



## The Impact of the Nuclear Program on Iran-Saudi Arabia Relations

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<b>Received</b> 18-02-2022	<b>Abstract:</b> Iran and Saudi Arabia are two long-standing powers in West Asia whose relations have had many ups and downs over different periods. The two long-standing powers of the region cannot ignore each other and are always in competition and achieving greater interests and influence in the region. In the meantime, several factors have affected this confrontation and hostility between the two countries, including these factors; there have been ideological differences and identity conflicts, geopolitical and geo-economics issues, the issue of Palestine and Israel, and the role of Saudi Arabia in regional orientations against Iran, and so on. But in the last two decades, one of the most important reasons and factors affecting relations between the two countries has been Iran's nuclear program. The nuclear program has made Saudi Arabia feel threatened by Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon and its loss of position and influence in the region. Saudi Arabia's first opposition to Iran's nuclear program came in the form of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which called for a ban on Iran's nuclear activities. Therefore, it is important to study the relations between the two countries as two influential powers in the region and the impact of the nuclear program on the relations between the two countries. This research seeks to examine the impact of the nuclear program on Iran-Saudi Arabia relations. Generally, can be concluded that the roots of the differences between the two countries are mainly ideological and based on security and political issues	<b>Keywords:</b> Iran Nuclear Program, Saudi Arabia, Foreign Policy, ISIL, JCPOA, Regional Security
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### INTRODUCTION

With the announcement of Iran's access to nuclear fuel cycle technology and its design on the international stage, the progress of Iran's nuclear program was raised as one of the most important international and regional issues. Since then, the issue of nuclear has been a constant and influential variable on the foreign policy agenda of Iran and its regional neighbors, the United States and the West. Iran's nuclear program should be considered by a country like Saudi Arabia, which was in Iran's neighborhood and security and geographical environment. The securitization of the issue by major powers, including the United States and its longtime ally Saudi Arabia in the region, has prompted Saudi elites to react from the outset. On various occasions, they have expressed their position on Iran's nuclear program. Since the beginning of its nuclear program in the international community, the Islamic Republic of Iran has placed its Arab neighbors at the center of its nuclear diplomacy and tried to gain their confidence. Saudi Arabia's rationale for Iran's nuclear program in the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration has been to maintain regional power and balance of power. In the Ahmadinejad administration, Saudi Arabia took a diplomatic approach to the nuclear issue, given the dominance of the central justice discourse and Iran's deterrent confrontation with the West and following in the footsteps of its regional ally, it opposed Iran's peaceful nuclear activities. Thus,

Iran's nuclear program once again reduced Saudi Arabia's confidence and power over Iran in the region. In addition, developments in Syria, Lebanon, Hamas, and the rise of ISIL during the Islamic Awakening that was going in Iran's favor, provided the basis for Saudi Arabia to view Iran's resistance in the nuclear talks as a disruptive factor in regional security and a new tool for increasing Iran's power. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy gradually saw a departure from the shell of conservatism and observed a move to change the status quo. In the Rouhani government, despite the discourse of constructive interaction with neighbors, after the nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia's position gradually shifted to a balance of threat and a military coalition to restore the regional balance. Saudi Arabia's position on Iran's nuclear program has been influenced by the performance of Iran's foreign policy based on various discourses, the doctrine of the Saudi kings in dealing with this issue. Also, regional developments, the policy of regional powers, and how to advance the nuclear issue in the international system, have been other influential factors in shaping relations between the two countries affected by Iran's nuclear case. Accordingly, it can be said that the main actor in the centrality and effectiveness of the nuclear case in the conflicting relations between the two countries has been Saudi Arabia.

### **Iran-Saudi Arabia Relationship under Ahmadinejad Administrations (2005-2013)**

Examining the variable of the nuclear case as an explanatory rather than the main reason in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia requires understanding its nature from the perspective of the Islamic Republic of Iran and examining its principles and goals. Also, since the explanation of the relations between countries stems from the thoughts and mentality of the actors towards domestic and foreign policies in the framework of discourses and doctrines; Understanding the orientation and political actions of countries at the level of bilateral, regional, and international relations depends on examining domestic factors, including the doctrines presented by governments. In this study, the agent factor in the political action and reactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the influence of structural factors such as regional developments and the United States as a factor of the multipolar international system in the formation of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations affected by the Iranian nuclear case is discussed.

### **THE GOALS OF IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM**

Iran's efforts to Acquisition of nuclear technology date back to the second half of 1950. Iran's initial goals for acquiring nuclear technology had economic, political-identity, and technological aspects during the Shah's regime. After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, beyond access to energy and economic growth, Iran began its nuclear program with a strategy of "self-sufficiency" and "independence" in acquiring indigenous knowledge. The strategy to achieve an independent nuclear fuel cycle was a symbol of progress and regional and global prestige. After the resumption of the nuclear program in 2002 alongside the main strategy; Technical, economic, and political aspects were also considered. The economic aspect, to balance energy consumption and diversify energy consumption sources, and protecting the Iranian economy from oil and gas price fluctuations in world markets. The most important technological goal of Iran is to achieve the science of atomic knowledge as the mother of sciences, which leads the fields of growth of Iran's scientific potential towards development. The political and identity aspects also lead to an increase in national pride. In other words, nuclear progress is to promote Iran's regional and international position and maintain Iran's superior regional power. The ideological aspect of Iran's foreign policy in the creation of global justice and

equal rights in economic development, technology for different countries is derived from the nature of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Iran's resistance to exercising its legitimate right to an independent nuclear fuel cycle also reflects the ideological aspect of Iran's nuclear program. These four goals have been considered as Iran's nuclear strategies since 2002 and with the resumption of nuclear activities in the Islamic Republic of Iran. But the ideological and value aspects of the Iranian nuclear issue in the period after the victory of the Islamic Revolution within the framework of the principles of Iran's foreign policy and the principle of anti-arrogance and non-compromise with hegemonic powers were at the forefront of nuclear policy. On the other hand, the realization of the principles and goals of Iran's foreign policy required the acquisition of nuclear power. Resistance, justice, independence, the peaceful use of nuclear energy, etc. depend on the nuclear power of Iran.

