambassadorial level.
1991	Mohammad Ali Hadi, new Iranian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, announced that Saudi Arabia and Iran were “two wings of the Muslim world”.
1991	President Rafsanjani met Crown Prince Abdullah on the side-lines of OIC conference in Senegal in what was the first official consultation at this level since 1979.
1991	Bilateral trade, flights and the hajj resumed.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Altorafi, 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Strikingly, this change in the Saudi–Iranian bilateral history has one factor in common with previous shifts. Again, a new threat became the guiding and organising principle in their relationship. Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and its new posture in the regional order created new realities for Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iraq posed a serious threat to the security of Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council for reasons that in Walt’s theory can be linked to Baghdad’s proximity, offensive capabilities and offensive intentions (1985, 9–13). Iraq suddenly became the most immediate threat to the GCC nations (Nonneman, 2005, 180) and provoked a new balancing behavior that is the dominant tendency when such events occur. In December 1990, the six GCC members declared that they would welcome better ties with Iran and that Iran should be included in any future regional security system. Tehran responded with readiness to collaborate in all aspects of the Gulf security plan (Malek, 1991). Its behaviour painted it as a rational and responsible actor, changing its image in the region and the world, thus paving the way for international cooperation (Soltani, 2011). The friendly diplomatic discourse between Saudi Arabia and Iran that then continued for almost 18 years became a useful historical reference for assessing the deep causes for their détente from 1991 to 1997, and the rapprochement process from 1997 to 2007.

This brings us to the question of unipolar dominance in the regional order as a defining component and cause for friendlier relations between both. It is certainly more difficult to use the unipolar logic in our case because of limited evidence. This article, however, argues from a historical and theoretical perspective that relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in a unipolar world primarily revolve around the policies of a sole superpower and the related structural modifications in the regional order. This phase of Saudi-Iranian relations coincided with an international order in which there was only one dominant power. The United States did not face any challenger at the international level - in other words, it was not constrained by Russia or anyone else if it chose to deal militarily with a rogue state. The American-led coalition swiftly defeated Iraqi forces and ushered in a period, albeit brief, in which it was the unsurpassed power in the world. The US also stabilised and pacified the system by launching a new offshore balancing strategy and entering into a series of defence agreements with GCC members. It formalised a defence pact with Saudi Arabia and placed Riyadh at the centre of these partnerships. Despite some pushback from Tehran, an increased American military presence in the region generally leads to stable ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is because a US-centred order in the Middle East decreases the threat perception in Riyadh, making it more secure against potential regional hegemony, including Iran. Such an order also exposes the Iranian regime to the most powerful state in the

system. Tehran particularly distrusts the unipolar order because it constrains its behaviour. As a change-driven state, it does not like any external power limiting its foreign policy options.

In this period, Riyadh and Tehran were exceptionally close between 1997 and 2001. This was the most constructive period of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, during which the Cooperation Agreement and Security Accord were concluded in 1998 and 2001, respectively. As their rapprochement culminated within several years of Mohammad Khatami's presidency, it implies that his reform-minded policies were a factor. His belief in dialogue was designed to facilitate communication, leading to coexistence, tolerance and a degree of cooperation in the global arena (Tanzmini, 2009). But while Khatami's policies were a factor, they were certainly not the only, or major, one. The main reason for their relatively constructive relations during this period was unrivalled US hegemony, and, specifically, a new American posture towards Tehran. In June 1998, the Americans announced their readiness to shift their policy towards Iran. In a speech to the Asia Society, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said: "As the wall of mistrust comes down, we can develop with the Islamic Republic, when it is ready, a road-map leading to normal relations. Obviously, two decades of mistrust cannot be erased overnight. The gap between us remains wide. But it is time to test the possibilities for bridging this gap." In January 1999, she also declared the policy of Iranian containment officially dead, and announced that Iran was too important to be isolated (Murray, 2010). These circumstances came about because of an unshakeable US commitment to the Saudis. Nevertheless, any discussion between Washington and Tehran in a different structural setting in which the US is less committed to Saudi Arabia may produce the opposite results. American cooperation with Iran will likely increase Saudi anxiety.

