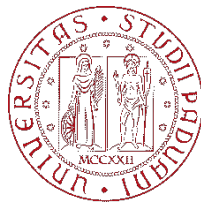


UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, LAW
AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**Master's degree in
European and Global Studies**



**UNDERSTANDING THE IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA RIVALRY:
THE EVOLUTION OF BILATERAL RELATIONS, REGIONAL
SECURITY IMPLICATIONS AND U.S. INFLUENCE
(1960-2018)**

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A.Y. 2023/2024

ABSTRACT

The study analyses the evolution of bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia from the late 1960s to 2018, focusing on the dynamics that have influenced regional security and changed the spheres of power in the Persian Gulf. The research shows how the analysis of historical and geopolitical events has influenced regional stability, changing alliances and increasing existing tensions in the area. Key events including the Iranian Revolution in 1979; the end of the Cold War; the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein; and the Arab Springs in 2011 have intensified the strategic competition between Riyadh and Tehran, leading them to use proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain as a new tool to pursue their expansionist aims and create strategic alliances in the region. The US role also emerges as an important player in conditioning the balance of power in the region. The policies of military intervention against terrorism following the 9/11 attacks have influenced relations between Riyadh and Tehran, showing how the American presence has played a key role in the new alliances. Using a qualitative approach, the study explores sectarian and geopolitical tensions and the proliferation of contemporary threats such as terrorism and nuclear power. Supported by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex theory and the Security Dilemma concept, the study analyses the security dynamics that have altered the balance and instability in the Gulf between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. A theoretical approach that provides a framework for understanding how the historical rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran has shaped alliances in the Gulf.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AAH	Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
BPT	Balance of Power theory
BTT	Balance of Threat Theory
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CSIS	Centre for Strategic and International Studies
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organisation
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IS	The Islamic State
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MBS	Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
NPT	Non-proliferation Treaty
NSS	National Security Strategy (US)
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

PSF	Peninsula Shield Force
RSCT	Regional Security Complex Theory by Buzan and Wæver
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is a region marked by conflict and war, and it holds significant strategic importance in global politics due to its natural resources, geopolitical position, and trade routes (Rahman, 2008). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are the main powers influencing the Persian Gulf region. Their influence is based on three different main factors: economic strength, military capabilities and political-religious leadership (Jahner, 2024). Saudi Arabia, a major oil exporter and a key player in the global energy market, has considerable economic influence, while Iran, despite international sanctions, continues to possess significant energy reserves and strong regional alliances (Statista, 2024). Militarily, Saudi Arabia appears to invest heavily in global defence, supported by strong ties with Western powers, particularly the United States; and Iran, having developed an extensive network of proxy forces and a missile programme, that can project hegemony in the region (Maloney, 2024). Thus, both countries claim religious leadership in the Muslim world, with Iran representing the Shia population on the one hand and Saudi Arabia representing the Sunni population on the other, further intensifying the rivalry. Their strategic competition, based on three levels: political, economic and security, has increased considerably in recent years (Ali, Azhar, Ansari, & Bashir, 2022).

The power dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly since the Iranian revolution in 1979 and during the late 20th century, mediated and often influenced by US interventions, represent one of the most critical issues in understanding contemporary security in the Middle East and more specifically in the Gulf region. To address this, it is essential to establish the theoretical and methodological foundations necessary to analyse the evolution of security policies and the implications of Iran-Saudi Arabia relations in the Middle East from the late 1960s to 2018, with a focus on the role of the United States in the Gulf. The main objective of this study is to examine the evolution of the Iran-Saudi rivalry from the late 1960s to the present day. The focus will be on the events and historical factors that shaped this rivalry, as well as the political and military motivations that fuelled it. The choice to analyse Iran-Saudi Arabia relations is driven by the current strategic importance of these two countries in the Middle East and the continued influence of the United States in the region, a presence that has increased in the region especially

following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) initiated by the Bush administration.

The study aims to analyse the evolution of bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia from the period of decolonisation to the present day. This study explores the regional security complex and its development, highlighting how the end of the Cold War accelerated the autonomy of a new regional order in international politics in the Gulf (De Vita, 2019). Analysing the historical and geopolitical dynamics, diplomatic exchanges and alliances forged over the past 70 years between Iran and Saudi Arabia therefore provides a broader context for understanding contemporary changes in the Gulf, focusing on specific key historical events that have influenced the spheres of power and balances in the Gulf and the complicated relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Starting with the Iranian revolution in 1979; the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988); the end of the Cold War in the Middle East and the end of bipolarity; the 9/11 attacks; the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011. All of these events created a great deal of instability and turbulence in the region, triggering a series of internal conflicts and political transformations and regional rivalries that continue to shape the geopolitical landscape to the present day.

On a regional level, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been a significant destabilising factor, manifesting itself through involvement in proxy wars, as was the case in the war in Yemen (2015), but also through support for various armed groups and militias in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (Barnes-Dacey & Bianco, 2024). Tensions in the Persian Gulf, where important energy routes are concentrated, further amplify the risk of wider and more complex conflicts. In Syria and Yemen for example, ongoing civil wars that began in 2011 and 2014 have led to major humanitarian crises, with millions of people displaced and infrastructure destroyed (Cfr, 2024). The war in Syria involves various regional and global powers, resulting in a fragmented nation, while in Yemen, the conflict between Saudi-backed government forces and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels has worsened the existing humanitarian crisis (Al-Goidi, 2024). Iraq and Lebanon are facing deep political crises and sectarian violence. In Iraq, from 2003, following the US invasion until now, and the fall of Saddam Hussein, ethnic and religious divisions continue to pose a serious threat to the stability of the country; while in Lebanon,

corruption, economic crisis and sectarian tensions have led since 2019 to a complete political collapse that threatens the very existence of the state.

All these events have thus altered the balance of power in the region, creating an extremely fragile security environment, where local conflicts have repercussions on regional subsystems, affecting not only the countries directly involved, but also neighbouring countries and international powers with interests in the area. The entire landscape of the Middle East thus remains marked by high instability, with the prospects for peace still seeming distant and a widespread sense of insecurity (Hazbun, 2018).

To understand the new regional security structures and balance of power, it is essential to analyse the historical context that has developed from the late 1960s to the present day, focusing on two main actors: Tehran and Riyadh. Security dynamics have gained increasing regional importance and relevance. New contemporary threats, such as proxy wars, terrorism, missile proliferation, cyber warfare and humanitarian crises, are influenced by geographic proximity: making them more likely to develop along short paths and requiring cooperation and regional security solutions to deal with them effectively (Weiner, 2006).

Proxy wars have become a significant aspect of this rivalry, with both Iran and Saudi Arabia supporting opposing factions in conflicts such as those in Syria and Yemen. Furthermore, terrorism, particularly Islamist terrorism, remains a persistent threat, with groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda exploiting the instability created by these conflicts to advance their agendas (Khan H. U., 2024). The proliferation of missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), particularly with Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, has raised concerns about a regional arms race (Lesser, 2004). Cyber warfare has also become a critical threat, as both Iran and Saudi Arabia have developed capabilities to conduct cyber-attacks that could compromise critical infrastructure. Moreover, humanitarian crises resulting from these conflicts have led to widespread displacement and suffering, creating long-term challenges to regional stability. Addressing these contemporary threats requires not only national responses but also regional cooperation. Regional security cooperation is crucial to mitigating these threats and maintaining a balance of power in the area (Le Beau & Troitskiy, 2008).

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

The study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the complex security relations in the Middle East. It will analyse the evolving relationship and strategic importance dictated by the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia over the years and the significant role of the United States in shaping these dynamics. This analysis will draw from existing literature, referencing the main schools of thought that have studied security in the Middle East since the 1960s, including realism, Constructivism and the Copenhagen School, along with the contribution of scholars like Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, particularly as outlined in their work “Regions and Powers: The Structure of International security” of 2003 (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

It will be crucial to clarify why discussing security in the Middle East today is essential, not only because of the ongoing crises and conflicts, but also because of the evolution of the reasons for these crises, starting from their historical and political roots. The Middle East, particularly the Persian Gulf, has been a focal point of global attention for decades, due to its strategic importance, energy resources and intricate interaction of political, ethnic and religious factors. The security issues in the region are not just due to current events but are closely connected to historical rivalries, colonial legacies and the arbitrary borders established by external powers in the early 20th century. These historical factors have led to enduring disputes, such as the Sunni-Shia divide, which has significantly shaped alliances and conflicts within the region.

The research will examine how power dynamics in the Persian Gulf subcomplex are significantly influenced by the concept of security, which is relevant when discussing crises, wars and territorial conflicts over spheres of influence. Here, Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a struggle for regional hegemony, each seeking to expand its influence over significant geopolitical areas. This rivalry has manifested in different forms, including proxy wars in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, where both powers support opposing factions to extend their reach and counterbalance each other. Iraq another key player in

this subcomplex has also played a significant role in these dynamics, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Instability and the resulting power vacuum also allowed Iran and Saudi Arabia to try to contend for competing levels of control which only added more complexity. The competition for influence over Iran, at the current stage of its struggle to define itself, has clear implications for stability across regional lines as each actor seeks an outcome reflecting their strategic goals.

