

## SAUDI ARABIA'S CONFLICT POLICY AGAINST IRAN, DURING THE BIN SALMAN'S GOVERNMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*By the start of governing Saudi Arabia in 2015, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (Salman of Saudi Arabia) shows that he is keen on leadership in the Middle East. Also, his thirty-year-old prince, Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, considers gaining the power behind the throne as a major goal in the country's future. Saudi Arabia assigns the Islamic Republic of Iran as the biggest obstacle in achieving these goals. After the "Mina catastrophe", the execution of Nimr al-Nimr (Sheikh Nimr) who was a prominent Shia cleric, and the attack on the Saudi Arabia embassy in Tehran, the relations between these two countries was damaged and eventually suspended. The quality of relations between these two countries determines the region's level of security. So, investigating the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia after Salman's inauguration can bring a clearer perspective on the future of these two countries' relations. There is a question here that is what are the motivations and reasons for creating tension in relations of the two countries and the offensive policy of Salman's government against Iran? The hypothesis of this paper is that after Salman's inauguration, the principles of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy were changed; and, in order to prevent the penetration of Iran after the Arab Spring, it turned into a completely aggressive approach. Accordingly, by using the theory of "motivational realism", the present paper has come to this conclusion that Saudi policies were formed in a variety of ways such as association politics and new alliance, the spread of proxy wars, the development of Wahhabism thinking, the arisen of racial differences, and the use of economic capacity and effective ways to renew war zone in order to reverse Iran's penetration.*

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, offensive policies, Mohammad bin Salman, motivational realism, regional competition.

### INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are competing for decades. And now, due to the political and social developments in both countries and in the Middle East, their competition has reached a turning point. The relation between Tehran and Riyadh is very important as the key actors and regional powers. The special status of both countries has maintained their relation important in holding and balancing power in the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and even the Mediterranean basin. By looking at the history of Tehran-Riyadh relations, we see lots of competitions that caused the two countries, not only after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 but also during the Pahlavi era to become natural competitors. This being a competitor was in the format of cooperation and solidarity policy as well as in the form of the "Nixon-Kissinger Doctrine" and because of identity, geopolitical, and structural features. For this reason, from the beginning to the present, different behavior patterns have existed in their relation (Alikhani and Zakerian, 2016: 178).

The major competition in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran is, in fact, a broader competition between countries that are seeking to change the global system and creating

polycentric, and those who are trying to retain the regional and global domination of the United States. Due to the growing regional penetration of Iran, the main concern of Saudi Arabia and some of the Arab states in the region is that with the US policy of withdrawing from the Middle East, the vacancy created by Iran and its allied powers will be filled. Also, this concern is raised by the fact that the Arab world is lowering its status and the Arab traditional powers are lost or are facing an internal crisis. Considering these conditions, Riyadh's foreign policy in the Middle East can be summarized in three points: First of all, the US domination is maintained over the army, security, policy, and economy of the region, especially in the Persian Gulf. Second, unite with Israel to gain firm support for international Zionism. Third and last is the confrontation with Iran and its regional allies such as Syria, Iraq, Hezbollah, and folks forces such as Hashd al-Sha'abi in all theatres. In contrast, Iran's strategy is to resist the domination of the United States and to improve relations with other world powers. The basis of Iran's foreign policy is to resist Israel and support Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis in Yemen. In addition, Iran seeks a regional confrontation with terrorist-Takfiri groups such as Al-Qaeda, Jabhat Al-Nusra, and ISIL, which are supported by Saudi Arabia. Iran hopes that it can have a regional confrontation with Saudi Arabia's efforts to establish its domination over the Middle East and the Persian Gulf (Mousavian, 2019).

The animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran has often been exhibited as a sectarian conflict between Wahhabi and Shia thought. At the same time, there is a geopolitical struggle for political, economic, and military advantage, and religious truth in this competition. Currently, a chain of stressful events in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen are often regarded as "proxy war" between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These events reach the top (specifically after the Mina catastrophe, the execution of Sheikh Nimr, and the severance of diplomatic and economic relations). Since 2015, after coming to power of Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and his crown prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud, they have led the kingdom of Saudi Arabia to an unprecedented, complex, and unstable competition with its regional competition. Prince Mohammad bin Salman has created a political-economic revolution both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia. Since his appointment as a crown prince, in order to strengthen power, he has controlled everything quickly by controlling the most important domestic security departments such as the internal intelligence service and the King's special forces. Accordingly, the main goal of this paper is to explain "the description of regional policies and mechanisms of Salman's government in the form of an offensive approach against Iran". The question that is posed here is what are the motives and reasons for creating tension in relations of the two countries and the offensive policy of Salman's government against Iran? With the future that Mohammad bin Salman shapes for his government and country, what are his regional policies for balancing against Iran?

The hypothesis of this paper is that after Salman came to power, the principles of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy went through a domestic revolution. After the Arab Spring in the regional states, Saudi Arabia adopts a completely offensive approach to prevent further Iranian penetration. And, in this way, it has tried to benefit from the association politics and new alliance, proxy wars, the development of Wahhabism thinking and penetration networking, the arisen of racial differences, the use of oil incomes and economic capacity and effective ways to renew war zone in order to reverse Iran's penetration. In this paper, it has been attempted to utilize the analytical and descriptive methods and to use authentic library resources such as books, articles, and also



the thoughts and speeches of political leaders. In this regard, by using the “motivational realism” theory, the regional manifestations of Saudi Arabia’s patterns of behavior are identified and explained in different layers. Using this framework will help us determine the main index of this competition by exhibiting the completion between Riyadh and Tehran. The competition between Riyadh and Tehran in the Middle East has been formed by combining internal conflicts and the policies of regional and trans-regional actors.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The existence of dangerous beliefs in the international system creates clear motivational goals for providing and protecting the security, order, social unity, and stability within countries (Hamilton and Rathbun, 2013: 454). Since insecurity is a natural and inevitable phenomenon, realists have always sought to solve the security equation. In contrast with the structural realism, which mainly considers government as a security provider, motivational realism emphasizes the importance of a variety of governments’ motivations and goals.

Motivational realism emphasized the importance of varieties of motivations and goals of governments. More precisely, motivational realism employs the reasoning that the key to comprehending the international hostile behavior lays within governments especially the greedy motivations, not within the structure of the international system. Of course, the reasoning of the objective realists is not that the structure of the international system is important, but that they do not consider this system as the only reason for their hostile behavior. In other words, they define the motivations of the enemy as a key variable in the international environment. Motivational realism believes that in a word in which most of the regional and international powers are greedy, there exists the probability of war (Collins, 2016:25).

