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## *The struggle for the regional hegemony: The strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Last Decade*

### **Abstract**

Saudi Arabia and Iran maintain since the Sha of Persia's fall a possible rivalry which origin may be in their two opposite positions about Islam. This rivalry has multiple focuses, and it has been evolving in the last decades, from a religious confrontation to politic and economic one. Its influence in the international sphere has also been affected, with changing allegiances with the regional and global actors. Both powers are important actors with a lot of regional influence in a key zone for the global politics and economy so the nature of their relation will be enormously affected by the global powers and will have repercussions in the regional dynamic.

### **Keywords**

Saudi Arabia, Iran, Hegemony, Middle East, strategic rivalry.

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## Introduction

Saudi Arabia and Iran are undoubtedly today's leading Muslim powers due to their great international projection and global influence, as well as for being the leading nations in the main branches of Islam: Shi'ism and Sunnism. The influence of both extends throughout the Middle East, affecting all countries in the region. Both are strong economically (18<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> in global GDP rankings respectively<sup>1</sup>) as well as diplomatically and militarily (3<sup>rd</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> in world military spending rankings). Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the two powers seem to be in an ongoing rivalry, which has been called by some experts "The Cold War of the Middle East"<sup>1</sup>.

The topography of the Middle East has three elements that stand out from the rest: The Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian Plateau and the Anatolian continental bridge<sup>2</sup>. Two of these geographical features are precisely the territories occupied by most of the powers we will study, which reveals their importance in the region.

Iran is in a privileged position in the Middle East geographically speaking. It has extensive borders with several countries from the Caucasus to the Indian subcontinent, with a western coastline overlooking the Persian Gulf and the vital Strait of Hormuz. Forty per cent of the world's oil passes through this strait<sup>3</sup>, which makes its control a very important asset for the Islamic Republic, in addition to the fact that Iran itself has the fourth largest crude oil reserves in the world and the second largest gas reserves<sup>4</sup>.

Saudi Arabia occupies most of the Arabian Peninsula and holds the world's largest oil reserves, second only to Venezuela. It is the cradle of Sunnism, and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located in its territory. In recent years it has been trying to increase its influence as head of the Arab League and OPEC.

This article aims to take a closer look at this rivalry, in particular at its development over the last decade. Both powers will be studied: whether this rivalry really exists and what are its characteristics, its origins, its effects and its possible evolution in the short medium term.

The first part of the article will explain the development of this rivalry since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, analysing the actions of both powers until this last decade, in order to understand the origins of their possible rivalry and how it has developed up to the

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1 GRUMET, Tali R. *New Middle East Cold War: Saudi Arabia and Iran's Rivalry*, Bachelor's thesis. University of Denver, 2015.

2 KAPLAN, Robert D. *La venganza de la geografía*, Barcelona: Diagonal, 2012

3 CORDESMAN, Anthony H. *Iran, Oil and the strait of Hormuz*, CSIS, 2007: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-oil-and-strait-hormuz>

4 Data from the "Oil and Gas Journal", 2017.

moment when our time frame of study begins. In addition, the theories of international relations relevant to this study will be explained, in particular their foundations: Mearsheimer's offensive realism and Walt's balance of threat.

The development of the article will consist of an analysis of both nations in different ways that will give us a picture of the possible sides of their confrontation. The characteristics of both nations will be key to understanding their relative power and their relations with each other and with the rest of the world.

On the other hand, it will be necessary to describe the most important dynamics that have been developing in the region and globally over the last decade and their impact on both powers.

Finally, in the concluding section we will try to identify possible scenarios for the short to medium term.

To guide the article, we will establish the following hypothesis: "The strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is strengthening, which will mean that one will gain regional hegemony over the other."

## History of a rivalry

The evolution of this area during the Cold War and the post-war years provides the keys to understanding regional dynamics and the position of international powers today.

That period was marked by the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. It served the US policy of containment and triggered conflicts in the region, which in the following decades have shaped the conflicting alliances around the two blocs of the world order. While the United States and Western European countries took a stand to protect Israel, the Arab countries, opposed to its existence, focused their policies on seeking Soviet backing. The Arab League pledged non-recognition of Israel and defence of the rights of the Palestinian people.

Other major milestones since World War II in the region have been the fall of the Shah of Persia and the Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf Wars and the Arab-Israeli conflict<sup>5</sup>.

The fall of the Shah and the theocratic Islamic revolution were the seeds of the rivalry between the two powers. Although it may be thought that the origin of their rivalry is centred on religious conflict, it does not seem to be the main factor that maintains the rivalry: "We do not deny that the Shia-Sunni struggle was, and indeed

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<sup>5</sup> ALGORA, María Dolores. "Las alianzas de Oriente Medio en el siglo XXI. Un laberinto geopolítico", in Castro Torres, Jose Ignacio (coord.), *Realineamientos estratégicos en Oriente Medio*, IIEE, 03/2019.

is, an additional factor, but not the only one: other elements, mainly of an economic and political nature, seem more decisive”<sup>6</sup>.

From that moment on, the current rivalry between the two powers began, as the possible spread of religious revolutions throughout the Islamic world was and still is a real threat to various dictatorial or monarchical countries, especially the absolute monarchies of the Persian Gulf, which also belong to the Sunni branch of Islam.

Tensions between these two heads of the Sunni and Shi’a branches of Islam continued to escalate over the following decades.

In the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf monarchies sided with the Iraqis, especially in economic matters on the side of Saudi Arabia, increasing tensions between the two powers<sup>7</sup>. In fact, Iraq came to count, if not with the support of the US, then with its approval, as stated by the US government at the time<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to this war with direct Iranian involvement, the two powers have clashed indirectly through their support for various supporters during the Lebanese Civil War and the Afghan Civil War. During the Lebanese Civil War, Iran’s support for Hezbollah was notorious, while Saudi Arabia, as part of the Arab League, supported the Lebanese government with a contingent of several tens of thousands of Arab soldiers, mostly Syrian. This contingent was called the “Arab Deterrence Force” and remained active in Lebanon until 1983<sup>9</sup>.

