



**From Confrontation to Reconciliation:
Assessing the Strategic Implications of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement on Gulf Security**

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Abstract:

Amid shifting geopolitical currents in the Middle East, analyzing changes in inter-state relations is essential for assessing prospects for regional stability. This research explores the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), situating it within broader regional security dynamics. Long defined by sectarian, ideological and geopolitical rivalries, the Saudi-Iranian relationship has fueled proxy conflicts and deepened fragmentation across the the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The recent normalization of ties, brokered by China, marks a pivotal diplomatic development, prompting critical inquiry into its underlying drivers, sustainability and broader implications for conflict resolution and alliance reconfiguration. Given the authoritarian nature of most regimes in the region, the paper focuses on the state-dominated institution, such as security mechanisms, while also examining informal power structures, including religious establishments and elite networks. Utilizing qualitative case studies of Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, the research examines how this rapprochement is reshaping threat perceptions, patterns of proxy warfare and alliance behaviour. While preliminary signs indicate a cautious de-escalation and emerging regional pragmatism, persistent structural barriers such as mutual distrust, ideological divides and unresolved conflicts continue to challenge the durability of peace. The paper argues that this détente represents a tactical recalibration driven by strategic necessity, rather than a transformative shift in the MENA security architecture.

Keywords: Middle East, Saudi-Iran rivalry, Saudi-Iran rapprochement, security complex, security interdependence, proxy conflicts, regional conflict

INTRODUCTION

The decades-long rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has remained a central axis of the Middle East's geopolitical landscape. Rooted in ideological, sectarian and strategic divergences, this enduring conflict has shaped the trajectory of numerous regional crises and alliances (Tehsin, 2018; Saleem & Bukhari, 2022). From the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution to the protracted proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, the competition between these two powers has deepened polarization across the MENA region. Against this backdrop, the 2023

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rapprochement brokered by China marks a potentially pivotal moment. The agreement to resume diplomatic relations after seven years of estrangement reflects a recalibration in response to shifting domestic imperatives, regional instability and evolving international dynamics (Institute of Policy Studies [IPS], 2023). While this diplomatic thaw raises hopes for de-escalation and dialogue, it also prompts key questions: Is the reconciliation a substantive strategic shift or a temporary tactical move? Can it deliver sustained peace in regions destabilized by proxy conflicts? Will it alter the broader security architecture of the Middle East?

This paper analyzes the evolving contours of Saudi-Iran relations through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which provides a conceptual framework to examine patterns of interdependence, threat perception and security inter-linkages among regional actors. By employing this theoretical lens, the paper seeks to unpack the structural and strategic factors underpinning the 2023 détente and assess its implications for regional security dynamics. Focusing on conflict theaters such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, the paper explores how the rapprochement has influenced proxy warfare, realigned regional alliances and reshaped threat perceptions. It evaluates whether the normalization of relations signals a deeper transformation within the MENA regional security complex or merely reflects a temporary alignment of interests. Ultimately, this inquiry aims to determine the extent to which renewed engagement between Saudi Arabia and Iran can serve as a catalyst for mitigating entrenched hostilities and fostering a more cooperative regional order. By offering a multidimensional analysis grounded in RSCT, the paper contributes to the broader discourse on conflict resolution and security reconfiguration in the contemporary Middle East.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing scholarship on Saudi-Iranian relations is extensive, spanning multiple disciplinary domains, including International Relations, Middle Eastern Studies and Security Studies. Historically, this rivalry has been framed through realist paradigms that emphasize power balancing, regime survival and the struggle for regional hegemony. Numerous studies have documented the use of proxy warfare in states like Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, where both Iran and Saudi Arabia have supported opposing factions to advance their strategic objectives (Gause, 2014; Fatima, Zehraa & Malik, 2017). These proxy engagements have been viewed as key tools in their broader geopolitical competition.

Another central theme in the literature is sectarianism. Scholars such as Wehrey (2013) have examined how sectarian identities, particularly Sunni-Shia divides, have been politicized to mobilize domestic populations and justify foreign policies. However, more recent contributions have challenged the dominance of the sectarian lens, arguing that while sectarian rhetoric is often deployed, the actual drivers of Saudi-Iranian rivalry are more pragmatic and rooted in regime preservation and strategic calculation (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Zehraa, Fatima a& Khan, 2018). These newer perspectives call for a more integrated analytical approach that combines both ideational and material dimensions in understanding regional dynamics.