Furthermore, the study will explain why it is also relevant to analyse how the US intervention has shaped the Middle East's security environment. Throughout history, the United States has frequently used military actions and diplomacy to both act as a stabilizing factor and a change catalyst. The importance of this segment of the analysis is to reveal the influence of U.S. policies on the regional balance of power and the contribution to the current state of affairs. The analysis will cover key moments such as the Gulf War of 1991, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the post-9/11 "War on Terror" to better understand how these actions have influenced regional power balances. The period of disengagement that began with the Obama administration will be examined as a critical phase that marked a reduction in direct military involvement and a recalibration of U.S. strategy in the area.

The U.S. withdrawal had a significant impact on the security situation in the Middle East, and regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran have tried to take advantage of this impact. The study will explore the consequences of this change, including how it has empowered some actors, changed alliances and increased competition for influence. By analysing these factors, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of why security in the Gulf is still a major issue, influenced by both historical events and contemporary geopolitical realities.

1.2 Research question

How has the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia evolved from the late 1960s to the present day, and what impact has this rivalry had on regional security? Additionally, how has the United States influenced the relations between these two countries and their effects on Middle Eastern dynamics throughout this period?

The main objective of this study as explained above, is to examine the evolution of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia from the late 1960s to the present day, highlighting key events and historical factors that have shaped this rivalry. Simultaneously, the study aims to analyse the impact of the rivalry on regional security and investigate the role of an external power: the United States, examining how its foreign policy has influenced the relations and spheres of power between the two states in the Gulf. Analysing the impact of the US on the dynamics in the Middle East and the regional balance of power.

This study is conducted using the conceptual framework developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver in their publication “Regions and Powers - The Structure of International Security”. They describe the Middle East regional security complex as a standard one, with polarity determined by regional powers, where regional interrelationships shape security policies on a daily basis. In their study, they note how geographical proximity plays a key role as security problems tend to be stronger between adjacent states and how the intensity of security interactions between states in a security complex is most visible in the military and political domains (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Additionally, Buzan and Wæver point out a significant discrepancy in the security system before and after the end of the Cold War, where new global and regional powers emerged and developed. According to their analysis, one of the major changes in the post-Cold War era is the evolution of the global security system: from the 2 + 3 system (two superpowers: the US and USSR, and three great powers: China, Europe and Japan) to the 1 + 4 system (the US only superpower and four great powers: China, EU, Japan and Russia).

This transition has had major implications for security in the Middle East. If during the Cold War, the Middle East was considered the object of competition between the superpowers (US and USSR); with the end of the Cold War, a new 1+4 system emerged. It changed the existing dynamics, leading the US to maintain a predominant position in the area, but also to face challenges from other global actors. The rise of China, the EU and the re-establishment of Russia's influence have created changes in regional security dynamics. This new global arrangement has created a more complex security environment in the Middle East, where the US now has to deal not only with regional conflicts but also with the interests of new global actors. This has led to an environment

where traditional alliances and rivalries, including those between Iran and Saudi Arabia, have changed, reflecting the presence of new actors in the area and their interests. The intervention of these powers through military operations, diplomatic initiatives and economic investments has increased the level of complexity of regional security, reshaping Cold War dynamics and creating a more intricate environment.

In light of this framework, the research will be divided into two historical periods: first, it will be analysed the complex regional dynamics, alliances and rivalries that characterised the Middle East from the late 1960s to the 1990s. Then, historical-political analysis from the 1990s to the present day will be considered, showing how the end of the Cold War has affected relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It will be explored how the end of the bipolar world radically transformed the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East due to the collapse of the USSR, which led to a major shift in the global power structure. The diminishing Russian influence left increased room for the US, reshaping the international and security dynamics both globally and regionally, as happened in the Gulf region.

The decision to focus on the role of the United States in the Middle East post-Cold War is dictated by its growing hegemony on a global and regional level since 1991: the year that marked the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of a unipolar world order dominated by the US. The latter, unlike Europe and China, already had an established military and political presence in the region, strengthened after their victory in the Gulf War (1990-1991). According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory, regional security dynamics are not only characterised by interactions between states within the region, but are often influenced by the great powers. In the case of the Middle East and specifically the Persian Gulf, American influence has been decisive through the projection of military force and threat management in the area. Following the 2001 attacks, American attention was intensified through the war on terror, leading to the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003. Actions that increased the American military presence in the Middle East and changed regional security relations.

The antagonistic relationship with Iran plays another important role in the choice to focus on the United States. The 1979 Islamic revolution was one of the biggest threats towards the US, which soured relations with the US embassy hostage crisis, marking a period of high tensions between the two countries. Containment policies and economic sanctions have characterised the last 50 years, creating a conflictual past that distinguishes the US from other powers that have had a less direct and more limited influence. In contrast, China emerged as a great power in the 2000s, with a fairly limited influence in the Middle East. Despite playing an important role on the trade and diplomatic front, Europe was unable to compete with the US presence, especially during the post-Cold War years. Moreover, it is important to emphasise another feature: the established historical relationship between the US and the Gulf countries made the US the main actor in reshaping the region's security dynamics between 1991 and the new millennium. Hence the decision to focus on American influence, because of their predominant role and impact in transforming the geopolitical landscape in that area.

1.3 Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative approach, supported by historical and comparative research elements, to analyse the dynamics that have shaped the evolution of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia while contextualising them within regional and international security dynamics.

The qualitative approach helps to delve into quite complex and dynamic phenomena such as those related to security dynamics and geopolitical relations between the two states. An approach that allows exploring different interactions between regional actors and also global, focusing on the depth of interpretation. This study is also reinforced by the analysis of specific case studies, which offer a diachronic perspective to understand how these relations have changed and evolved over the years.

The comparative method, embedded in the analysis, allows the comparison of different historical periods, highlighting discontinuous or recurring patterns in Iran-Saudi relations, and showing how geopolitical influence, regional alliances and power dynamics have changed. The comparative-historical approach lays the groundwork for understanding not only the causes and consequences of events but also the contemporary situation.

Both primary and secondary sources will be used and selected throughout the study based on criteria of relevance, accessibility and reliability. Primary sources will include official documents, political statements and intelligence reports. In particular, official documents from the governments of Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States will be analysed. In addition, the statements of Iranian and Saudi leaders will be analysed as they directly reflect the political strategy and the rhetoric used in bilateral relations and security issues. Speeches and statements by US presidents will also be analysed, which will undoubtedly offer perspective on US policies and strategies in the Middle East and regional interventions.

Secondary sources will include academic studies, books and articles, with a focus on key publications such as those by scholars of Gulf geopolitics, including F. Gregory Gause III and Professor Simon Mabon. Internationally oriented academic journals, including *Foreign Affairs*, *Middle East Journal* and *International Security* will offer up-to-date analysis and critical interpretations of regional security dynamics. Reports from international think tanks, such as the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, will help deepen the strategic and political perspective on the implications of Saudi-Iranian interactions.

An important element related to methodology will be the use of a critical approach to source analysis, especially when primary sources such as political speeches and government statements will be used. These sources can prove to be a double-edged sword as they can be characterized by rhetoric and bias, often constructed to influence public opinion. In this regard, speeches delivered by Iranian and Saudi leaders could be used to legitimize domestic policies and strengthen the country's position in regional competition. Therefore, a discourse analysis methodology will be used that will examine the content in the statements, but also the historical and political context. Another conceptual tool for critical analysis will refer to Barry Buzan and the Copenhagen School related to security studies and “securitization.” According to Buzan, security is a real process by which political actors see certain situations and issues as threats, using different measures to deal with them. Applying this perspective to the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh, the securitization of both countries and how issues such as Iran's nuclear program or support for armed groups in the region, have been means will be explored. Finally, Buzan and Wæver’s Regional Security Complex theory, by focusing on the regional dynamics of

security and how conflicts within a region are interconnected, will allow the examination of Iran and Saudi Arabia's interactions with external actors. The study of relevant and specific historical cases will be crucial in providing greater historical depth to better understand the security apparatus in the region and the evolution of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The historical research takes a chronological approach, intending to examine how specific events influenced the interactions between the two states. The following points will be analysed in detail: the Iranian Revolution (1979), which transformed Iran into an Islamic Republic and had a profound impact on Saudi Arabia. The Iran-Iraq conflict (1980-1988) in which Saudi Arabia financially supported Iraq, intensifying rivalries between the two countries and influencing regional alliances. The end of the Cold War in 1991 is another specific historical moment that represents a turning point for the international system and the Gulf region. The invasion of Iraq (2003) and the fall of Mossadegh allowed Iran to expand its influence; the proxy wars in Syria and Yemen (2010-2018) where Iran supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Houthi rebels, while Saudi Arabia sought to contain Iranian influence through military interventions and regional alliances. Finally, the Arab Spring in 2011 led to an increase in sectarian and geopolitical rivalries, bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran to exploit conflicts throughout the Levant and the Gulf. This analysis will consider the impact of these events on a political and military level, highlighting perceptions of mutual threat.

However, despite the methodological approach analysed, the study may face limitations that should not be underestimated. Among the limitations of the research may be the difficulties in accessing direct and up-to-date sources: the difficulty in accessing confidential or intelligence documents that could provide crucial information for the research, but are not available to the public. Another limitation is related to the complexity of interpreting security dynamics in a changing environment. This presents a challenge because future events could rapidly change the context being analysed. Therefore, it will be crucial to take a critical approach to mitigate potential biases in sources and treat them with due caution. The methodology adopted aims to provide an in-depth understanding of Iran-Saudi relations and regional and international security dynamics through the analysis of primary and secondary sources and targeted historical case studies. This approach will seek to fill existing gaps in the literature and offer new perspectives on Iran-Saudi relations and the role of the United States in the effort to contain terrorism.