According to the above explanations, all responsible governments since the beginning of Iran's nuclear program agree on advancing it, but each, by its political discourse, places one of the above aspects as the main strategy of its nuclear policy. Ahmadinejad's government as mentioned relying on the principle of justice, just peace, and the fight against arrogance, emphasized its ideological, identity, and resistance aspects. The emphasis of the Rouhani government is based on achieving the nuclear fuel cycle and not suspending the nuclear program, and justice in the use of nuclear technology by all societies (Barzegar, 2015). Thus, the nuclear program, which has been a priority in Iran's foreign policy for more than a decade, in turn, has specific principles and goals that are on the agenda of the Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani governments. While before Iran's nuclear program, Hezbollah and Palestine were raised in regional ideological and geopolitical issues in Iran's foreign relations with Saudi Arabia. By looking at the long-standing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the last half-century, it can be said that Iran's nuclear strategy, along with four aspects: political, economic, technical, and value, is considered a threat to Saudi national interests. Thus, the core discourse of governments in Iran and the approach of the Kingdoms of Saudi Arabia, regional developments, and important US variables have created degrees of conflict in the two countries' foreign relations.

## **Ahmadinejad Government's Foreign Policy Discourse**

Sub-discourses are formed within the framework of the main discourse of the Islamic Republic and form the semantic system and structure governing foreign policy that makes possible a special way of action and behavior (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2010). In this context, the elements and realities of foreign policy such as national interests, threats, national identity, national security, are not objective and preconceived realities but are re-established socially and in the semantic network of each state (Waeve, 2002). By mentioning these explanations of the meaning of discourse, we can understand the importance of its processing to study the bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Examining the nuclear discourse of Ahmadinejad's government requires understanding the process of the nuclear case during Khatami's government. The Iranian nuclear case as a security crisis was formed at the end of Sayed Mohammad Khatami's government. The reformation discourse<sup>1</sup>, which defined de-escalation and interaction in foreign policy as the foundations of its action, seeks to resolve the nuclear crisis through the signing of the Additional Protocol and its voluntary implementation, full cooperation with the IAEA, and the start of negotiations with three European countries. But this discourse was criticized for Fundamentalist discourse<sup>2</sup>. Ahmadinejad's government based its nuclear discourse on the negation of the reformist nuclear discourse. Ahmadinejad's government emphasized economic development and, in foreign policy, central justice and anti-arrogance, and there was a tactical change in the nuclear issue. Contrary to the reformation discourse, which made the nuclear issue and aspect of de-escalation in foreign policy and sought to marginalize the issue. Ahmadinejad's government criticized Khatami's nuclear policy. Thus, the realization of Iran's nuclear rights became the most important issue of foreign policy, and the main strategy of the Ahmadinejad government became a deterrent. In addition to intensifying the confrontation between Iran and the West, these conditions have complicated the security dilemma for regional rivals. The nuclear issue became a matter of values and identity following the new discourse. Because at the beginning of Ahmadinejad's government,

the role of revolutionary in foreign policy was highlighted. In the eyes of the Saudis, the new government had an ideological and value-oriented approach because the principle of justice has been taken from the Shiite religion and the manners of the pure Imams (AS). (Tabataba'i & Topchi, 2014). Saudi Arabia saw Iran's Islamist approach as a revisionist stance on the existing regional order (status quo). This means that the Saudis saw the emergence of religious identity in the new discourse as an identity threat to the region. On the other hand, justice-oriented discourse in the field of foreign relations, their duty to support the struggle of the oppressed people anywhere in the world they are and knew the defense of the oppressed against the oppressor and since justice is not possible without the support of weak Muslim nations, the denial of oppression and tyranny is based on the support of liberation movements and movements. This principle of foreign policy was revived as justice, at the regional and international levels, pursued the principle of expediency in foreign policy in parallel with national interests. For the Saudis, Ahmadinejad's government pursued a change of status quo based on an aggressive pattern. Saudi Arabia understood that Iran was seeking to export the Islamic Revolution and to introduce the values and ideals of the revolution to other Islamic nations to experience the same goal that the Islamic Republic of Iran has gone through it (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2009:). In other words, it is the establishment of a just Islamic system and the struggle against arrogance and oppressive governments in the region. Al-Saud felt threatened by this revolutionary behavior of Ahmadinejad's government due to the monarchy and the violation of the rights of the Shiites under their rule. Saudi Arabia has always accused Iran of interfering in the movements of Shiites in its eastern region (Qatif and Al-Ahsa) and considers them the representative of the Shiite government of Iran in their territory. Saudi Arabia's concern grows when that Iran seeks peace and security through the convergence of human society with political, social, and economic justice. Thus, the Saudi mentality towards the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran is to endanger its (Saudi) political and social security. Iran's behavior based on deterrent confrontation exacerbated these concerns. Iran's nuclear policy was based on the non-surrender and non-suspension of nuclear activities (Dehghani Firouzabadi & Zabihi, 2012). In general, anti-arrogance and non-acceptance of a foreign power in the region were other points of the discourse of Ahmadinejad's government and

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<sup>1</sup> Reformation Discourse under President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005).