In this era, one may ask about limits to Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. One example of this is the fact that both sides have never managed to forge a common security arrangement. At the peak of their collaboration in 2000, the Iranian Minister of Defence, Admiral Ali Shamkhani, proposed new arrangements for collective security in the Persian Gulf that excluded the United States, including the creation of a joint army "for the defence of the Muslim world". "The sky's the limit for Iranian-Saudi Arabian relations and co-operation, as the whole of Islamic Iran's military might is in the service of our Saudi and Muslim brothers," he said (Altorafi, 2012, 215). Unsurprisingly, the Saudis balked. They were not ready to sacrifice a long-term security arrangement with the US. Doing so would be akin to Japan entering into a security pact with China while exiting its defence treaty with the US. Riyadh's preference of sticking with Washington over Tehran was rational for reasons of aggregate power, proximity and offensive intentions - Iran is an immediate neighbour with a larger population and potential offensive intentions. The United States, by contrast, is far away and does not have hostile intentions towards Saudi Arabia. This also explains why Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with Iran on internal security matters in 2001 that excluded military collaboration. According to Article 1 of the Security Accord, both sides were obliged to respect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the other and refrain from inciting any violence or lending any support to groups or organisations seeking to undermine the internal security of either state (Aghababaei and Rezaei, 2010; Altorafi, 2012). This was driven primarily by the experience of the early 1980s, when Iran attempted to project power externally by mobilising pro-Iranian revolutionary groups and non-state actors in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia.

But what of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003? The forces uncorked by the invasion are seen today as cataclysmic for the region, but when America occupied Iraq, bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were unaffected for the first few years, despite the instability and insurgency that followed. The reason is that Iran and Saudi Arabia have always worried about Iraq's place in the regional order. Iran is concerned for historical and security reasons. In addition to the war of the 1980s, Iran also fought 24 wars with Iraq's Ottoman patrons over the course of more than four centuries (Banafsheh, 2016). On the Saudi side, the new Iraqi

leadership raised new threats: Empowered by its majority Shia population, Baghdad could have sought an alliance with Tehran. King Abdullah highlighted that Riyadh and Tehran should recognise that Baghdad was one corner of a triangle, and that developments there had to remain stable for the three countries to work well together (Banafsheh, 2016).

Our main proposition, therefore, holds. Saudi Arabia and Iran remained friendly till 2007 because of the unipolar order of the time. The massive American military presence in the region essentially acted as a stabiliser for Saudi–Iran ties. That it took a scant three weeks for the US to pummel the Iraqi army and overthrow Saddam Hussein’s regime did not go unnoticed in Tehran. Just four days after President George W. Bush made his now-infamous “Mission Accomplished” statement on May 1, 2003, Iran submitted a diplomatic proposal to the US via the Swiss Ambassador for comprehensive negotiation over a wide range of issues, also known as grand bargain proposal with the US. (Parsi, 2007). In that proposal, Iran signalled its willingness to discuss subjects including Hamas and Hezbollah, something it is usually extremely reluctant to do. In Saudi Arabia, the rising number of US troops being poured into Iraq — by November 2007, some 170,000 soldiers were in-country — had a reassuring effect. With one side cowed and the other reassured by American military might, Iran and Saudi Arabia pursued cautious policies and preserved dialogue at a high-level. Ali Larijani alone paid four official visits to Saudi Arabia for consultations with Prince Bandar and King Abdullah. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was accorded red carpet treatment and was greeted by the Saudi King at the airport when he arrived in Riyadh in March 2007. The Saudi press hailed Ahmadinejad’s visit as another sign of deepening ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and referred to the two countries as “brotherly nations” (Mafinezam and Mehrabi, 2007, 70). The friendly nature of Saudi–Iran ties that spanned 1991–2008 is detailed in Appendix 4.

The Current Hostile Phase: A Power Vacuum

In February 2008, King Abdullah summoned Iran’s Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and delivered a strong warning that Saudi Arabia would suspend its relations with Tehran. The King said that “Iran should stop interfering in Arab affairs”, and gave it until the end of the year to improve its relations with Saudi Arabia (Altoraiifi, 2012, 252–253). A leaked cable from the US Embassy dated April 20, 2008 also asserted that King Abdullah urged an American delegation to put an end to the nascent Iranian nuclear programme. The cable quoted the King as saying: “Cut off the head of the [Iranian] snake” (Colvin, 2010). Some key turning points in this new phase of Saudi-Iran ties are highlighted in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Turning Point from 2008 to 2011

2008	Riyadh remained extremely concerned with the agreement between Iraq and US on the status of US forces in Iraq.
2009	Prince Saud al-Faisal called in Cairo for a joint Arab strategy to deal with the threat emanating from Tehran.
2009	King Abdullah delivered a clear warning through Foreign Minister Mottaki who visited Saudi Arabia. He noted that Saudi Arabia would consider all options to defend its interests against Tehran’s aggression.
2010	Iranian joint ministerial and commerce committees ceased to meet.
2011	Ali Akbar Salehi’s intention to visit Riyadh was turned down by his Saudi counterpart.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Altoraiifi, 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Why the abrupt turn of events? A closer examination reveals that a changing US posture in the region was the reason. In December 2007, the US took its first steps towards disengaging from Iraq. In 2008, the Iraqi authorities and the US began discussions that led to an agreement on the status of American forces in Iraq. The

terms of the agreement were that US combat forces would withdraw from Iraqi cities by 30 June, 2009, and that all American troops would be out by 31 December 2011. The withdrawal plan also included Iraq's demands to ban US military strikes against Iran and Syria. At the same time, it did not include any mutually reinforcing roles for Riyadh and Tehran over the future of Iraq (Banafsheh, 2016).

