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From Arab Spring to regional reset: Saudi-Iranian rivalry and strategic contestation in the Gulf (2011–2023)

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This paper analyzes the Saudi-Iranian rivalry between 2011 and 2023 and its implications for Gulf regional security. It shows that the rivalry operates simultaneously at state, sub-state, and symbolic levels, reinforced through proxy conflicts, sectarian mobilization, and competing identity narratives. While the 2023 diplomatic breakthrough suggested progress, the findings confirm that the structural and ideological foundations of the rivalry remain unresolved. Positioned within a descriptive-analytical, interpretive framework, the research applies process tracing to examine key geopolitical events, including the Arab Spring, the Yemen war, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, and the 2023 China-mediated normalization. These events are viewed as part of a continuous geopolitical process shaped by power structures, domestic politics, and identity-driven strategies. The study integrates neorealism, offensive realism, and constructivism to provide a multi-dimensional explanation of the rivalry. While neorealism and offensive realism explain material interests and strategic behavior, constructivism highlights the role of identity, ideology, and sectarian narratives. A hybrid neorealist framework is proposed to incorporate non-state actors and symbolic tools of influence, reconciled methodologically through layered process tracing with explicit rules for weighing competing theoretical predictions. This theoretical approach helps explain both external behavior and internal motivations. The rivalry operates at state, sub-state, and symbolic levels, reinforced through proxy conflicts and religious mobilization. Although the 2023 diplomatic breakthrough suggests progress, the structural and ideological foundations of the rivalry remain unresolved. This research addresses a critical gap by combining theories and linking them to recent regional events. Policy recommendations include a formal dialogue platform between Gulf states and Iran, confidence-building measures, and a regional security charter. By combining theory, regional analysis, and policy insight, the study contributes to ongoing debates on Gulf security and offers practical ideas for future stability.

KEYWORDS

Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Gulf security, strategic identity, sectarianism, neorealism, hybrid realism

Introduction

The geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been defined by different strategic visions and opposing ideological accounts, resulting in continuous conflict and distrust. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Tehran began a revolutionary foreign policy entrenched in Shi'a Islamist ideology that directly challenged the balance of power in the region enjoyed by Saudi Arabia and the Sunni bloc. This long history has created an enduring rivalry that has made the overall political environment in the Middle East hostile, whereby the powers aim for regional supremacy via direct confrontations or proxy

conflicts. The rivalry is additionally complicated by this historical rivalry representing a broader contest over legitimacy, identity and vision of regional order. It is a competition beyond just a traditional states conflict.

In this research, the focus has been placed on the effects of the Saudi-Iran conflict on regional diplomacy, especially in regard to how it has evolved and survived in the face of regional crises, coupled with wars on regional diplomacy. For the study of Middle East politics and for the study of ideology and identity in the face of foreign politics in a very unstable regional environment, grasping the concept of the Saudi-Iran rivalry is imperative. This study stands out as it sheds further light on the theoretical and empirical aspects of structural and intermediary factors in relation to strategic behavior, with specific focus on the former non-great powers, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that toppled the Ba'ath regime and enabled Shi'a political empowerment, Iran swiftly moved to capitalize on the power vacuum that emerged, expanding its influence in not only Iraq but also Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Saudi Arabia, along with the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, remained concerned about the issue and viewed the increased Iranian activity in the region with grave strategic threat concern. The deepening divergence in power has significantly helped shape the Gulf security architecture and has brought about another alignment of external arrangements, chiefly those involving the United States (Han and Hakimian, 2019). Washington's strategic bonding with Saudi Arabia, and its maintenance of a military presence in the Gulf, have deepened regional cleavages that exist along the Saudi-Iranian confrontation, thus serving American interests.

Following the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011, both countries were eager to take advantage of the political shifts to expand their influence. Saudi Arabia tried to counter the growing influence of Iran by deepening its ties with the US and backing groups opposed to Iran in the region. On the other hand, Iran took advantage of the chaos to deepen its relations with Shi'a groups, casting itself as the protector of Shi'a communities and the opponent of Western dominance. The 2011 Arab uprisings also marked a change in the way both countries used sectarian identities to justify their actions. The different ways in which both countries view their threats and plan their security has, for many years, created tension in the Gulf and prevented meaningful regional collaboration.

The rivalry reached a critical point in 2016 when the Saudi authorities executed the Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr, which subsequently resulted in an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Both of these events diluted already simmering tensions and epitomized a wide ideological gap between the two authorities. The support Iran provides to organizations like Hezbollah, Houthis, and some Iraqi militias has made the regional security even more fragile and has compelled Saudi Arabia to wage a campaign of diplomatic isolation, economic pressure and military adventurism particularly in Yemen to counterbalance Iranian influence. The Yemeni war has continued to escalate since 2015 when the Houthis took over Sanaa, evolving into a prolonged proxy war where both powers have utilized asymmetric tools to advance their strategic objectives, further exacerbating the regional humanitarian crises (Juneau, 2020).

Simultaneously, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia would no longer seek to enhance Sunni leadership, but rather seek to bolster its influence through economic revival and key partnerships (Al-Dosari, 2016; Hidayat et al., 2022). As for Iran, it persists with its foreign policy of ideological resistance, regional deterrence, and unbalanced influence. The Gulf States often label their policies as blatant attempts to threaten their stability. Such shifts in foreign policy and their connection to internal political conditions such as regime legitimacy, elite cohesion, and ideological narratives are influenced deeply and analyzed more through constructivist theory in this study.