At the end of the Cold War, between 1989 and 1991, the bottom line was the triumph of Western influence<sup>10</sup>. The Gulf Wars and the consolidation of the state of Israel mark the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which, with the exception of Iran, Western influence is largely reinforced.

Since 11 September 2001, the situation has changed and alliances and friendships have become much more flexible. Public opinion in Arab League countries became suspicious of the West, with large demonstrations against the 2003 invasion of Iraq, although the dependence of the League’s governments on the US prevented Arab League condemnation.

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6 MORERA HERNÁNDEZ, Coral. “Los Primeros Momentos de la Revolución Islámica en el Discurso Periodístico Español”, *Revista Internacional de la Historia de la Comunicación*. 1979 No.2, pp. 97-125

7 CONVAL, Jose Ignacio. “La Guerra Irán-Irak (I) 40 años después”, *Descifrando la Guerra*, 2020: <https://www.descifrandolaguerra.es/la-guerra-iran-irak-i-40-anos-despues/>

8 <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/13/world/confrontation-gulf-us-aid-helped-hussein-s-climb-now-critics-say-bill-due.html> Accessed on 3 March 2020

9 SÁNCHEZ H, BARRIGÓN R., “El conflicto de Líbano”, *Conflictos Internacionales Contemporáneos*, Ministry of Defence, 2009.

10 Algora. Op. cit.

Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to be played out in the Afghan Civil War, where Saudi Arabia supported the Taliban in their struggle for power in the 1990s, while Iran maintained close ties with various Shia militias opposed to the Taliban regime.

Finally, the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the ensuing democratic momentum have led to a destabilisation of the region, in which the various discontents of the civilian masses are exploited by external actors to defend their interests. These revolts will serve as the beginning of our timeframe. Iran has been supporting certain revolts such as those in Bahrain between 2011 and 2012, where Saudi Arabia directly supported the government with troops<sup>11</sup>.

The main reason why Iran and Saudi Arabia had not been prominent as regional powers up to that point was mainly due to the existence of other powers such as Iraq, Egypt or Syria, which were strong regional powers with their spheres of influence and prevented the rise of others. The Gulf Wars and the Arab Springs eventually brought down the influence of these powers, leaving a power vacuum that Iran and Saudi Arabia have been able to exploit<sup>12</sup>.

As for the theories on which this article is based, in the field of geopolitics there are different theoretical frameworks that try to explain relations between countries. Since we are going to study a possible rivalry, the theoretical approach we will use as a basis will be realism. In it, the most widely held view of the international system among experts is that the international system is anarchic and driven by a selfish struggle for the survival of states. Realism understands that there are several spheres or images to study<sup>13</sup> which we could equate to three objects of study: leaders, state power itself, and the international sphere.

Kenneth N. Waltz's structural realism establishes a simplistic model in which only the third image (the international sphere) is studied, and which aims to establish a universal theory of international relations. However, "Waltz's systemic approach is unable to explain how changes in the international system occur"<sup>14</sup> as it does not address the internal factors that can explain countries' behaviour. Building on the importance of this image, neoclassical authors add the internal components of a country to study the foreign policy of a particular nation. The internal factors will come from Walt's balance of threat. It sets out the main characteristics that make one country perceive another as a threat: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive military capabilities and aggressive intentions.

11 <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/03/14/internacional/1300122963.html> Accessed on 10 September 2020.

12 KAPLAN. Op. cit.

13 WALTZ, Kenneth N., *El hombre, el Estado y la guerra*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1959.

14 JORDÁN, Javier, "Enfoques teóricos de los estudios estratégicos", in Jordán, Javier (Coord.), *Manual de Estudios Estratégicos y Seguridad Internacional*, Madrid: Plaza y Valdés, 2013, pp. 15-42

Having analysed the pre-existing relations between the two countries and the variables to be studied, it remains to establish the model that will allow us to study how they interact with each other, their allies and their regional sphere, and how this modifies their behaviour. In this context, we will establish Mearsheimer's offensive realism as a reference for the development of this rivalry. According to this theory, great powers always seek to increase their power in order to ensure their security, which will only come about when they become hegemonic<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, after establishing the variables that affect the rivalry, we will proceed to study them to see how the power of the two powers has evolved over the last decade. If these variables were to become stronger, according to Mearsheimer, this would lead to an intensification of rivalry until one of the powers had regional hegemony.

## Iran

For Iran, geography is one of its greatest assets. On the one hand, its position places it between the world's two most important hydrocarbon production areas, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Moreover, it is guaranteed the possibility of controlling passage through the Strait of Hormuz, which, as has already been mentioned, is one of the most important hydrocarbon passes on the planet and vital for supplying to countries such as China, India, South Korea and Japan<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, its topographical configuration coupled with its position gives it two fundamental advantages: a mountainous configuration that facilitates defence, and control of all land routes connecting the Middle East to Central Asia. The Zagros Mountains run through Iran from northwest to southeast along its western borders, so all passages between West and East in the area are under Iranian control<sup>17</sup>.

In terms of geographic disadvantages, it shares a land border with seven countries and a maritime border with all the countries of the Persian Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This implies the need for active diplomacy with many different countries, as well as the risk of having too many enemies around.

The Iranian political system came into being with the Islamic revolution of 1979, calling itself the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Supreme Leader, currently Ali Khamenei, is the head of the Iranian state. He is elected by an Assembly of Experts, a body composed of clerics. These experts are chosen by popular vote from a list of clerics filtered by the government. The Supreme Leader signs the election of the President of the Government, elected by the people, and can dismiss him if necessary.

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<sup>15</sup> MEARSHEIMER, John J., "The False Promise of International Institutions", *Revista de Seguridad Internacional*. 1994-1995, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 5-49.

<sup>16</sup> KEMP & HARVAKY, *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East*, map p. 113, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> KAPLAN. Op. cit.

It also elects six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, a body of Islamic legal experts who monitor initiatives that reach parliament and screen all candidates standing for election and can veto anyone.

The main characteristic of its political system is the mixture of Islamic theocracy with elements of popular representation, where the religious plays a central role. This implies that the cleric-dominated Guardian Council and Assembly of Experts have real power and control over the legislative and executive branches. It is also worth noting the tensions that arise when the head of government is moderate or reformist, as Supreme Leaders have so far been eminently religious and conservative. Having part of the executive power and the approval of the Assembly of Experts, as well as the possibility of dismissing the head of the executive, the Supreme Leader is the head of the Iranian state and enjoys wide-ranging powers.