<sup>2</sup> Fundamentalism Discourse (Justice Seeker) under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013)

points of contention between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The difference was that the United States, as Saudi Arabia's economic and security ally, was present in the security arrangements in the region, and the Islamic Republic was opposed to the hegemonic power in the region. Ahmadinejad's government sought to show that the hierarchy of power, polarization, and confrontations are not fixed and legitimate. Thus, the Riyadh authorities considered the Iranian government to be revisionist and disruptive of the security order that the Saudis and their Arab neighbors had created the region with US assistance. While Saudi Arabia itself pursued a conservative foreign policy in the region.

### **Regionalization of Iran's nuclear program**

The nuclear discourse of the Ahmadinejad government tied Iran's nuclear program to regional security. In a way that introduced and strengthened the concept of "interconnected security" within the construction of Iranian power. Accordingly, Iran linked the security of its nuclear power plants to regional security and warned countries in the region and abroad that any cooperation with a foreign invading force to attack Iran's nuclear facilities would be met with an aggressive response from Iran. It is worth noting that the developments in the region, including the crises in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, showed that the Islamic Republic is a Security maker actor and not a destabilizer in the region, and Iran's foreign policy always seeks to create a safe and stable region in its neighbors. In other words, insecurity for Iran will be insecurity for the region and at the global level. Saudi Arabia has defined its strategy as an "offensive defense" centered on direct military engagement with military adventures and countering any disruption to Iran's trade and transportation of goods and energy exports to the region by all possible means, including the use of the political and security potentials and its political groups in the region (Barzegar, 2014). For this reason, Iran's view of regional developments has become a mutual concern of the countries in the region.

### **Saudi Arabia's View of Iran's Nuclear Program The Approach of the Saudi Elite**

The attitude of the Al Saud elites towards Iran's nuclear activities determines their foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program. If they considered Iran's nuclear activities peaceful; security concerns and the threat of a nuclear Iran disappeared. But Saudi Arabia has had a military conception of Iran's peaceful nuclear program.

Saudi Arabia's approach toward Iran's nuclear program is interpreted in terms of a realistic view and a power struggle. A theory that believes that the decentralized structure and anarchic nature of the international system creates an atmosphere of mistrust and self-help and in some cases leads to the formation of a security dilemma. In a state of anarchy and security dilemma, countries intensely monitor and react to each other's movements and actions. In such a way that the slightest effort and activity of a country to increase its power is met with a defensive reaction from others. At the center of gravity, the security dilemma is the lack of full understanding of the real motives of countries on the one hand and the impossibility of distinguishing between defensive and offensive power on the other. Thus, countries not only show a balanced response to the increasing power of competitors but also control and adjust the ability of their friends; because as a result of changing people and thoughts, today's friends may become tomorrow's enemies.

In the Saudis' view, Iran will inevitably seek to increase its strategic power and hegemony; that on the one hand, to increase the distance of its power with Saudi Arabia and Iraq, two regional poles in the Persian Gulf, and on the other hand, to establish a balance against the regional forces (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2007). Accordingly, the disruption of regional order degrades Saudi Arabia's hegemonic position over its Arab neighbors. Saudi Arabia sees itself as the godfather of other Gulf sheikhdoms and has sought to establish a regional security order with six Persian Gulf Arab states. In this regard, by identifying its security threats and those of six other Persian Gulf countries, it formed the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council. According to the charter of this council, the security of each member is also considered the security of the others. Thus, the threat of Iran's nuclear threats has endangered the security of GCC members. As the leader of this alliance, Saudi Arabia considers itself obliged to defend the security of the member states. In this regard, will adopt policies regarding the Iranian nuclear issue that require the maintenance of the status quo and the regional and international power and position of Saudi Arabia in the region and the international system.

### **Saudi Arabia's position on Iran's nuclear program**

The Iranian nuclear issue became an international threat in 2003 that it has been five months since the US-led invasion of Iraq. At that