Following the power vacuum left behind, Iraq's coming to assume the strategic role seems natural. After the fall of Saddam, Tehran began working systematically on their political and military engagements with the post-invasion Iraq. Liable to foster a Shi'a political formation that is aligned with Iranian interests, does not, for sure, make Saudi Arabia's worries any lesser, especially of the growing Shi'a crescent from Tehran to Beirut. Further, relations between Tehran and its GCC neighbors has been fully poisoned by Tehran-Bahrain claims over disputed territories since the late sixties and various other claims after 1971 over the Emirati islands.

The increase of geostrategic rivalry has shifted-market instability to global markets and neighboring sea routes, undermining global market stability (Kindleberger, 1973). Serving as the central hub for seaborne oil transit, any conflicts between Riyadh and Tehran would lead to oil price increases and pose serious concerns over supply security. This is why a political confrontation at a bilateral level has ripples on a global scale in terms of economics and strategy. The US' withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018 signified a putative collapse of diplomatic containment approaches, driving further aggressive regional maneuvering by both players (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015).

Given this surprising turn of events, the China-brokered harmony between Iran and Saudi Arabia made diplomatic waters navigable. Although promising, the normalization remains fragile due to the lack of enforceable mechanisms and long-term institutional support; analysts posit that this marks a tactical pause instead of a structural shift (Baghernia, 2024). This buildup provides the basis for the research emphasis on applying international relations theories to explain both conflict and temporary cooperation.

With this background, the study has the aim of reflecting on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry from 2011 to 2023 as seen through major events and power shifts that have determined how the two relate. It considers the underlying causes of their hostility, whether religious divides, strategic competitions, or third-party alliances, while thinking about the fruits of recent peace talks, such as the 2023 China-mediated one.

Given the deepening rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the study aims to analyze critically the impact of bilateral interactions on regional security architecture between 2011 and 2023. The analysis is situated around understanding how this decades-old conflict has shaped Gulf security dynamics in particular through the evolving posture of Saudi Arabia in this period and the strategic responses it put forward. Accordingly, the study is guided by two central research questions: (1) How did the Saudi-Iranian interactions shape regional security between 2011 and 2023? and

(2) What security dynamics aimed to preserve and improve Gulf security, specifically with Saudi Arabia's stable interactions during that period? These questions inform the broader research aims, which include identifying the geopolitical and ideological factors sustaining this rivalry, exploring the consequences of regional instability, particularly in conflict zones such as Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, and assessing the extent to which global powers such as the United States have influenced the strategic balance in the Gulf. Moreover, the review considers the degree to which recent diplomatic overtures, such as the 2023 China-mediated détente, reflect a substantive shift in the regional order or merely a temporary recalibration of long-standing hostilities. This study, by applying theory to recent events and relevant hypothesis, drives a timely and relevant research to one of the most enduring rivalries in the modern Middle East.

The key contribution of this study is in the methodology it employs: it sequences theoretical perspectives in the cases while resolving inconsistencies openly, thus bringing rivalry analysis up to date with evidence from after 2020.

Literature review and theoretical framework

An article based on Saudi-Iran works on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry with the considerations of a country's shifting power and structural insecurities (Grumet, 2015). It is clear in the literature to agree with the Gulf's security not only being threatened by country rivalries but also with external alliances, sectarian divisions and evolving threats to national sovereignty. This part discusses the literature that looks at the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while also looking into the different theories such as neorealism, constructive realism, offensive realism, and hegemonic stability theory that can be used to analyze and understand this rivalry.

Legrenzi (2011) argues that the Council of Gulf Cooperation Countries was thought to be created in response to Iranian threats of expansion and region-wide disruption. Saudi Arabia, in particular, was reliant on American political and military guarantees given the region's weak political and military structures. In the same vein, Yetiv (2004) draws attention to the Gulf rivalry's global aspect, particularly the role U.S. foreign policy and oil market policies played. From a realist standpoint, these dependencies illustrate a classical balance-of-power model whereby weaker states align with external powers to hedge against regional threats.

The post-2003 political vacuum in Iraq represents a pivotal moment in the literature, marking a fundamental transformation in Iran's regional posture (Cerioli, 2021). Katzman (2003) and Knights (2013) emphasize how Iran exploited the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime to embed itself within Iraq's military and political fabric, thereby altering the sectarian and strategic calculus of the Gulf. Saudi Arabia perceived this growing influence as a zero-sum threat to Sunni dominance, prompting counterbalancing behavior through diplomatic isolation of Tehran and interventionist policies in regional theaters such as Yemen and Syria.

Cerioli (2024) provides a valuable framework for interpreting Iranian state behavior through four interconnected domains: Islamic political ideology, oil market influence, military expansion,

and foreign occupation. The vision laid out above helps us understand the rivalry as a battle of far more consequence than a strategic rivalry: it is a conflict for regional identity, for legitimacy, and for the shape of the political order of the Middle East. This is echoed further in Bianco (2018), who points to the highly ideological aspects of the Saudi-Iranian conflict after 2011, as the Arab Spring heightened sectarian narratives and deepened the divide between the revolutionary rhetoric of Tehran and the traditionalist outlook of Riyadh.

