Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry: The Iran–Saudi Conflict and the Crisis of Intra-Muslim Cooperation

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Abstract: **This study examines the paradox of persistent conflict and elusive unity among Muslim-majority states, using Iran and Saudi Arabia as a case. It explores how sectarian narratives and geopolitical rivalries inhibit regional cooperation despite shared religious identity. Using Social Constructivism and Contemporary Conflict Theory, this qualitative content analysis investigates how historical grievances, identity politics, and external interventions shaped the rivalry. Drawing on journals, policy texts, and official reports, the findings suggest that intra-Muslim cooperation is more likely where pluralistic identities, economic collaboration, and diplomatic dialogue prevail— while sectarianism, proxy wars, and hegemonic ambitions intensify conflict. The study contributes to peacebuilding literature by proposing culturally rooted frameworks for reconciliation and calls for reform in regional institutions like the OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) to foster durable Muslim unity.**

Keywords: **Sectarianism Cooperation Conflict Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Social Constructivism.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Middle East has witnessed escalating competition between the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sunni monarchy of Saudi Arabia. Though rooted in divergent ideologies and theological traditions, the Iran and Saudi rivalry has evolved into a broader contest for regional leadership and influence across the Muslim world. This rivalry has been shaped not only by material interests such as geopolitical control, economic competition, and military alliances but also by competing narratives and sectarian identities.

This study asks how sectarian narratives and strategic rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia have hindered intra-Muslim cooperation, and what theoretical and practical avenues might lead to sustainable dialogue. Drawing on Social Constructivism and Contemporary Conflict Theory, it analyzes how both states construct religious and national identities to justify their foreign policy choices, and how these discourses reinforce cycles of conflict.

Despite ongoing tensions, recent diplomatic shifts, such as the 2023 rapprochement and suggest the possibility of redefining regional dynamics. This study employs qualitative content analysis of published journals, media, policy texts, and organizational reports to assess the structural and discursive barriers to Muslim solidarity. By identifying key themes such as sectarianism, proxy warfare, media influence, and institutional weakness, the study offers a grounded analysis of both the obstacles and opportunities for enhanced Muslim unity.

Historical and Structural Roots of Conflict in the Muslim World

The historical trajectory of the Muslim world traces a narrative of cohesion and fractures. Islamic early caliphates, such as the Abbasids and the Umayyads, possessed gigantic states with multicultural populations and had employed pragmatic rule as a means of holding their multi-states together. When they collapsed, there was fragmentation along with several emergent

rival dynasties eager to give rise to future conflicts. The colonial era further entrenched the cleavages in the Muslim world. The European powers arbitrarily drew borders, disrupting the prior social and political organisation. The colonial legacy has been responsible for the ongoing conflict and competition between Muslim states (Hossein-Zadeh, 2005).

In recent times, Mohamed and Mohamed (2011) highlight that the impression that the Middle East is naturally prone to conflict has been refuted. Historical records indicate that the region has witnessed extended periods of peace and coexistence between its diverse population. Modern sectarian strife is relatively recent, typically being instigated by external interference and political modernization. Said (2014) argues that the formation of nationalism and nation-states in the 20th century introduced new dynamics. Competing national interests and ideologies have occasionally led to conflict, for example, the Iran-Iraq War and Saudi Arabia-Iran relations. Despite these challenges, there have been efforts to establish unity and cooperation among Muslim states. Organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) were established to promote solidarity and address issues of shared concern to the Muslim world (Abbas & Ahmed, 2024).

On the other hand, contemporary scholars have had a balanced and comprehensive perspective of the structural and historical origins of conflict between Muslim states, putting focus that current unrest is deeply embedded in an incorporation of political, economic, as well as social origins. Phillips (2024) argues that contemporary wars are less because of religious sectarianism and more because of regional rivalries, authoritarianism, and interventionism. Cordesman and Yarosh (2012) also list demographic pressures, economic imbalances, and poor governance as forces behind instability across the Middle East and North Africa. Kirazlı (2016) again confirms land conflicts, socio-economic grievances, and state repression as reasons for war and terrorism. Sørli, Gleditsch, and Strand (2005) provide empirical support that ethnic domination and low development, not Islamic ideology or oil, are stronger predictors of conflict in the area. Gelvin (2005) continues to describe how colonial legacies and failed state-making have bequeathed divided polities vulnerable to violence. Tibi (2012) argues that the development of Islamism—distinct from Islam as a religion—has politicized religion, which has created intra-Muslim world conflict. Gerges (2009) documents how intra-jihadist polemic made local complaints universal anti-Western rhetoric, and Mamdani (2005) explores the record of Western foreign policy in fostering radical movements through Cold War interventions. Collectively, all these authors stress that the reasons for conflict in the Islamic world are structurally and historically profound, being motivated by both internal causes and external manipulations.

Sectarianism and Its Impact on Intra-Muslim Relations

Sectarian clashes, particularly between Sunni and Shia Muslims, have been primarily responsible for Muslim world conflicts. Sectarian clashes often intersect with political and geopolitical interests, increasing rivalry and making cooperation difficult (Abdulmajid, 2022). Aljebori (2024) highlights that the Saudi-Iranian competition is a prime example of how sectarianism can fuel regional tensions. Both nations have supported opposing sides in Middle Eastern conflicts, ranging from Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. In Lebanon, the highly sectarian political landscape has generated a fragile political system. The recent combat risks igniting anew tensions between the country's various communities, highlighting longstanding problems of sectarianism (Hazbun, 2016). Individuals attempting to span sectarian divides have encompassed religious leaders and civil society organizations. But embedded suspicion and past grievances have a tendency to short-circuit attempts at reconciliation. Combating sectarianism requires an overarching strategy considering religious, political, and socio-economic factors. Encouraging inclusive governance and inter-sectarian dialogue are prerequisite measures towards curbing sectarian conflict.

On the other hand, Muslim sectarianism is a multifaceted phenomenon that is deeply ingrained within historical, political, and social dynamics. Abdulmajid (2022) points the origin of sectarian differences back to early Islamic history, with an emphasis that these have evolved over time with numerous expressions which continue to plague Middle Eastern cultural diversity. Z. S. Ahmed and Akbarzadeh (2021) discuss the way in which geopolitical rivalry, in particular between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has used sectarian language to seek national interests at the cost of the institution's coherence, e.g., of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). In Southeast Asia, interactions among Sunnis and Shiites in Indonesia, which mentions that there is ideological polarization but also integration efforts and functional coexistence (Faiz, Nasution, & Sodiqin, 2024). Despite all these issues, scholars like Whyte and Yucel (2023) appeal to intra-Muslim conversation and push back against the monolithic orthodoxy imposed upon them and instead call for mutual understanding and pluralism among Islamic traditions. The works of these scholars recognize that sectarianism is not merely an historical artifact but a dynamic entity fueled by political agendas and contemporary social structures during modern times that needs to be addressed with wise measures to consolidate unity and discourses in the Muslim world.