In terms of its economy, the most significant factor due to its heavy dependence on hydrocarbon exports is the economic sanctions imposed by the US in retaliation for Iran's nuclear programme. These sanctions prevent third countries from buying Iranian oil, notably affecting China and other Southeast Asian countries, which depend on energy imports for their economies.

On the other hand, regarding control of the Strait of Hormuz, it is complicated for the US to close it to try to stifle Iran, since the passage of hydrocarbons also depends to a large extent on the economy of Japan and South Korea, US allies. This, coupled with China's "New Silk Road" initiative, leads one to believe that China-Iran relations are likely to flow, since the Persians are necessary for the present (the purchase of hydrocarbons) and for the future (the Silk Road will pass through Iran, and its maritime variant needs Iranian ports) of the Chinese economy. It might even be possible to try to buy Iranian oil through third parties or other mechanisms to avoid sanctions<sup>18</sup>.

Iranian society is one of the most important in the Middle East. Iran had a population of 81 million in 2016, the largest in the Middle East and almost three times larger than Saudi Arabia's<sup>19</sup>. The percentage of young people is the same as in Saudi Arabia. However, the Iranian population does seem more prone to social protests in the streets. This was the case in 2019, when the government presented its measures to increase the price of oil<sup>20</sup>, which was covered by a multitude of international media; the repression, which resulted in up to 1,000 deaths, was criticised by the US and others<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio, "El dilema iraní, entre la proyección exterior y el control interno", in Castro Torres, Jose Ignacio (coord.), *Realineamientos estratégicos en Oriente Medio, IEEE*, 03/2019.

<sup>19</sup> KAPLAN. Op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.breakingisraelnews.com/140061/mass-protests-erupt-throughout-iran-burn-down-central-bank/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/world/middleeast/iran-protests-internet.html>

Iran's military is commensurate with the size of its population, with more than half a million active fighters. Its traditional tendency to intervene in the region, as well as its combat experience, make its army one of the most powerful in the Middle East. It is worth noting that Iran is a considerable technological powerhouse, with a level of university students reaching half a million graduates per year, especially in scientific fields<sup>22</sup>. This implies that Iran has the potential to develop its own weapons programmes such as the Zulfiqar tank. Moreover, as one of the most populous countries in the region, it has one of the largest armies in the region. Finally, although they are not part of the Iranian army itself, we should not fail to mention the various Iranian-sponsored militias. Hizbollah and the Houthi rebels have proven capable of taking on much more powerful armies (Israel and Saudi Arabia), achieving very good results with very limited numbers, antiquated weaponry and the use of guerrilla warfare. These organisations greatly enhance Iran's power projection.

Another of the most important and dangerous military capabilities is nuclear. The power that is closer to developing nuclear weapons of the two is Iran. Iran's nuclear programme has been a source of tension for years. Iran has, until now, always maintained that its nuclear research was for civilian purposes, but since the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the reintroduction of sanctions, it has threatened to develop the military nuclear side. Iran is currently capable of enriching uranium to 20 per cent (used in nuclear reactors that power ships), far short of the 90 per cent needed for an atomic bomb.

To get an idea, the Iranian stockpile before the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) treaty with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany) could have armed up to eight nuclear weapons<sup>23</sup>. Iran used its uranium to fuel Tehran's nuclear reactor and diluted some of it; however, after the US pulled out of the deal and the death of General Soleimani<sup>24</sup>, Iran has already declared that it will not comply with the terms of the agreement and has stated that it already enriches uranium to 20 per cent.

Despite the possibility of developing nuclear weapons, it is necessary to be aware that Iran's nuclear power plants are under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency so that their use for the development of nuclear weapons can be ruled out. If Iran wanted to develop them, it would have to do so in secret facilities, increasing the time needed to do so<sup>25</sup>. It is worth noting that one of Iran's main rivals, Israel, possesses nuclear weapons, although this fact is not

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22 <https://es.irancultura.it/Ir%C3%A9n/ciencia/>

23 KERR, Paul K. *Iran's Nuclear Program: Status*, RL 34544-Version 56, Congressional Research Service Report, Washington DC: Library of Congress, 20 December 2019.

24 <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20200105/472722183251/iran-pacto-nuclear-eeuu-soleimani.html>

25 Congressional Research Service. Op. cit.

confirmed by the Israeli government. Israeli nuclear capability is one of Iran's arguments for developing its nuclear programme. The EU did not welcome a return to the pre-JCPOA state, because of the threat of nuclear weapons development and because of the private European investment that had come to Iran with the lifting of sanctions<sup>26</sup>.

## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia occupies most of the Arabian Peninsula. A large percentage of its territory is occupied by desert, so a higher proportion of the population is concentrated in its cities. Its land borders on the Arabian Peninsula are totally permeable and not clearly defined,<sup>27</sup> especially with the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen. It is worth noting that on its western border it shares a coastline with Egypt, dominating the Red Sea between the two powers, while on its eastern coast it disputes sovereignty over the Persian Gulf, without having territories that serve as a basis for physical control of the Strait of Hormuz, which on its Arabian coast is controlled by the UAE and Oman. The main feature of its geography is its position, which provides it with large oil reserves.

The Saudi political system, like most Persian Gulf countries, is an absolute monarchy, currently headed by Salman bin Abdulaziz, although the country's main strongman, who has effectively ruled since his appointment as heir apparent, is Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The monarchy unites all powers, being the Guardian of the Holy Places. The Qur'an and Sunna form the national constitution.

On the economic side. Saudi Arabia has one of the largest oil reserves in the world, second only to Venezuela, according to the CIA's survey of oil reserves by country. It has a leading role within OPEC, and the oil sector accounts for 75% of its revenues<sup>28</sup>. In terms of future prospects, the Saudi heir's plan for the coming years, called "Saudi Vision 2030", is worth highlighting. This plan aims to diversify the Saudi economy, moderate the religious fundamentalist view of society, and increase foreign investment. It could be interpreted as an attempt to modernise and open up Saudi Arabia to the world. As a criticism of this project, some experts argue that the goals may be too ambitious and that the whole plan depends on the crown prince, his leadership and his political actions<sup>29</sup>.