These developments upended the status quo in the region. With a pending American exit, Tehran was assured of having more space to expand its influence and growing proxy network. Second, Iraq was no longer an occupied, neutral or buffer state between Riyadh and Tehran. Instead, it tilted towards Iran on all major regional issues. Iraqi Shia militia groups also grew bolder, and were free to carry out mortar attacks across the border with Saudi Arabia. Finally, the exit of Saudi Arabia's security blanket left them worried about the Americans' commitment to maintaining the regional order.

There is additional historical relevance in this argument. In November 2008, Riyadh remained extremely concerned with the actual agreement between Iraqi authorities and the US. On the other hand, Iran's view was that Saudi Arabia stood ready to re-ignite the Sunni insurgency in a bid to prevent US forces from leaving Iraq. Tehran also opposed any talks that extended the withdrawal timeline (Banafsheh, 2016). By and large, the US shared Iran's view, with Secretary of Defence Robert Gates famously remarking to the French foreign minister that Saudi Arabia wanted to "fight Iranians to the last American", and that it was "time for them to get in the game" (Lynch, 2010). The first part of his statement would be repeated by prominent Iranians years later.

In December 2011, the flag of American forces in Iraq was lowered in Baghdad. The next year, President Barack Obama announced a new East Asia Strategy (also known as the "Pivot to Asia"). This new strategy shifted the American focus from the Middle East to Asia, and was specifically a response to China's increasing muscularity in the region. With the shift, the US' central role in the Middle East was marginalised. It stayed largely uncommitted over the civil war in Syria and remained unwilling to prevent the rise to power of the Houthis in Yemen. It also allowed Russia to take a strategic role in the Syrian civil war, giving Iran an opening. Then, in April 2016, came The Obama Doctrine in the Atlantic in which the president cautioned against any US involvement in proxy wars fuelled by Saudi-Iranian competition in the Middle East. He also invited the Saudis to "share" the Middle East with their Iranian foes and settle their differences themselves (Schmierer, Jeffrey, Nader and Nazer, 2016). This idea of sharing the Middle East jolted Saudi Arabia, in particular. The present US administration has also adopted a policy of restraint in the region, despite taking a more antagonistic line towards the Iranian regime. In December 2018, President Donald Trump announced that he was withdrawing all American troops from Syria, sparking alarm among US allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, that Iran's position in Syria, and thus the region, would be strengthened by such a move. Earlier this month, he followed through on this, pulling out US troops and clearing the way for a Turkish offensive against America's Kurdish allies. Ankara obliged, and on 9 October, it initiated the offensive with air strikes which were followed by a ground push into Syria. Such moves aside, Trump has continued to support Riyadh's efforts to contain Iran. In May 2017, he visited Saudi Arabia, making him the only American president to make the country his first overseas stop as president. In May 2018, he also walked away from the nuclear deal with Iran, and then imposed new sanctions on Tehran, which were ratcheted up in 2019. This year, he put more pressure on Tehran with a symbolic military build-up in the Persian Gulf. However, his reluctance to use military force to counter actions such as the shooting down of a US drone and an attack on Saudi oil facilities — which Washington blamed on Iran — has led to great unease in the region over the American commitment to the defence of states in the region.

Throughout this time, Iran and Saudi Arabia have found themselves in an environment which is much less constrained than in the previous 15 years or so. There is no dominant power or combination of states within the regional order. “This is precisely why it is experiencing so much instability and violence” (Parsi, 2017). In this new environment, Riyadh has moved aggressively in pushing its regional agenda — what some scholars are already calling the Salman doctrine. The Iranian leadership, meanwhile, is not standing still, and is making the most of the American pivot from the Middle East. The Islamic awakening - the Iranian term for the Arab Spring — was seen as an opportunity to expand its asymmetrical influence and build a new Middle East, in which power in a mainly Arab region will be shared, if not shifted away from Saudi Arabia completely. They have thus engaged in a contest for regional supremacy or, at minimum, in a competition to maintain their relative positions in Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. As argued by Jonathan Marcus, this is in many ways a regional equivalent of the Cold War, which pitted the US against the Soviet Union in a tense military stand-off for many years (Marcus, 2017).