The Role and Challenges of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), established in 1969, is the world's second-largest intergovernmental organization, after the United Nations, and it exists to promote solidarity among its 57 member states and to tackle Muslim-world matters. Academics have discussed both its role and the multifaceted challenges that it faces. To give an illustration, the OIC has taken center stage in some of the war on terror campaigns and extremist threats, including, for instance, the signing onto the Code of Conduct and Convention on Combating International Terrorism within the 1990s (Castillo, 2014). However, again and again it has come into question over being effective, most notably within reaction to crises including the Palestinian one, in which it has come under criticism due to its inaction (Ali & Sultan, 2023). Internal challenges like political polarization, economic disproportion, and differences in the member states' national interests have also hindered its capacity to act as a collective entity (Kayaoglu, 2015). Moreover, the human rights strategy of the OIC has been marred by controversy, most notably with the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, which has been deemed to conflict with universal notions of human rights. In spite of these issues, the OIC remains an important forum for Muslim-majority countries to engage in dialogue and cooperation, seeking to find its way through the intricacies of modern-day global politics (Human Rights Law in Africa).

Islamic Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Recent studies highlight that Islamic conflict resolution processes are deeply shaped by religious ethics, historical practices, and community-based processes focusing on reconciliation, justice, and spiritual change. Funk and Said (2009) emphasizes the need for traditional Islamic practices such as sulh (mediation), tahkim (arbitration), and wujaha (community-based mediation), which place greater emphasis on mending social harmony and interpersonal relationships rather than punishment. These are complemented by spiritual qualities like purification of the inner self and forgiveness, heavily emphasized in Sufi traditions, that view peace as an individual and societal effort. Further, Huda (2024) explores as well Islamic peacebuilding as a synthesis of religious teachings and practical approaches to nonviolence, community reconciliation, and interfaith dialogue. Huda (2024) argues that they are not just rooted in Islamic tradition but also highly attractive to civil society agents, offering culturally relevant models of addressing contemporary conflict.

Modongal (2022) examines theological disputes regarding the conflict between Palestine and Israel, outlining how Islamic ethics of justice, mercy, and coexistence could be used in peace negotiations. Modongal (2022) argues in favor of recognition of religious thought in foreign affairs, believing that neglecting the spiritual dimension may miss avenues of reconciliation. Rohman (2018) emphasizes the role of religion as a source of peace, rather than conflict. He promotes the integration of religious factors into conflict resolution, and he endorses inter-religious relations and peacebuilding according to Islamic teachings to produce understanding and cooperation among various communities. These scholars demonstrate how Islamic conflict resolution is not only not limited to legalistic analysis but is a method that balances the ethical, the spiritual, and the communal. By invoking tradition and modern practice, Islamic paradigms have valuable knowledge and resources to draw upon in managing conflict in ways both culturally familiar and spiritually sensitive.

Prospects for Enhanced Cooperation and Conflict Mitigation

Recent studies emphasize that regionalism, inclusive governance, and environmental peacebuilding increasingly become the future potential of further collaboration and conflict prevention. Krampe, Hegazi, and VanDeveer (2021) argue that environmental cooperation, such as the management of natural resources, offers three mechanisms for guaranteeing peace: creating cooperative relationships, managing risks of resource wars, and enhancing post-conflict institutions' legitimacy. Their World Development research suggests that natural resource management, if transparent and inclusive, can prompt former adversaries to collaborate, especially in fragile or post-conflict environments. Adding to this, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) demonstrates how low-profile, non-governmental mediation and local outreach strategies have been able to de-escalate tensions in regions like Mindanao in the Philippines, Mali in the Sahel, and Aceh in Indonesia. HD's methodology emphasizes dialogue, building trust, and cultural sensitivity, and how non-state actors can complement classical diplomacy in disentangling complex conflicts (Leary, 2004).

Acharya (2004) then advances the norm localization theory according to which ideas and principles in international affairs should be domesticated within local politics and cultures so they can actually operate. The example of the book is on Southeast Asian regionalism, more specifically ASEAN, where Acharya illustrates institutions within regions the ability to borrow, adapt, and reinterpret the norms from a global world towards localized visions for cooperation, order, and

sovereignty(Acharya, 2004). Similarly, researchers such as Richmond (2012) and Paris (2010) have analyzed the competition between liberal peacebuilding models and peace in indigenous societies and called for "hybrid peace" initiatives that draw upon top-down and bottom-up approaches to conflict transformation. These frameworks suggest that conflict mitigation with long-term effects is not just a matter of institutional design but also of deep local ownership and cultural resonance.

This research, entitled "**Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry: The Iran–Saudi Conflict and the Crisis of Intra-Muslim Cooperation**" is guided by the dual theoretical approaches of Social Constructivism and Contemporary Conflict Theory. Together, these frameworks offer a nuanced and interdisciplinary perspective to understand why cooperation and conflict persist in Iran between Saudi Muslim states and communities.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on the Social Constructivist branch of International Relations theory, which emphasizes that states' interests and behaviors are shaped by social identities, norms and shared narratives rather than only material factors. Social Constructivism argues that social realities such as political solidarities, identities, and alliances are not fixed but are constantly being constructed and reconstructed through human interaction, history, and shared norms. As Wendt (1999) and Risse (2011) have said, political actions are typically shaped by collective identities rather than material forces in and of themselves. In the Muslim world, as evidenced in the literature, Islamic solidarity is socially constructed but varies across regions and eras. For instance, constructivists hold that states' identities – e.g. "revolutionary Iran" or "custodian Saudi Arabia" – are socially constructed and determine foreign policy. Further, it examines how sectarian divisions (Abdulmajid, 2022; Aljebori, 2024), ideological readings, and political interests shape cooperation or conflict between Muslim states and society.

On the other hand, Contemporary Conflict Theory presents an analysis of how competition for resources, political power, and foreign interventions contribute to the conflict within the Muslim world. According to authors like Phillips (2024), Cordesman and Yarosh (2012), and Kirazlı (2016), modern Middle Eastern conflicts are less about theological differences but are more essentially caused by political authoritarianism, socio-economic grievances, demographic pressures, and foreign interventions. Contemporary Conflict Theory (akin to neo-realism) argues that in an anarchic system states nonetheless compete for power and security. Realist explains, for example, Z. S. Ahmed and Akbarzadeh (2021) explain why Riyadh and Tehran pursue spheres of influence and defensive alliances – they respond to perceived threats and balance rivals that contribute to long-term instability. It also explains why organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), while possessing noble objectives, are faced with insurmountable challenges by virtue of political cleavages within and rival national interests (Kayaoglu, 2015).

Thus, the study aims to synthesize these perspectives: constructivism to interpret the meaning-making and identity-work of sectarian discourse, and conflict theory to account for material competition over resources, territory and security. Qualitative content analysis of published journal, key texts (speeches, media) provide the empirical basis for discerning how rhetoric (narratives, slogans, frames) interlocks with strategic actions.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary methods use in this study is qualitative content analysis of published journal, official discourse and media output from Iran and Saudi Arabia, supplemented by secondary sources. The study examines speeches by leaders (e.g. Supreme Leader Khamenei, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman), state media (PressTV, Al Arabiya, etc.), policy documents, and expert analyses. The approach follows conventional content analytic procedures: the study identified recurring themes, grouping statements under categories like "sectarian rhetoric" or "economic threats." By comparing how each side talks about shared issues (e.g. Yemen conflict, Jerusalem), It infer the social scripts shaping their rivalry. This interpretive analysis seeks patterns in language and framing, rather than statistical measures. The study constructivist lens means pay special attention to how terms like "Muslim unity," "Islamic world," or "Shiite crescent" are used as social symbols. At the same time, a conflict theoretic view is applied when interpreting discussions of power, arms, and regional security. While non-quantitative, the analysis draws on credible scholarly literature and data (e.g. on oil production, GDP, population) to ground generalizations. All factual claims are supported by reputable sources. In the following thematic sections, the study weaves narrative explanation with references to recent research and news reporting to support principal arguments.