1.3.1 Circumscribed historical period

It is important to note that the analysis will stop at a well-defined historical period, focusing on the events of 2018. This time limit was chosen to focus on the key events and dynamics up to that period, which changed Saudi-Iranian relations, avoiding excessive scattering into more recent events, which could shift the focus from the necessary depth. The war in Syria, Yemen, and Iranian nuclear power are some of the focal points up to this stage.

Iranian nuclear power and the JCPOA, signed in 2015, are an interesting topic for bilateral relations and also for contemporary regional security. The agreement that was born to limit Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief was perceived as a threat by Saudi Arabia, and seen as an attempt to strengthen Iranian influence in the region. Accordingly, events between 2015 and 2018, such as the U.S. decision to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018, will be analysed during the research. The decision to end the analysis until 2018 is motivated by the intent to provide an in-depth and detailed view of the major changes up to that historical period.

However, it is important to recognize the high relevance of the topic under consideration and how the situation in the Middle East is constantly evolving and highly dynamic. What might be relevant today could change rapidly due to unpredictable events, and relations between the two states, such as regional and international alliances, can evolve rapidly, leading to new developments. Therefore, although the main focus of this thesis is limited to a specific historical period (late 1960s - 2017/2018), it is crucial to consider that dynamics and alliances could evolve rapidly.

1.3.2 Reading The Contemporary Situation

In this regard, while stopping at 2018, to offer an in-depth analysis of security dynamics, it is necessary to recognize how historical transformations have affected the current security situation in the Gulf area. The last chapter will be dedicated to examining the contemporary regional security situation, taking historical dynamics as an interpretive lens. The ultimate goal is to offer a contextualized reading of the current security situation while keeping the focus on how historical and geopolitical changes up to 2018, have affected the current landscape.

The analysis will focus on the legacy of past dynamics and how tensions between Tehran and Riyadh continue to influence security strategies and participation in proxy conflicts. It will then examine how past conflicts have profoundly shaped the two states' current regional security responses and also the U.S. role in the area. The evolution of security trends will be explored next, taking the case of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and the subsequent U.S. retreat in 2018 as an example. It will then be analysed how the perceived threat associated with the deal and Washington's decisions, have impacted Saudi-Iranian relations. The effects of the Arab Spring in 2011 will also bring another focus, showing the new alliances and security strategies taken in the region.

Finally, the chapter will focus on the connection between the historical and geopolitical events analysed during the research and the contemporary situation, aiming to show how they are interconnected. It will analyse how security policies and power dynamics up to 2018 have influenced the contemporary configuration of regional security. This approach allows for staying within the defined time limits for the analysis while providing a link between historical events and the contemporary situation, without trying to predict future scenarios, but contextualizing developments within the research. This will avoid the risk of making predictions about dynamics that are difficult to predict, instead keeping the focus on recent developments and how trends analysed through 2018 continue to shape regional and international relations.

1.4 Literature Review

The topic of security in the Middle East is a complex and multidimensional field of study, influenced by historical, political, and strategic factors, and it is a major concern for states and societies today. Over the years, various researchers on this region have tried to emphasise certain aspects: the elevated level of conflict, the volatility of political alliances and/or the presence of weak regional institutions. Leading exponents have analysed these issues from different perspectives. James Gelvin, for instance, focused on the historical context of conflicts in the region in *The Modern Middle East: a History* (Gelvin, 2011); Mehran Kamrava offers an overview of Gulf rivalries and the implications for regional stability in *The Modern Middle East: a Political History since the First World War* (Kamrava, 2011); Olivier Roy in his book *The failure of political Islam* explores how

political institutions in the Middle East often prove to be ineffective and unstable, contributing to the fragility in the region (Roy & Volk, 1998); F. Gregory Gause in his studies have analysed political alliances in the Middle East, highlighting how alliances are often temporary and volatile (Gause F. , 2009). Toby Dodge analyses the political alliances formed after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, exploring how regional powers, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, created opportunistic alliances to maximize their influence, which contributed to destabilize the region with global repercussions and the involvement of great powers (Dodge, 2012).

All these elements have led scholars to develop specific and conceptual tools to understand this complex geopolitical context: Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) shows how regional security dynamics are influenced by interactions between states within the region and the role of external powers (Buzan & Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 2003). Kenneth Waltz's balance of power theory explains how states attempt to balance power to maintain stability within these regional structures (Waltz, 1979). Alexander Wendt's constructivist approach also emphasises the role of identity and norms in creating security policies, an approach that is relevant in a region where sectarian and national identities are strongly entrenched (Wendt A. , 1992).

The dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in particular, have been the subject of strong academic and political interest in the last few years. This literature review examines the concept of security and the main schools of thought and theories that have helped shape the understanding of regional security between the two powers in the Gulf, rivalries and external influences, while also analysing the role of the United States and how it has influenced the evolution of security in the Middle East.

Discussing security, it is noticeable that this concept is not limited to a single dimension, but relates to different areas, such as personal, social, national, and economic security. Every country strives to ensure the security of its territory and maintain its independence and integrity because regardless of the level of development, countries can be exposed to conflicts, terrorist attacks and clashes (Chandra & Bhonsle, 2015). However, in the present thesis, the concept of security will be analysed in its dimension of crises and conflicts between populations, focusing on wars and rivalries over spheres of influence. The dissertation will investigate how territorial disputes and conflicts have shaped

security dynamics in the Gulf region and more broadly internationally, analysing how these factors continue to transform and influence global security.

Threats to national security can be both internal and external, necessitating an effort between foreign policy, defence, and public order. However, it is important to emphasise that these dynamics vary greatly depending on the political context and the countries involved. The relevance of the concept of security varies depending on the level of analysis considered.

The concept of the security dilemma, already analysed in the 1950s by various authors such as John Herz, Herbert Butterfield, and Robert Jervis, represents one of the most important themes in the field of international relations. Herz defines the concept of the security dilemma as “politically active groups and individuals who are concerned about their safety from being attacked, subjugated or annihilated by other groups and individuals, but can never feel entirely secure in a world of competing units and are driven to acquire more and more power for themselves to escape the impact of the superior power of others” (Herz, 1950). Butterfield argues that “*the greatest war in history (...) could be produced between two powers, both desperate to avoid conflict of any kind*” (Butterfield, 1951). Jervis, on the other hand, argues that the security dilemma exists when many of the means by which one state seeks to increase its security diminish that of others" (Jervis, 1978).

Starting from the concept of the security dilemma, it is possible to observe how the latter has played a significant role in defining the current relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In fact, both countries, driven by the fear of regional conflicts and tensions, work to consolidate and strengthen their own sphere of power, which can lead to a series of competitive dynamics, including an arms race and in the worst-case scenario, the possibility of outright war. The growing need for security and at the same time the perception of mutual threats can create a vicious circle that may result in a full-scale war.

In order to understand the various approaches to security and cooperation among states, it is also necessary to examine the main schools of thought that have developed over the last century and have contributed most to understanding the evolution.

The debate on what constitutes a security issue has deep roots and needs in-depth study. In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of security was primarily seen through the fear of military threats, reflecting the logic of the Cold War. Conflicts such as the Six Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) shaped and reinforced this view. However, over the years, a growing recognition of threats emerged that were no longer exclusively military, but also related to economic crises, social tensions, and environmental problems. During this period, scholars such as Joffé emphasised how border disputes and territorial tensions were perceived as real existential threats to the security of states (Joffé, 1996).

Since the 1980s, there has been a notable change in the perception of security in the Middle East. Indeed, scholars also began to recognise non-military threats, which played a crucial role in destabilising the region. Barry Buzan, one of the leading theorists of this period, criticised the traditional approach for its limited and narrow view and proposed a broader understanding of the issue. In his work in 1991 and later in 1998 together with Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, Buzan argued that security had to be considered in political, economic and social terms (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

The events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent “War on Terror” have brought renewed attention to military and terrorist threats. It also brought a growing awareness of the importance of non-military threats. Scholars such as Chalk argued that security issues in the Middle East needed to be considered in a broader political, economic and social context, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of the root causes of regional instability (Chalk, 2003).

Despite the continued emphasis on military-related threats by some military-related scholars (Feldman & Toukan, 1997) (Cordesman A. , 2004), there has been a growing dissatisfaction with this limited approach. Zulfqar pointed out that this emphasis partly reflected the traditional interests of the hegemonic powers in the region (Zulfqar, 2018). Other scholars such as Blanton have focused on the link between increased military imports and human rights violations, pointing out how this leads to a decrease in personal security (Blanton, 1999).

Despite countless studies on security in the Middle East, discussed earlier, there are still several gaps in the literature. Several studies focus on single events or specific periods, without offering a comprehensive view of the security dynamics that have characterised

the region over the years. Moreover, most studies tend to privilege a military perspective, neglecting the importance of the political and historical dimensions. Traditional security studies often adopt a Eurocentric framework that, as Mekia Nedjar argues in his analysis, reduces the Middle East region to a simple security issue, ignoring local perspectives and historical events (Nedjar, 2024). The narrow focus on military aspects and the influence of Western culture have greatly limited the understanding of how security is perceived and managed within the region, preventing a more inclusive understanding of the area. In order to address the shortcomings due to the predominance of a narrow Eurocentric and military-centric view, a more inclusive approach is needed that considers both the broader socio-cultural context and postcolonial critiques that challenge narratives about the Middle East.