This brings us to the military might of Iran and Saudi Arabia and their power projection capabilities. A state that is amassing instruments of war, even for its own defence, is cast by others as a threat requiring a response (Waltz, 1998, 619). Saudi Arabia, in particular, has amassed a multitude of offensive weapons from the United States and the West in general. Riyadh also has the highest defence budget in the whole region. Despite spending huge amounts, the effectiveness of the Saudi military is suspect. Iran, on the other hand, spends far less than the Saudis, but employs very efficient asymmetrical warfare, using not only Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, but other non-state and state actors in the region as well. While Iranian military spending is miniscule compared to Saudi Arabia, its armed forces are no slouch, and rate fairly highly in terms of effectiveness. How will the contest pan out? One scenario is that a new regional hegemon emerges, with Iran the likelier of the two countries to do so. As Mearsheimer (2001, 2) argues, the desire for more power does not go away unless a state achieves the ultimate goal of hegemony. Iranian scholar Saideh Lotfian (2011, 28) also acknowledges that one of Iran’s goals is “to gain a prestigious status as a dominant power.” Mahan Abedin (2019) even claims that “Iran has reached the point of no return in terms of displacing the US as the dominant regional power”. However, this is wishful thinking. For this to happen, the US military presence in the region and its offshore balancing capacities would have to disappear.

This is unlikely to happen. Expecting the complete absence of an American military presence in a region that holds most of the world’s proven energy reserves and accounts for half of the world’s oil exports is, realistically, a near-impossibility. Instead, the US is more likely to oppose the emergence of a new competitor in the region. At the moment, it is keeping Iran in check via its allies, such as the Saudis. If this line of defence falters, Iran will likely then be in direct competition with the world’s most powerful nation. This scenario would come to pass if Saudi Arabia fails totally in checking Iran’s rise, and Washington’s offshore balancing strategy becomes inadequate for the task.

The argument that Saudi–Iranian ties are determined by a set of constraining structural realities in the regional order leads one to the conclusion that both sides will have an adversarial relationship if they are powerful enough to project their capabilities externally in an anarchic regional environment in which unipolar dominance is falling apart. One may ask why this is so, or why their hostility prevails at the time when violence and confrontations are falling dramatically. There are several explanations for this. For instance, the lack of economic interdependence and bilateral trade between Iran and Saudi Arabia. If strong economic ties existed, they could act as a brake on confrontational behaviour, for fear of affecting trade. Another factor is the fact that the Middle East is probably among the least integrated regions of the world, and proper channels for communication are either weak or non-existent. In addition, different ideologies, strong national sentiment and

sectarian politics also play a role. These factors explain why, if left to their own devices without an international and regional order to curb their behaviour, Saudi Arabia and Iran will continue to be at loggerheads.

Conclusion

Given the history of their friendship, a Saudi-Iranian de-escalation is not unthinkable. A regional order which is comprised of stable states, and the pacifying presence of a sole superpower, are historically the most favourable preconditions for such an outcome. A Saudi–Iranian rapprochement could also take place if Washington and Tehran come to terms — but only if the US remains committed to its regional allies. Any keen observer of the Middle East must also give a nod to Iraq’s significant role. A regional order that features Iraq as a buffering and balancing state will give it an outsized role in events. Another scenario in which the two sides could grow close would be the rise of a bipolar system, within which Iran and Saudi Arabia align with the same pole. With Russia, China and India making more inroads into the region, the US may no longer be an uncontested power there. At the moment, Asian powers are steering largely clear of getting involved in the politics of the Gulf, while seeking to maximise economic ties. Given that becoming involved in the Gulf inevitably leads to entanglement in its politics, it is unclear how long this hands-off approach can last. If established patterns are followed, this could lead to the most problematic of scenarios: A multipolar order in the Middle East, with several big powers challenging the US and enlarging their military footprint in the region. This may lead to Iran and Saudi Arabia allying themselves with different sides, while simultaneously building up their military capabilities. If such a situation comes into being, the trajectory of their ties would point to increased tensions, with the possibility of a direct conflict at some point. These alignments have accurately foreshadowed the course of Iran–Saudi ties over the past 90 years. It would be wrong to exclude them from projecting the nature of their relationship in the future as well.

About the Author

The writer is currently ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Malaysia, and previously served as his country’s ambassador to Iran. He has a PhD in international relations from the International University of Sarajevo, and is the author of two books.

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Appendix 1: Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia from 1925 to 1944