However, the government’s greed affects a wide range of resources including their desire to increase wealth and comfort and to spread political and religious ideology. Considering these explanations, two groups of players are formed. From the point of view of motivational realists, one group of prominent players emphasizes the variety of greedy motivations and a conditions is created in which the greedy government selects the competitive policies. The second group is the security-seeking governments which emphasize cooperation (Schweller, 1988). For this reason, the main issue of motivational realism is the discussion about security-seeking governments. Motivational realism put greedy governments against these types of governments. This theory considers the distrust of security-seeking governments towards the motivations of other players as the cause of opposition and conflict (Qalkhnbaz and Najafi R, 2017:32).

For the time being, geopolitical competitions and the increase in distrust motivation are leading the course of developments in the Middle East toward reciprocal strategies.

Based on to the paper's theoretical framework, Saudi Arabia adopting an aggressive approach and highlighting multilateral conflicts such as using the lever of economic pressure and taking advantage of oil competition, intensifying religious conflicts, militarily invading weak countries of the regional including Yemen and Bahrain, having widespread military dealings and strengthening the aggressive power, preserving the international prestige through massive investment in international organizations, seeks to present the components of a hostile and greedy state, especially in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Most of these features are against the Islamic Republic of Iran's approach in the Middle East region. Though the Islamic Republic of Iran has had serious disagreements with the Saudis after the Islamic Revolution, it



has always sought to play the role of a security-seeking government in the region through adopting a calm and active diplomacy-based approach. Considering what mentioned so far, the causes of aggressive policies and the costly signs of Saudi Arabia are discussed as follows.

### *1- The reasons for the formation of the hostile behavior of Saudi Arabian*

#### *1-1- The new decision-making structure focusing on the young prince*

The tendency to have regional power and to control the geopolitical events forms Saudi Arabia's foreign policy since regional excellence has a strong relationship with the survival of this regime (Gause, 2014: 4). Whereas the efforts to analyze the permanent conflicts in the Middle East have always been made through the perspective of Iran and Arabs relations, today's situation is entirely different. 2030 Economical Evolution Perspective, Mohammad Bin Salman's new approach to foreign policy and changes in the world market have led Saudi Arabia to a new strategy against Iran (Kelemen, 2018).

Undoubtedly Prince Mohammad bin Salman is determined to continue four decades of competition with Iran. As far as a new situation has been dominated in Saudi Arabia since 2015, Riyadh's concerns about the extension of Iran's influence on the Arab world and beyond have increased. For this reason, he wants to continue his country's enmity to Iran and gain the benefit from the continuance of this conflict in domestic politics. Former kings, Khaled (1975-1982), Fahd (1982-2005) and Abdullah (2005-2015) faced various internal challenges, which were covered through competing with Iran. But today Mohammad bin Salman is facing a series of challenges to which he cannot put an end in his favor. Consequently, these challenges have paved the way for a highly destabilizing competition across the region from Sanaa to Damascus and from Beirut to Baghdad. The prince's first and foremost goal is to stabilize his government and important political decisions be made under his supervision, and that is why a significant number of other princes seeking power have been removed by him. On the other hand, the prompt dismissal and condemnation of the Prince and Minister of the Interior, Mohammad bin Nayef and the former King's National Guard commander, as well as the arrest of wealthy princes such as Al-Waleed bin Talal under the pretext of combating corruption will probably make many frustrated princes and cousins stand against the Crown Prince, this is not clear what impact these first-time actions will have in the long run (Al-Rasheed, 2018).

Saudi Arabia deliberately continues to intensify tensions with Iran, this is while Iran strives to reduce conflicts through proposing diplomatic suggestions to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In fact, this strategy reflects the social and political amendments inside Saudi Arabia after Mohammad bin Salman took office. With hostile expression against Iran, the leaders of this country fuel fear in the country and consider this as a policy to unite the country for struggling against their own enemy, Iran (Kelemen, 2018).

Mohammad bin Salman wants to remind Saudi princes who have been marginalized and other Saudis that the young prince struggles against the extreme processes encouraged by Iran. For this reason, through reinforcing threatening Iran and magnifying his own mission to save the region from the occupation of Iran and Shi'ism, he tries to blame and suppress various groups in the country. For this reason, he always insists that foreign threats are the only threat to the kingdom. Even when the time US President Barack Obama emphasized that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states need more peace, justice, and employment, Turkish Faisal, the time ambassador of Saudi Arabia in the United States and the former chief of intelligence services of Arabia



promptly reminded that he meant Iran and considered it as the only destabilizing force in the Arab world (Al-Rasheed, 2018).

Currently, the foreign policy of father and son is based on a single doctrine, which is realizing Saudi Arabia's superiority to make it the only arbitrator in Arab and regional affairs and be the main point of entry for all international powers in the region. It seems that Saudi Arabia, being under the monarchy of Salman, is determined to pursue this goal, even if accompanied by further insecurity and developments in the Middle East as well as serious human, social, and political consequences. King Salman and his son determinedly yearn for turning Saudi Arabia's foreign policy from cautious diplomacy into an intrusive doctrine. Saudi Arabia, governed by the young Crown Prince, is still struggling to become a cruel regional Arab power, even if this goal needs more cooperation (such as closer cooperation with Israel) (Al-Rasheed, 2017).

### *1-2- Stimulation of Identity Faults*

The identity achieved after the Cold War is regarded as a major driver of nations' behavior in the competitive environment of the international system (Maslinejad, 2010: 193). Ethnic nationalism and ethnicism are related to concepts affecting the state's identity or competing with it. An essential and controversial point is how this identifying variable affects foreign policy. Ethnic and religious challenges that have arisen in the historical process of state-building affect the patterns of foreign policy behavior and the interactions of governments, as well as the method of behaving the regional security arrangements (Moaz and Landau, 2004: 101). These identity perceptions in geopolitical competitions, as the source of all environmental information, are the focus of all environmental behavior (Tahami and Kavianirad, 2015: 6). In old condition, there is space for cooperation rather than direct confrontation, the inappropriate beds reflecting conceptual, ideological, and identity conflicts caused the crisis of conflict in nationalist thoughts of Fars-Arab and Shia-Sunni.

The strategy of Saudi Arabia's government for dealing with the Islamic Republic of Iran in geopolitical areas has consistently been based on the reciprocal Identity Ideas. For this reason, Saudi Arabia has based its foreign policy agenda on two major approaches:

- A. Ethnic Distinction and the Struggle for the Dual Induction of Arabs and Ajam (non-Arabs) (Ethnic Ideals)
- B. Discriminating Identity and bolding the Shia-Sunni fault in the region (religious ideas) (Khazri et al., 2017: 198).