As mentioned earlier, there are countless debates on which international relations (IR) theory is most effective for analysing the Middle East. Over the years, several theories have developed that have contributed to increasing and complicating the understanding of regional dynamics. Each of these theories offers a specific perspective and tools that can be applied to explain distinct aspects of inter-state relations in the region. Realist theory offers an interesting perspective for analysing security in the Middle East, highlighting the concept of international anarchy as a central principle. According to Realism, states are the main actors in the international system, motivated by the quest for power and security in an anarchic context (Morgenthau, 1948). Realist theory sees conflicts in the region as a manifestation of this anarchy for resources and influence. For example, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been interpreted as a struggle for regional dominance and territorial control, in which actors pursue their interests through wars and strategic alliances (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Realism is based on different characteristics: firstly, the nation-state is seen as the main actor in international relations, while individuals and organisations have limited power. Moreover, the state is an actor that acts in a unified manner, especially during conflicts, which shows that despite possible internal divisions, the state acts cohesively to pursue its national interests. The state is usually defined by its ability to interact with other states through its power to protect the national interest and ensure security (Morgenthau, 1948). A state is considered secure if it can defend itself and prevent other states from changing its behaviour and core political values. Since states, according to realism, live in an

anarchic context, where there is no established international hierarchy, they will consequently have to rely only on themselves to achieve their security. Realism advocates two different strategies: balance of power and deterrence. While the balance of power is based on strategic alliances, deterrence is characterised by fear of an external threat.

The concept of power is therefore dynamic and multidimensional, varying according to various approaches in international relations. Looking at the realist approach, several scholars, such as Hans J. Morgenthau and John Mearsheimer, see international politics as a power struggle. On one hand, Morgenthau argues that international politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature and that power is the main purpose of states (Morgenthau, 1948), while Mearsheimer not only extends this idea, but also explains that states are driven to maximise their power to ensure their own security in an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). Raymond Aron, also a realist, defines power as “the ability of a political entity to impose its will on others’ (Aron, 1962), a realist approach that nonetheless differs somewhat from other authors in its more sociological analysis and offers a useful perspective for analysing how power and security dynamics influence both international relations and conflicts in the region (Bayramzadeh, 2016).

In the context of the Middle East, realism is often accused of oversimplifying regional dynamics by focusing exclusively on states, ignoring the crucial role of non-state actors such as armed groups, and ethnic and religious minorities that influence regional dynamics. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia represents how the competition is not only at the state level, but also involves non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Shia militias in Iraq. Using realist theory, this struggle could be seen for regional hegemony, hiding a more complex reality involving ideological and sectarian factors (Gause III F. , 2014).

However, the realist approach has been strongly criticised for its pessimism and tendency to see the conflict as something inevitable, encouraging leaders to act on suspicion, power and force. According to realist theory, the possibility of peaceful change in international relations is limited. It has been criticised for its inability to explain significant historical transformations such as the end of the Cold War: an event that showed how international cooperation can emerge, going against realist predictions of an international system characterised by conflict. Criticism of realism has also been levelled at the state-centred

view, neglecting the role of non-state actors and internal dynamics. The collapse of the USSR, for example, was not taken into account by realists because they did not give importance to internal forces and popular movements. A limitation that shows a vision that does not consider the complexity and variables that influence the behaviour of states, as well as the international context.

Starting from the 1950s and 1960s, attempts were made to replace the classical realists with more scientific concepts and reasoning. Neorealism is seen as an attempt to construct a more scientific approach to the study of international relations. Kenneth N. Waltz, and the greatest exponent of neo-realism expanded some earlier realist ideas, following a more scientific and rigorous path. In his book *Theory of International Politics* (1979), he tried to expand realism through a more scientific lens, breaking away from the classical realism of Morgenthau. Waltz used an economic metaphor in his work, comparing states to companies that act in the international system with the primary purpose of survival and maintaining their security (Waltz, 1979).

This theory, also known as structural realism, shifts the focus from individual nation-states to the systemic level of international relations, showing how the actions of states are nothing more than a consequence of the pressures exerted by international competition that condition their choices. The scene is always dominated by anarchy, but this approach focuses more on the structure of the system rather than human nature. Anarchy is thus an intrinsic feature of the international system and not simply a consequence of human nature. Systemic factors, such as the asymmetric distribution of power and the absence of a central supranational authority, create competitive pressures that influence the behaviour of states and their choices of alliances and security arrangements (Waltz, 1979).

Regionalism in this context becomes a tool adopted by individual states to address shared challenges under the leadership of a hegemonic state. During the Cold War, for example, the US and USSR supported regional groups and regimes to extend their influence and counter the other superpower. Berry Posen argues that although states may be aware of the consequences of their actions to reduce the security of others, the “*nature of their situation compels them to take the steps that they do*” (Posen, 1993). This means that even though the actions of a state may make the international system more dangerous and unstable, they are seen as inevitable due to the pressures and necessities to which the state

is subjected. Posen further argues that foreign policy and security decisions are inevitably influenced by the anarchic structure of the international system and the need to ensure one's survival in an environment of uncertainty, fear and competition.

In this regard, the bipolar competition between the US and the USSR during the Cold War is a clear example of how regional alliances in the Middle East were influenced: aware that their support for regional regimes could increase global tensions, they continued, however, to do so because it was crucial to their security and balance of power. The US supported the Gulf regimes as part of its strategy to contain Soviet influence, while states such as Egypt and Syria were supported by the Soviet Union. An example demonstrating how the structural pressures of the international and regional system shaped the alliances and security choices of regional states (Waltz, 1979).

William Wohlforth analyses the concept of internal balancing, i.e. the tendency of great powers to give more importance to improving their military capabilities in order to maintain their position of power, than to create external alliances (Wohlforth, 1999). An approach that may explain why states favour the expansion of their internal capabilities over external ones, such as alliances. On the other hand, John Mearsheimer argues that external balancing, i.e. the formation of alliances to counter external threats, may be a crucial point in the formation of alliances (Mearsheimer, 2001). For the scholar, external alliances are essential for states facing threats. This was evident during the Cold War when alliances in the Middle East were influenced by bipolar competition, but also by the need to balance the influence of the superpowers. Where the latter supported regional alliances to counter the expansion of the other bloc and to protect their own interests.

Neo-realism has been criticised for its universal applicability and for neglecting the importance of international cooperation. Robert Keohane argues that neo-realism fails to explain the dynamics of cooperation between states despite anarchy. To fill this gap, he developed institutionalist neo-liberalism, which is based on the role of international institutions and how they can facilitate cooperation and mitigate conflict at the same time (Keohane R. , 1984).

The debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism has been heated in international relations, even though the two schools of thought have been considered particularly similar. Two institutionalist exponents: Lisa Martin and Robert Keohane have

argued that “for better or worse, institutional theory is a half-sister of neorealism” (Keohane & Martin, 1995), however, there are differences: for example, while for neorealists the view on international cooperation is rather pessimistic, for neoliberal institutionalists cooperation is viewed with a decidedly more optimistic approach.

Neo-liberal institutionalism focuses on the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation and mitigating anarchy through the creation of shared rules and norms. Keohane and Nye see states as dominant actors in international relations, but at the same time argue for the presence of hierarchy within international politics. Neoliberal institutionalists focus on environmental and economic issues, and globalization represents an increase in interconnectedness and linkages, mutual interdependence that positively influences behavioural patterns and changes the level of cooperation between states (Keohane & Nye, 1977). States therefore act in their own interest, but with a more optimistic view of cooperation. Keohane recognizes that cooperation is not an easy endeavour and can result in tensions, but believes that states can benefit from cooperative strategies (Keohane R. , 1984). Institutionalists place a great deal of trust in institutions. These in fact, in addition to serving as arbitrary bodies, provide a coordination mechanism to facilitate states to gain potential gains from cooperation (Martin & Keohane, 1995).

These current aims to understand how security regimes, such as regional partnerships and strategic alliances, have been adopted to address common threats while promoting stability. Efforts to create security cooperation mechanisms in the Middle East, such as collective security initiatives among Gulf countries, reflect the importance of institutions for regional stability (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

At the end of the 1980s to early 1990s, constructivism emerged, representing a counterpoint to realist theory and neorealist one. Constructivism arose in response to the weaknesses of traditional theories that had not given much space to social interactions and collective identities. Scholars of this current see international relations as intersubjective and regard the state as a social construction. This means that states, and at the same time their interactions, are influenced by shared norms and identities in regional constructions.

Alexander Wendt, a prominent constructivist theorist, uses the concept of the security dilemma in his constructivist writings to emphasise that anarchy is not the main cause of

this phenomenon. He states, "We do not begin our relationship with others in a security dilemma; security dilemmas are not given by anarchy or nature" (Wendt A. , 1992). According to the author, in fact, anarchy is not an immutable condition, but is constructed by states through the interactions they have. It can be interpreted in different ways according to the meaning attributed to it by different actors. Therefore, constructivism shifts the focus from the static nature of the anarchist system, as advocated by realists, by stressing the importance of ideas, beliefs, and identities that influence state behaviour, emphasizing how reality is always under construction and dynamic. Unlike realism, this current sees the security dilemma as a product of states' perception of their own identity rather than a situation marked by the anarchist system.

The security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a significant example that can be analysed using constructivist theory. According to McDonald, norms reflect shared expectations about appropriate behaviour by states with a particular identity (McDonald, 2018), and in this case religious norms and sectarian identities play a crucial role. Here Shiite-Sunni rivalries are instrumental in shaping regional security dynamics. Where religion is not just a cultural factor, but a real political tool to legitimize alliances and foreign policies. A perspective that allows for an understanding of how social constructions and ideological beliefs can influence interstate rivalries. Moreover, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not only limited to the Persian Gulf region but has global ramifications.