Axes of Contestation: A Thematic Analysis of Iran–Saudi Rivalry

Sectarianism as a Political Instrument

Sectarian identity (Shiʿa vs. Sunni) has been one of the most visible motifs of the Iran–Saudi rivalry. However, constructivist insights argue that sectarian categories are not *"organic"* givens but are politically constructed narratives. Al- Qarawee notes, *"sectarian identity is not an organic state of being; it is a conflict-oriented narrative"* used by elites to mobilize supporters and demonize (Al-Qarawee, 2004). In the Middle Eastern context, regional governments have often *"invented and presented"* sectarian identities as collective group *"mental maps"* for political ends (Al-Qarawee, 2004). Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have indeed utilized sectarian rhetoric instrumentally. For example, during the Syrian civil war, each country rhetorically cast the conflict in sectarian terms (Iran championing Alawite/Shiʿa Assad vs. a variety of Sunni rebel groups), even though both had initially supported more inclusive forces (Phillips, 2018). Phillips observes that in Syria *"identity politics was not the immediate policy"* for either side, but became a Plan B strategy as sectarian proxies proved more tractable than moderate ones (Phillips, 2018). Thus, sectarianism serves as an expedient frame or fallback justification.

Under Khomeini, Iran explicitly defined itself as the leader of the Shia world. Revolutionary ideology emphasized Shiʿa themes as core components of state legitimacy (AlSaied, 2021). For years Iranian schoolbooks and media stressed the suffering of the Shia community and cast the regime as protector of persecuted Shiʿa globally (Majin, 2017). By contrast, Saudi Arabia's regime built its legitimacy partly on its Sunni Islamic credentials – as *"custodian of the Two Holy Mosques"* and leader of the (Sunni) Muslim community. Riyadh's official discourse underscores Sunni Islamic unity and Arab or Islamic nationalism rather than sectarian grievance (Behzad, 2018). Indeed, AlSaied (2021) notes that Saudi Arabia's *"sectarian movement"* arose in reaction to Khomeini's Shiʿa revolutionary threat, whereas post-1979 Iran *"magnified sectarian differences"* constitutionally in service of its exportable ideology. In recent years, as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (MBS) has pursued a more secular nationalistic agenda his *"Vision 2030",* formal sectarian rhetoric has waned in Riyadh. In Iran, by contrast, overt Shiʿa religious discourse remains central, since detaching from it would undermine the revolution's ideological foundations (AlSaied, 2021).

Sectarian framing fuels domestic legitimacy for both governments. In Shiʿa-majority Iran, the leadership's propagation of Shiʿa martyrdom narratives and the doctrine of *"velayat-e faqih"* (Guardianship of the Jurist) binds population loyalty to the Supreme Leader (Aldandashi, 2021). Aldandashi (2021) also highlights that in Saudi Arabia, the regime deploys Sunni Arab nationalist and Islamic identity symbols (the holy sites, Wahhabi scholars, etc.) to unify its diverse citizenry. Both states have at times accused each other of inciting internal dissent: Iran alleges Saudi funding of Sunni extremism among its Baluch and Ahwazi minorities, while Saudi accuses Iran of encouraging Shiʿa unrest in Eastern Arabia. Such accusations illustrate how sectarian *"discourse wars"* mirror geo-strategic competition. Finally, sectarianism functions less as earliest hatreds and more as a political instrument – a set of identities and grievances constructed by regime elites to mobilize support, justify foreign interventions, and delegitimize the rivalry (Al-Qarawee, 2004).

Geopolitical Competition for Regional Hegemony

Beyond sectarian labels, Iran and Saudi Arabia vie in a realist sense for influence across the Muslim world. Both envisage themselves as potential regional hegemon. Underlying this is a zero-sum calculus: each side perceives that a gain in the other's area of influence directly threatens its own security and stature (Chen, 2017). Historically, the United States infamously established Iran and Saudi Arabia as *"the twin pillars of the Middle East,"* underpinning U.S. interests through alliances and military aid (Aldandashi, 2021). However, the Shah's overthrown in 1979 upended that order and unleashed an attempt by Iran to reimagine regional leadership. Iran's revolutionary regime proclaimed itself the vanguard of Islam (the Shia ummah) and set ambitions to reshape the balance of power (Ostovar, 2016). In reaction, Saudi Arabia and its allies strove to contain Tehran's agenda by counter-mobilizing Sunni states and militias (Grumet, 2015). Hoang Nguyen and TURAN (2019) argue that the Iran–Saudi struggle became *"a fight for power through the lenses of religion,"* with each side funding proxy forces and ideological networks worldwide.

This competition has played out on multiple fronts. In the Gulf peninsula, Arab monarchies (led by Saudi Arabia) long worked to counter Iran's regional dominance – for example, Riyadh backed Iraq's Saddam Hussein in the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War as a check on Tehran (Huwaidin, 2015). In the Levant and North Africa, Saudi and Iranian influence frequently run in opposite directions. Lebanon's Hezbollah militia is Iran's prime ally there, whereas Saudi Arabia supported various Sunni coalitions and favored the Lebanese Sunni-Syrian axis. In Yemen, Iran has backed the Shiʿa Houthi movement,

prompting Saudi Arabia (with U.S. support) to launch a military campaign to restore a Saudi-aligned government. In Syria, Iran and Russia back President Assad's regime, while Saudi Arabia (with Turkey and Qatar) supported rebel groups – a competition so intense that military analysts have labeled it a proxy war. As Professor Vali Nasr has noted that Iran *"has built a network of proxies across the Middle East"* (Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiʿa militias in Iraq and Syria, Houthis in Yemen, etc.) (Lane, 2023). Riyadh, for its part, likewise sponsors Sunni armed groups (e.g. in Syria's rebel factions, and indirectly in Libya and Afghanistan) though often more secretly (Gopal & Hodge, 2022).

Indeed, Naghizadeh (2019) , Iran and Saudi Arabia have been *"engaged in a proxy conflict over influence in the Middle East and other regions of the Muslim world."* He argues that *"have provided support to opposing sides in nearby conflicts, including the civil wars in Syria and Yemen; and disputes in Bahrain, Lebanon, Qatar and Iraq"*. Geographically, the struggle has even stretched beyond the Middle East into Africa and Asia, as both powers court allies in Sudan, Yemen (Horn of Africa proximity), Pakistan, and elsewhere (Verhoeven, 2018). The rivalry has even been labeled a new *"Cold War,"* fought on multiple levels for regional hegemony (Hiro, 2019). Particularly, control of oil and energy resources is at the source of much of this competition: whoever can dominate the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and secure Gulf oil supplies wields enormous economic and political influence (Ghoble, 2019).