The application of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), has offered a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the interdependence of security among regional actors. Scholars like Gause (2014) and Mabon (2018) have used RSCT to

conceptualize the Gulf as a distinct sub-complex characterized by enduring patterns of rivalry and alliance, shaped not only by regional actors but also by external interventions. This theoretical lens highlights how regional security is deeply interconnected and subject to systemic shocks that reverberate across multiple conflict zones. In recent years, the shifting roles of global powers particularly the strategic retrenchment of the United States and the rising diplomatic engagement of China and Russia have added new dimensions to regional security discourse. China's mediation of the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement has sparked considerable scholarly interest, especially regarding its potential to signal a shift toward a multipolar order in the Middle East (Fulton, 2023).

While several analyses have examined the motivations behind this normalization, there is limited empirical assessment of its consequences, especially in terms of reshaping regional security patterns and institutions. Despite the growing richness of the literature, a clear research gap remains. There are relatively few studies that systematically assess how the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement affects the regional security architecture when analyzed through the RSCT framework. Most existing works focus either on the historical rivalry or on the diplomatic gesture itself, without exploring how this normalization influences conflict dynamics in frontline states such as Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the role of authoritarian state institutions and informal power structures in responding to or facilitating this rapprochement has been largely overlooked.

This paper seeks to fill that gap by offering a theory-informed and empirically grounded analysis of the Saudi-Iran normalization through the lens of RSCT. It uniquely combines geopolitical analysis, sectarian dynamics and regional case studies to evaluate how rapprochement between two rival powers affects broader regional security complexes. By examining case studies of Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, the research explores how patterns of proxy warfare, alliance behaviours and threat perceptions are being reconfigured in the wake of normalization.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the role of authoritarian institutions such as military establishments, security agencies and state-aligned religious bodies in mediating or resisting these shifts. In doing so, this paper contributes original insights to ongoing debates about regional order in the Middle East. It goes beyond describing the normalization event to critically assess its implications for long-term regional stability, the durability of proxy conflicts and the structural transformation of security relationships. Thus, the research not only addresses a concrete gap in existing scholarship but also adds depth to the theoretical and empirical understanding of contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics. Within RSCT, internal dynamics stem from the historical and strategic relationships among regional actors, while external powers though capable of intervention cannot unilaterally determine the security order unless they are deeply embedded within the region. This makes RSCT especially suitable for understanding regions like the Middle East, where dense networks of conflict, alliances and rivalries define the strategic landscape.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (RSCT)

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), established by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), offers a robust framework for examining how security interdependence clusters geographically. The theory posits that states' security concerns are not formed in isolation; rather, they are shaped by their interactions with neighbouring states. Consequently, regions become the primary arenas where security threats emerge and cooperation evolves. Each regional security complex is

identified by patterns of amity and enmity, levels of securitization, geographical proximity and power distribution among its constituent states, with security being both internally constituted and externally influenced.

A compelling case study within this framework is the Gulf sub-complex, where the longstanding rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran forms the structural core of regional polarization. Their competition for influence manifests in proxy conflicts (e.g., Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon), ideological contestation and diplomatic balancing acts. These reflect entrenched patterns of enmity, a key RSCT indicator. Additional indicators, such as external overlay (e.g., the involvement of the United States, Russia and China) and regional security interdependence are also evident. For instance, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab uprisings significantly altered the Gulf's internal security dynamics and intensified cross-border securitization processes, demonstrating both overlay and penetration indicators within RSCT.