Year	Official diplomatic discourse between Persia (Iran since 1935) and Kingdom of Hejaz, Najd and its Dependencies (Saudi Arabia since 1932)
1925	Abd al-Aziz sent a letter to the Persian consulate in Jeddah after the takeover of Hejaz emphasizing his guarantee of security for the area as well as for the freedom of pilgrims.
1925	The Persian consul general in Syria Habibollah Hoveida was sent to Jeddah to inspect the conditions for pilgrimage. Another Persian delegation arrived to inspect the situation in Kaaba.
1925	Abd al-Aziz sought Persia's recognition of Najd and Hejaz.
1925	Reza Khan offered Saudi ruler to mediate an end to the siege on Jeddah by the Ikhwan.
1925	Abd al-Aziz congratulated Reza shah and wished success to new Pahlavi dynasty.
1925	Persian delegation thanked Abd al-Aziz for the message and stressed that Persia wished to maintain close ties with the government of Hejaz.
1926	Abd al-Aziz expressed willingness to help Persia restore the desecrated Shi'i sites. Hoveida also recounted Abd al-Aziz's insistence that he treated the Shia's fairly.
1927	Prince Faisal bin Abd al-Aziz hold discussion with the Persian consulate and observed that Persia might recognize the kingdom in return for basic guarantees of protection for the Shia holy sites.
1927	Reza Shah sent Hoveida to visit the Kingdom of Hejaz, Najd and its Dependencies. Hoveida held talks with the Saudi king and expressed the willingness of the shah's government to establish diplomatic relations.
1927	Iran lodged an official complaint to the League of Nations when King Abdul Aziz signed a bilateral treaty with the British in Jeddah in which he recognized the government of Bahrain.
1928	King Abd al-Aziz reached out to Reza Shah to sign a mutual security pact. Reza Shah agreed to initial contacts with a view to establish diplomatic ties but was reluctant to enter into any alliance. Abd al-Aziz's initial proposal was substituted with a nonbinding promise of nonaggression.
1929	Persia granted formal recognition to the "Government of Hejaz and Najd"
1929	Iran and Saudi Arabia concluded and signed the Friendship Treaty in Tehran. The treaty was signed in Persia, exchanged in Jeddah, and recorded in the archives of the League of Nations.
1929	Two monarchs exchanged congratulatory messages and acknowledged the beginning of their diplomatic relations.
1930	Reza Shah appointed Hoveida as his ambassador to newly established Embassy in Jeddah. Persia established a consulate in Najd. Abd al-Aziz assigned Rashid Pasha as his envoy to Persia and Iraq.
1932	King Abdul Aziz's son, Price Faisal, visited Persia on a good will mission to Tehran.
1934	Mohammad Ali Moghadam was dispatched as Persia's last ambassador to Saudi Arabia before the outbreak of World War II.
1938	Iran initiated to convene the first forum on the Middle East to encourage regional states including Saudi Arabia to conclude friendship and security pacts as Europe descended into its pre-war crisis.
1939	Iran and the kingdom attempted to hold a summit for Muslim unity in Turkey. The measure failed when German troops invaded Poland in September of that year.
1940	Iran urged Saudi kingdom to join friendship and security pacts with regional states.
1943/44	Relations remained largely passive until a single incident with Iranian pilgrim in Makah in December 1943 who was arrested and beheaded. Iran protested and eventually broke off diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia in March 1944. Since then, Lebanon represented Saudi interests in Iran.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Badeeb, 1993; Altorafi 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Appendix 2: Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia from 1946 to 1978

Year	Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia
1946	Saudi king and Iranian shah exchanged friendly letters.
1947	Diplomatic relations resumed between Iran and Saudi Arabia.
1948	Iran resumed the pilgrimage and requested that the kingdom expand its trade ties.
1948	Saudi Arabia appointed Hamza I. Ghouth, from a Shi'ite background, as its ambassador to Iran.
1952	Saudi Arabia expanded trade ties with Iran despite the boycotts by Britain.
1953	Iran and Saudi Arabia concluded commercial agreement.
1953	Shah awarded King Saud with a Pahlavi Order and Crown Prince Faisal with a Crown Order.
1955	King Saud visited Iran.
1956	Shah supported Saudi Arabia against a claim by Abu Dhabi to the Buraimi oasis at the UN.
1956	King Saud endorsed Iran's charge that its citizens in Bahrain had been mistreated by the British.
1956	Saudi Arabia refused Arab League calls to sever relations with Iran for selling oil to Israel.
1957	Iranian shah visited Saudi Arabia.
1958	King Saud and Iranian Shah supported King Hussein of Jordan against internal revolts.
1958	Lebanon received Saudi and Iranian moral and material support to prevent a socialist coup.
1960	Saudi Arabia refused Arab League calls to sever relations with Iran for getting close to Israel.
1960	Iran and Saudi Arabia became founding members of OPEC.
1962	Iran helped Saudi Arabia contain a socialist coup in Yemen
1962	King Saud extended a warm reception to Iranian Prime Minister Ali Amini.
1962-65	Iran supported Saudi Arabia in a proxy war against Egypt in Northern Yemen.
1964	The shah sent his foreign minister Abbas Aram to convey hopes for improved Saudi-Iranian relations. Faisal urged support for Saudi initiatives across the Muslim world to fight communism.
1965	King Faisal stopped in Iran on the first leg of a tour of Islamic states.
1965	Arab-Iranian Friendship Organization established in Tehran.
1966	Faisal sent the future Saudi minister of foreign affairs Omar Saqqaf to Tehran on a courtesy visit.
1967	Faisal visited Tehran and delivered a heartfelt talk before deputies and the shah in the senate.
1968	Saudi officials visited Tehran to improve the conduct of Iranian pilgrims.
1968	Iranian shah made stop-over in Jeddah to meet king Faisal on his way to Addis Ababa.
1968	Saudi king returned the shah's visit and negotiated a draft border agreement.
1969	Iran and Saudi Arabia signed the Agreement over the Islands of al-'Arabiya and Farsi...
1969	Faisal turned for help to the shah to counter south Yemen's air raids in Saudi Arabia. Shah ordered round-the-clock flights for two days to deliver military equipment.
1969	Mutual support of Iran and Saudi Arabia to establish the OIC.
1969	Iran dropped its claims to Bahrain.
1971	Iranian military took control of three small islands claimed by both Tehran and Abu Dhabi.
1971	Iran and Saudi Arabia joined Egypt and Morocco in the Afro-France Safari Club. It was a code name for an elite intelligence force formed to support anti-communist regimes.
1972	Iran and Saudi Arabia became twin pillars of United States.
1972	A high-level visit by Iran's ministry of finance to Saudi Arabia. Expanded joint investments.
1973	Iraq pulled out from seized border post near Basra fearing from Saudi-Iranian reprisal force.
1973	Prince Fahd travelled to Iran to ask for cutting off oil supplies to Israel. The request was declined but the shah agreed to supply crude oil to Egypt and extend medical aid to the Arab war front.
1974	Prince Fahd, Saud al-Faisal, the shah and members of the Iranian Cabinet met to discuss oil issues.
1975	Saudi efforts helped Iran to reach Algiers Agreement (settled border dispute) with Iraq.
1975	Iran declared a week of mourning when King Faisal was assassinated.