time, Iraq was considered as a point of confrontation and competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia to increase political power within the country and at the regional level. After the developments in the field of political power in Iraq, this competition finally ended in favor of Iran. The developments in Iraq and Iran's nuclear activities will increase Saudi Arabia's pessimistic attitude towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. The existence of tense historical relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran provided the basis for considering Iran's nuclear power in the region as a threat. In other words, the two factors of geopolitics and geo-culture have been influential components in creating conflicting foreign policies towards each other. This led Saudi Arabia to view Iran's nuclear program as a military effort to increase regional power. The first reaction of Saudi Arabia to Iran's nuclear program was in the form of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, which called for the closure of Iran's nuclear activities. In 2003, King Abdullah said was concerned about Iran's nuclear program. Also, Saud al-Faisal, in his speech at the US Council on Foreign Relations, called for US intervention in response to Iran's request to acquire nuclear technology (Mohtadi, 2006). Therefore, from the very beginning, relations based on doubt and mistrust were formed between the two countries over the nuclear issue. Can be stated that Saudi Arabia implicitly had four major concerns about Iran's nuclear program: First; Saudi Arabia, along with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, considered Iran's nuclear program to be an environmental hazard. In particular, some regional allies (sheikhdoms) of Saudi Arabia need the water of the Persian Gulf to supply their drinking water. They have repeatedly expressed their concern about this issue in various ways. For example, in an interview with a Saudi newspaper, Abdul Rahman al-Attiyah stated that the Bushehr nuclear power plant was close to Manama and Doha, members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, before it was close to Tehran and if environmental problems occur in this power plant, these countries (Qatar and Bahrain) will damage more than Iran. The second reason for Saudi Arabia's concern about Iran's acquisition of nuclear technology- From Saudi Arabia's point of view nuclear bomb- is to upset the balance of power in the region to the detriment of the Saudis. Throughout history, the two countries have always competed for power and leadership in the region. With the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran as an ideological power, this competition and conflict intensified. Also, according to the strengthening of Iran's position in Iraq, Lebanon,

and Palestine, the Saudis are increasingly concerned about increasing Iran's role in the region. For this reason, Saudi Arabia, along with other sheikhdoms in the region, along with the European Union and the United States, was determined to prevent an increase in Iran's nuclear power. Third concern; Saudi Arabia has opposed the entry of nuclear weapons into the region for the past five decades. If one of the differences between the Arabs and Israel is having nuclear weapons in the region (See: [www.nti.org](http://www.nti.org)). Accordingly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia acknowledged that Iran could not use nuclear weapons against the United States and Israel, so it posed a threat to its Arab neighbors in the first place. In this regard, Saudi Arabia believes that the Islamic Republic will use its nuclear power to export the revolution and strengthen fundamentalism. In addition, Iran's nuclear weapon is a kind of Shiite bomb that promotes the status of Shiites (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2007). Whereas King Abdullah and his decision-making team have been based on this before, and they based their strategy on compliance with the United States to suspend all Iranian nuclear activities. Of course, the promotion of the US policy of Iran's phobia in the region should not be overlooked in the Arab perception of the threat of Iran's nuclear program. Although Ahmadinejad's government tried to reduce the depth of relations and show Iran's relations with Arab countries positively, perhaps the variable of Iran phobia is considered one of the most important challenges of this government against Arab countries that have been propagated against Iran (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2010). The last concern was the possibility of a military attack on Iran -This issue is currently excluded- From Saudi Arabia's point of view, this US military attack alone or with its allies, especially Israel, takes place in two ways:

1. Limited Attack: This means that in a lightning operation, Iran's nuclear facilities will be attacked by the United States. In this case, not only will the military attack not affect Saudi Arabia, but it will serve its interests.
2. Unlimited or full-scale attack: in which case a full-scale war takes place to overthrow the Iranian government and replace it with a new government. If Saudi Arabia participates in a military attack against Iran, it will be targeted by this country.

To meet these concerns, Saudi Arabia sought to establish closer ties with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Saudi Arabia also expressed dissatisfaction with

Iran's nuclear program at the 2004 GCC Foreign Ministers' meeting as part of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In another statement in 2005, they stated that Iran's nuclear program had no justification and that Iran's actions were an adventure. In February 2006, when the Agency referred Iran's case to the Council, The then Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, headed by Saudi Arabia stated Members have no objection to referring Iran's nuclear case to the Security Council and they implicitly agreed to impose sanctions on Iran. Despite a realistic approach to Iran's nuclear program, Saudi Arabia's position on the Board of Governors vote in 2006, the GCC meeting in 2005 is repeated. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council saw the Iran nuclear talks with the P5 + 1 as the first step in normalizing Arab-Iranian relations over the nuclear program. Therefore, since the beginning of the negotiations, they have taken the "observation and waiting" approach. They were so concerned about the content of Iran's nuclear file that then-Foreign Minister Turki al-Faisal said: "There is concern among the Arab countries because they did not interfere in the negotiations" (Mason, 2014). This has led to a kind of relationship based on competition and interaction between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Given Saudi Arabia's complex relationship with Iran, which is based on strategic regional competition, conflict of interest in various areas of the Middle East, and diplomatic engagement; despite the escalation of regional conflicts, the Saudis did not accept a completely confrontational approach to Iran and escalating differences with the international community (the approach sought by the United States). Saudi authorities in most issues, particularly the nuclear program, wanted a political and diplomatic solution to force Iran to reconsider its policies and they believed that any military confrontation with Iran could lead to the destruction of relations between the two countries and threaten the stability and security of Saudi Arabia by spreading the conflict to this country (Ershadmanesh, 2016). During a visit to Germany in 2007, King Abdullah stated that "Iran is seeking a peaceful nuclear program and if so, we have no justification for confronting and challenging the Iranian nuclear issue and Adopting such an approach will make the nuclear case even more challenging" (Elaph, 2007). The Saudis, on the other hand, have taken a cautious stance since the beginning of Ahmadinejad's administration; although, they were concerned about Iran's position in support of Palestine and Hezbollah. At some point, Saudi Arabia failed to find strategic assurance about