26 <https://www.malaymail.com/news/world/2019/11/05/eu-concerned-by-iran-nuclear-enrichment-announcement/1807225>

27 SCHOFIELD, Ryan. *Arabian Boundary Disputes*, University of Cambridge, 1992.

28 CIA, *The World Factbook 2020*, Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020.

29 KINNINMONT, Jane. "Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract, Austerity and Transformation", *Chatham House*, 19 July 2017: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-07-20-vision-2030-saudi-kinninmont.pdf>

Another variable to take into account is the influence of society on state decisions. Saudi Arabia has a young, predominantly urban and modern population located in the heart of the Hijaz (the area where Medina and Mecca are located), as opposed to a Wahhabist population living in the deserts of Nejd.

The young population suffers from unemployment of close to 25 per cent in the latest data from 2016<sup>30</sup>, in a country where most of the indigenous workers are paid by the government and depend on oil for their salaries. The fluctuations in the price of oil and the resulting crisis mean that the 2030 vision aims to reduce dependence on oil and increase the private sector, which is currently dominated by foreigners<sup>31</sup>. In addition, it includes a series of social opening measures, strengthening women's rights in an attempt to alleviate the discontent of Saudi youth. Foreign employees have started to leave the country, but the problem of youth unemployment is persistent<sup>32</sup>. However, there is no evidence of mobilisation or major social unrest, and when there was in the midst of the Arab Spring in 2011, it was easily controlled by the royal family. It should be noted that, according to IndexMundi data, 40% of the Saudi population is under the age of 25, so it is plausible that discontent will spread in the coming years<sup>33</sup>.

The Saudi military is much smaller than Iran's and is undergoing accelerated modernisation and arms purchases. The Saudi monarchy is currently by far the world's largest arms importer, with the highest defence spending in the region. Unlike Iran, Saudi Arabia has never historically had a military tradition or experience in conventional warfare or direct intervention until the Yemen war, which explains the Saudi military's failure to intervene in Yemen, where, with far more advanced and substantial means<sup>34</sup>, it has so far been unable to suppress the uprisings or achieve decisive successes. Lack of experience against an enemy like the Houthis is proving to be a key factor in the final outcome<sup>35</sup>.

On the nuclear front, it has always perceived Iran's nuclear programme as a threat to its existence. The Obama administration's rapprochement with Iran was frowned upon by the Saudi monarchy. This changed with the arrival of Donald Trump as US president and the return of Iran's nuclear programme, in response to which the Saudis

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30 <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/paro-epa/arabia-saudita?dr=2015-12>

31 <https://www.icex.es/icex/es/navegacion-principal/todos-nuestros-servicios/informacion-de-mercados/paises/navegacion-principal/noticias/NEW2017714563.html?idPais=SA>

32 AL OMRAN, Ahmed, "Record numbers of foreign workers leave Saudi Arabia", *Financial Times*, 10 July 2018.

33 CIA. Op. Cit.

34 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-03-25/los-huthi-siguen-avanzando-en-yemen-tras-cinco-anos-de-intervencion-saudi.html> Accessed in June 2020.

35 CUENCA, Arsenio, "The Houthi insurgency in the Yemen war", *The World Order*, 2018: <https://elordenmundial.com/la-insurgencia-huti-en-la-guerra-de-yemen/>

have threatened to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran gets them<sup>36</sup>. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's own nuclear capabilities are not advanced, although its close relations with Pakistan as well as its recent rapprochement with Israel seem likely to bear fruit in this regard.

### Rivalry in the last decade

Given the characteristics of the two powers, it is necessary to discern how they have been relating to each other over the last decade. As discussed above, their rivalry predates the temporal context of this article, so a study of each country's actions against the other over the last decade will serve to try to identify a trend.

The main confrontational actions between the two powers have been concentrated on three fronts: religion, oil prices and peripheral conflicts. These three fronts are part of their strategies in the struggle for regional hegemony.

Saudis and Iranians have been at loggerheads over religion since religion became a fundamental part of the Republic of Iran in 1979. As an example, in 2016, Saudi Arabia executed a Shia cleric who was an opponent of the Saudi royal family and a leading Shia figure in the Arabian Peninsula, leading to an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and eventually the severance of diplomatic relations. Without ignoring the importance of religion, some authors argue that it is merely an eminently practical excuse for attacking the ruling power<sup>37</sup>. This defence of the faith by each of the powers gives them arguments for international intervention in places such as Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. In the specific case of Yemen, Saudi Arabia supports the government, while Iran defends the Houthi rebels as Shiites who are oppressed by the Sunni majority because of their religion. In the case of Lebanon, the confrontation is political, with Iran siding with Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia supporting certain politicians who are sympathetic to its interests.

On hydrocarbons, Iran tends to be more concerned with the short term than the long term, unlike the Saudis. This is due to two main reasons: the reserves of each of them and their productive capacity<sup>38</sup>. Saudi Arabia has larger reserves and a lower cost of production, as well as greater weight in OPEC, which is why in recent years it has tended to lower its prices in an attempt to force the US not to continue developing *fracking*, which in its beginnings had a much higher production cost than traditional extraction. This drop in prices, coupled with international sanctions on Iran, is a

36 NOUR, Ismael. "El peligro de una carrera nuclear en Oriente Próximo", *El Orden Mundial*, 2019: <https://elordenmundial.com/peligro-de-una-carrera-nuclear-en-oriente-proximo/>

37 WEHREY, W. KARASIK, NADER, GHEZ, HANSELL, A. GUFFEY, *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam*, Rand Corporation, 2009.

38 Ibid.

major setback for the Iranian economy, which has reduced its production and caused countries such as China to reduce their imports of Iranian hydrocarbons<sup>39</sup>. In the hydrocarbon economy, Saudi Arabia appears to be stronger vis-à-vis Iran due to economic sanctions.