1975	The shah paid a two day visit to King Khalid to offer condolences. Prince Fahd visited Tehran.
1976	King Khalid and Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan visited Iran.
1976-77	Iranian efforts and Saudi financial / logistical support led the Soviets and Chinese out of Oman.
1974-78	Iran and Saudi Arabia helped the US conclude a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Saudi financial aid helped Egypt break with radical Arab states.
1978	Iranian shah visited Saudi Arabia in January and then in April again.
1978	Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud visited Tehran.
1978	Iran and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement to partition the neutral zone between them.
1978	Crown prince visited Tehran

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Badeeb, 1993; Altorafi 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Appendix 3: Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia from 1979 to 1990

Year	Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia
1979	Iranian shah exiled Iran on 16 January. Ayatollah Khomeini returned back to Tehran on February 11.
1979	Iran's first post-revolutionary prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, received a Saudi delegation that expressed hopes to improve ties with Iran in July.
1979	Saudi King Khalid called the Iranian revolution a beginning to further closeness and understanding.
1979	Prince Fahd claimed great respect for Iran's new leadership.
1979	Hostage crisis with American diplomats in Tehran (444 days) since November 4. Iran and the US broke their diplomatic relations.
1980	Saudi Prince Nayef expressed approval of the Pan-Arab Charter in Baghdad on February 8, considering Iraq to be the only credible deterrent against the proliferation of Iran's revolution. Charter's key provision declared that should Iraq go to war with a non-Arab state, other Arab countries must rally behind it.
1980-88	Saudi Arabia supported Iraq against Iran. It provided US\$24.8 billion plus logistical support.
1981	Saudi Arabia and GCC states issued a joint communiqué in response to Iranian threats to target oil facilities.
1981	Iran abandoned talks with Riyadh to end the war with Iraq.
1981-82	Saudi Arabia increased financial aid to Iraq as Iran repelled Iraqi aggression and advanced into Iraq.
1982	Saudi King Fahd strengthened military partnership with the US. Bandar bin Sultan was dispatched as new Saudi ambassador to the US to lobby for an active US role in Gulf security.
1984	Tehran rejected UN Resolution 552 and turned down peace proposals by the GCC and OIC.
1984	Iran attacked Saudi vessels in the Persian Gulf.
1984-88	Iran and Saudi Arabia were indirectly involved in the Tanker War.
1984	The Saudi Air Force downs an Iranian F-4 fighter over Saudi offshore oil facilities in the Gulf
1985	Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal visited Iran and discussed with President Khamenei to reduce tensions in May. In December, the Iranian foreign minister Velayati returned the Saudi visit. He deliberated with King Fahd in Riyadh.
1986	Saudi Arabia decided to increase oil production to pressure Tehran. Under the umbrella of the GCC, it also conducted joint military manoeuvres with the US, which proceeded to sign bilateral military cooperation agreements to establish bases in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

1987	Hajj incident happened as Saudi security forces confronted Iranian pilgrims on charges of committing a security breach. Tehran reported that 400 Iranian pilgrims were killed. Other sources numbered the casualties at 275 Iranians, 85 Saudis, and 42 other pilgrims.
1988	Saudi Arabia broke diplomatic relations with Iran in April. The breakup occurred within a week of US attacks on Iranian oil platforms and warships, and right before the US Congress voted in favour of an arms sale of US\$450 million to the kingdom.
1988	Saudi Arabia bans imports of Iranian products.
1989	Imam Khomeini died on 3 June. Saudi–Iranian animosity has not changed with his death.