### *Ethnic Ideas:*

Tribal identity is strongly rooted in the region's history. The ethnic identity approach emphasizes the recognition of the motives and goals of leaders and statesmen towards ethnic groups, as well as the foreign and domestic policy of governments and their sphere of influence. This increase in the sphere of influence in the region is based on a major factor that is mainly used for creating new areas of influence in the region. This element includes Shia groups for Iran and Salafist groups for Saudi Arabia. Cultural, ethnic, sectarian, and religious differences in many Middle Eastern countries have formed and strengthened various groups in specific regions, and it is why the groups usually intend to protect themselves against other groups. Therefore, regional conflicts overlap ethnic and sectarian differences.



It is institutionalized in Saudi foreign policy that sectarianism is embodied in Wahhabi ideology. For Saudi Arabia, sectarianism in this sense not only justifies the Shia inferiority in Saudi's political society but also makes it possible for the Saudis to know Wahhabism as a factor causing solidarity with Arab nationalism and replace it with as a stronger force against Iran where Shia Muslims make up its majority. Also in the national and, more significantly, in the foreign arena, they presented themselves as supporters of true Islam against the Shia as ideological perverts and supporters of Iran. Therefore, sectarianism is a tool for the realization of hegemony in the region and even in the world of Islam. The performance of Mohammad bin Salman indicates that Saudi Arabia is endeavoring to replace a sort of modern nationalism with past traditions and that Arab nationalism will be driven by the current sectarianism. They have become vulnerable in this area (Robinson et al., 2018: 26-36).

The main issue in various parts of the Middle East is the struggle over the ethnic conflicts the policy, which Saudi Arabia used to raise the cost of confrontation for Iran so that Iran's influence of power in the region would be prevented, the project of scaring Iran would be implemented, and the chaos about Iran would be expended into this country.

That is why Thomas Friedman has concluded in his research that bin Salman can display more aggressive behavior towards Iran, and we can see that Saudi Arabia turns the whole region into a field of competition with Iran (Friedman, 2017).

### *Religious Ideas*

Yeel Guzansky believes that Saudi-Iranian relations are defined through religious, ideological, hostility, and competition for regional influence (Guzansky, 2015: 52). The position of religion in any country is undeniable. After the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the emergence of a Shia Islamic state, which became parallel with the Wahhabism position in Saudi Arabia. These two countries are always trying to broaden their Islamic beliefs throughout the Persian Gulf and the Middle East (Osiewicz, 2016: 2).

Saudi religious beliefs are based on Wahhabism ideology, which is according to the thoughts of Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab who lived in the eighteenth century. He lowered the social dignity of Turks and Iranians to the extent that his intellectual base has been associated with anti-Turkish and anti-Iranian language (Małachowski, 2011: 14).

After Saudi forces took control of many parts of the peninsula and established the first Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, many schools and centers funded by the Saudis and spread Wahhabism throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Between 1744 and 1818, Saudi clerics and missionaries expanded institutions and concepts promoting Wahhabism so widely in the Arab world that even the return of temperate concepts at the time the Ottoman Empire destroyed Saudi power failed to eradicate extremism and Wahhabism got saved; this became the ideological basis for Saudi Arabia's returning to Najd and Riyadh monarchy between 1824 and 1891 and eventually the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. However, when Salman bin Abdulaziz took power in 2015 and due to the presence of Prince Mohammad bin Salman by him, a sort of modernization took place in the social space of Saudi Arabia. The public disrespect and criticism against the ideas of extremist and the promise of supporting moderate Islam have been interpreted as a new approach to stop takfiri thought. But his language indicates that Prince Mohammad bin Salman has deliberately condemned the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists and expelled Wahhabism from religion (Mouline, 2018).



Wahhabism will be a pillar of the Saudi kingdom. Religious institutions, schools, universities, mosques, ministries, international organizations, and media groups are still under the influence of Wahhabism. With the advent of the Islamic Revolution and the formation of an influential geopolitical discourse in the region, Saudi Arabia deemed this discourse to be against geopolitical interests and even its own existence and always tried to take serious actions through creating a rival discourse in a systematic form against the Shia crescent, which according to Mohammad bin Salman is going to become a full moon (Diara, 2016).

Also, regardless of the widespread propaganda of Mohammad bin Salman about the decline in the role of Wahhabism in the Saudi government, this thinking has still an effective role in the vital aspects of government. Information sources indicate that Salman was one of the key figures in the 1980s in Afghanistan and in the 90s in the Balkan for propagating Jihad thinking in Afghanistan and Bosnia. He has also served as the main channel and bridge between the Saudi's state bureaucracy and fanatic clergymen in establishing Wahhabi propaganda centers. Salman bin Abdul Aziz has also fired some Saudi's senior officials such as the justice minister and police chief for opposing the Wahhabi clergymen's institutions. He has also offered different positions in his cabinet to three grandsons of Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab in order to ensure that Saudi Arabia continues to maintain its absolute fidelity to Wahhabi Islam (Choksy and Choksy, 2015: 12).

## *2- Expanding Proxy Wars*

Part of Saudi Arabia's strategic policy to take the role of the Middle East region leader is proxy wars. This strategy has been reflected in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. In areas where identity and ideological mechanisms play a central role in the creation of action patterns, proxy wars are the sign of scattering threats against the enemy (Mosalanejad, Samadi, 2018: 204). For regional powers, the proxy war is not only the ideal way to minimize their direct casualties but also it can provide an important opportunity for diplomatic maneuvers. The emergence and growth of proxy forces as a major military and political actors in the Middle East can be clearly observed in recent years, especially as this phenomenon has almost been formed indigenously in the Middle East region (Marshall, 2016: 184). Saudi Arabia knows that the United States is no longer a reliable ally as it was in the past. For this reason, it showed a reaction to the post-Arab spring challenges by increasing weapon imports and creating a more aggressive foreign policy. In fact, Saudi Arabia's proxy opposition against Iran is systematically influenced by its sectarian components that have been used to support extremism (Soage, 2017: 8). For this reason, King Salman's government has launched a cold war against Iran for geopolitical, economic, and sectarian infiltration that may last decades and have devastating effects on the region. Iran also defends its strategic interests by understanding the danger it is exposed to.