The regional power contest is thus a mix of ideology and realpolitik. On the ideological side, Iran portrays itself as the rightful leader of the *"oppressed"* Muslim world (especially Shiʿa), accusing Saudi Arabia's monarchy of being un-Islamic or corrupt. Saudi Arabia, in turn, casts itself as the protector of Sunni Islam and guardian of holy places. But beneath these narratives lies typical balance-of-power behavior. For example, during the 2000s and 2010s Saudi officials lobbied Western partners to isolate Iran economically, while Iran sought new strategic patrons (Russia, China) to counterbalance U.S. influence. Both states have simultaneously courted non-Arab Muslim powers (e.g. Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia) to build alliances based on shared sectarian or anti-Western agendas (CALVO, 2023). The result is that sectarian rhetoric often overlaps with classic geopolitical competing: each side accuses the other of territorial designs (e.g. Iran allegedly dreams of a *"Shiʿa crescent"* across the Fertile Crescent, Saudi Arabia fears Iranian encirclement) even as they maneuver military and economic assets.

Proxy Conflicts and Militia Politics

A trademark of the Iran–Saudi rivalry is its indirect nature: the two have largely avoided direct war, instead sparring through proxies and militias (Naghizadeh, 2019; Özkoç, 2020). This pattern dates back to the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s (when Saudi funds bolstered Saddam) but intensified after 2003. In practice, Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and affiliated Qods Force train, equip and fund a constellation of armed groups. By 2022 Tehran had allied with *"more than a dozen major militias"* across Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Syria and Yemen (Lane, 2023). These include Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Iraqi Shiʿa militias (the Hashd al-Shaabi), the Houthis in Yemen, the Assad regime forces (including foreign Shia brigades) in Syria, and proxies in Palestine (Hamas and Islamic Jihad). The Wilson Center notes that since the 1979 revolution Iran *"provided arms, training and financial support"* to militias in at least six countries. U.S. policy has emphasized sanctions against these networks, but sanctions have only partially stemmed Iran's reach (Lane, 2023).

Saudi Arabia's proxy role has been more diffused but similarly impactful. Riyadh has financed Sunni militias and rebel factions in several theaters. In Syria, Saudi and its Gulf allies funneled support to a patchwork of anti-Assad groups; in Iraq it invested in Sunni political blocs and supported former Baathists (Berti & Guzansky, 2014). In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition has backed the internationally recognized government (and Sunni tribes) against the Iranian-backed Houthis. Riyadh has also, at times, funded Salafi militias in Pakistan and Afghanistan to counter Iranian influence (Zimmerman, 2022). In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia previously backed Sunni parties and militias to offset Hezbollah's dominance (Helfont, 2009). Importantly, both Iran and Saudi see such proxy wars as cost-effective ways to project power without full-scale invasion – a classic *"proxy warfare"* strategy. Thakur (2024) observes, since the Arab Spring *"the expansion of regional power for Iran and Saudi Arabia became easier with the states toppling weaker countries… Iran's contribution to the Houthis in Yemen in 2015 acted as a magnet for Saudi Arabia's intervention"*.

Quantitatively, the toll has been enormous: millions displaced, thousands of fighters active. Yemen's war (2015–present) exemplifies the proxy logic: Iran supplies the Houthis with some rockets and missiles (often reverse-engineered), while Saudi led a coalition that has conducted air strikes and ground incursions on the Houthis (Thakur, 2024). In Syria, conflicts between Iran-backed Shiʿa militias and Saudi- and Turkish-backed Sunnis prolonged the civil war. Notably, neither Tehran

nor Riyadh seems able to fully dictate outcomes; each suffers blowback. The security dilemma is stark: Saudi arms transfers to Sunni tribes in Iraq have occasionally fueled sectarian violence (spurring those tribes toward Iran), while Iranian backing of Shiʿa gunmen in Saudi Arabia (e.g. Eastern Province) has stoked Riyadh's fear of internal revolt. As Fraihat (2016) notes that involvement in proxy wars *"makes disengagement almost impossible as it only worsens the circumstances."* Thus, militia politics have locked both states into cycles of confrontation – from Yemen's rubble to Lebanon's tension – entrenching the divide.

While sectarianism provides a ready terminology, both Iran and Saudi have often acted pragmatically, adjusting alliances beyond sectarian lines. Recent years have seen surprising realignments as geopolitical realities shift. The most dramatic example is the March 2023 agreement: under Chinese mediation, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to restore diplomatic relations and reopen their embassies (Jazeera, 2021b). This breakthrough – terminating seven years of diplomatic rupture – reflected both sides' exhaustion from decades of conflict. The two governments also pledged to respect each other's sovereignty and not interfere in internal affairs as highlighted by (Jazeera, 2021b), suggesting awareness that perpetual hostility was self-destructive. In parallel, Riyadh signaled willingness to ease Saudi-led measures (e.g. allowing Qatari planes to overfly Saudi airspace) and promised that U.S. or Israeli forces would not use Saudi bases to strike Iran (Ali-Khan, 2024). Such moves indicate a pragmatic rebalancing: confronting common challenges (like Gaza conflict spillover) has pushed Saudi and Iran to coordinate deconfliction measures.

Even before 2023, the rivalry exhibited episodic agreements. In 2020–21 Gulf politics, for instance, a Saudi-led blockade of Qatar (a Riyadh ally-turned-rival that had Iranian ties) was abruptly ended by Saudi Arabia and its partners restoring full relations with Doha (Jazeera, 2021b). This step illustrated Riyadh's pragmatism in closing a costly Intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (intra-GCC) dispute at a moment when external challenges emerged. Similarly, Saudi Arabia quietly resumed engagement with Iraq's central government after years of hostility, recognizing that Baghdad's stability affected the Gulf. In 2023, Riyadh even moved to re-establish ties with Syria's Assad regime, long a Russian and Iranian ally; Saudi media confirmed that embassies would reopen after Eid al-Fitr (Yaakoubi, 2023). This dramatic shift – after a decade of hostility – was explicitly linked to the earlier Iran deal, underlining how the Saudis saw normalization with Tehran as a key to mending other relationships.

On the Iranian side, there has also been strategic flexibility. Tehran has cultivated relationships with Sunni groups when convenient (e.g. maintaining ties with Pakistan, Afghanistan's Taliban, and Kurdish parties) and has engaged in regional forums like the I2U2 (Israel–UAE–US–India) indirectly by pressuring conspirators. Iran's 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) negotiations, for example, were partly driven by pragmatism to relieve sanctions, even as Riyadh opposed the deal fearing it would embolden Tehran. Likewise, Iran has at times cooperated with moderate Gulf states (Oman, Kuwait) on security initiatives (counter-piracy, anti-drugs).