The last front to be studied would be the peripheral conflicts that both powers use to increase their relative power or diminish that of their opponent. In this particular case, we will study the cases of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Bashar al-Assad has traditionally been an Iranian ally, the Alawite religion of the Syrian ruling class being an offshoot of Shiism. From the very beginning of the Syrian civil war, Iran and especially Hezbollah have supported the Syrian government. Thanks to its combat experience, Hizbollah has developed into a well-trained armed group with international projection. Iranian support, however, did not prevent the grave danger to the Syrian regime in the summer of 2015. Russia's timely and decisive intervention made it the undisputed arbiter of the situation<sup>40</sup>.

For Saudi Arabia, the overthrow of the Assad family could mean the birth of an allied state, since the Sunni religion is the religion of 80 per cent of the Syrian population. The Saudi-led Arab League funded and supported Syrian rebels against the Iranian ally. Moreover, there are indications, though no certainty, that Arab League member countries and even Turkey have been able to fund ISIS to continue fighting the Syrian government<sup>41</sup>.

Iraq is the opposite example, the ruling class has traditionally been Sunni while the vast majority of the population is Shia. After the overthrow of Saddam, who was a member of the Arab League and an ally of the Saudis, Iraq became a zone of influence for Iran. With the rise of the Islamic State, tensions increased, with Iraqi President Al-Maliki accusing Gulf states of funding and morally supporting ISIS, although these accusations were rejected by the US and lack evidence.

Following the collapse of the Iraqi army in the wake of the ISIS offensive, Iranian-backed militias contributed to the anti-terrorist war and still have a significant presence in the country. Iranian influence has been felt in recent years, with American troops even leaving the country due to numerous protests by the Iraqi government and its population after the death of General Soleimani, an important figure in the Iranian army, in an American attack on Iraqi soil. However, since 2018, Iraq has seen a different type of anti-Iranian protest, with mass demonstrations against government

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39 MORENO, Carmen. "China en Oriente Medio. La competición por la hegemonía global", in Castro Torres, Jose Ignacio (coord.), *Realineamientos estratégicos en Oriente Medio*, IEEEE, 03/2019.

40 MARTÍNEZ SÁNCHEZ, Eva. "Realineamientos Estratégicos en Oriente Medio", in Castro Torres, Jose Ignacio (coord.), *Realineamientos estratégicos en Oriente Medio*, IEEEE, 03/2019.

41 [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151202\\_rusia\\_putin\\_turquia\\_petroleo\\_ei\\_ep](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/12/151202_rusia_putin_turquia_petroleo_ei_ep)

corruption and Iran's influence over the government, with pro-Iranian militias firing on protesters<sup>42</sup>.

Yemen is a clear case of Sunni-Shia tensions. The country has been embroiled in a civil war since 2015, in which the government, largely supported by the US until the change of administration in 2021, and the Sunnis of the Arab League<sup>43</sup>, are facing the Shiite Houthi rebels, with numerous media outlets reporting Iranian support<sup>44</sup>. This conflict is escalating and stalling, with the League forces and the Yemeni government failing to achieve any results. On the contrary, the rebels, less well-equipped and using guerrilla tactics, have claimed responsibility for the attack on Saudi Arabia's largest refinery<sup>45</sup> even though there was no proof of it according to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo<sup>46</sup>. The Saudis blame Iran for the logistical support needed for this attack<sup>47</sup>, the first on this scale, as Saudi Arabia had to halve its crude oil production because of the damage<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, the UAE has disassociated itself from the coalition supporting the Yemeni government, dealing another blow to Saudi foreign policy.

As a result of this drone and cruise missile attack, world oil production fell and there was a sharp loss of confidence, exposing the Saudi monarchy, which, as the leading arms importing power today, is not capable of resolving a conflict that it entered thinking of a quick victory. Moreover, with Crown Prince Bin Salman being the main supporter of the intervention, his image has been badly shaken, with changes of heir being not uncommon in the Saudi royal family<sup>49</sup>. However, this incursion into the Yemeni conflict may respond to a real Saudi fear of a Yemen with a population equal to their own (around 30 million) but with a much higher population density, an easily defensible mountainous terrain riddled with oases, and an estimated number of weapons of almost 80 million, three per Yemeni inhabitant<sup>50</sup>.

Continuing with Lebanon, we find the world's leading Shia militia and one of the main instruments of Iranian influence in the Middle East: Hezbollah. The or-

42 DAVISON, ABOULENEIN, "Threats, arrests, targeted killings silence Iraqi dissidents", *Reuters*, 2019.

43 <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/03/30/55183072ca474188068b457d.html>

44 [https://web.archive.org/web/20070616045131/http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/uploads/tf\\_004\\_002.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20070616045131/http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/uploads/tf_004_002.pdf)

45 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-49709721>

46 *Ibidem*.

47 [https://www.clarin.com/mundo/arabia-saudita-presento-evidencia-asegura-ataque-drones-petroleras-provino-iran\\_o\\_3cx1HGJh.html](https://www.clarin.com/mundo/arabia-saudita-presento-evidencia-asegura-ataque-drones-petroleras-provino-iran_o_3cx1HGJh.html)

48 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-49690725>

49 PALOMINO, Carlos. "La guerra de Yemen, ¿el Vietnam de Arabia Saudí?", *El Orden Mundial*, 2019: <https://elordenmundial.com/yemen-el-vietnam-de-arabia-saudi/>

50 KAPLAN. *Op. cit.*

organisation was created to fight against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and has always benefited from substantial financial and logistical support from Tehran. The difference between Hizbollah and other militias is its international outreach to other neighbouring countries, a fairly successful military record against Israel, and the ability to maintain a parallel state and services to the population that allow it to have its own 'public' safe haven in southern Lebanon. Moreover, the political branch of this organisation is active in Lebanese political life, allowing the influence of Shiism, and thus of Iran, to expand. As for Saudi practices, Lebanon's constitution stipulates that the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, so until the resignation of Prime Minister Hariri, who was accused of being a puppet of Saudi Arabia, the Saudis have been as supportive as possible of any attempt by Lebanese prime ministers that favoured them.