Another central theme of this theory is the concept of identity. Constructivists believe that states do not have a single identity, but can have multiple identities, socially constructed through interaction with other actors. For example, the identity of a small state will have different interests from those of a large state. While survival is pursued, the large state will likely want political and economic hegemony. Unlike realist and neo-realist theories, which emphasise material and power interests, this theory argues that perceptions and social constructions deeply influence the behaviour of states and their alliances (Wendt, 1999).

In the Middle East, religious identities affect the context and play a crucial role in shaping states' security policies. This region is marked by several religious divisions that dominate geopolitical dynamics: Sunni and Shiite Islam. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran

goes beyond simple power issues and represents important ideological and normative differences. Iran, which is considered the main proponent of the Shiite view of Islam, opposes the Sunni powers in the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia, which is linked to Sunni Islam. A religious division that not only influences alliances and conflicts in the region, but also shapes expectations and names concerning appropriate behavior for each state. A rivalry that is expressed through a range of geopolitical and ideological actions, including support for opposing factions in regional conflicts and strengthening of strategic alliances.

Social norms are central to constructivism, and security is seen as a social construction and means preserving the group's core values (McDonald, 2018). States that conform to a particular identity will need to reflect the norms associated with those identities, where some behaviours and actions will be more accepted than others. For instance, Iran's actions in the Middle East region reflect its Shiite identity, which puts it at odds with Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia. Iran supports movements that share its own Shiite vision, while Saudi Arabia feeling threatened by Shiite expansion, seeks to counter it by supporting groups and states with its own vision. Tensions between the two countries have manifested themselves through proxy wars such as that in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon, and by supporting political and military movements in the region.

Constructivism thus offers a lens for analysing the complexities in the Middle East, showing how rivalries are not just a matter of power, but influenced by ideological constructs and religious identities. Rivalry between Sunnis and Shiites, rooted in ancient religious and sectarian divisions, is an important element in regional security dynamics, where tensions that go beyond material power struggles reflect deep ideological and normative differences, demonstrating how religious norms and identities influence security dynamics in the region (Onuf, 2013).

With the end of the Cold War, the traditional view of security, focused exclusively on the state was challenged and described as reductive, prompting several scholars to propose broader and more contextualised definitions. The Copenhagen School, founded by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde in the 1990s, offered an important development in this regard, and the theory of regional security complexes emerged as an innovative means of analysing security and understanding the structure and balance of power. It

represents one of the most advanced attempts at the concept of security, focusing also on the importance of securitisation and the identification of security threats (Monteleone, 2017).

Security is no longer seen only as a question of military capabilities and material threats, but also of perceptions and social constructions of security through regional relations (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

1.4.1 The theory of regional security complexes

In recent years, regional systems have become essential to understanding security dynamics at the global level. While the latter continues to play a crucial role in international security dynamics, various scholars have begun to distinguish the regional level, from the systemic and state levels, using it as a separate level of analysis to examine contemporary security issues (Lake & Morgan, 1997), (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) (Hurrell, 2005). While regions provide an important analysis between state and international levels (Stewart-Ingersoll & Frazier, 2012); the study of regions has begun to see growth since the late 1950s and 1960s (Binder 1958, Brecher 1963, Russett 1967, Kaiser 1968, Thompson 1973). The end of the Cold War, as anticipated earlier, led to a drastic reduction in the involvement of major powers in most regions, leading regions to gain greater autonomy in the international context (Amable, 2022).

For many years only two levels of analysis - national and global - had dominated the discussion of security analysis, while the regional level took over much later, helping to provide a holistic understanding of security dynamics at the regional level. In this regard, Barry and Wæver defined the regional level as the interaction between the national and global levels, arguing that the regional level provided a better and clearer theoretical view of international security dynamics (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The regional level is also described as the level where most security action occurs.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Barry Buzan and later updated by Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, provides a key to understanding how security concerns between states are interconnected and influence regional stability. Initially presented in the first edition of *People, states and Fear* (1983), before being updated in 1998 with a revised version by Buzan together with Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, and finally in 2003

the RSCT explores the complexity of security relations between states and their interdependence (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The theory explains that regional security complexes are formed when the security problems of a group of states are so intricately linked that they cannot be analysed separately. In this regard, the concepts of amity and enmity become central to the RSCT. Amity represents positive relations, i.e. inter-state relations ranging from friendship to the expectation of protection and support. Enmity, on the other hand, describes negative ones, referring to relations conditioned and supported by suspicions and fears, which may stem from territorial disputes, ideological differences, or complex historical ties (Buzan, 1991). The presence of hostilities can be particularly complex when there are deep historical roots between the peoples involved.

Security complexes are extremely broad phenomena rooted in historical and geopolitical contexts that are not always well-defined and clear. These links are crucial in understanding security complexes and relations in one or more regions. In the Middle East, it is evident how both the ethnic and religious components have facilitated and legitimised security interdependence in a large group of states. At the same time, however, these factors represent a double-edged sword: because they can lead to the creation of positive as well as negative relations.

Iran has its roots in the Persian culture of the pre-Islamic era, but at the same time, it also has the current religion-Islam. Although the majority of Iranians are Shiite, the religion does not represent the entire Iranian identity (Kamari Majiin, 2017). With the outbreak of the Iranian revolution, the state became Shiite and tried to eliminate non-Islamic minorities from Iran's historical and cultural heritage. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, bases its identity on Sunni Islam and tribal affiliations (Rubin, 2011), with Wahhabism guiding many religious and political decisions. This historically well-established Sunni-Shia divide has led the conflict to go beyond simple religious differences, creating real geopolitical rivalries. The conflicting Iranian and Saudi identities have reinforced a perception of a mutual threat, fuelled by religious and political issues that both ruling elites use to consolidate internal consensus. The competition, exacerbated by the historical rivalry between Shiites and Sunnis, is also dictated by an ideological competition (Mabon S. , 2013) where the concept of social justice in Iran refers to the

Shiite tradition, while in Saudi Arabia the central role of the monarchy is reinforced by the management of Islam's holy sites (Wood, 2005).

Although Islam is a factor that should not be overlooked in security relations in the Middle East, it is necessary to emphasize that this is not the only element to be considered. Ethnic, political and geopolitical components represent key points in determining stability at the regional level. The political and religious identity of the two states, rivalry between Shiites and Sunnis, intervention by external actors, and geopolitical ambitions all contribute to making the Persian Gulf a complex security system. Non-Muslim religious minorities, such as Christians, Jews, Yazidis, and Bahá'ís, further complicate relations. Groups that often suffer persecution or marginalization, such as the Bahá'ís in Iran, have attracted international intervention, exacerbating complexity in the area.

The relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example, perfectly illustrate the concept of the security complex. These two countries are often viewed as regional rivals, with both ideological (Shia vs. Sunni) and geopolitical competition. Their rivalry creates significant consequences for regional security, influencing power dynamics and contributing to instability in neighbouring countries and beyond. To provide more insight into these rivalries and how they affect regional security, some practical examples show the tangible consequences of this competition. The two states have been competing for the role of the dominant power in the region for years, and to increase their hegemony at the expense of the other, they wage proxy wars in various countries in the Middle East, as happened with Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. A power struggle that has strong negative repercussions for peace and security in the region. As Afshon Ostovar notes, the rhetoric and escalation of proxy wars are not recognized by either side and how they are destroying the region (Ostovar, 2018).

One of the most visible examples of these proxy wars is related to the conflict in Yemen that began in 2014, where Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni coalition against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. In Iraq, the rivalry appeared as Iranian support for Shiite militias and Saudi support instead for Sunni groups, contributing to sectarian violence in the region. The presence of armed groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda in the region has increased as a result of these rivalries with strong regional security implications

(Hojayem, 2016). Also, the conflict in Syria, where Iran supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad while Saudi Arabia supported Sunni rebel groups, intensified the war and a possible political resolution. In the Persian Gulf, the rivalry between the two states can be seen in tensions over the Strait of Hormuz, as well as a strategic sea passage for the oil trade. Iran has repeatedly threatened to close the strait, creating fears for the stability of the region. Moreover, the U.S. presence in Bahrain to ensure the security of the routes is seen by Iran as a threat.

As can be seen, the rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran in both the Middle East and the Persian Gulf have increased regional instability, creating a complex security system that makes it difficult to foresee a resolution of tensions in the short term. The theory of regional security complexes also elaborates four distinct levels of analysis in the study of regional security: internal, regional, interregional, and global. The internal level deals with internal security and stability issues and the vulnerabilities created by sub-state actors and their interrelationships. The regional (state-to-state) level depends on security interactions between states in a security complex and is the level where most interactions occur. The inter-regional level is less important as interactions between states in different regional complexes are more limited and finally, the global level is characterised by the influence of global forces and major powers engaged in a specific region and the interaction of the latter with regional security structures (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

After considering the contributions of the various theories, however, many gaps remain in the literature. Regional Security complex theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver, has been the subject of several criticisms, showing some limitations and highlighting how it is partly outdated. Dennis Senam Amable criticizes how RSCT focuses on regional security complexes that have already been formed but does not analyse how the latter initially emerged (Amable, 2022). The theory, according to Amable, is effective in analysing already established regional structures, yet provides few tools for understanding the formation of new security complexes. Troitskiy makes another criticism of Buzan, related to the role that great powers play (Troitskiy, 2015). How these shape regional security complexes. Troitskiy believes that the RSCT partly underestimates the role of external powers, especially during the initial stages of the

formation of these complexes. Taking the case of the Persian Gulf, whereby the security interdependence between Saudi Arabia and Iran plays a limited role, several external powers such as the U.S. and China, on the other hand, play an important role in fostering or hindering regional cooperation. The RSCT therefore, should focus more on the impact these external actors have in shaping and varying regional security dynamics. Iver Neumann in 1994 raised doubts about the very definition of “region” within Buzan's theory, arguing that regions were not natural entities but political constructs (Neumann, 1994). Neumann also followed by Kavalski, argues that the RSCT risks ignoring specific local and political dynamics that lead to the formation of security regions, as regions are often created by external political actors and powers (Kavalski, 2011). Suggesting how, the theory needs to be adapted to consider the different local and political circumstances that influence the construction of security regions, especially in areas such as the Middle East.