In understanding these developments, more and more the literature looks to constructivist theory, which highlights the roles of identities, narratives, and perceptions in determining international conduct (Wendt, 1999). Constructivist scholars argue that the dispute is not physical but ideational, originating from a clash of misrecognition, long-standing historical conflicts, and religious symbolism. Ontological security, which underscores how states guarantee their self-identity in times of uncertainty, has recently extended this notion. According to Shadunts (2023), Iran's foreign policy behavior is not only influenced by material threats but also by a crisis of identity and knowledge production, especially in the post-JCPOA environment. Similarly, Adisönmez et al. (2022) and Cohen and Hitman (2021) argue that Saudi Arabia and Iran deploy regional confrontation as a mechanism to stabilize internal ontological insecurities tied to regime narratives, sectarian identity, and civilizational legitimacy. These internal anxieties become externalized as sectarian rivalry and regional assertiveness.

Simultaneously, offensive realism, as articulated by Mearsheimer (2001), offers another lens through which to interpret the rivalry. From this perspective, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are rational actors striving for regional hegemony in an anarchic system. Iran's interventions in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and Saudi Arabia's assertive foreign policy under Vision 2030, are thus viewed as offensive strategies to maximize power and deter external encroachment. These actions, while portrayed as defensive in domestic rhetoric, fit within an offensive realist logic of preemption and denial of strategic depth to rivals. Although offensive realism was originally developed for great power politics, recent work suggests its conceptual tools can be cautiously adapted to explain the aggressive regional behavior of middle powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia (Juneau, 2020). This study therefore applies offensive realism not as a full explanatory model, but as a framework to understand the logic behind specific expansions and counter-expansions.

Another complementary approach is hegemonic stability theory, which postulates that regional and global stability are more likely when one power predominates. The current multipolar fragmentation in the Middle East, featuring U.S., Chinese, Russian, and Turkish interventions, undermines the prospects for a stable Gulf security regime. As regional powers compete for dominance, the absence of a clear hegemon or cooperative architecture perpetuates instability and escalates proxy conflicts. Roberts (2025) introduces the concept of *residual hegemony*, arguing that despite visible U.S. military pullback in the Gulf, influence persists through latent mechanisms such as technological dependencies, infrastructure networks, and institutional linkages. This suggests that U.S. retrenchment does not equate to full withdrawal but rather a transformation of its hegemonic role into more indirect yet structurally embedded forms of dominance.

The neorealist tradition remains the dominant theoretical lens in the Gulf rivalry literature. Originally articulated by Waltz (2000) and later extended by researchers like Walt (1987) in the balance-of-threat variant of neorealism, neorealism is concerned with structural constraints and the international system's influence on state behavior. States are unitary actors in an anarchic international order in order to survive, which leads to states forming alliances and primarily balancing against threats. Saudi-Iranian rivalry fits neatly into this mold as both states employ regional proxies and external alliances and deterrent posturing to assuage their perceived vulnerabilities (Gul et al., 2021).

Iran's partnerships with non-state actors such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, and certain Iraqi militias can be seen as asymmetric balancing designed to compensate for conventional military imbalances. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, counterbalances externally via U.S. military support, arms purchasing, and coalition-building with Gulf and Western states. The whole balance-of-power dynamics support Walt's contention that threat perceptions originate from perceived intentions rather than just capabilities.

It is important to acknowledge that neorealism, offensive realism, and constructivism originate from divergent ontological premises: neorealism rests on structural materialism, offensive realism on rational power-maximization, and constructivism on intersubjective identity formation. Although such paradigms are often viewed in opposition to one another, this study methodologically integrates them using layered process tracing. Each theory is assigned to the explanatory level at which it provides the clearest causality—systemic pressures for neorealism, strategic expansion for offensive realism, and identity securitization for constructivism. This approach shifts theoretical tension to complementarity. This explicit integration makes certain that the hybrid framework is logically consistent and that the unique perspectives of each paradigm are preserved (Sotara and Grillitsch, 2022). To join these perspectives, the study proposes a hybrid theoretical framework combining structural realism, offensive expansionism, and ideational identity formation. Arghavani Pirsalami et al. (2023) demonstrate how Iran's strategic posture post-JCPOA is driven as much by regime survival and ontological reassurance as by security concerns. This synthesis helps explain how threat perception is not only shaped by external constraints, but by internal political narratives that frame rival states as existential challengers.