Finally, the Arab-Israeli conflict is a crossroads of strange alliances, demonstrating that the rivalry is not driven by fanatical religious hatred but by the interests of both powers. The clearest indicator is Iran's support for Hamas. The Iranians support the Hamas organisation despite the fact that it is a Sunni movement and a supporter of opposition groups in Syria that run counter to Iran's interests. The reason for this is that this group operates inside Israel with significant involvement inside the Palestinian territories, mainly in the Gaza Strip, an example of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend"<sup>51</sup>. On the other hand, the Saudi monarchy provides diplomatic support for the peace talks, but always on the side of the Palestinians, as can be seen from the Arab League's statements on the US government's MESA initiative<sup>52</sup>. With Saudi Arabia seeking American support and Israel being an important ally for the US, there is a certain moderation and even tolerance towards Israel, leaving a power vacuum in the more radical realm, which Qatar is trying to exploit in its support for the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>53</sup>.

As a conclusion to the external actions carried out by both powers, we can highlight certain aspects. Their rivalry transcends the religious to become a struggle for influence: religion internally has great influence on society and government, but does not prohibit external action in support of opposing religious groups. Their confrontation is also economic, since the hydrocarbon customers that one loses may be gained by the other.

Saudi Arabia has lost influence due to the failure of direct action, while in diplomatic channels it maintains a non-radical attitude towards Israel, seeking rapprochement with the US. Iran is willing to remain in a precarious economic situation in order to maintain its external influence, even threatening to move forward with a military nuclear programme, something the Iranian government has so far denied.

51 CASTRO TORRES. *Op. cit.*

52 <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2020/02/01/5e35c31221efa01coa8b4635.html>

53 SHAHTAHMASEBI, Darius. "New Turkey-Iran-Qatar axis is rising in Middle East, and it has Saudi Arabia furious", *Russia Today*, 22 March 2019.

Despite the Yemeni quagmire, Saudi Arabia appears to be gaining strength under the US umbrella.

We could say that, while Saudi Arabia tries to lead a US-allied Arab League, Iran would be its counterweight, supported by China and Russia, though not directly.

### **Influence of Other Powers**

Given the actions that both countries have been taking against each other over the last decade, it is necessary to look at the effects of this confrontation in the international sphere and how the international sphere influences it.

As realism tells us, a country's power and international actions do not depend only on its mere capabilities, but the international sphere and the actions of other countries will be the basis and limits on which a country can act. The actions of other countries, international organisations and non-governmental organisations will be the main co-determinants of any state's external action.

### ***Israel***

With Iraq weakened, Israel's foreign policy efforts have been geared towards countering Iranian influence, especially in its immediate neighbourhood. Iran and Israel see each other as enemies. The Israeli idea is primarily to limit the actions of guerrillas such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria and to prevent the development of Hezbollah's precision-guided missiles. Iran also continues to support Hamas against Israel<sup>54</sup>.

Both the Arab League countries, especially Saudi Arabia, and Israel see Iran as their greatest international threat, and an alliance between the two can be highly advantageous. Already in 2002, the Arab League offered Israel its recognition if it would recognise the Palestinian state<sup>55</sup>. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia positioned themselves against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) treaty to curtail Iran's nuclear programme, the main triumph in their relationship being<sup>56</sup>. This climate has produced a series of diplomatic overtures, most notably statements by the Saudi crown prince recognising Israel's right to statehood<sup>57</sup>. This relationship could lead to criticism of the Saudi regime from the Muslim community, but other countries, such as Jordan and Egypt, express that their relations with Israel are good. The rapprochement will be

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54 MARTÍNEZ SÁNCHEZ. Op. cit.

55 <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5268406>

56 <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2018/05/10/5af34a4646163f80548b458d.html>

57 <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/>

necessary for Saudi Arabia to reach its 2030 goals, due to the growing need to allocate resources to this plan. The resolution of the Arab-Palestinian conflict would be a boon to Saudi foreign policy and would save Saudi coffers<sup>58</sup>.

### *Turkey*

The Middle East is witnessing a rise of regional powers seeking to increase their influence in the region. Turkey is one of them. In Syria, it supported the rebels against the Syrian government from the outset, antagonising Iran. As part of this rise to power, Turkey is fearful of a Kurdish self-rule being established on its border and has sent troops into Syria to try to increase its border security zone, coming into direct conflict with Syrian government troops<sup>59</sup>.

Since the Qatari diplomatic crisis and the Khashoggi murder, relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia have been strained. Turkey supported Qatar in its dispute with the Saudis as well as supporting warring parties in places like Egypt and Sudan<sup>60</sup>.

### *Egypt*

The Egyptian government of Al Sisi, as a rival to the Muslim Brotherhood, is being supported by Saudi Arabia. The Muslim Brotherhood is a radical Sunni organisation, born in Egypt, which opposes the absolutist monarchies of the Persian Gulf, as it advocates the establishment of caliphates in Arab countries and the expulsion of non-Muslims from these countries. This radical organisation clashes with the Saudi image of moderate Islam<sup>61</sup>, which is why the Saudis supported the Egyptian military's Al Sisi to carry out the coup d'état that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt.

Iran, on the other hand, supports the Muslim Brotherhood for three main reasons: first, because the organisation erodes Saudi Arabia's influence, which benefits Iran; second, because of Qatar's explicit support for the organisation; and finally, because Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the organisation. Any actor that hinders the in-

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58 LLOVO, Jacobo. "Israel y Arabia Saudí, una alianza por asumir en Oriente Próximo", *El Orden Mundial*, 2018: <https://elordenmundial.com/alianza-israel-arabia-saudi-oriente-proximo/>

59 <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-says-syrian-government-forces-attacked-its-observation-point-144148>

60 <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-erdogan-rey-arabia-saudi-abordan-lazos-bilaterales-acontecimientos-regionales-20190731230935.html>

61 <https://es.aleteia.org/2018/04/10/arabia-saudita-intenta-limitar-la-influencia-de-los-hermanos-musulmanes/>

terests of the Saudi monarchy is being supported by Iran, regardless of its religious or political status.