The 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement provides a timely opportunity to assess RSCT's explanatory power in contexts of potential transformation. Using RSCT indicators such as shifts in amity/enmity, realignment of regional power configurations and changes in threat perception, one can evaluate whether the rapprochement signifies a systemic shift or merely a temporary strategic adjustment. If durable, it may suggest a transition from a conflict-driven complex toward nascent security community building, another key theoretical indicator. However, RSCT cautions that even with changing patterns of relations, institutional inertia and historical mistrust (deep-rooted enmity) may persist, limiting the scope of genuine transformation. By applying RSCT and its core indicators, patterns of amity/enmity, securitization levels, external overlay, regional interdependence and potential for security community formation, this paper critically evaluates whether the Saudi-Iran *détente* constitutes a fundamental restructuring of the Gulf security order or remains a pragmatic recalibration within an enduring competitive framework. Beyond bilateral relations, these indicators illuminate broader regional implications such as shifting alliances, evolving threat perceptions and the potential reconfiguration of the MENA security architecture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the evolving dynamics of Saudi-Iran relations, particularly in the context of the 2023 rapprochement and to assess its implications for the broader Middle Eastern regional security complex. The analysis is guided by Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which provides the theoretical lens to evaluate patterns of amity and enmity, levels of securitization, regional interdependence and the influence of external actors. The paper relies exclusively on secondary data, including peer-reviewed academic literature, policy reports from reputable think tanks, official diplomatic statements and coverage from credible international media. These sources provide the empirical foundation for understanding both material developments (such as shifting alliances and ceasefires) and ideational shifts (such as changes in threat perception and diplomatic rhetoric). The primary method used to analyze this data is thematic analysis, which involves systematically identifying, coding and interpreting patterns or themes within the data that relate to regional security dynamics. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to trace and compare recurring developments in Saudi-Iranian behaviour before and after the 2023 *détente*. Key themes identified include de-escalation in proxy conflicts,

realignment of regional alliances, shifts in diplomatic engagement and modifications in threat narratives.

These themes are then mapped directly onto RSCT's core indicators to evaluate whether observable changes reflect a deeper transformation in the Gulf sub-complex or merely a strategic recalibration. In doing so, thematic analysis serves as the analytical bridge between empirical evidence and theoretical interpretation, ensuring a coherent and focused examination of how the Saudi-Iran rapprochement may be reshaping the regional security landscape. By employing thematic analysis within the RSCT framework, this paper maintains methodological clarity while offering a structured and theory-driven exploration of one of the most pivotal geopolitical developments in the contemporary Middle East.

SAUDI-IRAN RIVALRY: HISTORICAL AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Strategically, both Riyadh and Tehran have long aspired to shape the security architecture of the Middle East, particularly within the Gulf sub-region. Their contest has been reinforced by divergent foreign policy alignments. Saudi Arabia has historically aligned with the United States and Western powers, upholding the status quo and resisting revolutionary movements. Iran, in contrast, has adopted an anti-imperialist posture, supporting resistance groups and challenging U.S. and Israeli influence through a network of proxies, including Hezbollah, the Houthis and Shiite militias in Iraq (Ullah, 2024). Several turning points have intensified this rivalry. The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked a foundational rupture, as Iran's revolutionary ideology threatened Gulf monarchies. During the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq, reinforcing strategic mistrust. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq significantly altered the balance of power, enabling Iran to expand its influence via Shiite political networks, a development that alarmed Riyadh (Ali et al., 2020). The Arab uprisings of 2011 further escalated tensions, particularly in Syria, where the two sides backed opposing factions. In Yemen, the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana'a is viewed by Saudi Arabia as an Iranian expansion became a major flashpoint (Terrill, 2011).

The 2016 execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr by Saudi authorities and the retaliatory attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran marked a diplomatic nadir, resulting in the severing of formal ties. These events entrenched a pattern of mutual hostility and proxy conflict, with both states deploying sectarian narratives and asymmetric strategies to assert regional influence (Ullah & Xinlei, 2024). Understanding this historical and strategic backdrop is crucial for assessing the significance of the 2023 rapprochement whether it represents a genuine shift in regional dynamics or merely a tactical pause in a deeply institutionalized rivalry.

Drivers of the 2023 Rapprochement

The 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement represents a significant diplomatic breakthrough, ending seven years of severed relations and signaling a potential reconfiguration of Middle Eastern geopolitics. This détente was not the result of a singular event but rather a convergence of domestic, regional and international pressures that compelled both states to recalibrate their foreign policies (Nawaz, Amin, & Asghar, 2023). A key motivator was mutual fatigue from prolonged and costly regional conflicts. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia faced a military stalemate and growing international condemnation over humanitarian conditions, while Iran struggled to maintain its influence in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon amid economic sanctions and domestic unrest.