Even though neorealism, offensive realism, and constructivism have substantially different starting points—be it structural materialism, rational power-maximization, or intersubjective identity formation—this article integrates them all by using a complex methodology. With the use of process tracing, the different perspectives can be ordered logically: neorealism brings attention to system-wide limitations, offensive realism focuses on the strategies of expansion and counter-expansion, and constructivism sheds light on the significance of identity narratives and ontological insecurity. Each theory is assigned a different explanatory dimension, which shifts the conflict between the theories into complementarity. Reconciliation and adjudication of the methodology. Although the underlying paradigms have contradictory ontologies, they can be synthesized as long as each is confined to the domain in which it has comparative advantage

and as long as conflicts are resolved through predetermined rules. In the article, neorealism designs the framework for system level constraints, offensive realism designs the rationale for strategic expansion, and constructivism designs the mechanisms of identity securitization. If the predictions differ, the layer which is supported by the stronger form of process tracing is preferred. Hoop tests are weak tests, smoking-gun tests are strong tests, and doubly decisive evidence is stronger than smoking-gun evidence. This approach makes theory contamination less likely and makes the evidentiary hierarchy explicit. The strength of inference is given for the dominant layer for each case; the other layers only provide secondary or complementary mechanisms, not additional competing explanations. Recent theoretical scholarship, such as Michaels (2022) who updates realist-constructivism by explaining the layered explanatory power and how realist and constructivist logics in foreign policy analysis complement each other, supports this approach. Similarly, methodological research (Beach, 2023) has shown that process tracing is epistemologically flexible and well-suited to multiple theoretical integrations, which enhances its usefulness.

Indeed, this study interacts with the literature that poses the Saudi-Iranian rivalry not as an act of mere statecraft, but as a deeply embedded conflict in historical trauma, religious legitimacy, and a contested vision of Middle Eastern order. While the functional constitution of rivalry has been studied in more traditional approaches, this study attempts to further the discussion through a synthesis of neorealist and constructivist theoretical insights, linking these insights with recent cases from 2011 to 2023 to provide a timely view on regional security challenges and prospects for de-escalation via diplomatic realignment. Recent analyses of post-2023 ties suggest that rapprochement effects remain largely symbolic across Yemen and Iraq, which supports our claim about shallow identity change (Alotaibi, 2023; Cook, 2023; Fantappie and Nasr, 2023; Salami, 2023). Cerioli (2024) and Roberts (2025) position Gulf order within evolving great-power brokerage and residual United States influence, aligning with the neorealist layer of our framework.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical, interpretivist research design grounded in a descriptive-analytical methodology, enriched by the method of process tracing. Given the complexity of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its entanglement with structural forces, ideological contestation, and evolving foreign policy orientations, a descriptive-analytical approach offers the most appropriate framework for conducting in-depth, context-sensitive analysis. Rather than seeking to quantify behavior or test causal hypotheses through statistical models, this research aims to interpret the strategic motives, identity narratives, and geopolitical consequences that have shaped bilateral relations over the past decade. By situating state behavior within broader theoretical and historical contexts, the study endeavors to uncover the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate competition, conflict, and intermittent cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The descriptive-analytical method allows for systematic engagement with secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed

academic literature, policy reports, governmental declarations, regional think tank analyses, and international institutional documents. Data were selected based on their thematic relevance, scholarly credibility, and chronological proximity to the events under review. Sources published between 2000 and 2024 were considered, with particular emphasis on those addressing the 2011–2023 period. Different in origin, the time band selected here is dependent upon capturing the maximum polarization interim, namely the post-process induced by the Arab Spring and dread of maximizing the catalytic impact, i.e., the diplomatic normalization in 2023 by China between Riyadh and Tehran, thus coherently delimiting the temporal *raison d'être* for tracing the evolution of the rivalry. Besides, stringent source inclusion criteria were applied, thereby upholding the study's analytical validity.

The selected materials analyzed were either peer-reviewed or institutionally validated by eminent academic or policy entities such as Chatham House, Middle East Institute, or the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. Whenever available, Arabic sources were also included, either in the original or translated versions, so as to present indigenous-level accounts and not build on Western accounts. Explicitly, blogs with non-peer-reviewed content, anonymous commentary, or political commentaries lacking in academic or institutional credentials were excluded, enhancing the reliability and interpretive richness of the analysis.

A process tracing, applied as a descriptive-analytical method, acts as the analytical core of this study, thereby helping in the identification of causal pathways and mechanisms linking discrete political events to broader strategic shifts. This method is particularly suited for unpacking how key events; such as the Arab Spring, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, and the 2023 China-brokered normalization, fit into a long-term rivalry driven by both external strategic shifts and internal ideological narratives. This lens is helpful in interpreting how a Yemen military campaign (2015), Iran's response to the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA (2018), and the normalization of 2023 talk to each other and are interrelated. In other words, these events are not isolated, contrarily, are interconnected developments happening within a continuous bloc of geopolitical dynamics. To aid this understanding, Table 1 offers a brief overview of selected geopolitical events from 2011 to 2023 serving as causal milestones in intensifying and recalibrating the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Every event is documented for its strategic importance and is located within a broad interpretive narrative that demonstrates the effectiveness of process tracing in recreating diplomatic and security changes over time. Case-level reasoning evaluates information according to its significance, giving preference to doubly decisive and smoking-gun evidence when theoretical frameworks conflict.

This study looks at offensive realism in the context of regional players such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, focusing on their strategic reason and pursuit of influence within a structural framework. This study, therefore, looks at offensive realism in the context of regional players such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, paying attention to their strategic reason and pursuit of influence within the structural framework. Both countries show offensive realism in proxy wars, alliances, and deterrent signaling, showing offensive behavior in power projection, which is typical for global powers. First, the descriptive-analytical framework allows a detailed examination of

the rivalry's events in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Bahrain. Second, the descriptive-analytical method is essential for understanding the ideational aspects of the rivalry, including how historical grievance, sectarian identity, and regime legitimacy influence foreign policy decision-making. The study also applies constructivism's internal political factors, such as elite ideological framing, national identity preservation, and their impact on external behavior. In the end, process tracing serves as a powerful instrument in relating theoretical insights from neorealism, offensive realism, and constructivism to actual empirical realities and hence will provide greater explanatory power for the study.