In 2016, a workshop on escalating tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia was held at Taffler University, France by the support of the Carnegie Foundation of New York where participants agreed on the point that the current tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia will likely be intensified over the next five years and they affirmed that the main topic of these conflicts will be related to Saudi Arabia's support from proxy groups in the Middle East wars (mainly in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain) (Ighani, 2016: 4). But considering the current situation in the region, the conflicts of the two countries have more sensitivity in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen:



### **2.1. Yemen:**

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen have never been structurally stable for various political, historical, and strategic reasons. The complex relationships that have developed over the past decades have faced more complex dimensions since the "Arab Spring". The new Yemeni government came into being in 1990 with the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic in the north and the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen in the south. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Yemeni military officer who ruled northern Yemen in 1978, took over the leadership of the new country. Earlier, the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh had carried out several military operations against a group of its citizens called "Houthis" or "Believing Youth" during several years, but in 2004, due to anti-national security and anti-American activities by the Houthis, more serious armed conflicts began between their leader, Hussein al-Houthi and government forces (Firdausi and Anshu, 2018: 3).

Riyadh views Houthi's control over Yemen as a potential threat against itself. Saudi Arabia believes that the Houthis are considered a serious threat to the security of the region because of the obvious relationship with Iran. In Saudi Arabia's logic, the military stance against the Houthis group is a way to prevent the spreading influence of Iran across the whole peninsula. For this reason, Saudi Arabia is trying to pursue a long strategy of "Containment and Maintenance" towards its southern neighbor (Salisbury, 2015: 4). Former Saudi Arabia, King Abdul-Aziz's statement that "Yemen must be kept weak" is a sign of an old fear that indicates the point that Saudi Arabia has always viewed Yemen as a threat to its internal security (Guardian, 2011). Indeed, Saudi Arabia interprets the empowerment of Zaidiyyah Shias in Yemen as the enhancement of Iran's regional power. Hence, Iran's strategic interests in Yemen are easily fulfilled. Yemen, located in the southwest of the Saudi Arabia Peninsula, with a 35 percent Shia population, could serve as Iran's potential operational base against Saudi Arabia. Easy access to Yemen for Iran equals easy access to Saudi Arabia (Reardon, 2015).

For this reason, after the development movement towards the empowerment of the Ansarullah<sup>1</sup> forces, Saudi Arabia was forced to directly attack Yemen for fulfilling its benefits. In March 2015, when the "Decisive Storm" operation was launched, the only purpose of Saudi Arabia was declared as returning the legitimate government of President Mansour Hadi and arresting the Houthi militias. Mohammad bin Salman certainly expected to improve his political influence in the power system through the rapid conquest of his air force equipped with the most advanced western weapons and industries, but the military coalition still remains in the war swamp for the fifth consecutive year and Saudi Arabia has tried to turn Iran's role and interference in Yemen into the dominant discourse, while the Yemeni Ansarullah's legitimate government has rarely been considered. One of the reasons for this issue is the situation in which Saudi Arabia needs to justify the coalition's inability to achieve its military objectives despite the existence of modern weapons, the military presence of coalition countries, airstrikes, and diplomatic support (Lackner, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> The Ansarullah is the official name of a group known as the "Houthis"; the Ansarullah of Yemen came from a group called the Shabab al-Momenin, founded in the early 1990s in Saada province. Shabab al-Momenin sought to revive the status of the Zaidiyyah religion in Yemen society, and to use its organizing power against the Sunni Wahhabi groups active in Yemen. In less than two decades, Ansarullah from a local rebel group could actually become the main ruler of parts of Yemen, including its capital, Sanaa.





### *2.2. Iraq:*

King Salman and his son, Mohammad, believe that Saudi Arabia's regional policy regarding Iran has been very passive and failed. They are forming a new and dynamic approach that seems its implementation has been begun in Iraq since June 2017. The Iraq-Saudi Arabia relationship is historically being changed between hostility, tension, acceptance, and regional coexistence but a new change and transformation in this regard could ignore the highly challenging past that has remained in the memory of the Iraqi people (Al Aqeedi, 2018).

Compared to Saudi Arabia's activities in other parts of the region, the presence of this country in Iraq has increased dramatically. In fact, Iraq provides an opportunity for the Saudi authorities to apply the lessons they have learned from their unsuccessful interventions in Syria and Yemen. "There is a sense in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that it is too late to bring Syria and Lebanon back, but there is a confrontation scene with Iran in Yemen and Iraq, and we are trying to modify this situation; today, we are at the forefront to return Iran's influence to its borders" said an outstanding Saudi diplomat (Filkins, 2018). Saudi Arabia tries to reconnect Iraq after nearly three decades of economic and diplomatic disconnection to prevent Iran's regional influence. These relationships have begun since 2016, accelerated rapidly in mid-2017, and even expanded more after the 2018 general election (ICG, 2018: 14).

Saudi Arabia's strategy is to launch a wave of national pride based on Arab identity in Iraq, and with economic investment and social influence, revive Arab identity in this country and put Iraqis against Iran. However, the Iraqis do not want their country to become a place for Saudi Arabia's hostilities again. On this basis, as part of its reassessment of the Iraqi scene, therefore, Saudi Arabia focuses on the policy that the vast majority of Iraqi Shia place their ethnic identity higher than their religious belief. For this reason, Saudi Arabia's policymakers have decided to focus on Iraqi Shia, because they can create the greatest challenge for the government.

In general, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia pursues four tactical methods to confront Iran in Iraq:

- 1- Influencing the Shia Political Elites
- 2- Strengthening Economic Relations
3. Religious Mutual Interaction
4. Expanding Social Relations (ICG, 2018: 21).

### *2.3. Syria:*

The globalization of economic, political, and strategic interests is one of the reasons based on which authoritarian countries intervene in other countries. The Syrian conflicts are good examples of the continuing evolution of an international proxy war (Alverny, 2017: 5). Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, many countries and governmental organizations concerned with their interests have been present in this crisis. Saudi Arabia had a prominent role among the countries that took action against the Assad government. King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz was the first Arab leader who broke his silence and protested the Syrian government's measures to suppress the 2011 demonstrations. He was also the first Arab leader who openly armed the Syrian government's opposition. In this context, Riyadh actually considered the Syrian civil war as an opportunity to reverse the regional order after 2003 and a means for overcoming Iran's influence in Syria and creating a domino effect that could weaken Tehran in Lebanon and Iraq (Dacey, 2018).



When Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency of Syria in June 2000, relations between Riyadh and Damascus, in turn, were moving towards improvement. The two capitals performed measures to strengthen relations, and the Saudis wanted to help consolidate the status of the new president (Riedel, 2012). But in early 2002, Syria took a neutral stance unlike all Arab states at the Arab League Summit in Beirut and the Palestinian-Israeli peace issue plan. One year later, in 2003, after the US invasion of Iraq, relations between the Saudis and Syria fell into a bad situation. Syria refused to cooperate with the US-led coalition, and Riyadh, supported by Washington, began the Syrian government isolation plan but the breaking point of the relations of two countries was the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005, that the Saudi government blamed the Assad government. Following this event and the occurrence of the Cedar Revolution and the separation of politics in Lebanon into two currents, called as March 8<sup>th</sup> and March 14<sup>th</sup>, and the increasing influence of the "Iran-Syria-Hezbollah" Front in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia tried to have a more serious approach towards Syria and after the start of the Syrian crisis, Riyadh decided to condemn Assad in a general confrontation and accelerate opposition movement against the Assad regime. In November and December 2011, the Arab League supported by Saudi Arabia announced a plan called "Restore Order to Syria" (Al-Jazeera, 2011). On February 12, 2012, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister called on the Arab League to perform decisive actions to resolve the Syrian crisis. Proposals presented by the Saudis included imposing economic and political sanctions against Syria, creating communication channels with the Syrian oppositions and assisting them in all aspects (The Guardian, 2012). Also, at the first meeting called "Friends of Syria Group", held in Tunisia on February 24, former Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Saud al-Faisal said, "Arming the Syrian opposition is a great idea" (Al-Jazeera, 2012).

In this situation, Prince Turki bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, son of the then-King and Deputy Foreign Minister, visited Ankara in 2012 and called for the establishment of a center in the city of Adana (that has a distance about 100 km from the Turkish-Syrian border) to create a channel to facilitate the transfer of equipments and weapons to the rebels (also similar centers were established in Istanbul and Jordan). In addition, a number of observers believe that the Saudis have signed agreements with Eastern European countries to sell weapons worth 806 million Euros aiming to send weapons to rebels in Syria (CIR, 2017: 153).

The root of Saudi Arabia's interference in the Syrian civil war is the same as what is known as the "Cold War" in Islamic lands. In the Saudi's view, Iran is a major threat to national security. This was stated by former US ambassador in Saudi Arabia, James Smith: "There are three concerns in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy: Iran, Iran, and Iran" (Smith, 2016). The battle for hegemony in the Middle East, the expansion of pro-Iranian forces, including the military arena, are serious threats to Saudi Arabia. As a result, Saudi Arabia is trying to make Iran's most important ally, the Damascus regime face the challenge. For this reason, the civil war in Syria has been recognized by the Saudis as well as other Arab countries as an important element in the struggle for regional influence, especially with the axis of "Iran, Syria, and Lebanon".

By weakening Iran-Syria relations, Saudi Arabia can strengthen its position in Lebanon and expand its influence in Iraq. That is why Riyadh has been willing to support Jihadist-Salafi organizations such as Ahrar al-Sham and so on during these years to overthrow the Syrian regime. In 2015, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said in a press conference: "Iran is occupying the Arab lands and we are decisive to counter any Iranian movement and we will



do whatever we can in the political, economic, and military fields to protect our land and people” (The Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2015).

Finally, it should be stated that Saudi Arabia seeks to engage the so-called axis of Islamic Resistance in a series of regional and trans-regional challenges so that by using the inhibition coefficient enhancement in the form of making a network of its interests can move countries under the influence of Iranian policy including Iraq and Syria towards geopolitical balancing and by redefining regional communications with Israel in the form of a new threat network can make cost points more complicated for Iran.

### *3- New Coalition*

Saudi Arabia's main reason for forming a coalition is to disrupt the balance of power in favor of Iran in the region. In 2015, after Salman bin Abdulaziz coming to power, Saudi Arabia tried to strengthen its regional power by establishing a number of unofficial and multilateral coalitions and alliances in which there was a combination of Arab states, Muslim groups, and other countries under its leadership. Their first coalition was in the Yemeni war against the Ansarullah movement created in March 2015. In December 2015, a military coalition called the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition was formed. Also in June 2017, an anti-Qatari coalition was formed to force former Saudi Arabia's rival to change its political behavior towards regional developments (Miller, 2017).

The important point about creating a coalition against Yemen is Saudi Arabia's attempt to expand the scope of the coalition from the level of the Persian Gulf to the level of the Arab world. Saudi Arabia has also been able to engage countries like Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan in its coalitions. At the Arab League leaders, Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, Saudi Arabia had the responsibility of the center of a movement that announced the issue of the formation of the "Unite Arab Army" on March 29, 2015 (Reuters, 2015). Saudi Arabia proposes the idea of a military coalition in the region with the US government support, which is well aware that this mechanism may not have necessary efficiency despite the common threats and the declaration of the Egyptian government for not accompanying, that has imposed a serious impact on the framework of this plan. But it assumes that by pursuing this plan, it could save the costs of war so that in this way, legitimize its actions.

Mohammad bin Salman is currently trying to turn Saudi Arabia into a serious regional power against Turkey, Iran, and other rivals. In this regional struggle, Saudi Arabia tries to redefine its regional and trans-regional links by maintaining traditional political-alliances. Saudi Arabia has always known the goals of the alliances as three issues: confronting Iran's influence in the region, restoring Arab confidence in Saudi Arabia, and creating more military cooperation among the Arab League members (Gaub, 2016: 2).

#### *3.1 Pakistan*

One of the countries that Mohammad bin Salman is trying to take a special look at Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has numerous strategic interests in Pakistan. Just as Israel is a strategic ally for the United States in the Middle East, Pakistan also plays the same role for Saudi Arabia. Maintaining a deep relationship with Pakistan extends Saudi Arabia's ambitious motives to spread its ideology beyond the Arab world. Pakistan is the second-most populous Muslim country in the world. Except for countries such as Bangladesh, the Central Asian Republics and Turkey or Muslim



minorities in India, whose national identity has more manifestation, Pakistan has a very strong religious identity. This issue has been very important for Saudi Arabia to influence Wahhabism thought during previous decades. For this reason, Saudi Arabia views Pakistan as a vital component of its plan to limit Iran (Blank, 2015). Regarding Pakistan's border with Iran, Riyadh can be present in the borders of Iran by strengthening Pakistan. Therefore, Saudi Arabia, by massive economic packages and investment, buys the Pakistani government's loyalty financially and convinces the Pakistani government not to pursue the incitement of terrorists by Saudi Arabia on Pakistan's borders. Saudi Arabia's performance can be well observed in the words of Adel Al- Jubeir when he stated, "Saudi Arabia is not only an observer of Pakistani politics but also a real participant in Pakistani affairs" (Siddique, 2019).