Iran's nuclear activities or their interests required that the existing ambiguities in their relations with Iran not be exposed. The pessimistic approach of the Saudis opened a wide space for various accusations against the Islamic Republic. The atmosphere of doubt and mistrust is an issue that has targeted the national interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Gholamreza Pour, 2006). This pessimism went so far that Saudi Arabia, along with some Arab states, supported the military attack on Iran, which was identified after the release of Wiki Leaks documents (Barzegar, 2015). As can be seen, Saudi Arabia has taken a dual stance on Iran's nuclear program. In any case, the Saudis tried to isolate the Islamic Republic's influence in the region rather than seek to improve their relations with Iran and discuss the nuclear issue. Saudi Arabia believed that Iran's nuclear program to prevent Saudi Arabia from leading the Arab world. Therefore, although Iran was a member of the NPT, Saudi officials stated that the agreement did not fully serve the interests of the Arabs. Iran's acquisition of nuclear technology was a threat to Saudi interests. The Saudi rulers believed that to destroy Iran, its nuclear ambitions must be prevented. During a visit to Saudi Arabia in 2011, President Ahmadinejad stated that all countries in the region would be involved in the event of a military attack on Iran and this is not in the interest of either side. Overall, Saudi Arabia's position on the Iranian nuclear issue is negative but cautious and has often raised environmental concerns in his official position. Despite the adoption of the main approach by Saudi Arabia, the form of their emergence has been different (Saffari Anaraki, 2015). Relations between the two countries, as mentioned during the eight years of Ahmadinejad's administration, are defined based on conflicts of interest between the two countries in the region and on developments in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. As Saudi Arabia formed a coalition against Iran, also Iran continued its fundamental policies in the region in support of the Axis of Resistance. In addition, Saudi Arabia's support for the P5 + 1 group in practice and the policy of regionalization of Iran's nuclear program by Saudi Arabia and Iran's nuclear program as a new security problem in the region, economic sanctions also affected the economic relations between the two countries to some extent.

#### **Economic Relations Affected by Sanctions**

Over the past four decades, sanctions against Iran have created a dynamic game between Iran and the United States. In the

meantime, the regional actors are also involved, according to their interests. From the beginning of the UN and US sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia has been with the sanctions. Although it had formally declared a neutral position. Arab officials held several meetings to discuss Iran's issues and impose further sanctions on Iran. In 2008, for example, Saudi Arabia held a meeting with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and Germany. In this meeting, they sought to provide solutions to exert more pressure to suspend Iran's nuclear program. On the other hand, US officials have made several trips in support of the Saudis to align with Iran's neighbors in imposing more sanctions. Sanctions have had a distinct effect on Iran's foreign trade, forcing Iran to change its trading partners. Thus, the flow of investment to Iran slowed down. Sanctions on Iranian oil buyer companies in China, Europe, India, Turkey, have reduced Iran's share of oil production. Saudi Arabia was also pleased with the situation and sought to isolate Iran economically. This has been one of the main obstacles to establishing diplomatic relations through economic relations with this country (Saudi Arabia). The increase in sanctions has also led to further economic divergence in relations between the two countries.

### **THE IMPACT OF THE IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM ON IRAN-SAUDI RELATIONS IN THE ROUHANI'S GOVERNMENT (2013-2021)**

#### **The Nuclear Discourse of the Rouhani Government**

Rising tensions between Iran and the West over the nuclear issue have led to economic and political pressure and the imposition of more sanctions on Iran. Rising international sanctions and the resulting economic problems have led to the discourse of constructive interaction in Iran's foreign policy should be unveiled. The victory of the Rouhani government coincided with the tenth year of Iran's nuclear talks. The nuclear issue has been the most important in Iran's foreign policy over the years. The foreign policy of the Rouhani government, with a relatively mild interpretation of Iran's revolutionary-Islamic identity, used identity maps in other semantic frameworks. For example, The Iranian government is an anti-oppression that cannot accept nuclear inequality. At the same time, Iran has the ability to establishing constructive interaction with the world to realize its nuclear rights. The Rouhani government sought the country to progress and

gain international prestige in international equations, not in opposition but constructive interaction with the world. In the context of this discourse, the negotiating apparatus of diplomacy chose the approach of constructive interaction with the P5 + 1. Rouhani's government has tried to defuse regional tensions during the nuclear negotiations (Saniabadi & Mirhosseini, 2015). Since the Rouhani administration took office, the Saudis, following in the footsteps of the United States, have welcomed the Iranian negotiation process to reach a nuclear deal. But at the same time, they accused Iran of interfering in Syria and Yemen and pursuing its interests against Saudi Arabia in those areas. Also, Saudi Arabia did its best to thwart these talks. In the meantime, they were trying to gain concessions from the United States; some experts analyze obtaining permission to attack Yemen in this regard. After failing to divert the talks, the Saudis focused their efforts on blocking its implementation. Because the nuclear deal and the possibility of improving US-Iranian relations were pursued with concern by many Arab countries in the region. These countries see the Iran-West nuclear deal as the end of US commitments to protect those countries against Iran.