The absence of decisive victories and the rising costs of proxy engagements encouraged both sides to pursue risk mitigation and de-escalation (Nawaz et al., 2023). This rapprochement marks a pragmatic recalibration, rooted in mutual exhaustion from costly and unresolved proxy conflicts. Driven by domestic strain, regional stalemates and international pressures, both states prioritized de-escalation over confrontation to stabilize their foreign policy agendas (Nawaz et al., 2023).

Economic priorities also played a pivotal role. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is attempting to diversify its economy away from oil dependency, requiring a stable regional environment to attract foreign investment and pursue large-scale development goals. For Iran, international sanctions and mounting socio-economic pressures, including inflation and political unrest, created a pressing need to reduce external tensions and focus on internal stabilization (Zhang, 2024). The changing global energy landscape, compounded by the economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, further contributed to the logic of de-escalation. As renewable energy gains momentum and global oil dependency declines, both countries face long-term uncertainty regarding their energy-based growth models. Regional stability thus became essential for protecting energy infrastructure and maintaining investor confidence. Additionally, the Ukraine war and its impacts on global supply chains emphasized the importance of securing maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb (Nawaz et al., 2023). Economic imperatives were central to the Saudi-Iran détente, as both states confronted growing internal pressures and the declining viability of oil-centric growth models. The need for regional stability to attract investment, secure energy routes and adapt to a shifting global economy drove both governments toward de-escalation and pragmatic cooperation.

The perceived retrenchment of the United States from the Middle East also encouraged regional actors to adopt greater strategic autonomy. With Washington pivoting toward the Indo-Pacific, reducing its involvement in regional conflicts and withdrawing from Afghanistan, the regional order appeared increasingly uncertain. This power vacuum encouraged Riyadh and Tehran to assume greater responsibility for managing their rivalry and preventing escalation (Zhang, 2024). Crucially, China's diplomatic mediation provided an effective and face-saving mechanism for both parties to reengage. By offering a neutral platform, Beijing facilitated dialogue while enhancing its own diplomatic profile. For Iran, this represented a step toward reintegration amid global isolation. For Saudi Arabia, it reflected an evolving strategy of multipolar engagement and strategic diversification beyond traditional Western partners. Ultimately, the rapprochement did not emerge from ideological convergence but from strategic pragmatism, driven by overlapping interests in regional stability, economic resilience and geopolitical repositioning.

Regional Conflict Dynamics Post-Rapprochement

The 2023 Saudi-Iran détente has begun to influence regional conflict dynamics, albeit unevenly. While it is too early to declare a systemic transformation, early signals suggest a tentative reduction in hostilities, a shift toward dialogue and a recalibration of proxy strategies across key Middle Eastern hotspots (Ali et al., 2024; Elayah, 2023; Sevilla, 2024). The cases of Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon provide a useful prism through which the practical implications of the rapprochement can be assessed (Hamzawy, 2025; Rhoades et al., 2023). In Yemen, backchannel talks and a decrease in cross-border attacks signal cautious optimism, although a comprehensive political settlement

remains elusive. In Syria, both states have shown limited interest in escalating their support to opposing sides, indicating a potential stabilization of the conflict's regional dimensions.

In Iraq, where both powers maintain significant political influence, a more tempered competition has been emerged, with an emphasis on sustaining fragile coalitions rather than instigating sectarian confrontation. Lebanon, while still mired in economic collapse and political paralysis, has also witnessed subtle changes in external influence patterns, as both Riyadh and Tehran appear to be reassessing their engagement strategies. Overall, these developments point to a gradual shift in regional posturing. However, whether this marks the beginning of a long-term transformation or merely a strategic pause remains contingent on the durability of the Saudi-Iran agreement and its institutionalization within broader regional security mechanisms.