This table has been largely prepared by using three sources: Badeeb, 1993; Altorafi 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Appendix 4: Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia from 1990 to 2007

Year	Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia
1990	Iran and Saudi Arabia opposed Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Riyadh adapted new balancing behaviour.
1990	Six members of the GCC welcomed better ties with Iran.
1990	Iran responded with readiness to collaborate in all aspects of the Gulf security plan.
1991	Informal meeting between foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Oman. Two states restored diplomatic relations.
1991	Foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Saudi Arabia in April. He and his counterpart Saud Al Faisal discussed issues ranging from Gulf security and economic cooperation to the disputes over Hajj, OIC and Opec policies. Saud Al Faisal reciprocated by visiting Tehran in May.
1991	Two rivalry states upgraded their bilateral relations to the ambassadorial level in June.
1991	Iran and Saudi Arabia resumed trade, flights. Iranian pilgrims resumed the hajj in Saudi Arabia.
1991	President Rafsanjani met Crown Prince Abdullah in Senegal on the side-lines of OIC conference.
1992	Foreign minister Velayati, Iranian intelligence, judiciary, military, and naval heads visited Saudi Arabia. The kingdom issued statements in defence of Tehran’s modest weapons procurement plan.
1993	Abdulaziz al-Khuwaytir, the Saudi education minister, visited Iran. He also met and handed President Rafsanjani a formal invitation from King Fahd to visit Saudi Arabia.
1993	Rafsanjani invited King Fahd to visit Tehran and felt rejected when the king declined. In September 1993, Saud al-Faisal avoided meeting with Velayati at the UN General Assembly.
1994	Tehran and Riyadh embarked on a series of secret visits including one by Iran’s intelligence minister to Saudi Arabia.
1994	Series of talks between Iranian envoys Mehdi Hashemi Rafsanjani and Hussein Mousavian with Crown Prince Abdullah in Casablanca. Mousavian was invited to Jeddah in the fall, where he met with Abdullah for four more consecutive meetings. They agreed that Iranian and Saudi businessmen could receive residency and other permits to engage in investment and register companies in each other’s countries, a privilege the kingdom would grant Iran for the first time. It was also decided that Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s foreign ministers should meet biannually, and their other leaders at least once a year, and that the two states should form a joint security commission.
1994	Mousavian and Hashemi met with King Fahd. The king endorsed Abdullah’s agreements, and underscored the importance of preserving the balance of power between Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran.
1995	Prince Abdullah and President Rafsanjani met privately during the OIC summit in Islamabad.
1997	Saudi Arabia attended OIC Summit in Tehran.
1998	Rafsanjani visited Riyadh in February; Crown Prince Abdullah visited Tehran in September 1998.
1998	Iran and Saudi Arabia signed the Cooperation Agreement.

1999	Saudi Minister of Defence Prince Sultan visited Tehran in March 1999.
1999	President Khatami visited Riyadh in May 1999; He signed Joint Communiqué with Saudi King Fahd.
2000	Iranian Minister of Defence Ali Shamkhani visited Riyadh in April 2000.
2001	Saudi Minister of the Interior Prince Nayef visited Tehran in April 2001.
2001	Iran and Saudi Arabia signed the Security Accord.
2002	President Khatami met with Prince Abdullah in Jeddah.
2003	A brief cooperation between Saudi and Iranian authorities over reform in their judicial systems.
2003	Saudi Arabia and Iran signed an oil agreement that led to higher prices in international markets.
2003	Iranian speaker of parliament Mehdi Karrubi and Saudi majlis al-shura chair Muhammad bin Jubair issued a joint statement rejecting US unilateralism in launching pre-emptive wars and Western media attacks on Islam.
2005	King Abdullah was among the first heads of state to congratulate President Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad also joined the OIC meeting in Saudi Arabia in December 2005.
2006-2007	Two states conducted the strategic talks. Respective heads of their national security councils chaired these meetings.
2007	King Abdullah received Ahmadinejad at the airport on his first official visit to Riyadh.
2007	Ahmadinejad attended Opec summit in Riyadh in November 2007 and performed the hajj in Mecca in December.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Altorafi 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.