The RSCT emphasizes security interdependence among states, showing how they within a region share common threats and cooperate to address them. However, this idea is not always applicable in the case of the Middle East. Iran and Saudi Arabia, for example, have common threats such as regional instability and terrorism, but they do not cooperate on security. Esmaili, Salimi and Firoozabadi argue that in such contexts, the RSCT fails to explain why states in the region do not develop cooperation despite having several common concerns (Esmaili, Salimi, & Firoozabadi, 2021). Buzan and Waever's theory should therefore be adapted by understanding how in some regions, interdependence is not taken for granted and how external powers can foster or hinder cooperation. In addition to these criticisms, it is important to underscore how challenging it would be to gain a full understanding of the regional security context without an in-depth analysis of their relations, starting from the historical, political and religious context.

In order to have a clear analysis of the context that has marked Iran-Saudi relations and continues to this day, it is essential to identify and analyse the major turning points that have affected the regional security landscape. The Iranian revolution in 1979, the end of the Cold War, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 with the subsequent fall of Saddam

Hussein, and finally the Arab uprisings in 2011, all represent pivotal moments that have led the Middle East to face a new Cold War. Gregory Gause in this regard states:

“The best framework for understanding the complicated and violent regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war among a number of regional players, both states and non-state actors, in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles. It is a cold war because these two main actors are not confronting and most probably will not confront each other militarily. Rather, their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region's weak states. It is a struggle over the direction of the Middle East's domestic politics more than a purely military contest.” (Gause III F. , 2014)

And again, Roxane Framnfarmaian, who specializes on Iran, argues that:

“Reincarnation of the Arab Cold War...often called the Iran-Saudi proxy war, it is a sectarian confrontation...today, the second Arab Cold War has a different tinge. The Saudi-led moderates have changed little; the radicals however are now no longer secular, but Islamist and primarily Shia, led by Iran's anti-Western, anti-Israeli ideology” (Farmanfarmanian, 2012).

Both scholars describe the current rivalry between the two countries in the Gulf as a real cold war with different implications for both the Middle East and the United States. Especially between 1979 and 2003, the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran was crucial. The two countries together with the alliances forged over the years participated in a new kind of conflict that goes beyond the traditional elements of war, coming very close to the enmity that existed between the USSR and the U.S. during the Cold War.

The first key moment was the Iranian revolution of 1979, which transformed the conflict between the two states from a geopolitical rivalry to a sectarian clash that polarized the region based on different ideologies (Nasr, 2006), changing the nature of relations between the two states. The Iranian revolution not only challenged the status quo in the region, but introduced a factor of instability that further complicated the international

situation, threatening the Saudi desire for political stability. Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's holy places, saw its regional responsibility linked to the preservation of peace and stability, both domestically and with neighbouring countries. From a regional security perspective, the revolution introduced an element of systemic instability. A change that altered the balance of power in the area, leading to a geopolitical and sectarian rivalry that would affect the Middle East for decades to come. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia were not just limited to being ideological, but strongly influenced security in the Gulf and alliances with other external actors such as the US (Wright, 2007). This also leads to the support of proxy wars, as already mentioned in advance. Revolutionary Iran as a result began to exert strong pressure, fuelling geopolitical and sectarian competition by influencing security throughout the region, creating a chronic sense of insecurity that characterizes relations between the two states (Adisönmez, Onursal, & Oztig, 2022).

The end of the Cold War in 1991 also represented another important turning point for relations between the two states, changing the security dynamics in the area. With the dissolution of the USSR, the power vacuum led to a shift in alliances and an increase in power by the US in the Persian Gulf. Iran, deprived of Soviet support, began to expand its power by forming alliances with non-state actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shia groups in Iraq. A strategy that inevitably led to an increase in militarisation by Saudi Arabia and consequently Iran itself (Gause F. , 2010).

The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein represented the third crucial turning point. These events led to a power shift between Iran and Saudi Arabia, increasing the already existing tensions. Iraq, once perceived as a hostile enemy, became a political battleground where Iran and Saudi Arabia sought to expand their influence. With the fall of Hussein, a power vacuum occurred, leading to the creation of a Shia government in Iraq, changing the balance in the region while challenging the historical Sunni hegemony. Tehran saw this change as a favourable opportunity, deciding to strengthen its ties with the post-Saddam Shia governments and increase its influence in the country. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia felt intimidated by these developments, fearing a decline of Sunni influence in the region. The two countries never clashed directly, but decided to divide the region into two opposing camps, based

on political and religious ideologies, seeking to consolidate their spheres of influence, marking a new phase of indirect confrontation between the two powers (Terrill A. , 2011).

Finally, the Arab Spring in 2011, was considered the fourth turning point for regional security in the Gulf. The uprisings led to an increase in sectarian and geopolitical rivalries. Iran sought to expand its influence by supporting Shia groups, while Saudi Arabia supported Sunni ones and intensified its role in the proxy war in Syria (Wehrey F. , 2013). Creating instabilities that have damaged regional security. The Arab Spring uprisings have led the two countries to exploit conflicts throughout the Levant and the Gulf, supporting opposing political factions and financing rival armies. Hostility between Tehran and Riyadh has intensified as they sought to expand their influence in the domestic politics of states in transition. Both countries, in fact, sought to improve relations with the new leaders that emerged from the uprisings, trying to exploit the precarious situation and power vacuums in the weaker countries.

These four different turning points are therefore essential to understanding our analysis. All four have proved crucial in transforming the regional security paradigm, leading Saudi Arabia and Iran to fuel sectarian divisions, support their allies through military support and armaments, and create a climate of continuous tension that is difficult to marginalize. This new 'cold war' between Iran and Saudi Arabia has inevitably led the Gulf region to turn into a strategic battleground, also involving external powers such as the US.

Another dimension to be taken into account is the economy and energy markets. Both countries are major oil exporters, and their policies have a decidedly significant impact not only on their own economies but also on regional and global stability. The relationship between energy and security is very relevant for the Gulf, as the economies of Saudi Arabia and Iran are largely dependent on oil exports, with a direct impact on both national and regional security. The management of these resources can consequently affect the countries' internal stability and at the same time their ability to compete for regional hegemony. If one of the countries were to face an economic crisis, it could be weakened to such an extent that it would no longer be able to maintain an effective defence policy and at the same time affect the regional and global system.

Oil exports are a significant source of income for both nations and an economic shock could generate strong internal instability, reducing both defence capabilities and fuelling social tensions. Economic competition between the two Gulf countries tends to increase political and military rivalry, as both countries want to expand their influence in the region, including by financing armed groups and forming alliances with international powers. The conflict in Syria, for example, shows how Tehran and Riyadh's energy policies have financed proxy wars, increasing regional instability. The interdependence between economics and security is also evident when a state's economic resources, such as oil, are exploited to strengthen its military security and influence regional politics (Koch & Stivachtis, 2019).

Through my thesis, I intend to fill these existing gaps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional security dynamics in the Gulf through a detailed study of the bilateral relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. A key element of my analysis is the influence of the US on relations between the two countries. The gaps I want to fill will refer to two criticisms levelled against the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The first, made by Troitskiy, shows how the two authors focus on already formed security complexes, without offering an in-depth analysis of the formation process and the evolution of these regional complexes over time (Troitskiy, 2015). This thesis will therefore explore in more detail the emergence of the Gulf sub-complex, which developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s: a period characterised by the British withdrawal from the region and the rise of the oil powers. By analysing these historical events and the emergence of the subcomplex, I will attempt to provide more historical depth to understand geopolitical transformations. The research will also highlight how the end of the Cold War accelerated autonomy in regional security dynamics and also in international politics.

The second criticism states that RSCTs tend to underestimate the influence of external powers, which instead play an important role in shaping security relations within a regional complex. A key element of my analysis is the influence of the US on relations between the two countries. And the thesis aims to examine how specifically, US policy has influenced regional security dynamics in the Gulf, helping to shape alliances and

rivalries. An important element in understanding how the global strategies of the great powers are linked to regional rivalries, redefining the regional security landscape.

The US has had strategic interests in the Middle East for decades, intervening both directly and indirectly in regional dynamics. American trade with the Middle East dates back more than two hundred years, when as early as 1767 trade began between Boston and Smyrna, a town in Turkey, laying the foundation for the first American Ottoman treaty signed in 1831. (Howard, 1974). During that same period, American missionaries also conducted religious, medical, and educational missions. However, before World War I, U.S.-Middle East relations were primarily focused on trade and missionary activities. With the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, the Middle East came under European influence, while the U.S. maintained a marginal role in international affairs during World War I (Al Sarhan, 2017).