Yemen

Perhaps the most immediate and visible impact of the rapprochement has been in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and Iran have supported opposing sides in a brutal conflict since 2015. Following the normalization of diplomatic ties, there has been a notable de-escalation in hostilities. Saudi Arabia has engaged in direct negotiations with the Houthi rebels, facilitated in part by Omani mediation and tacit Iranian support (Ali et al., 2024; Elayah, 2023). Iran has softened its rhetorical backing of the Houthis and signaled openness to a political resolution, aligning with its broader strategy to ease regional tensions (Tehsin, 2018; Sevilla, 2024). Ceasefire agreements, increased humanitarian access and prisoner exchanges all suggest a shift toward conflict containment, even if a final peace settlement remains elusive (Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2024). The Saudi-Iran rapprochement has thus yielded tangible de-escalation in Yemen, marking a shift from proxy confrontation to cautious conflict management. While a lasting peace remains uncertain, mutual restraint, dialogue and indirect cooperation suggest a strategic pivot toward containment rather than escalation.

Syria

In Syria, the effects of the rapprochement have been subtler but nonetheless significant. Saudi Arabia, once a leading sponsor of anti-Assad factions, has moderated its stance and reestablished diplomatic ties with the Assad regime as part of a broader Arab normalization effort (Partrick, 2021). While Iran remains a key military and political backer of the Assad government, it has not opposed from this Arab outreach, viewing it as a step toward consolidating Syria's reintegration into the regional order (Geukjian, 2014). The reduction in Saudi opposition to Assad reflects a shift from regime change objectives to pragmatic stabilization, an approach that indirectly aligns with Iran's longstanding goals in Syria (Al Sabaileh, 2024). This convergence has reduced the intensity of indirect confrontation between the two powers on Syrian soil (Ali et al., 2024). Overall, the rapprochement has fostered a subtle convergence of interests in Syria, with Saudi Arabia pivoting from regime change toward stabilization, aligning indirectly with Iran's objectives. This shift has lowered the intensity of proxy confrontation, reflecting a cautious accommodation within a redefined regional order.

Iraq

Iraq, long a battleground for Saudi-Iran influence and sectarian contestation, has also shown signs of reduced geopolitical tension. The country has hosted several rounds of Saudi-Iranian dialogue

since 2021 and the continuation of these diplomatic efforts has helped stabilize the security environment (Hamzawy, 2025; Tehsin, 2018). There has been a marked decline in sectarian rhetoric and mobilization, particularly in southern Iraq, where Iranian-backed militias have traditionally exerted strong influence. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has expanded economic engagement and expressed willingness to support Iraqi development and energy initiatives (Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2024). Although Iraq's internal challenges remain complex, the thaw between Riyadh and Tehran has created space for a more constructive trilateral relationship (Ali et al., 2024). The Saudi-Iran détente has thus contributed to a notable easing of tensions in Iraq, marked by reduced sectarian rhetoric and enhanced diplomatic engagement. This shift has opened space for more productive trilateral cooperation, particularly in development and energy, despite Iraq's ongoing internal complexities.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, political gridlock and economic collapse persist, yet external intervention from Saudi Arabia and Iran appears to have moderated (Geukjian, 2014; Rhoades et al., 2023). Hezbollah, Iran's key ally, continues to dominate the political and security landscape, but there has been a relative decline in overt provocations or escalatory posturing. Saudi Arabia, which had withdrawn its ambassador in 2021 amid tensions with the Lebanese government, has since resumed limited diplomatic engagement and softened its confrontational stance (Al Sabaileh, 2024). While the fundamental divisions within Lebanon's political system remain unresolved, reduced regional pressure has helped prevent further destabilization and may pave the way for future mediation efforts (Ali et al., 2024). The post-rapprochement period has not eliminated regional conflicts but has fostered a climate more conducive to dialogue, restraint and political recalibration. The Saudi-Iran détente has lowered the temperature of proxy competition, creating diplomatic space and opening backchannels for conflict management (Sevilla, 2024; Elayah, 2023). These shifts illustrate the potential of regional diplomacy, underpinned by pragmatic interests, to reduce polarization and gradually reshape the security landscape of the MENA region. However, the durability of these changes will depend on the sustained commitment of both actors to institutionalize their engagement and avoid reverting to zero-sum competition.

Reconfiguring the Middle East Security Complex

The 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement has not only eased bilateral tensions but also initiated broader shifts within the Middle East's regional security architecture. Interpreted through Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this détente signals a recalibration of interdependence, alliance behaviour and threat perceptions among key regional actors. The entrenched structure of conflict rooted in ideological polarization, sectarian rivalry and proxy warfare is now being challenged by emerging dynamics increasingly suggestive of a flexible and multipolar regional order (Ali, 2023; Gul, 2021; Terrill, 2011).