Appendix: 5 Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia from 2008–2019

Year	Official diplomatic discourse between Iran and Saudi Arabia
2008	King Abdullah delivered a strong warning indicating that Saudi Arabia would suspend its relations with Tehran.
2008	A leaked cable from the US Embassy asserted that King Abdullah urged a US delegation to put an end to Iranian nuclear programme. The cable quoted the king as saying, “Cut off the head of the [Iranian] snake”.
2008	The US and Iraq agreed on the status of US forces in Iraq. They agreed that US combat forces would withdraw from Iraqi cities by 30 June 2009, and that all US forces would be withdrawn by 31 December 2011. Withdrawal plans did not include any mutually reinforcing roles for Riyadh and Tehran over the future of Iraq.
2008	Riyadh remained extremely concerned with the agreement between Iraq and United States.
2008	Iran viewed that Riyadh was prepared to reignite the Sunni insurgency, which was possibly aimed at preventing US forces from leaving Iraq. Tehran also opposed any talks that extended the withdrawal timeline, and pro-Iranian crowds demonstrated in Baghdad to call for an end to the occupation.
2009	Prince Saud al-Faisal called in Cairo for a joint Arab strategy to deal with the threat emanating from Tehran.
2009	King Abdullah delivered a clear warning in March through Foreign Minister Mottaki who visited Saudi Arabia. King also noted that Saudi Arabia would not continue to talk to Tehran unless it stopped interfering in Arab affairs, and that it would consider all options to defend its interests against Tehran’s aggression.
2010	Riyadh maintained that certain level of US commitment in Iraq would be necessary.
2010	Iranian joint ministerial and commerce committees ceased to meet.
2010	Secretary of Defence Robert Gates told the French foreign minister that Saudi Arabia wants to “fight Iranians to the last American” and that it is “time for them to get in the game”.

2011	Ali Akbar Salehi's intention to visit Riyadh was turned down by his Saudi counterpart.
2011	Saudi military rolled into Bahrain on 14 March 2011. Iran protested. A date of Saudi intervention in Bahrain has also a symbolic meaning in Saudi–Iranian rivalry. “14 March” represents a coalition of political parties and independents in Lebanon that is usually opposed to pro-Iranian coalition also known as March 8 Alliance.
2011	Crisis in Bahrain has been followed by multi-sided and much bloodier armed conflict in Syria since 2011 in which Iran directly and Saudi Arabia indirectly have been opposing each other ever since.
2011	The US Justice department charged two Iranians with attempting to murder Saudi ambassador in the US Adel al-Jubeir.
2012	A series of protests evolved against anti-Shite discrimination in Saudi Arabia's eastern provinces. Riyadh blamed Tehran for the protests.
2012	Iraqi Shi'i militia group al-Mukhtar carried out mortar attacks across the border with Saudi Arabia. Riyadh suspected Iran was behind it.
2012	Saudi Arabia offered to offset the loss of Iranian oil sales and Iran warned against this. Turki Al Faisal suggested that Saudi Arabia would support the US-led sanctions against Iranian oil.
2013	Iran alleged Saudi Arabia for explosion near Iranian Embassy in Beirut on 19 November.
2014	Iran and Saudi Arabia clashed over the new government in Iraq.
2014	Saudi Arabia refused to allow Iran into international talks in Geneva in January to discuss Syria's regime's fate.
2015	Saudi Arabia begins a bombing campaign in Yemen against Houthis who ousted the president Hadi from power. Riyadh claims the airstrikes are a response to Iranian support for the Houthis.
2015	Hajj stampede escalated tensions between Riyadh and Tehran due to deaths of large number of Iranian pilgrims.
2015	Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and his Saudi counterpart al Jubeir get in a heated argument during the Syrian peace talks in Vienna.
2016	Saudi Arabia executed prominent Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Tehran was set ablaze.
2016	Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry announced that it cut diplomatic relations with Iran.
2016	Iran's foreign ministry alleged that Saudi warplanes targeted Iranian embassy in Yemen.
2017	President Trump visited Riyadh. He echoed the Saudi view that Iran was to blame for all the region's troubles.
2017	Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Qatar. Riyadh criticised Qatar's relations with Iran.
2017	Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accused Iran of an act of “direct military aggression” by supplying missiles to rebels in Yemen.
2017	Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri unexpectedly resigned during his stay in Saudi Arabia. His unexpected move becomes another issue in Saudi–Iran tensions.
2018	Saudi Arabia's crown prince Muhammed bin Salman talked about pushing back a dangerous Iranian threat. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif accused Saudi Arabia for aggressive behavior in the region.
2019	The US and Saudi Arabia alleged the Iranian side for the unprecedented drone attack on the largest Saudi petroleum processing plant.

This table has been largely prepared by using following sources: Altorafi 2012; Banafsheh, 2016.