American contacts in the region began to intensify after World War I, following the division of the region by Western powers such as France and Britain. However, the historical period between the two world wars shows how the U.S. was only partly involved in Middle Eastern affairs politically, while it began to make economic deals in the region. Indeed, U.S. oil companies started negotiations for concessions in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Bahrain, and Kuwait as they realized the strategic importance of the Middle East due to its energy resources and geopolitical position (Ismael, 1986). Beginning with World War II, the U.S. presence intensified, and the main interests of the United States in the region were not limited to exclusively commercial interests but also expanded to strategic and political ones. The main motivations included managing the free flow of oil from the Gulf, ensuring the survival and security of Israel, and finally limiting Soviet influence (Al Sarhan, 2017). The growing oil demand became a key resource for the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War, prompting the U.S. to be increasingly present and to intervene in the Middle East region at the same time. Oil as a strategic resource prompted Washington to establish a presence in the region to access resources, forging agreements with Saudi Arabia; on the other hand, the U.S. wanted to contain Soviet expansion during the Cold War. The decline of European colonialism led the U.S. to seek to establish a leadership position in the region, wanting to fill the gap left by France and Britain and establish a dominant position in the area. During the Cold War, the U.S.

developed policies of containment, deterrence and détente to counter possible Soviet expansion in the Middle East region.

The U.S. adopted various strategies to strengthen its influence in the area, such as oil agreements, direct intervention, and military and diplomatic assistance. In 1933, the oil agreement with Saudi Arabia was signed, which gave U.S. companies the right to extract oil, initiating a strong economic presence in the region. Another important step occurred in 1945 with the meeting between Saudi King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud and President Roosevelt, which initiated a lasting bilateral relationship based on security and oil. The U.S. also intervened militarily, as it did in 1953 through direct interventions to influence local regimes and stabilize alliances. Operation Ajax (1953) overthrew the Mossadeq government in Iran, supporting the return of the Shah and consolidating U.S. influence against the USSR. And finally through military and economic assistance to allied regimes in the region such as Saudi Arabia and to ensure stability and anti-communist support, maintaining a pro-Western regime in a strategic country. The U.S. played the role of peace broker as it did in 1978 with the Camp David Accords (1978) between Egypt and Israel, which enshrined the first peace between an Arab country and Israel.

The U.S. had greater relations with Saudi Arabia mainly through oil deals, establishing a solid military and political presence. It has also supported the state of Israel, seeking to protect its sovereignty since the mid-20th century. In Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty, supporting the Iranian government economically and militarily until the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In the post-Cold War period and with the fall of the USSR, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East saw a shift in priorities: nuclear proliferation and combating terrorism, especially after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Another important aspect of my study concerns the role of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Isis. Non-state actors contribute significantly to the context of regional security between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The activities of these groups are in many cases an extension of regional politics, contributing to heightened tensions and conflicts. Analysing the role of the United States and these terrorist groups is therefore crucial to provide adequate depth to the understanding of contemporary geopolitical dynamics and to assess the effectiveness and consequences of international security strategies adopted over the years.

1.5 Thesis relevance

The choice to analyse the bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not merely limited to a purely academic interest, but a crucial step to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of security and stability in one of the world's most unstable regions, the Middle East, and their impact globally. Iran and Saudi Arabia represent the two main regional powers in the Gulf area, each with a distinct and often conflicting vision for the region's development and influence. Iran, with its Islamic republic, and Saudi Arabia, with its absolute monarchy, are involved in a geopolitical competition that extends beyond their national borders, that has influenced and supported several regional conflicts, such as those in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon over the years, often in the form of proxy wars. The hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia has also become a structural feature of relations, rooted in repeated historical processes. This rivalry is now an integral part of their institutional structures, influencing their respective spheres of influence and shaping regional and sometimes even international politics. Competition for leadership in the region, tensions over Iran's nuclear programme and conflicting alliances are just some of the main reasons that have fuelled hostility between the two countries. (Mirza, Abbas, & Qaisrani, 2021).

Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the main factors that have increased tensions between the two countries, explaining how the rivalry is not limited to a regional issue, but has major impacts on the Middle Eastern security system, as well as involving global dynamics. Over the years, both countries have sought to assert their influence in the Middle East: on the one hand, Iran is sustained by the Shiite bloc and on the other Saudi Arabia is characterized by the Sunni bloc. A distinction rooted in sectarianism that is not only limited to tensions related to the religious sphere but also ethnic and tribal, influencing domestic and international policies. Indeed, both countries have used sectarian divisions to further their regional and global ambitions, increasing tensions and creating an environment of instability that also has international repercussions.

Another important feature is related to Iran's nuclear program, which is perceived as a real threat by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. For this reason, Saudi Arabia has sought to increase its power while creating new strategic global allies, such as the United States for example, to contain Iranian hegemony. Creating repercussions in international

relations, but also on regional security policies, helping to alter the geopolitical landscape in the area.

The conflicting alliances reflect another key point to analyse that strongly affects the rivalry between the two countries. If, for example, since the beginning of the civil war in Syria (2011), Iran has supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad through military support and by funding Shiite groups to have an important ally and consolidate its influence in the Levant, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia has decided to support Sunni groups, seeking to pursue its own regional interests. A decision that has inevitably affected the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the conflict in Syria is only one among many examples of the conflicting alliances that have been forged over the past few years and how they have affected regional geopolitics. The next chapters will explore other examples and historical events that have shaped regional and global alliances, showing in detail the changing bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Gulf.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how the rivalry and cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia influence not only the region but also international balances and alliances, especially in a context of increasing geopolitical complexity. The Middle East, perceived as a crossroads of regional and global interests and in a strategic location, is characterized by a complex web of conflicts, alliances and power relations. Competition among regional powers not only affects internal dynamics in the region but also develops externally, involving international actors and causing repercussions on global politics. The presence of external actors such as the U.S. has led to significant impact in the region. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 for example and the expansion of the war on terror have changed regional balances and alliances, leading Iran to increase its influence in Iraq for example. Competition for energy resources is an additional motivation for geopolitical complexity, where global powers are attracted to control these resources. Social and political changes such as those caused by the Arab Spring have disrupted the existing regional order, contributing to an unstable landscape. The presence of ethnic and sectarian tensions such as between Shiites and Sunnis further amplifies this complexity, increasing fragmentation and instability in the area.

In this regard, it is also interesting to consider another external actor: the United States, which reshaped the balance of power in the region following the events of 11 September

2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent war on terror strongly supported by George W. Bush. The September 11 terrorist attack led to a significant reorganization of American foreign policy in the Middle East, influencing geopolitical dynamics. U.S. President George W. Bush (2001-2009) following the 9/11 attacks initiated the war on terrorism, stating that this war would not end until terrorism was eradicated. He adopted a foreign policy geared toward security and combating terrorism. The Obama administration (2009-2017) although it promised to reduce military engagement in Afghanistan, continued the war on terrorism but also pursued more diplomacy by signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Donald Trump (2017-2021) also continued the fight against terrorism through a policy of “maximum pressure,” imposing tough sanctions on Iran and withdrawing the U.S. from the JCPOA in 2018 (Nuruzzaman, 2020).

Understanding US influence is crucial to analysing how the security policies of Iran and Saudi Arabia have evolved over time. Despite the significant amount of research and studies on the Middle East, including David W. Lesh's “The United States and the Middle East: A Historical and Political Overview” (Lesh, 2006), which shows a fairly broad perspective of US involvement in the region, and Terrill “The Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry and the Future of the Middle East” (Terrill A. , 2011), which explores the specific dynamics of the rivalry between the two countries, there are still several gaps in the literature related to the bilateral relations between the two states. Additional studies, such as Patrick Cockburn's “The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution” (Cockburn, 2015), focus on specific events, but do not offer insight into the security dynamics that have characterised the region over the years. Weichert’s work, ‘The Shadow War: Iran's Quest for Supremacy’, examines Iran's strategies but does not dwell on its relations with Saudi Arabia (Weichert, 2023).

To address these gaps, it is necessary to focus on research that integrates analyses of Iran's and Saudi Arabia's security policies with a particular focus on their balance of power and at the same time the impact of external powers. A comprehensive understanding requires the analysis of historical periods from the late 1960s to 2018 to understand security dynamics. Such a perspective focusing on historical transformations, security policies and

the influences of external actors will provide a more detailed view of current regional threats and responses.

Current challenges, such as the threat posed by Sunni Jihadist terrorism represented by extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, as well as Shiite militant activities led by Hezbollah and Iran-backed militias mainly in Iraq and Syria; constitute part of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Changes in security regimes are partly the result of the evolution of bilateral dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia over the years, and the analysis of these two countries offers an in-depth understanding of new regional threats and responses. Furthermore, the security of the Persian Gulf, one of the most critical regional sub-complexes, is directly affected by these relations.

CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FROM 60S TO 90S

Although the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has intensified in recent years, it should not be regarded as static and unchanging, but conditioned by the historical context (Mabon & Wastnidge, 2020). To analyse the contemporary context of competition between Tehran and Riyadh, it is necessary to understand how the rivalry has a longer and more troubled history, where the historical roots lie more than fifty years ago.

Relations between the two states have long been characterized not only by geopolitical rivalry but also by strong ideological and identity opposition, which intensified after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. By analysing the historical period, it is possible to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Iran-Saudi relations over the past 60 years.