A prominent indicator of this shift is the reconfiguration of alliance patterns. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states historically aligned with Saudi Arabia's hardline stance toward Iran are now increasingly adopting hedging strategies. For instance, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has restored diplomatic ties with Tehran while advancing normalization with Israel under the Abraham Accords. Similarly, Qatar maintains open communication with both Riyadh and Tehran, positioning

itself position as a diplomatic intermediary. These nuanced postures reflect a departure from rigid bloc politics, as states prioritize national interests, strategic autonomy and geopolitical balancing (Jerri, 2023).

This highlights how the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement, viewed through RSCT, signals a broader transformation in the Middle East's security landscape. The reconfiguration of alliance patterns evident in the hedging strategies of GCC states shows a shift away from rigid ideological alignments toward flexible, interest-driven regional behaviour. Concurrently, a multipolar regional order is taking shape, influenced by the growing engagement of external actors like China, Russia and Turkey. China's successful mediation in the Saudi-Iran agreement underscored its rising diplomatic influence and the declining centrality of Western powers in regional conflict resolution (Rahman, 2024). Russia, despite its preoccupations in Ukraine, continues to project military and diplomatic influence, particularly in Syria. While, Turkey has pursued normalization with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, positioning itself as a regional broker and economic stakeholder. These developments introduce complexity but also expand diplomatic space for conflict de-escalation and regional cooperation (Gul, 2021).

Simultaneously, cautious revitalization of regional institutions is equally significant. Platforms such as GCC+3 (involving Egypt, Jordan and Iraq) and bilateral dialogues signal renewed interest in intra-regional mechanisms for managing security and economic challenges. Iraq's earlier mediation between Riyadh and Tehran, along with Oman's role in the Yemen peace process, illustrate the emerging role of regional actors as brokers rather than proxies (Ali, 2023; Rahman, 2024). Together, these developments reflect a shift from externally imposed security solutions toward more localized, multilateral approaches to conflict resolution and cooperation, aligning with RSCT's emphasis on regional agency and interdependence.

Another notable shift is the declining centrality of the Sunni-Shia binary. While sectarian narratives remain politically potent, recent diplomacy reflects a preference for strategic pragmatism over identity-based alignment. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Iran's efforts to mitigate sanctions have created intersections of interests in regional stability, decreasing the prominence of sectarianism in statecraft (Jerri, 2023; Terrill, 2011). Altogether, these developments suggest that the Saudi-Iran détente may be contributing to a reconfiguration of the Middle East security complex. Though volatility persists, the emergence of diplomatic flexibility, diversified alignments and regional agency marks a departure from past patterns of rigid rivalry offering cautious optimism for a more cooperative, albeit contested, regional order.

Assessing the Durability and Limitations of the Rapprochement

Despite the diplomatic momentum of the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement, its long-term durability remains uncertain. Beneath the surface of renewed engagement lies a web of unresolved tensions, contrasting strategic contradictions and institutional gaps that could undermine transformative potential (Nawaz, Amin, & Asghar, 2023; Tehsin, 2018). The most formidable obstacle is the deep-seated mistrust between the two regimes, rooted in decades of proxy warfare, ideological antagonism and geopolitical rivalry. Riyadh continues to see Iran's support for non-state actors like Hezbollah, the Houthis and various militias in Iraq and Bahrain as a direct risk to Arab sovereignty and regional stability (Ullah, 2024; Partrick, 2025). Conversely, Tehran perceives Saudi Arabia's

U.S. alliance and growing ties with Israel as part of a strategic containment strategy aimed at undermining the Islamic Republic.

The persistence of deep-rooted ideological divergence compounds existing tensions Saudi Arabia and Iran. The fundamental dissonance between Saudi Arabia's conservative monarchy and Iran's revolutionary Shiite theocracy continues to shape their foreign policy narratives and regional influence strategies (Nawaz et al., 2023). While economic and strategic calculations may temporarily suppress ideological imperatives, these foundational differences are unlikely to disappear and could resurface during leadership transitions, regional crises, or periods of domestic instability (Tehsin, 2018).