The net effect is that alliances are not immutable. For instance, Turkey (a Sunni-majority state) shifted from backing Arab rebels in Syria to a more neutral stance with Russia and even implicit coordination with Iran on some fronts. Qatar has hesitated between Iranian partnership and Gulf cooperation. Internationally, both Iran and Saudi have diversified partners: both now court Russia, China, and other powers as alternatives to the US. Saudi joined BRICS talks in 2023 and signed a major security deal with China, even as Iran tightens ties with Russia and China to offset sanctions (GERALD IMRAY, 2023). So, this is strategic pragmatism: despite all the sectarian rhetoric, both sides will engage with unlikely partners or competitors when interests align (Saudi working with Israel or China on energy, Iran negotiating with the Gulf monarchies via Oman). Yet this pragmatism is bounded; deep distrust and ideological posturing still limit full cooperation. What is certain, nonetheless, is that the competition is not fixed: changing alignments intermittently create opportunities for diplomacy (as in 2023) even as both sides hedge their bets.

Institutional Weakness in Pan-Islamic Unity

A broader context for the Iran–Saudi rivalry is the longstanding failure of Muslim-majority countries to unite under common institutions. Pan-Islamic organizations like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) or the Arab League have proven incompetent at mediating Sunni-Shia tensions. The OIC, in particular, was designed as a voice of collective Muslim solidarity. But in practice it has been restricted by member states' rivalries. After the 2016 diplomatic spat following Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shia cleric, the OIC's leadership conspicuously sided with Riyadh. This "*open backing of Riyadh"* in a Saudi-Iran dispute, it was been noted that deepened inter-sectarian gaps within the OIC and led many Shiʿa Muslims to question the organization's neutrality and commitment to Muslim solidarity (Ilishev, 2016). In effect, the Saudi-Iran conflict corrupted an institution meant to transcend it.

Likewise, the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) often reflect intra-Arab political divides more than pan-Islamic ideals. During the 2017–2021 Qatar crisis, the Saudi and UAE-led quartet imposed a blockade citing Qatar's closeness to Iran (Jazeera, 2021a), even though in theory the GCC is about cooperation. Ironically, both Iran and Saudi have occasionally proposed initiatives for Muslim unity when convenient (e.g. Islamic summits, anti-extremism pacts), but these have usually served as thin veneers for pursuing national agendas. A contributing factor is that the two countries' leaderships define *"Islamic interests"* so differently that no forum can reconcile them. Iran's self-conception as leader of the *"Shiʿa crescent"* directly clashes with Saudi's ambition to lead the Sunni Arab majority and be guardian of Islam's holy sites. Ilishev (2016) argues that pan-Islamic unity remains *"the goal of some… but far from their current reality"*.

Therefore, the institutional architecture for conflict-resolution among Muslim states has largely broken down. Global powers have at times filled the gap: the 2023 China-brokered agreement is a case where two external patrons (China) and allies (Oman, Iraq) forced an accommodation that the Arab-Muslim system itself could not. But absent such third-party mediation, Gulf Sunnis and Iranian Shiʿa remain organized into separate blocs rather than a united Ummah. This weakness of pan-Islamic institutions allows the Iran–Saudi rivalry to perpetuate intra-Muslim divisions without easy multilateral remedies.

Foreign Intervention and Global Power Dynamics

The Iran–Saudi rivalry has never unfolded in isolation from great-power games. Indeed, interventions by external powers have often shaped the conflict's delineations. During the Cold War, Iran (under the Shah) and Saudi Arabia were both backed by the U.S. as anti-communist allies. As noted, the Nixon administration's *"twin pillars"* strategy made them key player of U.S. policy in the Gulf (Aldandashi, 2021). After 1979, the U.S. reoriented toward Saudi Arabia (and later Saddam's Iraq), while Iran became the main adversary. Washington's invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) paradoxically expanded Iran's influence (by removing rival regimes) and forced Saudi Arabia to deepen its security ties with the U.S. and Israel. U.S. sanctions policy has profoundly affected the rivalry: stringent U.S. and multilateral sanctions on Iran (especially after 2018) have crippled its economy and pushed Tehran to lean on its Gulf proxies. Riyadh lobbied the U.S. to isolate Iran and supported policies (like the 2018 maxims sanctions) intended to curb Tehran's missile and nuclear programs. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's own military interventions (with U.S. support) – in Yemen or Bahrain – have been justified partly as blocking an "Iranian expansion."

Beyond the U.S., Russia and China have emerged as pivotal players. Russia's alliance with the Assad regime in Syria, and its sales of advanced weaponry to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, link Moscow to each side. In Syria, Iran and Russia fought (and collaborated) jointly, demonstrating how Russian and Iranian interests sometimes align. Conversely, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its desire for energy revenues have brought it closer to Saudi-led OPEC talks (Parker & Lynch III, 2021). China has also become a key mediator. China's huge trade and investment ties to Iran (oil imports, infrastructure projects) give it leverage, and Beijing has sought to maintain cordial relations with Riyadh (T. Ahmed, Arslan, Niaz, & Mustafa). The fact that China could convene the 2023 Riyadh-Tehran talks shows how global power dynamics now intertwine with the rivalry. Moreover, the U.S. *"pivot"* or distraction elsewhere has motivated both Iran and Saudi to hedge. Saudi Arabia has signaled an openness to Chinese and even Russian partnership (participating in BRICS forums, diversifying arms purchases), while Iran sought Chinese credit lines and invited Russian diplomatic overtures to offset Western pressure.

This global interplay creates both complications and openings. For example, the Gulf states' joint investment in missile defense systems has drawn U.S. and Israeli support, angering Iran. Conversely, Iran's flirtation with a Chinese-led security bloc alarmed Saudi Arabia. Yet at times international powers have also proposed cooperation: U.S. backchannel talks in Oman, or the U.S.-brokered nuclear deal (JCPOA) indirectly affected Saudi calculations. The Cold War analogy is fitting: Iran and Saudi are the regional rivals, but superpowers set the stage (once as patrons, now as multipolar influencers). Iran's ideological challenge to U.S. order and Saudi's role as its principal Arab security partner mean that U.S. policies (e.g. arms sales, sanctions) have inadvertently fueled mutual distrust. In short, global power dynamics act as both catalyst and constraint in this rivalry.

Economic Competition and Oil Politics

Oil wealth lies at the heart of both economies, making economic factors a critical dimension of the rivalry. Saudi Arabia, with the world's largest proven oil reserves and the biggest OPEC output, wields enormous influence over global oil markets. Iran, while also an oil producer, has been handicapped by sanctions that reduced its exports. This imbalance

translates into competitive posturing. Iran frequently accuses Saudi Arabia of flooding markets during crises to drive prices down – a strategy that hurts Iran's revenues especially when Tehran is locked out of markets. For example, the 2020 OPEC collapse saw Saudi Arabia briefly cut prices deeply in a price war (and to pressure U.S. shale) that also punished Iran (Tabrizi, 2016). Similarly, in the mid-2010s after Iran signed the nuclear deal, Tehran hoped to ramp up exports (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2017). Saudi Arabia responded by refusing output cuts that would have stabilized prices, fearing a loss of market share. In one 2016 OPEC meeting, analysts noted that *"the kingdom refused to contemplate a freeze in output… worried that Iran could progressively increase its market share"* (Tabrizi, 2016). Iran, for its part, *"refused to accept production quotas"* that would hold it below pre-sanctions levels, viewing such limits as an attempt by Saudi Arabia to stunt its recovery (Tabrizi, 2016). These behind-the-scenes *"oil wars"* demonstrate how economics intensify the rivalry: energy has become yet another battlefield, as both states wield production and pricing as political weapons.