#### **JCPOA and Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Post-Deal Conditions**

Since the adoption of the JCPOA in June 2015, Iran has pursued interactive policies in the framework of the development of regional relations, relying on independent and bilateral approaches with countries such as Saudi Arabia. Even the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran (Mohammad Javad Zarif) during visiting Saudi Arabia tried to open the door to cooperation with Saudi Arabia through diplomatic means. But Saudi Arabia's reaction in action and speech was contrary to Iran's policies. Iran's strategy after the nuclear deal is to prioritize economic development in Iran's foreign policy. Under these conditions, Iran sought to enhance economic cooperation with countries in the region. But Saudi Arabia has sought to perpetuate its long-standing policy based on threatening Iran's nuclear program; however, in a telephone call with Obama after the nuclear deal, King Salman stated that he "considers and supports JCPOA as a controlling factor for Iran's acquisition of a nuclear bomb" (Torabi & Edwards, 2015). But Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said after negotiation with the United States in 2015 that he still could not comment on the nuclear talks in general. Also, the semi-official Saudi media criticized the United

States. Prominent columnists -Turki al-Faisal, Jamal Khashgeji, Qassan Charbel, Ahmad al-Qiz, and others- All major Al-Saud newspapers agreed that the United States had turned its back on its Arab allies and seeks to give Iran an advantage against the Arabs. They indirectly stated that if the US policy in promoting Iran's position in the region does not change, they will work with their regional allies to achieve and complete the nuclear fuel cycle (Pollack, 2015). As can be seen, after the adoption of the official position, Saudi Arabia supports it, but in practice behaves differently, which can be understood from the lower political layers. A Saudi newspaper under the headline "Iran nuclear deal; return of evil to the Middle East", wrote: "Although Al-Saud officials do not publicly express their criticism and objections to the provisions and conditions of the resolution, they will certainly show it in their actions and foreign policy." They believe that the nuclear deal with Iran should have taken into regional tensions such as the crisis in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain and this has led Saudi political elites to pursue more aggressive policies against Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. According to Saudi Arabia's request, the nuclear deal should end Iran's entire nuclear program, and the weapon of sanctions remains against Iran (Kalout, 2015). The reasons for Saudi Arabia's pessimistic view of the Iran nuclear deal and the post-deal situation can be summarized in four factors:

1. Disruption of the balance of power in the region: The regional conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the process of the nuclear issue were such that Iran has won in the regional conflicts. In this regard, achieving a nuclear fuel cycle and reaching an agreement with the great powers was considered a victory for Iran. Independence in fuel enrichment could potentially be used to build nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia is worried that other countries in the region will face an arms race to balance the forces in the region, which will lead to an increase in the power of Iran. Because unlike Iran and its allies (axis of resistance), the axis of compromise in the region has become extremely weak. Therefore, we are witnessing an increase in the efforts of the Saudis to realize their strategy of regional hegemony and change the balance of power in their favor.
2. Increasing economic power: In the eyes of the Al Saud decision-making team, an Iranian who has been able to influence the region under sanctions, once sanctions are lifted and

access to financial resources, will increase their expansionist approach. Some believe that improving Iran's economic situation will increase its willingness to advance its revolutionary goals and political influence. In this approach, Iran can implement the strategy of issuance of revolution in the region while solving internal challenges and achieving economic growth.

3. Failure of Iran phobia: Normalization of the Iranian situation means that the threat of Iran will be neutralized. Because when Iran is not a threat, they will move on to other issues. Iran's phobia has been a barrier to hiding many regional problems. As long as Iran is presented as a threat, it is possible to form a coalition, hide other problems, and dissuade others from addressing their domestic issues. Saudi Arabia continues to insist on making Iran's nuclear capability dangerous and threatening Iran in the region (Farazmand, 2015).
4. Increasing Iran's military capability: The lifting of arms embargoes will lead Iran to expand its military capability and support its pro-government groups in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere.

It should not be overlooked that the above four concerns in the context of regional developments after the Islamic Awakening affect the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There are at least 20 active conflicts in the Persian Gulf region, and Iran and Saudi Arabia have interests in each of them. Including the transfer of friendly governments in Egypt and Yemen and the victories of the Axis of Resistance in Syria and Iraq, which was to the detriment of the interests of Al-Saud. Hence, we are witnessing the shift of Saudi diplomacy from conservative to aggressive. For example, the invasion of Yemen and the internationalization of the conflict in that country. Therefore, on the one hand, Iran's foreign policy should pursue appropriate opportunities for the country's growth and development in the post-JCPOA period in the international arena, and on the other hand, due to the critical atmosphere in the Middle East, it (Iran) continues its defense-security policy to prevent instability and terrorism within the borders of Iran (Mousavi, 2015).

#### **US Impact on Iran-Saudi Relations in the Post-JCPOA Era**

Attending talks with the United States and other regional powers proved that Iran is a responsible actor and seeks economic