Thus, in essence, this research method provides a nuanced, theoretically grounded, and empirically rich account of one of the most consequential rivalries in modern Middle Eastern politics. By merging interpretive rigor with methodological transparency, the study is thereby able to contribute to academic and policy discourse on regional security, strategic behavior, and the emerging international order in the Gulf.

Discussion

The Saudi–Iranian rivalry has endured because it is structurally embedded within the fragmented Gulf security order, reinforced by power asymmetries, identity-oriented competition, and the absence of a legitimate regional hegemon. To explain its persistence, this section applies the hybrid framework systematically across four key events: the Arab Spring (2011), the Yemen War (2015–present), the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (2018), and the 2023 China-mediated normalization. Each event is examined through a dominant theoretical lens, supported by complementary perspectives, to avoid over-layering while capturing the multi-dimensional character of the rivalry.

Arab Spring (2011): constructivism as dominant

The Arab Spring is best understood through constructivism, which highlights the role of identity securitization, sectarian mobilization, and regime legitimacy. As uprisings erupted in Bahrain and Syria, Iran viewed them as Shi'a empowerment and a challenge to tyrannical rule. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, viewed them as a threat to the stability of Sunni rule as well as the stability of the region. Such conflicting views more eloquently explain the Saudi military action in Bahrain and Iranian rhetorical support for the opposition in Syria than any material calculations do. Symbolic acts demonstrate how policy was shaped and defended under the paradigm of ontological security (Shadunts, 2023; Adisönmez et al., 2022), while neorealism associates these series of events to systemic balancing behavior; constructivism better explains the ideational overreactions, identity-based securitization, and transformation of local uprisings to region-wide conflicts.

Bahraini government requested in March of 2011 for the Peninsula Shield forces to enter Bahrain, meanwhile Tehran was framing protests as valid Shi'a mobilization associated with anti-authoritarian Shi'a legitimacy. Riyadh made the move in a bid to

TABLE 1 Process-traced key events in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry (2011–2023).

Year	Event	Description	Strategic impact	Key references
2011	Arab Spring and Bahrain Crisis	Popular uprisings swept the region; Iran backed Shi'a protests in Bahrain while Saudi troops entered to restore order	Sectarian polarization intensifies; Iran-GCC distrust deepens	Bianco, 2018 ; Abdullah, 2012
2015	Saudi-led Intervention in Yemen	Saudi-led coalition launched Operation Decisive Storm against Iranian-backed Houthis	Proxy warfare escalates; rivalry regionalized	Feierstein, 2017 ; Darwich, 2018
2016	Execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr	Prominent Shi'a cleric executed; Iran's reaction included attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions	Diplomatic relations severed; ideological confrontation peaks	CJPME, 2018
2018	U.S. Withdrawal from JCPOA	U.S. exited Iran nuclear deal, reimposing sanctions; Iran resumed uranium enrichment	Gulf instability surges; Riyadh endorses U.S. maximum pressure	Cook, 2023
2019	Aramco Drone Attacks	Saudi oil facilities targeted; attributed to Iran or proxies	Energy insecurity exposed; deterrence credibility questioned	Salami, 2023
2020	Soleimani Assassination	U.S. drone strike kills top Iranian commander; regional tensions spike	Iran strengthens non-state alliances; Saudi security recalibrated	Fantappie and Nasr, 2023
2023	China-Brokered Rapprochement	Diplomatic restoration via trilateral Beijing agreement	Strategic thaw; testing durability of normalization	Baghernia, 2024 ; Commentary, 2023

prioritize regime security and alliance reassurance, which is in line with identity securitization and balancing dynamics identified in this case. Documented spikes in sectarian rhetoric in 2011–2012 in Bahrain and Syria illustrate how symbolic politics translated domestic legitimacy needs into regional postures ([Abdullah, 2012](#); [Bianco, 2018](#); [Legrenzi, 2011](#)).

Yemen War (2015–present): offensive realism as dominant

The Yemen War exemplifies offensive realist dynamics, as both Saudi Arabia and Iran pursued regional power maximization under conditions of uncertainty. Iran's support for the Houthis, although limited in scope, symbolically expanded its influence at minimal cost ([Juneau, 2020](#)). Saudi Arabia responded with a full-scale intervention to prevent the establishment of an Iranian-aligned regime on its southern border, reflecting a strategy of pre-empting encirclement. These behaviors fit [Mearsheimer's \(2001\)](#) logic of rational expansion rather than defensive balancing. Constructivist insights remain relevant, especially regarding sectarian narratives that justified the conflict to domestic audiences ([Bianco, 2018](#)), but they played a secondary role. Thus, the Yemen War underscores how Saudi Arabia and Iran deliberately expanded their strategic depth through aggressive regional maneuvers, consistent with offensive realist assumptions.