Beyond oil, economic diversification is a component of the contest. Saudi Vision 2030 represents Riyadh's attempt to transition away from oil-dependence and modernize its economy. It entails encouraging nationalism over religious identity, as Saudi elites now argue that sectarianism is *"incompatible"* with development (AlSaied, 2021). Iran, facing collapse of growth under sanctions, has struggled to diversify but emphasizes self-sufficiency (with slogans like *"resistance economy".* Both states compete for foreign investment and regional trade partnerships. Riyadh's investment in Arab and African markets and its pivot toward tech and finance (with new cities and enterprises) contrast with Iran's efforts to bolster ties with Europe and Asia. Financially, Saudi Arabia's much larger GDP and foreign reserves give it a cushion that Iran lacks; by some estimates Saudi's economy is roughly twice the size of Iran's and its per capita income many times greater. This gap enables Saudi Arabia to allocate more resources to defense, subsidies and foreign projects, whereas Iran's war chest is limited.

At the same time, both countries recognize mutual interdependence in certain domains. The global economy binds them together: global oil prices, energy security, and even shared concerns about market stability. There have been occasional hints of cooperation: for instance, Saudi and Iran, as top OPEC producers, both have an interest in preventing a collapse of oil prices (which would hurt all exporters). Tabrizi (2016) highlights that a stable OPEC deal requires both to compromise, yet sectarian distrust has so far prevented cohesive action. The very fact that Chinese interests (energy imports) and broader global market factors compelled both to sit down in 2023 underscores that economics sometimes demands pragmatism. In summary, oil politics and economic competition amplify the rivalry but also provide material incentives that could, in principle, bring them together.

Ideological Models of Governance

Iran and Saudi Arabia represent fundamentally different models of Islamic governance, and these ideological contrasts underlie much of their antagonism. Iran's 1979 Revolution created a theocratic republic based on Shiʿa revolutionary ideology. Its founding doctrine of velayat-e faqih places ultimate authority in a supreme cleric (the wali-ʿamr or Supreme Leader). The Iranian constitution enshrines a mission to export the Revolution and uphold Shia political thought (Kamrava, 2024). Symbolically, Iran's leadership often frames itself as the "vanguard" of Islam's true spirit and positions the state as a moral crusader. In practice, this means that key decisions (foreign and domestic) are legitimized through religious narratives and clerical endorsement. Iran's legal and educational systems are deeply intertwined with Shiʿa jurisprudence and guardianship theory (Majin, 2017).

Saudi Arabia, by contrast, is an absolute monarchy with Sunni foundations. Its legitimacy rests on tribal monarchy and a partnership with Wahhabi clerics (Alrebh, 2017). The Saudi king holds political control, but religious scholars are powerful in determining social norms (Mouline, 2014). The Saudi state is not theocratic in the Iranian sense; rather, it fuses monarchy with a strict form of Sunni Islam. Importantly, unlike Iran's claim to be an *"Islamic Republic,"* Saudi Arabia has no constitutional democracy; the royal family's rule is justified by religion (custodianship of Mecca and Medina) and by tribal consent. The state's ideology emphasizes obedience to the king as a duty for Muslims and rejects republican forms.

These divergent systems manifest in how each country views the ideal Islamic order. Iran's model is explicitly revolutionary: it preaches that Muslims (especially the oppressed Shiʿa) must overthrow unjust rulers and establish godly governance. After 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini famously called for the end of *"illegitimate monarchies"* which he meant were the Saudi Arabia and others (Demircan, 1997). In this view, Iran's Islamic regime is first and foremost, and the state apparatus merely serves religious aims. The state's foreign policy is thus understood as spreading the revolution and defending Shiʿa communities. Saudi Arabia's model, on the other hand, is one of conservative stability. The ruling family believes it has an

ordained role to be guardian of Islam's core heritage. While it finances Islamic institutions abroad, it discourages political Islam outside the monarchy, and its religious narrative traditionally stressed quietism and obedience. Riyadh's involvement in ideology has been mainly through funding institutions that preach the Saudi (Wahhabi) version of Islam, to counter what it saw as the Iranian Shiʿa challenge.

Moreover, these ideological models shape internal governance. Iran's clerical system left little room for secular opposition; instead, entire state policy is justified by theology. Saudi Arabia suppresses political dissent (Islamist or secular) through a combination of religious authority and security. Both countries thus equate regime survival with religious mission. In recent years, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reforms (permitting cinemas, curtailing clerical power) indicate a shift toward a more nationalistic, less overtly sectarian ideology (AlSaied, 2021). By contrast, Iran's leaders have doubled down on ideological rhetoric as economic hardship has deepened, fearing that abandoning the core narrative would undermine their rule. Therefore, the ideological models of governance – theocratic clerical republic versus conservative monarchy – provide a contrasting worldview. Each side views the other's system as illegitimate or dangerous. This ideological clash, more than any theological minutia, drives mutual suspicion and frames the rivalry as an existential struggle between two incompatible models of Islamic leadership.

Media, Narrative Control, and Soft Power

The rivalry extends into the information domain: both Iran and Saudi Arabia engage in extensive media campaigns and soft-power initiatives to shape regional narratives. In the digital era where 24/7 news and social media, the battle for hearts and minds is fierce. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies' control major Arabic outlets like Al Arabiya, Sky News Arabia that project a modernist, pro-monarchy version of events. Iran similarly operates its own channels like PressTV in English, Al-Alam in Arabic, etc. and encourages foreign Shiʿa stations. Both states flood the airwaves with propaganda supporting their versions of events. For example, Iranian media emphasize alleged Saudi-perpetrated oppression of Shiʿa in Bahrain or Eastern Saudi Arabia and cast Iranian actions as *"resistance"* to foreign aggression (Thakur, 2024). Saudi-aligned media depict Iranian influence as a subversion of Arab sovereignty and highlight reformist or activist rhetoric against Iran's clerics. The two networks sometimes even livestream each other's speeches for counter-commentary.

External powers have also weighed in. Russia's RT Arabic, for instance, aims to sway Middle Eastern public opinion – and by some measures it now outperforms the Gulf's own networks in online engagement. Similarly, China's CGTN broadcasts in Arabic, and Western outlets like the BBC and France24 compete with regional channels. In fact, one media assessment notes that RT Arabic *"now outstrips"* Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in social media reach, indicating how foreign players enter the info-battle. China, interestingly, won favor by emphasizing secular development and subtly aligning with Saudi-led economic narratives (Berman, 2025). Thus, the media landscape is crowded, and messages are contested.

Focusing on Iran and Saudi, both have dramatically expanded their propaganda budgets. Iran reportedly spent over $1–2 billion per year on media and *"propaganda"* directed at Arab publics as of the 2010s (Berman, 2025). Its state broadcasters (IRIB) and online outlets push conspiracy theories about Western plots against Islam, while promoting Iran's role in Arab causes. Even during economic crises, Iran increased funding for what Khamenei calls an *"Explanation Jihad"* to counter criticism (Berman, 2025). Saudi Arabia likewise invests in soft power, although less openly acknowledged. Through the state-funded Muslim World League and its many charitable foundations, Saudi promotes its religious ideology internationally. Saudi universities and scholarships attract students from across the Muslim world, building contacts that reinforce Saudi perspectives. The kingdom also leverages cultural diplomacy like high-profile events, Islamic conferences to project an image of moderate Islam.