The Saudis and Pakistanis have many reasons for friendship with each other, in a way that the Saudi Arabia ambassador in Pakistan was the first foreign envoy to meet with Prime Minister of this country, Omran Khan at his residence in Islamabad after the declaration of election results. These reasons may be largely economic but the deal has been mutually beneficial for nearly 40 years. There are many reasons for this point that the relations between these two countries will improve significantly in the near future, as Pakistani Defense Minister Khajeh Mohammad Asef says, "His country is not committed to anything more than protecting Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity" (Jaffrelot, 2017). Pakistan provides military capacity across the Persian Gulf and the Middle East for Saudi Arabia. "They cannot do anything without strong convergence with Pakistanis," says Craig, a Middle East security expert. He adds "Estimating that how many Pakistani soldiers are serving in the Middle East reaches 65,000 people". If relations with Pakistan are not always strong, Saudi Arabia will have no other manpower to fuel its military vehicle (Hincks, 2019).

### *3.2 Israel*

The coordination of Saudi Arabia and Israel has been actively supported by the Trump government. The United States is very interested in a joint meeting between Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran. The basis and foundation of creating this joint front are the oppositions who are present in Riyadh and Tel Aviv about the "Iranian Nuclear Deal". Donald Trump's coming to power and his withdrawal from the nuclear deal has increased Saudi-Israeli convergence to confront Iran. In addition, Israel is well aware that with the help of Riyadh, its relationship with other Arab and Muslim countries will also change as some of them such as Egypt and Pakistan, are affiliated with Saudi Arabia (Ayoob, 2018).

Mohammad bin Salman may not initially succeed to be beside Israel publicly but Israel has now offered its request to create an international coalition against Iran and Qatar. However, the Saudis are still trying to secretly cooperate with Israel on security and economic issues. In July 2016, a Saudi Arabia business and academic delegation visited this country for creating stronger relations aiming to strengthen the military capabilities of Saudi Arabia and cooperate in any armed confrontation with Iran. Saudi Arabia is also trying to create a new geographical and strategic link with Israel. Following Saudi Arabia King's trip to Egypt, this country proposed to assign two Red Sea islands, Sanafir Island and Tiran Island to Saudi Arabia. Both islands are in the straits of Tiran and are the only way for Israel to access the Red Sea. This issue may also be regarded as an operational center in the future to promote military and security cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Thus, Saudi Arabia prepares the minds of its people for more



cooperation with Israel, especially in the Saudi-backed media, the programs or articles that clearly criticize the occupation of Palestine and the Zionists' behavior with Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza are not currently allowed to broadcast or print. In this regard, Saudi Arabia has even seriously criticized Qatar for supporting the Palestinian group, Hamas, that is now known as a terrorist organization by this country. Mohammad bin Salman is certainly pleased with doing these actions in relation to Israel and assures them that he supports further strengthening cooperation. However, it should not be expected that the Israeli flag to be raised in Riyadh soon. This requires a great deal of preparation and coordination and is very important for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to plan this action (Al-Rasheed, 2018).

Meanwhile, Jared Kushner, Trump's special envoy to the Middle East, has established a special relationship with Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Kushner's Inc. book "Greed, Ambition, and Corruption", recently published by an American writer, Vicki Ward, has revealed the role of Donald Trump's son-in-law in regional developments. In this book, more detail of the American plan, the "Trading of the Century", has been narrated. The plan began with the surrender of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, and then Jordan would deliver parts of its land to the Palestinians, and in return, Jordan would be delivered parts of Saudi Arabia's land. This issue gives Israel the possibility of maintaining vast parts of the West Bank (Unz, 2019).

### 3.3 America

Saudi Arabia was a country that had a different position in Trump's advertising rhetorics and policies. The change in the White House's look at Riyadh during the Trump era has been significant. Saudi Arabia was the first foreign country that he visited during his presidency (Gause, 2018). For this reason, Saudi's dictator kings and rulers follow what they heard from the new US president as a green light to continue their repressive policies in the region (Postel and Hashemi, 2018: 2).

With Donald Trump's policy and events happened in 2018 led by Mohammad bin Salman, especially the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, a critical journalist of the Saudi Arabia government, Riyadh finds itself in the extreme strategic bottleneck, as many members of the US Congress have been demanding punishment and reconsideration in relationship with Riyadh. But Trump has always displayed a different political behavior towards Saudi Arabia; for this reason, Prince bin Salman in praising Trump regards him as "the proper person at the proper time" (Friedman, 2018).

At the beginning of each year, the International Crisis Group publishes a list of the "Ten Conflicts to Watch" around the world. The second position in this list in 2018 is what is called "United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran Competition", and emphasizes that Washington plays a pivotal role in this dangerous game<sup>2</sup>. Based on this report, the competition has been strengthened in a parallel way with the three peripheral developments. Strengthening the authority of Mohammad bin Salman, Trump's aggressive strategy about Iran, and the end of Islamic State control in Iraq and Syria motivate Washington and Riyadh to pay more attention to Iran (Postel and Hashemi, 2018: 1).

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group. 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2018, 2 January 2018: [www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2018](http://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2018)



Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has prepared an ambitious reform plan in partnership with the US and several other military colleges to create a defense university inspired by the US National Defense University. In fact, these military universities intend to turn Saudi military officers into strategists who can link their operational missions to the geopolitical environment of the region and the developmental goals of their political authorities (Samaan, 2019).

However, Saudi Arabia is the largest importer of weapons from the United States and this country has purchased 112 billion dollar military weapons from 2013 to 2017. Although Barack Obama had imposed restrictions regarding arms sales and information to the Saudi Arabia Coalition in 2016, the Donald Trump government canceled those restrictions in March 2017, just before his trip to Saudi Arabia. In 2018, the United States sold 4.4 billion dollar arms directly to Saudi Arabia, and the government confirmed the sale of Patriot missiles in December of the same year. Tens of billions of dollars are still pending for congressional approval. The Trump government has shown that despite the crisis of Khashoggi's assassination and the Yemen war, it does not have any tendency to reduce its relations with Saudi Arabia (Vittori, 2019).

The United States believes that the Arab world needs security reconstruction. For this reason, it knows the MESA (The U.S. project of a Middle East Strategic Alliance) as a step forward, especially because it links military security to political and economic security. MESA is a working group that seeks to promote the interoperability of member states' defense systems through "regional capable centers" that cover "maritime, cyber, air, and missile domains" as well as border security, asymmetric warfare, and command and control. This working group was first introduced in May 2017 in a visit by US President Donald Trump from Saudi Arabia, and Riyadh described this alliance as "helping peace and security in the region and the world." This coalition includes all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) as well as Egypt and Jordan (Farouk, 2019).

Launched under a larger security program called "Expanding Regional Consultative Mechanisms" and "Deepening Interoperability", the aim of this coalition is to share the financial burden of the US supporting its allies and its interests around the world. This strategy in the Middle East is consistent with Trump's decision to reduce US involvement in regional security and makes US support heavily proportionate to what the Gulf states pay; as Trump said, the Gulf states should pay more money to protect themselves (Farouk, 2019).