In March 2011, Peninsula Shield forces entered Bahrain at the government's request, while Tehran framed the protests as authentic Shi'a mobilization tied to anti-authoritarian legitimacy. Riyadh's move prioritized regime security and alliance reassurance, consistent with identity securitization and balancing dynamics identified here. Documented spikes in sectarian rhetoric in 2011–2012 in Bahrain and Syria illustrate how symbolic politics translated

domestic legitimacy needs into regional postures ([Abdullah, 2012](#); [Bianco, 2018](#); [Legrenzi, 2011](#)).

U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (2018): neorealism as dominant

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA illustrates the primacy of neorealist systemic pressures. With the collapse of institutional guarantees, Iran recalibrated its nuclear strategy, perceiving survival within an anarchic order as contingent on deterrence. Saudi Arabia, in turn, deepened reliance on U.S. defense guarantees, interpreting the collapse as confirmation of Iran's revisionist ambitions ([Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016](#); [Mirza et al., 2021](#)). While offensive realism helps explain Iran's assertive maneuvers post-2018, the dominant driver lies in the absence of enforceable rules within the international system. Constructivism also complements this explanation by showing how Iran reframed the JCPOA collapse as a narrative of revolutionary resistance, bolstering regime legitimacy. As [Arghavani Pirsalami et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrate, Iran's post-JCPOA posture was simultaneously about ontological reassurance and regime survival, reinforcing the logic of deterrence and identity preservation even under systemic constraint. Together, these perspectives highlight how structural insecurity and identity narratives combined to escalate rivalry.

In the period following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, Iran took a nuclear posture that escalated demands step by step. It sought leverage through its nuclear program and regional behavior while maintaining a deterrent narrative to the home audience. In response, Saudi Arabia increased its defense coordination with the US and other partners, viewing the failure of the negotiations as proof of the Iranian regime's revisionist ambitions. This sequence conforms to a neorealist interpretation

of systemic pressure, with constructivist and ontological security use amplifying the interpretive threat and regime justification (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2016; Shadunts, 2023; Arghavani Pirsalami et al., 2023; Roberts, 2025).

Beyond systemic insecurity, Iran's reaction also reflected deeper ontological anxieties. As Ezbidi (2023) notes, Tehran's leadership framed the U.S. withdrawal not merely as a geopolitical loss but as a sectarian and ideological assault, which intensified the regime's reliance on symbolic narratives of revolutionary resistance. This aligns with Arghavani Pirsalami et al. (2023), who emphasize that Iran's post-JCPOA posture combined deterrence with ontological reassurance. Thus, the episode reveals how systemic and identity-based logics reinforced one another, driving both strategic recalibration and ideological consolidation.

China-mediated normalization (2023): neorealism with constructivist support

The 2023 rapprochement brokered by China is best explained through neorealist balancing in a multipolar Gulf environment. Saudi Arabia and Iran recognized the costs of continued confrontation and sought tactical de-escalation, facilitated by China's role as an external mediator (Baghernia, 2024). Roberts (2025) characterizes this as "residual hegemony," noting that even amid U.S. retrenchment, its structural influence persists through technological dependencies and institutional linkages. However, the agreement's fragility underscores the importance of constructivist factors: symbolic reconciliation did not resolve deep ontological insecurities or sectarian identity divides. Thus, while neorealism accounts for the systemic incentives to balance within a multipolar order, constructivism explains why this normalization remains shallow and unlikely to transform the rivalry into sustained cooperation.

The March 2023 Beijing statement restored diplomatic ties and produced subsequent embassy moves and high-level security talks (Editors, 2024). Yet indicators in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria showed uneven or minimal de-escalation through 2023–2024, suggesting a tactical thaw without identity transformation. China's role functioned as brokerage rather than guarantee provision, while residual United States influence persisted through defense, energy, and institutional channels (Baghernia, 2024; Cook, 2023; Fantappie and Nasr, 2023; Commentary, 2023; Salami, 2023).

However, recent scholarship tempers optimism about the durability of this rapprochement. Cook (2023) and Fantappie and Nasr (2023) underline that normalization has not produced meaningful de-escalation in Yemen, Iraq, or Syria, suggesting that its impact remains largely symbolic. Salami (2023) further demonstrates how Iraq continues to experience competing Saudi and Iranian influences despite the Beijing accord, underscoring the fragile and uneven nature of the détente. Taken together, these accounts confirm that while neorealism explains the short-term balancing incentives behind the deal, constructivism clarifies why deep-seated identity cleavages prevent sustainable transformation of the rivalry.

Synthesis

Across these cases, the hybrid framework demonstrates explanatory clarity by sequencing theories according to their strongest causal fit. Constructivism provides the best explanation for the Arab Spring, where identity securitization was decisive. Offensive realism dominates the Yemen War, where power maximization shaped the strategies of both states. Neorealism is most relevant to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, where systemic constraints drove behavior. Finally, the 2023 China-mediated normalization is best understood through a neorealist lens, though constructivist insights help explain the symbolic fragility of the rapprochement. By applying theories in this sequenced manner, the study avoids theoretical over-layering while retaining the complementarity of material and ideational explanations. The Saudi–Iranian rivalry thus emerges as a strategic identity conflict, where structural insecurity, rational expansion, and ontological narratives reinforce one another across time.