Social media is another front. Online campaigns, hashtags, and troll armies have often fanned sectarian sentiment. There is evidence of state-coordinated social media efforts on both sides – from Twitter bots praising Iran's role in Yemen to networks amplifying Gulf grievances about Iran in Lebanon. Both governments also try to control internal media narratives: Saudi authorities routinely clamp down on Salafi preachers who challenge the state, while Iran censor's dissident clerics or activists (especially those advocating closer ties with the West).

Despite these tensions, there are moments of media convergence on shared issues. For instance, both Iranian and Saudi media can unite in condemning Israeli military actions in Palestine though from different angles or lamenting Western double standards. Qatar's Al Jazeera which is traditionally pro-Saudi and GCC has at times aired Iranian leaders' speeches, showing that informational flows are not one-sided. Still, generally, narrative control remains a zero-sum game: each side frames the other as dangerous and itself as defender of Islam or justice. This media war heightens mistrust and makes any mutual understanding harder to achieve, as public opinion is regularly fed propaganda about *"the other side's plots.*

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Potential for Cooperation

Amidst long-standing enmity, can Saudi Arabia and Iran find common ground for cooperation? Recent developments create the potential for some modest but worthwhile opportunities for cooperation – even if high obstacles remain in the way. The 2023 diplomatic thaw itself shows an understanding that constant hostility would not be sustainable. Within a week of Beijing talks, both countries took conciliatory moves: They agreed to *"reenact a 2001 security cooperation agreement"* (Aljazeera, 2023) and committed to respect each other's sovereignty. In other words, it has helped to stabilize different regional fronts. For example, the Yemen ceasefire has been easier to manage with Riyadh and Tehran both applying pressure on their proxies. Reports indicate that since the deal, Saudi Arabia has reduced its diplomatic battle with Iran at the global level, and Iran has restricted provocative explanations on the Saudi administration (now aware that any confrontation would ruin the new agreement). According Ali-Khan (2024) the rapprochement *"has been surprisingly effective at containing Gulf tensions"* in the face of new crises.

Beyond crisis-management, there are areas of common interest. Economically, both depend on stable oil markets and attracting investment – indeed, a unified OPEC stance or joint infrastructure ventures could benefit both states. They share vulnerability to climate change like water scarcity and extreme heat that might prompt collaborative research or resource sharing. Security-wise, Sunni and Shiʿa states alike fear terrorism and unlawful smuggling; on paper, an intelligence-sharing agreement could be mutually beneficial if trust were sufficient. In the religious sphere, both claim to care about Muslim unity in the abstract; their leaders could, if political costs were manageable, sponsor inter-sectarian dialogue forums that address humanitarian crises like the plight of refugees or the status of Jerusalem jointly.

Politically, recent Arab summits have shown a slight thaw: for instance, the Arab League summit in 2023 hosted Iran's foreign minister without incident, signaling at least a grudging acceptance of Iran's place. Saudi Arabia has also engaged more with Lebanon's Hezbollah-led government after years of separation, reflecting a desire to stabilize a key front. Interestingly, while Saudi Arabia moved toward rapprochement with Israel and the U.S., the conflict in Gaza showed that Riyadh was not fully aligned with a hardline pro-Israel camp – instead, Saudi officials deconflicted with Iran to prevent escalation (Ali-Khan, 2024). This indicates that, under certain conditions, Iranian and Saudi interests can align like preventing a wider regional war with Israel.

However, deep trust deficits emerge. Hardliners on both sides remain influential; any sign that one government is *"appeasing"* the other provokes domestic backlash. The transactional agreements like China's security pact are still fragile, susceptible to being *"broken"* by new conflicts in proxy zones like Syria, Yemen and Lebanon (Ali-Khan, 2024). Nevertheless, the potential for cooperation exists if gradual confidence-building continues. Both states could pursue incremental steps: for instance, humanitarian deconfliction in Yemen, joint management of oil production like moderated by a revived OPEC dialog, and cultural exchanges like pilgrimage arrangements or joint counter-violence initiatives. Multilateral frameworks – including UN mediation or third-party guarantors – may help ensure that agreements stick. The key question for policy is whether both sides can shift from zero-sum sectarian frames to a more pragmatic calculus of mutual long-term gain. Early signs for instance, suspended blacklists, partial prisoner exchanges have been cautiously promising, but only sustained political will can transform potential into reality.

Interlocking Dynamics of Identity, Power, and Rivalry

The investigation of these ten themes reveals a complex matrix of constructed identities and power dynamics. Constructivism explains why sectarianism, once a marginal identity marker, was politicized: elites on both sides built up and inflated Sunni–Shiʿa narratives when mobilization was advantageous (Al-Qarawee, 2004). For instance, Aldandashi (2021) notes that the Iranian regime under Khomeini systematically transformed Shiʿa symbolism into statecraft (velayat-e faqih, martyr commemorations). Saudi elites countered by disseminating Salafi doctrine to delegitimize Shiʿa authority. These identity according to AlSaied (2021) scripts persist even as material conditions change; nationalism or pan-Islamism often conflict with sectarian frameworks (Saudi nationalism in Vision 2030 versus Khomeini's transnational Shiʿism). A constructivist would note that the *"reality"* of the contest is partly constitutive: the identity of both states (Islamic revolution vs. Islamic monarchy) was defined in opposition to the other, creating a feedback cycle of enmity. Meanwhile, conflict theory reminds us it is also a competition for scarce resources like oil rents, strategic depth, and international alliances. The proxy wars and arms races are best accounted for as security dilemmas: each side's attempt to defend itself by sponsoring

proxies or digging in necessarily endangers the other (Thakur, 2024). Iran's supply of missiles to the Houthis provokes Saudi airstrikes, which reaffirm Iranian resolve to sponsor more proxies as a deterrent.

Importantly, these dimensions reinforce each other. Ideological posturing like sectarian criticism justifies realpolitik actions like supporting militias, which in turn necessitate further narrative fortification. The two approaches also yield different policy suggestions. A pure realist might call only for power-balancing measures like arms deals and anti-Iran coalitions, whereas a pure constructivist would stress dialogue and narrative change. The synthesis suggests both are needed: confidence-building measures like prisoner exchanges and joint task forces coupled with reframing rhetorical tapestries like religious dialogues that could break the division of Muslim Ummah.

Critically, context matters. The Middle East's fractured institutional environment means that bilateral Saudi–Iran agreements often run aground on broader regional issues. The rivalry has unfortunately inhibited unified responses to shared threats: for instance, Muslim countries have struggled to address the Palestinian issue collectively because the Saudis and Iranians have different agendas like domestic vs. anti-Israel. Similarly, global jihadist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda flourish partly because Sunni and Shiʿa states spend resources fighting each other instead of countering extremism collectively. In this light, the analysis underscores the opportunity costs of the rivalry: a united Muslim front on development, health (COVID-19 response), or climate change is far more elusive because of the Iran–Saudi conflict.