Institutional deficits further undermine the rapprochement's prospects. The Middle East lacks robust regional security institutions comparable to the European Union or ASEAN, which could mediate disputes or enforce conflict-resolution norms. The GCC remains constraint by internal rifts and maintains no formal integration with Iran (Del Sarto & Soler i Lecha, 2024). Without institutionalized mechanisms for crisis management, the détente remains vulnerable to rapid reversal under pressure (Ullah & Xinlei, 2024).

This underscores how enduring ideological divides and weak institutional architecture threaten the sustainability of Saudi-Iran rapprochement. While pragmatic cooperation is emerging, the absence of durable regional security mechanisms and the regime-based ideological dissonance keeps the détente fragile and susceptible to collapse future crises. Moreover, several geostrategic flashpoints could reignite hostilities. In Bahrain, tensions between the Sunni monarchy and Shiite opposition allegedly backed by Iran remain a latent trigger. Maritime disputes in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf regularly sparks crises, often involving tanker seizures or naval encounters (Terrill, 2011; Ullah, 2024). In Lebanon, Iran's backing of Hezbollah clashes with Saudi Arabia's support for rival factions, perpetuating a fragile political paralysis (Geukjian, 2014; Partrick, 2021). Domestic political volatility adds further uncertainty: in Iran, factionalism between moderates and hardliners risks disrupting diplomatic continuity; in Saudi Arabia, the concentration of decision-making in Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's hands increases the fragility of foreign policy in the event of succession or internal dissent (Nawaz et al., 2023).

Overall, the rapprochement reflects a convergence of short-term interests rather than a structural transformation of the regional order. Unless sustained by deeper cooperation, institutional frameworks and mutual trust-building, the détente risks remaining a temporary strategic pause rather than a lasting reconfiguration of Middle Eastern security (Ali et al., 2020; Zhang, 2024). This reveals that despite the 2023 rapprochement, enduring geostrategic flashpoints and domestic political instability in both Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to threaten long-term regional stability. The détente appears tactically driven and interest-based, lacking the structural foundations such as institutional support and durable trust necessary for a lasting transformation of the regional security order.

CONCLUSION

The 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement represents more than a diplomatic thaw; it signals a critical realignment within the evolving regional security architecture of the Middle East. Driven by converging economic imperatives, strategic recalculations and shifting global power dynamics,

Riyadh and Tehran have increasingly favored pragmatic, interest-based diplomacy over ideologically rigid confrontation. This shift stems not from reconciled values but from a mutual recognition of the costs of sustained rivalry, especially amid the decline of U.S. regional dominance, post-pandemic economic strains and the rise of multipolar engagement led by actors like China. What distinguishes this rapprochement from past, short-lived attempts is the multipolar mediation framework and enhanced regional agency underpinning it. Unlike previous efforts primarily shaped by Western powers, the 2023 normalization was brokered by China, signaling a broader geopolitical transition. Additionally, regional actors such as Iraq and Oman have also assumed mediatory roles, illustrating an emerging trend toward localized, non-Western diplomacy. The decline of the Sunni-Shia binary as the primary analytical and policy lens, replaced by strategic pragmatism, also marks a significant discursive and policy shift in Middle Eastern statecraft.

This paper contributes to the existing scholarship by integrating Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to interpret the détente not as an isolated development but as a potential inflection point in the structural evolution of the Middle East's security complex. By analyzing post-rapprochement dynamics in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, this paper reveals a cautious recalibration of proxy strategies, diplomatic behaviour and alliance configurations. Furthermore, it also highlights institutional weakness, unresolved ideological tensions and volatile flashpoints that threaten the durability of this shift. While the rapprochement offers cautious optimism for a more cooperative regional order, it remains a strategic adaptation rather than a structural transformation. Its future hinges on the ability of both states to institutionalize trust, expand multilateral security mechanisms and manage ideological divergence. This research provides a timely and original assessment of how shifting patterns of interdependence and regional autonomy, viewed through the RSCT framework, are beginning to reshape one of the most entrenched rivalries in contemporary geopolitics. Whether this moment catalyzes sustained peace or merely delays renewed confrontation remains contingent on the political will and diplomatic foresight of the region's leaders.

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