development and the expansion of foreign trade. Negotiations with Iran and discussions on interests in which Saudi Arabia had no share have shown the geopolitical importance of Iran and a great achievement in the diplomatic arena. Iran's position as a member of the negotiating team to pursue its interests means recognizing Iran's international position. Some American analysts have concluded the implementation of the JCPOA, Some American analysts have concluded that with the JCPOA agreement, Iran will be a more effective actor in stabilizing the region, preventing the growth of extremism and terrorism, and resolving regional crises. For example, in the tensions over the incident and the severance of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, for the first time, the United States and European countries, unlike in the past, tried to take a moderate approach and encouraged the two sides to resolve the conflict. But Saudi Arabia has always been concerned about the closeness of the United States and Iran during the negotiations, despite its pro-Western stance. Therefore, some Saudi analysts were concerned that following the establishment of good relations between Iran and the West, the United States, as the most important ally of Saudi Arabia, may divide the hegemony in the region and returned the region to the Shah and the Iranian military hegemony in the Persian Gulf, when Iran considered itself the "regional gendarme." In addition to the impact of the nuclear case on improving relations between Iran and the United States, Saudi Arabia is concerned about new US policies toward the region. On the other hand, the policy of "Asia Pivot" and "Leading from behind" has also doubled the concerns of the Saudis (Behboodinejad & Kumarpandi, 2015). In this way, Saudi Arabia will lose much of its US support. The Saudi elite believes that Iran and the United States may be able to reach agreements in other areas and endanger Saudi interests. It should be noted here that the relative improvement in Iran-US relations is considered in light of past hostile relations. So the idea that the United States could turn Iran from the strongest revisionist country in the region into a partner in building a new order in the Middle East would be a false hope. It must be acknowledged that Saudi Arabia continues to serve the US interests in the region and the event of such an event, they will most likely go their way and no longer has to care about US interests (Bahgat, 2007). On the other hand, according to Saudi political elites, Iran continues to expand its regional influence and nuclear program and for this reason, the United States has to prevent this

expansion in various ways, including creating deterrence by strengthening Saudi Arabia; however, other options such as a military confrontation has never been completely ruled out. The US view of Saudi Arabia as a deterrent and balancer against Iran is one of the main common goals of the US and Saudi Arabia in the new regional context (post-JCPOA). In fact, after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the Saudis defined a regional role for themselves in the shadow of the severance of relations between Iran and the United States, but post-JCPOA Saudi Arabia no longer has the former role in US Middle East policy, and this has led to an extremist approach by the Saudis. Nevertheless, Iran pursues a cautious policy in managing the Saudi threat in the region to challenge the legitimacy of Saudi policy in portraying Iran as a threat agent and at the same time, it continues to interact with the great powers.

### **Coalition with Regional Powers**

Initially, Saudi Arabia tried to boycott JCPOA close to the United States. But after the nuclear deal, Saudi officials worried that Iran could reach an agreement with the United States on nuclear activities. Iran changed developments in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen in its favor. All of this has led to Saudi Arabia finding itself in regional straits, in the absence of hegemonic support and with the increase of Iran's regional power, Saudi Arabia would prefer to achieve a network of alliances and coalitions and maintain its regional position without the West (Naderinasab, 2010). For this purpose, Riyadh needs a series of powerful and even weak friends in the region, but of geopolitical and geostrategic importance, to play the role of a buffer zone for the Saudis. The Rouhani government's solution to counter the Saudi extremist approach is to use diplomatic tools to resolve issues. Also, it is obvious that due to the existence of regional threats, Iran's foreign policy also has a defense-security nature. In general, the Saudis have always shown that they do not use rational and diplomatic approaches in the regional competition, and have resorted to destructive and security measures to compete regionally with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### **Factor of Pakistan**

The new interactive platforms between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, largely due to the recognition of Iran's nuclear program, are security-oriented. In this approach, the position of Islamabad can be decisive for Riyadh. In general,

the goals and interests of Saudi Arabia in Pakistan can be summarized as follows:

1. Pakistan cautious view of Arab developments: Pakistan has taken a neutral stance toward Riyadh's actions in the region. Evidence of this claim is the non-participation of Islamabad in the coalition for the Saudi military operation against Yemeni Houthis led by Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Pakistan does not have a negative view on the establishment of Riyadh hegemony in the Arab world and the Islamic world.
2. Pakistan can shift the balance of power in favor of the Arabs and Saudi Arabia by building a nuclear umbrella and selling deterrent weapons.
3. As the Saudis intensify developments in the region, in addition to economic aid to Pakistan (delivery of 50,000 barrels of free oil per month) and religious centers and Islamic schools in Pakistan, has made significant investments in parties such as the Muslim League and influential institutions such as the military. In addition, they seek cultural and spiritual influence in these centers to increase Pakistanis' adaptability with their regional goals.
4. Using the Pakistani extremist groups: The closeness of Saudi-Pakistani relations is a great opportunity to attract Islamabad to recruit extremist groups active in Pakistan to play a role in regional developments and strengthen takfirist movements in the Middle East and on the other hand, achieve a nuclear balance against Iran. The purchase of a nuclear bomb from Pakistan shows the depth of Iran's hostility in the opinion of Saudi Arabia (Kebriaeizadeh, 2016). As a result, Saudi Arabia seeks to recruit and put Pakistan's military and religious weight against Iran's growing power.

#### **The Factor of Yemen War**

Progress in nuclear talks, Saudi Arabia and its regional allies have become increasingly aware of the potential threat posed by Iran. The invasion of Yemen and the coincidence with the nuclear talks cannot be considered accidental; rather, it was a response to the recognition of Iran's influence in the region (Homani, 2015). Thus, Saudi Arabia allied with 10 Arab countries and, led by this coalition, launched a military attack on Yemen to destroy the Houthis. They (Saudi Arabia and its allies) wanted by resorting to war, to remind Iran to stop interfering in the affairs of Arab countries and to show that Saudi

Arabia still can manage regional crises. So by launching the Yemeni war, they proved to the United States that they are less credible because of the nuclear talks with Iran, and independent of the West, they have the ability to ensuring the security of the region. Accordingly, after the start of the nuclear negotiations in the Rouhani government, at the 35th session of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia, along with other members, reaffirmed the need for a joint [Arab NATO] force. Riyadh seeks to instill this belief in the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf that from now on, Arab countries look to Riyadh to confront the threats and ensure the security of the region and on the other hand, the security of the Persian Gulf is the security of the Arab world (Khatib, 2015). Accordingly, Saudi Arabia, after the nuclear talks and the recognition of Iran as a responsible actor in the region, is trying to portray the negative role of Iran and continue to instill Iran's phobia in the region.