Conclusion

At a foundational level, this study is grounded in the conviction that international relations, particularly in the Middle East, cannot be understood solely through the prism of material power or transactional diplomacy. Instead, it approaches the Saudi–Iranian rivalry as a deeply embedded conflict system, sustained not only by structural insecurity but by identity politics, historical narratives, and normative contestation. The main problem addressed in this research was the absence of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional framework capable of explaining both the enduring hostility and the periodic de-escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This issue is critical, given the destabilizing effects of their rivalry on broader Gulf security and the international system.

Informed by an interpretivist methodology and a multi-theoretical framework, the study seeks not to reduce this rivalry to a singular explanatory model but to understand it holistically, as a phenomenon shaped by competing visions of regional order and political legitimacy. The framework combined Neorealism, which explained the rivalry's systemic pressures; Offensive Realism, which interpreted Iran and Saudi Arabia's assertive behaviors post-2011; and Constructivism, which revealed how sectarian identity, domestic ideological narratives, and ontological insecurity contributed to threat perception. This alignment not only acknowledges their ontological divergence but explicitly shows how they can be methodologically reconciled through layered process tracing, allowing each paradigm to explain distinct causal mechanisms without theoretical incoherence.

This study directly answered its two research questions. First (RQ1), it demonstrated that Saudi–Iranian interactions from 2011 to 2023 reshaped Gulf security by intensifying proxy conflicts, forging external alliances, and recalibrating the regional order through key events. Second (RQ2), it showed that efforts to preserve Gulf security were mediated not only by systemic constraints but also by sectarian narratives, regime legitimacy, and domestic political imperatives. These findings confirm that

the rivalry persists because structural, strategic, and symbolic dimensions reinforce one another over time.

This study aimed to provide a synthesized theoretical framework regarding the Saudi-Iranian conflict triggered in 2011–2023, spanning a period characterized by proxy wars, major conflicts, and the change of key players in the region. The study showed how classical and modern forms of realism, especially neorealism, remain useful to be applied to strategic behavior, but not to the ideational, sectarian, and asymmetric factors that fuel this conflict. This study, in an effort to close this gap, made use of a combination of neorealism, offensive realism, constructivism as well as a combination of interpretative and materialist approaches where the focus is on securitization of meaning and legitimacy, identity, and legitimacy securitization.

A review of these pivotal moments shows how the Arab Spring protests in 2011 deepened sectarian divisions in Bahrain and Syria, later leading to the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia from 2015 with the asymmetric support of the Houthis and Saudi intervention. The 2018 U.S. JCPOA withdrawal led to regional imbalance and harder, riskier moves, and the 2023 China-led normalization changed the pattern of outside mediation. These moments illustrate the inseparable nature of security threats and identity-driven strategies. Both ruling regimes took and amplified sectarian narratives in a bid to sustain their legitimacy at home and to rationalize their actions in the region.

This study contributes originally to academic literature by proposing a revised neorealist framework that incorporates the role of sectarianism and non-state actors into the structural logic of international rivalry. By conceptualizing the Saudi-Iranian confrontation as a form of strategic identity conflict, the study expands the boundaries of neorealism while maintaining its core emphasis on survival and balancing behavior in an anarchic system. This hybrid framework provides a more accurate and nuanced explanation of the rivalry's persistence, offering scholars a new lens to analyze similar cases where identity, ideology, and power converge. Unlike previous analyses that treated these paradigms as incompatible, this study shows how their ontological divergences can be reconciled and transformed into analytical complementarity.

In terms of methodological innovation, the study applies process tracing within a review-based design, demonstrating how descriptive analysis can be used to reconstruct strategic patterns and diplomatic shifts across a defined historical timeline. This design allows for both theoretical depth and empirical clarity, making visible the causal mechanisms that connect events such as the 2015 Saudi intervention in Yemen, Iran's response to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, and the China-mediated normalization initiative of 2023.

Importantly, the study also addressed how domestic political imperatives; such as regime survival, ideological legitimacy, and elite discourse, shape external behavior. Constructivism was thus applied to link the internal ideological construction of political elites with their foreign policy postures.

These findings underscore a central dilemma: while short-term diplomatic gestures may reduce tension, they do not resolve the underlying causes of regional insecurity. As long as threat perceptions remain rooted in existential identity claims and zero-sum hegemonic aspirations, structural transformation will remain elusive. A meaningful shift in Gulf security, therefore, requires

reconceptualizing the region not as a balance-of-power arena but as a shared security community, wherein coexistence is premised on mutual recognition rather than dominance.

This research also holds significant policy relevance. It calls for the institutionalization of GCC-Iran dialogue forums, nuclear confidence-building measures, and multilateral security platforms inspired by the OSCE model. These recommendations flow directly from the study's findings: sectarian securitization during the Arab Spring underscores the need for religious dialogue; the destabilization following the JCPOA withdrawal highlights the urgency of nuclear CBMs; and the fragility of the 2023 normalization demonstrates the necessity of institutionalized Gulf-wide platforms. Furthermore, track II diplomacy, engaging religious, academic, and civil society actors, can complement state-level dialogue by fostering epistemic trust and social resilience.

Finally, one has to acknowledge this study's methodological limitations. This reliance on secondary sources limits access to real-time decision processes and elite perceptions. Observational and descriptive research techniques in the field such as ethnographic studies in the regional capitals, focused interviews with high officials, and media discourse analysis should be incorporated in the future research. Such research methodologies will allow us to explore foreign policy and its formation in the context of Iran and Saudi Arabia better.