Finally, it should be said that the new coalition for Mohammad bin Salman in respect of better recognition of the changing geopolitical environment of the Middle East with the two goals of redefining the common enemy and isolating it through increasing political and financial support as well as transforming from the traditional and dependent oriented relations into blackmail and threat oriented relations, is among the desired components in the Saudi Arabia's new policy.

#### ***4. Economic Leverage***

The dependence of financial and monetary flows on black gold in the Middle East has, in contemporary history, made oil to be converted into an instrument for the advancement of political goals, whether in Iranian history, that oil has become a factor for asking independence, or in Saudi Arabia, which has always been a driving force for taking advantage in the competition field. Iran and Saudi Arabia, after becoming two main pillars in the Middle East, and the coincidence of this issue with the establishment of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Iran had enjoyed its benefits for 10 years due to the good relations



it had with the United States, but after the Islamic Revolution all at once, all the capacities of this political and economic tool was handed over to Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Riyadh asked its other neighboring countries that had formed the GCC as a united front to have more cooperation in the field of oil to prevent Tehran from becoming a regional hegemony power. On the other hand, regarding the strained US-Iran relations and regional threats, the United States had succeeded to approve successive sanctions on Iran at the UN Security Council.

Saudi Arabia through this path has encouraged Washington for years to take aggressive actions against Iran. According to the documents published by WikiLeaks in 2018, Saudi Arabia has incited the United States to attack Iran by diplomatic correspondences in 2008 (WikiLeaks, 2018). Saudi Arabia is well aware that its actions against Iran in the economic fieldwork better than in the political or military fields. For this reason, Mohammad bin Salman, as the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, has considered numerous goals with regard to the changing geopolitics of the region in his regional and trans-regional trips to Pakistan, India, and China. Considering the new US approach, some Western observers believe that Mohammad bin Salman's efforts to strengthen Saudi Arabia's cooperation with these countries is an attempt to shift Riyadh's focus toward the East to replace Saudi Arabia's relations with the West. For this reason, Saudi Arabia's focus is not only on strengthening and confirming past relations with countries such as Pakistan but also on a plan to expand trade and economic partnership with India and China. This is, in turn, a new concept in Saudi Arabia's economic diplomacy, especially with regard to the point that China and India are also the largest importers of oil from Iran. However, Mohammad bin Salman is looking for something beyond the fields corresponding to his current position in the West. There seems to be a wide range of long-term goals in relation to the West that Riyadh implements in the 2030 Outlook Plan (Jan 2019). This policy is being implemented while the geopolitical calculations of the world are being changed to reach a new assessment of the relationship between Saudi Wahhabism and Jihadist extremism in the international security space. Riyadh's rulers are trying to reinforce their strengths. For this reason, Saudi Arabia's 2030 Outlook makes its regional competition an economic one.

One of the main goals of Mohammad bin Salman is to transform Saudi Arabia's economy and free his country from oil dependency. The unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia is over 12 % and 70 % of Saudi workers are working for the government. The Saudi Arabia Ministry of Labor has estimated that the economy would create 1.2 million jobs by 2022 to reduce unemployment to 9% (Reuters, 2018). But as the country lacks business experience and does not have specific expertise outside the oil and petrochemical industries, this important point would not be possible without foreign partnerships, especially Americans. Thus, the private sector in Saudi Arabia has severely been depending on the United States. Saudi Arabia's public system is also heavily dependent on American management expertise. Riyadh has hired US consultants since the 1950s, and in recent years, US companies such as McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, and Amazon Company have worked on hundreds of projects for this country. Prince Mohammad bin Salman has linked his domestic reputation with these technological projects. Therefore, its success is also politically important for him (Miller, 2018).

The death of Jamal Khashoggi, the critic journalist of Saudi Arabia government at the consulate of this country in Turkey - though the US initially reacted towards it and it was even talked about political and economic sanctions - could not have a serious impact on the relations between Washington and Riyadh. Saudi Arabia also initially took a completely offensive stance towards



the United States approach, in a way that the Saudi Arabia press office released an official statement entitled "Oil Weapon" and reminded the United States that the economy of Saudi Arabia Kingdom plays an important role in world economic life. They said that if the Saudis were punished for Khashoggi's death, Riyadh would retaliate with stronger measures. In a program about using oil as a weapon, Turki Aldakhail, the head of the Arabian public network, pointed out that imposing sanctions on the world's largest oil exporter could create a global economic disaster. Aldakhail warned the Trump government that if an action is taken against Riyadh, the United States will "drag its economy" towards death (Rashid, 2018).

A simple explanation for the US doubt to deal with Saudi Arabia is that the US government refrained from doing serious action for fear that punitive policies against Saudi Arabia could make the regional confrontation with Iran more complicated. For this reason, senior US officials, including Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and Secretary of the Treasury, Steven Mnuchin, expressed concern that by imposing excessive pressure on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh could instinctively take actions to endanger the oil market (Rashid, 2018). Indeed, Saudi Arabia's economic policies emphasize the urgency of the Iranian threat. Mohammad bin Salman says, "We are a primary target for the Iranian government and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not want to take action too late to wait for the battle in Saudi Arabia" (Miller, 2018).

However, although Saudi Arabia by using "Oil Weapon" will cause short-term damage to the United States and the world economy, it will ultimately harm Saudi Arabia's economy in the medium to long term. The reason for this point is not that the United States is moving towards independence on energy production. Saudi Arabia sees no proper outlook for its oil demand, considering the US oil production increase and probable approval of the NPEC plan (against OPEC organization) in the US Congress and the heightened trade war between the US and China, it should consider its market share. For this reason, Prince Mohammad bin Salman has ordered to perform studies about the option of Saudi Arabia's withdrawal from OPEC and probable scenarios.