## *Qatar*

As Saudi Arabia embarked on the path of moderate Islam, a vacuum was created in the head of radical Sunnism. This gap is beginning to be filled by Qatar, which is trying to assert its leadership over Saudi Arabia. Tensions have been growing until countries allied with the Saudis<sup>62</sup> and the Saudis themselves have cut relations with Qatar. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the leading television network in the Islamic world, Al Jazeera, is Qatari and gave explicit media support to the Arab uprisings that sought to end the authoritarian regimes they were suffering. These revolts were seen by the absolutist Gulf monarchies as a serious threat<sup>63</sup>. Qatar is accused of funding terrorism, including that of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda.

Iran's good relations with Qatar are the best example of pragmatism in international relations. While in Syria groups backed by the Qatari monarchy are fighting the Iranian-backed Syrian government, in Yemen both countries support the Houthis. Thus, we can infer that, depending on the theatre of operations, allies and enemies are flexible.

As we can see, the Middle East is a convulsive region where allies and enemies are shifting and where a multitude of regional actors are trying to assert their influence and achieve different objectives. However, this analysis would be incomplete without looking at the influence of the major global players in the region, whose power and influence are capable of changing the state of relations between countries.

## *Global players*

Within geopolitics, the states that will most influence international relations will be the great powers, which, because of their capacity, will have the greatest effect on any region of the world.

Mearsheimer defines a great power as a state with sufficient military might to engage in open warfare with the world's most powerful power and to weaken it seriously, even if they are ultimately defeated<sup>64</sup>.

62 [https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/Arabia-Saudi-Egipto-relaciones-Qatar\\_o\\_651284908.html](https://www.eldiario.es/internacional/Arabia-Saudi-Egipto-relaciones-Qatar_o_651284908.html)

63 [https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-arabia-saudi-y-otros-paises-arabes-rompen-relaciones-diplomaticas-catar-201706051331\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-arabia-saudi-y-otros-paises-arabes-rompen-relaciones-diplomaticas-catar-201706051331_noticia.html)

64 MEARSHEIMER, John J., *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. 2003, p.5.

### *United States*

Today, although no longer at its peak and without absolute hegemony, the United States remains the world's leading power and is able to influence every continent.

The United States has followed two different paths in the Middle East over the past decade, coinciding with the two different administrations that have governed them. Obama's outreach to Tehran caused misgivings in Saudi Arabia and Israel. Together with Germany, it signed the Security Council pact, which lifted sanctions on Iran in exchange for limitations on its nuclear programme, and which also began a withdrawal of troops from the different conflicts, while maintaining its capacity for influence. The JCPOA, signed by the five permanent members of the Security Council, Germany and the European Union, set limits on Iran's nuclear activity in exchange for a general lifting of the economic sanctions that were suffocating Iran. The treaty was signed in April 2015, and remained in force until the US unilaterally withdrew and reinstated sanctions on Iran and anyone sourcing hydrocarbons from the Iranian market, with few exceptions. Iran has since failed to live up to its side of the agreement, which severely limited its nuclear capabilities and allowed the International Atomic Energy Organisation access to Iranian plants and laboratories for inspections and to ensure their peaceful use.

The Trump administration has thus again moved closer to Saudi Arabia and Israel. There have been ongoing clashes between the US and Iran in Iraq, with missile launches following the death of General Soleimani and the establishment of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organisation by the US.

As a summary of US policy in this regard, we can state that it is today a stable ally of Saudi Arabia and a declared enemy of Iran. The newly inaugurated Biden administration has so far made no major moves towards a return to the treaty and relations with Iran remain tense. On the other side, the US has made statements against Saudi Arabia, retracting its support in Yemen and linking Khasoggi's death to Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman<sup>65</sup>. In this way, the US appears to be entering a period of greater equidistance between the two powers rather than the previous administration's staunch support for the Saudi monarchy.

### *China*

The People's Republic of China has two potential interests in the Middle East: the purchase of hydrocarbons to satisfy its domestic demand and the "New Silk Road" project, officially called the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI).

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<sup>65</sup> <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-02-25/la-administracion-biden-cambia-el-rumbo-en-la-relacion-con-arabia-saudi.html>, accessed on 28 February 2021

In the Middle East, China appears to be pursuing a strategy of being a purely economic actor.

Establishing the BRI is essential for China to further develop its trade by avoiding the Strait of Malacca, a route that, while it has so far had no problem using, is nonetheless a vulnerability for possible future scenarios. The BRI has three main axes: a rail axis, based on the Trans-Siberian; a maritime axis, which passes through the Gulf of Oman and very close to the Strait of Hormuz (so it needs stability in the area and the possibility of trade with Iran and the use of its ports); and a land axis, which passes through Iran. This initiative, coupled with the need to import hydrocarbons and sanctions on Iran, means that China cannot side with either power: it needs Saudi Arabia to continue to sell it hydrocarbons, but to complete the BRI, it needs a stable Iran. Economic interdependence is growing, with Chinese investments in Iran and Qatar and Saudi investments in China<sup>66</sup>.

At the global level, this Chinese initiative could be a real boost to the world's geopolitical balance. In its initial stretch from China westwards, China needs to gain full control over the China Sea, which will involve increasing tensions with Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan and other countries in the area with which it has territorial disputes and increasing its control over the rest of the Pacific Ocean to increase its influence and commercial capabilities in South America. To this end, China has spent years reinforcing and modernising its navy at great speed, with two aircraft carriers already in service, another that may be launched in 2021 and plans for another seven, although it is still far from the eleven that the United States has in service.

In the next stage, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is the Chinese government's tool for creating these land and sea routes, which will also greatly benefit the countries through which they pass. The main land route from eastern China passes through Iran and the main sea route through the Suez Canal, so China is obliged to reach out to both Saudi Arabia and Iran, which it is doing through heavy economic investment.

The ultimate goal of the BRI is to economically unite the known world with the exception of North America, becoming an alternative to the current world economic system based on the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and free competition.