Nevertheless, trends reveal a gradual shift toward openness. The fact that neither side seems intent on full-scale war unlike Iran–Iraq 1980, or the Iran–Saudi ship attacks in 2019 that were contained indicates war weariness. Economic strains – Saudi diversification and Iran's sanctions crisis – incentivize finding peaceful settlements. The pressure on both from sub-state violence like ISI assaults, Yemen death toll might prompt cooperating on counterterrorism. Theoretical constructs like security communities where states form mutual security arrangements seem remote, but mini-areas of cooperation like security dialogues, OPEC accords could gradually accumulate trust. The content analysis shows that even as public rhetoric remains harsh, backchannels mediated by Oman, Iraq, China, EU have produced results. Future research should monitor whether social media dialogues and people-to-people ties like student exchanges and cultural visits also recover, which would support a constructivist expectation that changing discourse can lead to changed policies.

Policy Directions for Regional Stability and Sectarian De-escalation

The continuation of the Iran–Saudi rivalry has important policy implications for the Middle East and beyond. First, international actors need to be reminded that sectarian framing is a tool, not an eternal conflict. External efforts to *"solve sectarianism"* alone may fail unless underlying power issues are addressed. Policies that simply condemn one side's rhetoric like Riyadh's anti-Iran sermonizing or Tehran's anti-monarchy chants, without engaging the strategic root causes will likely be ineffective. Instead, neutral parties should facilitate dialogue at both elite and grassroots levels, perhaps through Track II forums (non-state diplomatic forums), that allow each side to hear the other's concerns in nonzero-sum ways. For example, a religious scholars' council including Sunni and Shiʿa jurists could work to debunk extremist narratives on both sides, encouraging a pan-Muslim identity over sectarian division. In this manner, international promotion of moderate voices and the protection of pluralistic spaces (open to sermons critical of all sides, not just one) could gradually undermine the sectarian caricatures fueling the conflict.

Second, the policymakers must back regional security frameworks with Iran and Saudi Arabia as co-equals. The failure of institutions such as the OIC indicates there is a need for new arrangements. One can borrow from the larger Astana or Sochi model (Iran, Turkey, Russia) which, while far from ideal, has demonstrated that bringing in varied players (even competitors) can stabilize war zones. Similarly, regional dialogues that involve Gulf states, Iran, Iraq, and others (perhaps under UN or multilateral auspices) could help manage crises in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Importantly, such dialogues should address not only immediate conflicts but also broader issues like oil market coordination, water-sharing, or supply-chain resilience. For instance, Saudi negotiation in OPEC, discussions that involve Iran-coverage under practical diplomacy-may trigger collaborative pragmatic economic cooperation, as experienced during the early 2020s in times when global demand demanded unified divisions.

Third, the rivalry also serves to accentuate domestic governance issues in both nations. Constructivist understanding suggests that regime identities are partially maintained by being able to invoke the threat of an external enemy. Therefore, the reforms that alleviate domestic grievances like through liberalizing political space or equality may take some pressure off and condemning the rivalry. For Saudi Arabia, pursuing further economic and social modernization (ensuring ordinary

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Saudis experience benefits from Vision 2030) could diminish the regime's dependence on pan-Sunni ideology. For Iran, modest political liberalization (making room for opposition voices) could erode the conspiracy scenario. In all cases, external powers could condition aspects of participation (trade, investment, security cooperation) on concrete steps toward inclusive politics. This is good for self-interest: steadier, more just societies need less outside competition for solidarity.

Fourth, confidence-building measures between the two governments should be expanded and protected. The 2023 Chinese-brokered agreement was a positive development, but its terms (non-interference, embassy exchange) are fragile. International guarantors (China, Russia, the UN) and regional states (Iraq, Oman, Jordan) can help implement and monitor the agreement, ensuring that neither side steps back publicly for domestic consumption. For example, joint committees could oversee disengagement of proxies or coordinate humanitarian corridors in conflict zones. Sports or cultural diplomacy (joint Saudi–Iran football matches, arts festivals) could humanize *"the other"* for citizens. While such steps are soft, in other historical rivalries they have helped break down enmity.

Finally, broader multilateral pressure for de-escalation may be necessary. After decades of polarizing the region, the two countries share new challenges – a receding U.S. presence, economic reform needs, and a rising regional power like Turkey – that might be better addressed collectively. A multilateral peace process, possibly framed around economic integration— meaning Gulf common market rather than solely sectarian reconciliation, could reshape incentives. In the meantime, other Gulf and Muslim states should avoid zero-sum positioning, for instance, Saudi, UAE, and Egypt's previous siding with the U.S. and Israel against Iran blocked chances for a unified stance on Israel, which could have been a common cause. Instead, consensus on global Islamic issues like climate action, refugee aid, anti-piracy could build trust. If, for example, Saudi and Iran jointly sponsor a massive infrastructure or renewable energy initiative in Africa or Asia, it would signal that cooperation can complement competition.

Ultimately, the rivalry demands a multi-pronged policy approach. It is not enough to focus on arms limitations or sanctions in isolation; one must also tackle the narratives and institutions that sustain conflict. Constructivist lessons suggest supporting new shared identities (like regionalism or Islamic common cause on non-political issues) while conflict-theoretic logic calls for balancing mechanisms (arms control, alliances). A successful approach would strategically combine these: encourage narratives of "Muslim partnership" in parallel with verifiable security arrangements.

3. CONCLUSION

The Saudi–Iran rivalry is an entrenched feature of contemporary Middle East politics based on divergent identities and power interests. The extended qualitative analysis allows this study to reveal that sectarian rhetoric is much better understood as a manipulable political instrument than an absolute fate. Underlying much of the confrontation are geopolitical and economic competition (for regional hegemony, for oil revenue), but it is perpetuated through constructed ideological oppositions and proxy conflicts. International actors like Russia, China, the United States and EU have shaped the rivalry's context, at times exacerbating and at times moderating tensions. Despite decades of hostility, recent indicators – notably the 2023 rapprochement – suggest that strategic recalibration is possible. For lasting change, however, it will be necessary to build mutual trust and to reform the pan-Islamic architecture that has previously failed both Sunnis and Shiʿa. Encouragingly, the same instruments of competition (media, narrative, diplomacy) might be turned to the purpose of reconciliation if diplomacy succeeds: soft power used to amplify narratives of coexistence, and diplomatic channels leveraged to address shared challenges.

AI and Writing Assistance Disclosure

This paper represents my original scholarly work. In the course of conducting research and preparing, I utilized artificial intelligence tools in a limited and responsible manner. Specifically, AI-assisted platforms were employed to help identify relevant scholarly literature, access publicly available policy reports and news articles, and refine initial search strategies. These tools functioned solely as supplementary aids to enhance the research process and did not generate, compose, or structure the core content of the paper.

Additionally, I used Grammarly for language editing and grammatical refinement to ensure clarity and academic tone. All conceptual development, critical analysis, argumentation, synthesis of sources, and writing were independently undertaken by the author. I affirm that the intellectual contributions and scholarly interpretations contained herein are my own, and I assume full responsibility for the academic integrity of this work.

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