##### ***5. The Policy of Reconstructing the War-Torn Zones in Syria and Iraq***

Saudi Arabia uses various tools, such as threats, economic pressure, sanctions, and eventually military aggression to infiltrate the political systems of other countries. The use of huge oil revenues is the first tool Saudi Arabia usually uses for a political influence outside its borders. In this regard, after the end of the ISIS crisis in Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia, in addition to strengthening diplomatic relations, has tried to strengthen its position in Damascus and Baghdad through the reconstruction strategy.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia's aids in reconstructing parts of Iraq liberated from ISIS occupation could be a proper place to create positive leverage for their influence. Riyadh tries to play a more highlighted role in the reconstruction sector of Iraq with the promises and projects it has defined in the 2030 vision (Al Aqeedi, 2018). Former Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Adel al- Jubeir, announced at the International Conference on Iraq Reconstruction in Kuwait that Saudi Arabia will allocate one billion dollars loan and 500 million dollars of the export credits between the two countries to support Iraq's reconstruction. For Saudi Arabia, these are the essential part of long-term political planning, including cross-border trade increase, developing infrastructures in newly liberated areas, investing in the private sector, creating jobs and introducing high-quality products to Iraq's market. Regarding Iraq's geographical proximity, Riyadh has focused





on southern Iraq's market, particularly the rich and ancient province of Basra. In Iraq, too, Saudi Arabia is competing directly aiming to limit Tehran's influence. This region is at the heart of the protest movement in Iraq because its residents feel that the Iraqi government has not paid attention to them since 2003. For this reason, Basra became the growth center of the anti-Iranian spirit and creating the opportunity for change. By understanding this emerging trend, Riyadh has invested in building projects such as the city's new Sheraton Hotel and a petrochemical plant. Iraqis in Basra are now seeking to reopen a long pipeline that allows this country to transfer oil from Saudi Arabia to the Red Sea (Mansour, 2018: 5). "The Saudis have finally realized that the way to deal with Iran's influence in Iraq is through trade," says one Arab economist (ICG, 2018: 18).

Syria is also another damaged country after the Arab Spring developments. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2010, a number of Middle East countries have been affected by regional developments, among which Syria has suffered the most. Figures show that between 250 and 500,000 people have been killed and half of Syria's 22 million people have become homeless. The Syrian Civil War was the "biggest refugee crisis in the world" in contemporary history and also had the most political reactions internationally (Gause, 2014: 10-11). The UN report has estimated that by the end of 2013, Syria would be lagged 40 years behind human development (Phillips, 2016: 1). The World Bank and other prestigious centers have also concluded in their investigations that the reconstruction of Syria will cost between 250 billion and 350 billion dollars, while the economic situation of Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, is more appropriate to help Syria than Russia and Iran (TRT world, 2019). For this reason, Saudi Arabia tried to direct its economic supports towards protecting the US-led coalition and humanitarian supports from Syrian refugees and homelesses residing in the camps. Saudi Arabia tries to play a pivotal role in the post-war Syrian reconstruction process with its 100 million dollar aid to the "International Coalition for Stabilization and Reconstruction of Freed Syrian Regions". During a meeting of the Coalition's Foreign Ministers in Brussels, the foreign minister of this country has announced the granting of these aids as Saudi Arabia's commitment to post-war reconstruction (Reuters, 2018). There is no doubt that the economy is the Saudis' tool for removing past opacities with Damascus and achieving specific political goals, such as investment in northern Syria in order to attract the trust of the Kurdish democratic forces. Regarding Iran's economic problems, Saudi Arabia knows that the issue of Iraq and Syria reconstruction could bring regional competition into a new phase and create a new front against Iran by announcing its readiness to revive diplomatic relations with Syria. The point seems unlikely at least in the short term, and there is still no sufficient space for achieving this goal.

## CONCLUSION

Competition has become a permanent feature of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia relations. Two countries with two different ideologies are trying to create their own desirable regional order. At the same time, as King bin Salman came to power in 2015 and then the Republicans came to power in the United States, it has had devastating consequences that have made Saudi Arabia a source of instability in the region. The shift in diplomatic and economic mechanisms in the region, the crisis of government formation in Lebanon, conflicts in occupied Palestine, political competition in Iraq and Syria, and rising tensions and concerns around the world about Iran's nuclear program in a way have been shaped by the competitions of these two



countries. Saudi elites know Iran as a serious threat because they believe Iran has destroyed order governing the region and the Persian Gulf. Therefore, the recent maneuvers of Prince Mohammad bin Salman are planned to counter what he calls an increasing threat. In fact, King bin Salman's government in this competition tries to actively pursue its hostile foreign policy in three domestic, regional, and international domains. At the domestic level, by removing other princes and wiping them out of the political sphere of this country, King Salman has tried to change the traditional method governing Saudi Arabia so far and to direct the foreign policy of this country toward more effective measures in the region. At the regional level, complex and unresolved issues are increasing their pressures on this country's leadership. The increasing influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the axis called Islamic resistance at the regional level after the 2011 Arab revolutions are the most important factors in changing the foreign policy of this country. At the international level, the main and effective factor was the strategy that the United States proposed during the Obama administration as "Looking East Priority", and Saudi Arabia accused the United States of failing to support its regional allies. For this reason, Saudi Arabia in the King bin Salman period tried to significantly increase the performance of its foreign policy in East Asia, the Russian Federation and the European Union. In addition, Donald Trump views his relations with Saudi Arabia as a lucrative deal, and hence benefits in three directions: the purchase of military weapons by Saudi Arabia, which could thus perform broader advertising in the US election, probable support of Saudi Arabia from the "deal of the century" that Trump wants to name it as a major success in his foreign policy, and the Saudi involvement in the anti-Iran axis, which helps him destroy Obama's heritage. For this reason, the stimulation of regional competitions by the US has been a necessary motivation to sufficiently play an effective strategic role in creating an aggressive approach as a behavioral model of Saudi Arabia. Hence, all these factors have led Saudi Arabia in line with the concept of a greedy actor to try to put its aggressive approach for regional balancing and limiting Iran's power on its foreign policy agenda. Saudi Arabia, based on the traditional components such as: showing and shaping ethnic and religious differences, and organizing and operating its infantry through the expansion of Wahhabi schools and universities, or based on new strategies such as maintaining geopolitical confrontation field by increasing economic power and implementing the 2030 outlook project, the widespread presence in the media and cyberspace, the formation of terrorist groups to spread proxy wars, changing balance of power within the framework of regional or international coalition reformation and renovation, and strategic policy-making to increase Iran's costs to support Shia in the region, growing economic, political and cultural cooperation with countries in the region in new regionalism form, increasing the purchase of military weapons and major change in the "military morphology" of Saudi Arabia and so on are the central goals of Saudi Arabia government. By pursuing new strategies, King bin Salman Abdulaziz's government is trying, first, to reduce the level of Iran's economic, diplomatic, and cultural relations in the region by planned measures, and second, to bring the Islamic Republic of Iran into a series of regional crises by creating security chaos so that it can reproduce its role in the region through the Iranophobia and Enemy Project; thirdly, it can provide the necessary ground to compensate its political influence reduction by increasing economic and investment incomes in various regions. In these circumstances, the historical difference between the two countries and the possession of Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the political atmosphere of Saudi Arabia, despite Iran's perpetual desire to reduce tensions, have made the variables leading to reconciliation



cannot be seriously observed and Saudi Arabia by moving towards aggressive behavior, and risk-taking, heightens the crisis in the region, that the future of the Middle East has been tied to this ongoing conflict.

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