### *Russia*

Just as China wants to be an economic actor, Russia is trying to become a diplomatic actor. Russia's strategy over the last decade has attempted to regain global clout as a counterweight to the US under President Vladimir Putin. Russia's intervention in Syria has had this effect. Countries such as Israel, which were initially 'on the side-

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66 MARTÍNEZ SÁNCHEZ. *Op. cit.*

lines', found themselves in need of dialogue with the Russians<sup>67</sup>, while other actors, such as Iran, were already traditional allies. In the specific case of the Syrian war, it has managed to mediate between all the actors, reaching agreements with countries such as Israel, Jordan, the US, Iran and Turkey, while continuing to defend the Assad government<sup>68</sup>. It is precisely in Syria that Russian influence has been strengthened the most, but other projects, such as the construction of nuclear power plants in Iran, should not be underestimated.

However, Russian relations with Saudi Arabia have never been good, especially over oil. Saudi Arabia has always controlled OPEC, while Russia used Venezuela to exert its influence. During 2020, the two fought an oil war after Saudi Arabia lowered the price of a barrel to 8 dollars, causing countries like Russia, with a higher extraction cost and lower production, to not get enough revenue from the sale of hydrocarbons<sup>69</sup>. During the coronavirus pandemic and the downturn in hydrocarbon demand, Russia and Saudi Arabia have worked closely together in the OPEC+ framework to reduce production in order to increase the oil price and stabilise the market.

In short, Russia does not seem likely to opt for either power, although it clearly has much better relations with Iran than with Saudi Arabia.

### *European Union*

The last actor with some global influence could be the European Union. If there is one thing the EU lacks, it is a common foreign policy. Each European country looks after its own interests abroad. However, the Union's heavyweights do agree on their misgivings about Donald Trump and current US foreign policy. Trump began his presidency by calling on European NATO allies to increase their defence spending, withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal spoiling European business that had been initiated in the Persian country after the lifting of sanctions by Obama and, finally, set tariffs on the European market<sup>70</sup>.

European countries have always been pragmatic when it comes to diplomacy and have sold arms to Saudi Arabia without qualms, while increasing their trade dealings with Iran when sanctions were lifted. In other words, no EU country is currently developing a clear influence in this rivalry.

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67 <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/09/21/55febd20ca474177558b4585.html>

68 CONDE, Álvaro, "Siria, un campo de batalla entre Israel e Irán", *El Orden Mundial*, 2018: <https://elordenmundial.com/siria-un-campo-de-batalla-entre-israel-e-iran/>

69 <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/08/813439501/saudi-arabia-stuns-world-with-massive-discount-in-oil-sold-to-asia-europe-and-u-?t=1592921453585>

70 ARANCÓN, Fernando, "Estados Unidos abre en Europa un nuevo frente en la guerra comercial", *El Orden Mundial*, 2019: <https://elordenmundial.com/estados-unidos-abre-en-europa-un-nuevo-frente-en-la-guerra-comercial/>

## Conclusions

Iran and Saudi Arabia have had an ongoing rivalry since the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This revolution was seen by the Persian Gulf monarchies and the Sunni Muslim world as a threat to their interests and existence. We can determine that this was the origin of the rivalry, since, from the very beginning, the Iranian regime directly exhorted the rest of the world's Muslims to get rid of their Islamic monarchies. Since then, the confrontation between the two powers has been taking place in different spheres and scenarios from which we can subtract that Saudi Arabia has the lead in terms of economy, energy and international support, while Iran has a much more numerous and prepared armed forces and human capital with greater potential than Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Iran has already managed to project its influence into countries such as Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq and has a geography that is highly conducive to defence and increasing its influence.

We have identified throughout this article the different fronts on which the rivalry between the two powers is developing and we can conclude that this confrontation is not based on a local dispute, but transcends borders and falls within the game of economic warfare and indirect confrontations that are consistent with confrontations with global influence. This rivalry is heavily influenced and in practice "guided" by the international sphere, both by other regional actors and global actors, especially the United States.

The Saudi monarchy has a major advantage in this regard: strong US support and Israel's support of convenience, which are vital to the development of this rivalry. While Iran counts these two powers as enemies and an understanding with the current American or any Israeli government seems unlikely in the short term, Iran does not have the strong support of any global power. China is committed to a non-interventionist foreign policy based on economic interdependence in order to win allies, while Russia is committed to maintaining a strong diplomatic posture, trying to act as an intermediary in the different conflicts in order to strengthen its position, but taking calculated risks, as it knows it is not in a position to confront the US. Although Russia and Iran have agreed to support the Syrian regime, Russia has a more moderate stance, making concessions, for example, to Israel and not intervening to try to ease economic sanctions, which China may be able to circumvent through indirect means, but which it is not fighting against diplomatically either.

The other regional powers are either allied with one power or the other or have internal tensions that Iran and Saudi Arabia exploit for their own interests. In practice, all the scenarios and countries in the region are under Persian and Saudi influence, as is the case in Qatar, Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, etc., which shows that both are bidding to be a stronger power vis-à-vis the other. As the two are currently the strongest countries in the region, their rivalry is nothing more than a struggle for regional hegemony. As it advocates offensive realism, they will only believe that their situation is secure and favourable when they are the hegemon and no one disputes that position.

The future of this rivalry will depend more on the international sphere than on the powers' own actions. The enormous influence that the US and economic sanctions have in the Iranian-Saudi confrontation has been observed, while Russia and China do not have that level of influence.

At present, it appears that Saudi Arabia could take over regional hegemony if a number of conditions are met, such as the Biden administration maintaining a similar stance on Iran; Russia, China or the EU not making strong and real diplomatic efforts to end sanctions; the completion of its military upgrade as a tool to increase its influence; Russia not taking control of OPEC altogether; and the end and non-extension of the Yemeni conflict. This last condition is important as Yemen shares a large and diffuse desert border with Saudi Arabia and has a population equal to Saudi Arabia's, a large percentage of it Shi'a, and a large number of weapons.

On the other hand, for Iran to establish itself as a hegemon in the short term, a lifting of sanctions would be necessary for its economy to flourish, avoiding the risk of social unrest or tensions. To achieve this uprising requires the intervention of a strong global actor, such as China or Russia; while they may consider Iran their ally, China has already diversified its hydrocarbon imports, and Russia has no interest in ceasing to be a reliable and credible mediator for all parties. Iran already possesses all other potential capabilities (demographic and military power), but it seems unlikely that China or Russia will take such a step in the short term unless there is a new US president inclined to negotiate.

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