#### **The Factor of the Israel Regime**

The dissatisfaction of Saudi Arabia and the Zionist regime with the negotiation process between Iran and the West and finally reaching an agreement has provided the context for close relations between the Zionist regime and Saudi Arabia. If the Saudi officials started their informal relations after the approval of JPCOA. Despite two opposing nuclear poles in the Middle East, Iran, and Israel, Saudi Arabia is trying to get closer to the Zionist regime as an enemy of Iran. Saudi Arabia intends to pursue its interests in parallel with Israel's interests towards Iran. Gaining the support of a regime that has a nuclear bomb; In addition to increasing the weight of Saudi Arabia, finding a common enemy with Iran changes the pattern of friendship and enmity in the region and strengthens the anti-axis coalition of resistance. To improve relations with the Zionist regime, Saudi Arabia has also announced their readiness to sell oil to Israel that this relationship has cast a shadow over Tehran-Riyadh relations, and Iran-Saudi relations have been influenced by Saudi-Israeli relations. This effect can be seen in the recent Saudi action against Iran, such as the "Abraham Agreement" and the "deal of the century" at the request of the Israelis. Although Saudi Arabia has not formally normalized relations with Israel, it has used that leverage to counter Iran's growing power.

#### **The Use of Oil as a Political Tool**

The use of oil has always been one of the tools of Saudi foreign policy to achieve their goals

and national interests. Saudi Arabia is using this policy to control and weaken the other side and has applied this policy in the case of Iran. During the years of Iran's nuclear negotiations and its support for Syria and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Saudi Arabia used oil as an offensive and political tool against Iran. The oil tactic was the latest tactic to Confrontation of Iran's regional influence and Iran's withdrawal from the nuclear talks. For example, with oil prices falling in 2014, Riyadh imagined that oil prices would not fall below \$ 70 a barrel for a short period. But the price of a barrel of oil reached \$ 30 a barrel (Melone, 2016). But the economies of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states were not immune to the drop in prices. They were hit the hardest; so much so that their damage reached \$ 370 billion a year. Saudi Arabia's actions in OPEC, as well as the restrictions it imposes on Iran to prevent an increase in oil exports, are aimed at keeping Iran in the pre-sanctions environment (Ardakani, 2016). With the nuclear deal, the old competition rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia was revived. With the approval of JCPOA and the lifting of some sanctions on Iranian oil in January 2016, Iran sought to realize its share of OPEC's oil production portfolio. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia convened the Doha summit to get out of the production ceiling recession. Iran also boycotted the Doha summit, blocking an agreement to pull Saudi Arabia out of the production ceiling. Also in OPEC, the representatives of Riyadh and Tehran always looked at each other with concern and their differences prevented the proposal determine a production ceiling at the 2016 OPEC meeting. In general, the economic stimuli of both countries are intertwined with the intense geostrategic competition that exists between them; the competition has intensified since the beginning of the Islamic Awakening, and especially in the post-JCPOA context.

## CONCLUSION

In this research, the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia affected by Iran's nuclear program were examined. The nuclear issue was discussed during the presidencies of Ahmadinejad and Rouhani. At the regional level, the nuclear crisis plan as a stimulus to polarize the region and intensify the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the process of Islamic awakening and the war in Syria and Iraq. A practical example of the rivalry over the nuclear issue was Saudi Arabia's attempt to isolate Iran politically and economically in the region. At the international level, the United States, through its public

diplomacy tools, spread Iran's phobia among Arabs in the region, including Saudi Arabia, and declared Iran's nuclear program a security crisis. By examining Iran's nuclear goals, it became clear that Iran's nuclear policy has been the same from the beginning until today; because according to the general policies of the Islamic Republic and the general principles of foreign policy and the nuclear discourse plan, only the form of the game has changed and the rules are the same. Although diplomatic trips between Iran and Saudi Arabia were doing. Nevertheless, the predominant Saudi approach has been cautious and with suspicion of Iran's nuclear program. Given the discourse of constructive engagement with countries in the region, we continue to see an increasing trend of Saudi hostile policies against Iran, which has led to a cold war between them. Since the Rouhani government came to power and especially the approval of JCPOA, has been trying to balance the new forces by restoring its position in the hierarchy of power. Saudi Arabia considers JCPOA to be the cause of Iran's hegemony in the region and the realization of other goals of Iran's foreign policy, including the issuance of revolution. From Saudi Arabia's point of view, Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon will lead to the strengthening and stabilizing of the axis of resistance from Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq to Yemen. Therefore, the most important reason for the increase in the gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the post-JCPOA period is the increase of Iran's power and influence in the region. Thus, after the nuclear deal, the Saudis considered Iran their enemy. Saudi Arabia tries to use the strategy of reducing oil prices before JCPOA and insisting on increasing the production ceiling and reducing prices after JCPOA to be an obstacle to Iran's economic goals. The cases examined in this study show that Saudi Arabia seeks to create seizures against Iran in the region. In general, can be concluded that the roots of the differences between the two countries are mainly ideological and based on security and political issues.

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