To sum up, this study contributes to the Middle East's international relations scholarship by offering a theoretically comprehensive yet analytically rigorous treatment of what is arguably the region's single most long-lasting and unresolved rift. By answering the research questions posed and bridging theoretical gaps, it develops an original hybrid framework of "strategic identity realism" that connects physical power and identity politics. In doing so, it invites scholars to move beyond strict theoretical silos and view complexity as a positive analytic. In this way, this study paves the way for research that can not only explain regional insecurity but also offer practical steps for its transformation. The policy measures in Section 6 translate these findings into practicable steps that prioritize institutionalized dialogue, nuclear and missile confidence-building, and desecuritization of sectarian identity.

Policy recommendations

Considering the findings of this study, it is quite clear that durable de-escalation in the Gulf cannot be achieved through episodic diplomacy or symbolic normalization. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is established as a structurally embedded conflict with deep-rooted identity and ideological dimensions. Hence, its long-term stability calls for a strategic rethink of regional security architecture, diplomatic engagement, and norm-building. Each of the recommendations below flows directly from the key events and theoretical insights analyzed in the study.

First, drawing on the lessons of the Arab Spring (2011), when sectarian securitization heightened identity-based polarization, both Iran and Saudi Arabia should be encouraged to engage in a formal, inclusive Gulf Dialogue Forum, ideally supported by neutral external factors such as Oman, Kuwait, or international institutions. This platform would institutionalize communication channels, allowing states to express concerns, share security assessments, and negotiate disagreements before they escalate

into open hostility. This initiative should include all Gulf states, regardless of ideological or sectarian orientation, to foster a sense of collective ownership over regional peace.

Second, reflecting the destabilization following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (2018), there is a pressing need for confidence-building measures (CBMs) related to the nuclear and missile domains. As shown by the fallout from the withdrawal, regional actors are often left vulnerable to the consequences of great power negotiations. Iran and the GCC states should establish a regional nuclear transparency protocol, where technical experts from both sides conduct reciprocal visits to observe nuclear activities and missile development. This could be modeled after the confidence-building practices of the 1975 Helsinki Accords, adapted to the Gulf context.

Third, in line with findings from both the Arab Spring and the Yemen War (2015–present), which revealed the instrumentalization of sectarian identity, the desecuritization of sectarian identity must become a priority. The use of sectarian narratives has proven effective for short-term regime consolidation but destructive for regional integration. Both Tehran and Riyadh should revise state-sponsored curricula, media messaging, and religious outreach to promote intra-Islamic tolerance and pluralism. The establishment of a joint Saudi-Iranian Commission on Religious Dialogue, comprising clerics, scholars, and educators, would signal a commitment to reducing sectarian polarization. Such a step, while symbolic, would address one of the most emotive and instrumentalized drivers of rivalry.

Fourth, building on the study's theoretical insight that Gulf rivalry is sustained by shared vulnerabilities as much as by divergent identities, regional security cooperation should be framed around shared vulnerabilities rather than divergent identities. Issues such as climate change, maritime piracy, cyberattacks, and economic diversification affect all Gulf states. Initiatives like a Gulf Environmental Security Council or a Joint Gulf Cyber Task Force could serve as starting points for functional cooperation, creating habits of interaction that may gradually soften strategic mistrust.

Fifth, recognizing the study's finding that domestic imperatives, including regime survival and legitimacy concerns, shape foreign policy behavior, any diplomatic effort that ignores the internal political dynamics, such as elite fragmentation, legitimacy concerns, and ideological posturing, is unlikely to succeed. Therefore, external mediators, such as China or the EU, should adopt a dual-track diplomacy that engages both official representatives and influential societal actors (academics, religious figures, media institutions) to build a multilayered peace constituency.

Sixth, as demonstrated by the fragility of the 2023 China-brokered normalization, while this development was a positive step, it should not be overestimated. As Baghernia (2024) notes, China's involvement remains marginal in terms of sustained security guarantees. Regional actors must avoid becoming over-dependent on external mediation and instead prioritize indigenous conflict resolution models. A possible pathway could be the drafting of a Gulf Security Charter, drawing lessons from the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Such a charter would codify principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, and peaceful dispute settlement.

Seventh, consistent with the study's emphasis on structural insecurity and the absence of enforcement mechanisms, future

regional frameworks must include mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and early warning systems. Drawing on UN best practices, the Gulf could benefit from establishing a Regional Conflict Prevention and Monitoring Center, equipped to analyze tensions, report violations of agreements, and provide independent verification of state conduct. This would reduce the perception of bias and foster long-term trust.

In sum, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry must be addressed not only as a bilateral issue but as a systemic challenge to regional security and international order. By grounding these recommendations in the empirical cases analyzed and the hybrid theoretical framework developed, the study demonstrates how institutional mechanisms, identity reconciliation, and strategic foresight can transition the Gulf from fragile *détente* to sustainable coexistence. The recommendations proposed here are therefore not abstract ideals but pragmatic steps informed by the study's findings, offering a realistic roadmap for policymakers and scholars committed to breaking the cycle of rivalry and reimagining the Gulf as a space of cooperation.

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