2.1 Sectarianism, religious and geopolitical division in the region

The antagonism between Tehran and Riyadh is deeply rooted in religious and geopolitical motivations. On one hand, both nations believe that they are the true representatives of two opposing streams of Islam. Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni community, while Iran supports the Shiite community. On the other hand, there is an ongoing struggle for dominance in the region, especially in areas where the interests of the two states clash, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen (Hall, 2016). The struggle for influence and power is primarily a competition for geopolitical and ideological dominance, rather than being only driven by religious motivations. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the origins of this shift, the factors that shaped it, and to analyse the division that has deepened the split between Tehran and Riyadh.

The split between Shiites and Sunnis dates back to the 7th century, and according to Robin Wright, the division was not based solely on religious or doctrinal differences, but on a dispute over who was best suited to lead the nascent Muslim community, the Ummah. With the death of Muhammad in 632 A.D., there were disagreements between Shiite and Sunni Muslims over who was the rightful heir to lead the Ummah, and Muslims split into

two groups (Abdo, 2013). The Shiites supported Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, while the Sunnis argued that the leader should be chosen by consensus among the followers, supporting Abu Bakr, a friend of the prophet. While Shi'ites *da shi'atu* Ali (“partisans of Ali”) saw Ali and his descendants as part of a divine order; Sunnis, followers of Muhammad's Sunna (“way” in Arabic), did not support political succession based on the prophet's bloodline. Ali in 656 became caliph, ruling for only five years as he was assassinated. Abu Bakr's supporters won and the rift was solidified when Ali's son Hussein was killed in 680 in Kerbala (modern Iraq) by troops of the ruling Sunni caliph. The Sunnis continued to monopolize political power, while the Shiites were marginalized by part of the Sunni majority. This division, initially political, was also consolidated over time culturally and religiously, creating two distinct visions of Islam. Shiites see the Ayatollahs as their religious leaders, while Sunnis base their religious practice on the acts and teachings (Sunna) of the prophet. This difference led Sunnis to see Shiites as heretics, while Shiites argued that Sunni dogmatism led to the emergence of extremist sects, such as the Wahabi Puritans. Iran and Saudi Arabia then sought to assert their power, increasing competition for influence both regionally and globally.

2.2 Conflicting Perspectives on the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia: Internal security and Regional Domination

To understand the complexity of the dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, however, it is necessary to consider the analyses advocated by two prominent scholars-Mabon and Gause-who offer two different, but mutually influential, points of view.

Simon Mabon argues that the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are deeply rooted in each regime's “internal security dilemmas,” representing challenges that have led both countries to use narratives to strengthen their own power while delegitimizing opponents. In Iran, the doctrine of *velayat e-faqih* (“supreme leadership theory”) establishes political and religious power in the country and is also used in foreign relations, helping to strengthen Iran's role as the leader of the Shiite world. In Saudi Arabia, there is Wahhabism, a form of Salafism, which is used to consolidate its internal authority and represent the Sunni world. Consequently, the identities and values upheld internally will also influence foreign policies and international relations (Mabon S. , 2016).

On the other hand, Gregory Gause proposes a distinct vision for Saudi Arabia. He argues that the Iranian threat to Saudi Arabia is centred not so much on Tehran's ability to incite dissent among Saudi Shiites but on the extent of its regional influence in strategic across key geopolitical arenas such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and smaller Gulf monarchies, like Bahrain. According to Gause, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia should be seen primarily as a struggle for regional dominance and balance of power rather than a challenge to internal regime security and identity (Gause G. , 2014). This interpretation shows Riyadh's view of Tehran as a threat due to its expanding influence, which diminishes Saudi influence in the region. Consequently, the competition is more focused on strategic external dynamics rather than internal dissent, as argued by Mabon.

Analysing both aspects in the analysis, the role of internal security and geopolitical competition is crucial to capture the various nuances and dynamics that fuel the rivalry between the two states. Ideological narratives and strategies related to internal security increase the respective regimes' internal control level while justifying achieving regional ambitions. For example, Tehran uses anti-imperialist and revolutionary rhetoric to legitimize support for terrorist groups such as the Houthi rebels in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Finally, not considering both aspects would risk offering a biased view of the conflict, since there is a strong correlation between domestic and foreign policy

2.3 The Analysis of the Security Dilemma

Finally, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is commonly perceived as the result of a sectarian division between Sunnis and Shiites, but in reality, it is also rooted in issues of geopolitical power and mutual uncertainty, a concept known as the Security Dilemma. This term, first developed by scholars such as John Herz and later explored by Robert Jervis, Nicholas Wheeler, and Alexander Wendt, refers to the situation in which two states, in seeking to improve their own security, increase mutual insecurity, creating also an environment characterized by tensions and suspicion. More specifically, Jervis in the book "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," explains how one state (A) wanting to increase its security, will end up reducing that of another state (B). As is the case with Iran and Saudi Arabia, where both are driven by the uncertainty of the other's actions

(Jervis, *Cooperation under the Security Dilemma*, 1978). The moment one of the two states, Iran for example, decides to increase its security by supporting outside groups or regimes through arms, it reduces the security of the other state-Saudi Arabia-creating a security dilemma that will affect relations between the two.

By analysing the concept of uncertainty in more detail, one can understand why there is still a security dilemma between the two states. States usually increase the weapons at their disposal to implement their security. The same weapons are produced or purchased to protect themselves, thus for defensive purposes, which can, however, also be used for offensive purposes against other states (Roe, 1999). However, the uncertainty of a state is not only limited to the accumulation of weapons but also through physical actions, contributing to the security dilemma. The deployment of troops to borders could result in a defensive action, but that could be seen at the same time as preparatory for an invasion, increasing the risk of escalation between states (Jervis, 1976). The development of new military technologies such as nuclear weapons and long-range missiles can incentivize pre-emptive attacks by other states (Debs & Monteiro, 2014). Both two examples of physical actions combined with the impossibility of predicting the other state's intentions with certainty are among the main factors that fuel the security dilemma between nations.

According to international relations theory, existential uncertainty is dictated by the fact that states and governments can never fully predict the intentions of other states, leading to a sense of uncertainty that is one of the main causes of the security dilemma that is triggered between states (Williams, 2008). Alexander Wendt, an exponent of constructivism, shows how, unlike realists, state identity is one of the focal points in creating amity and enmity relationships and it is the hostility that is created that brings about a security dilemma. In detail, Saudi Arabia interprets Iran's actions as both defensive and offensive as a threat, regardless of Tehran's real intentions. Moreover, this perception is strongly influenced by the historical rivalry between Sunnis and Shiites, but also by the ideological construction of their respective religious and political identities. Consequently, according to constructivism, national identities, social constructions and the struggle for regional hegemony contribute daily to intensifying the security dilemma,

making both increasingly distrustful of the other. Where past and present relationships prove crucial in dictating the behaviour of states (Roe, 1999).

The power struggle between the two states in acquiring the hegemony of the region can be further explained by the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). According to this framework, the world can be divided into distinct regions which form a security complex, where the security dynamics of a state cannot be fully understood on their own, but must be analysed in relation to the region as a whole. This concept will be delved into later in this chapter, relating it to the scenario at hand.

2.4 The Persian Gulf as a Security Subcomplex: From the End of Colonialism to the Rise of Regional Powers

The rise of the Persian/Arabian Gulf reflects the broader trajectory of contemporary history, where domestic dynamics have played a large role in regional politics. Alliances and foreign policy decisions have been driven by ideological considerations, and as transnational norms weakened, regional forces became more prominent. The British domination of the region, mainly during the early 20th century, allowed partial stability by aligning the interests of both the local and colonial rulers.

For over 150 years, Britain was the dominant power in the Gulf, driven by economic and commercial interest (Allday, 2014). Britain's influence in the region began in the 19th century as part of a broader strategy to protect trade routes to India. One of the main narratives claimed that the Strait of Hormuz was controlled by the tribal confederation of the Qawasim, who imposed large tolls on merchant ships. The British Kingdom's refusal to pay the tolls of local Arab piracy led to a conflict with the Qawasim that resulted in an overwhelming victory for the British (Kelly, 1980). This view, however, was later refuted by Sultan Al-Qasimi, who argued that the British invasion was an operation to dominate control of trade in the Gulf, using the myth of piracy to justify the invasion (Al-Qasimi, 1988).

After India's independence in 1947, the Gulf continued to be an important strategic point because it provided Western access to oil, leading the UK to continue to dominate it for commercial reasons. Even after the decolonisation of many areas, the Gulf remained

under British influence due to agreements made with local leaders. A situation that allowed the UK to control oil flows that were increasingly important for international trade (Smith, 2004). The Gulf supplied the UK with around 80% of its crude oil imports (Rabi, 2006). British influence in the Gulf began to wane with the end of World War II and the increasingly prominent role of the two superpowers: the US and USSR in a bipolar world. Due to the weakening of the conflict and internal economic difficulties, it could no longer maintain firm control over the region militarily and politically, especially in the face of increasing pressure for decolonisation and the emergence of nationalist movements in the Middle East (Smith, 2004).

The Gulf, during the early years of the Cold War, was considered a poorly penetrated subregion that barely managed to penetrate other regional complexes (Santini, 2024). A key component in this scenario is the discovery of oil in several Gulf states which transformed the region's economic and political importance (Dogan, 2024). Oil wealth allowed local leaders to gain more financial independence from Britain and put the region in the sights of global powers. In this context, the British strategy shifted from direct control over the territories to supporting local leaders to sustain stability while preparing for the withdrawal. To understand the evolution of the Gulf's transformation, it is necessary to delve into three moments in particular: the Nixon Doctrine of 1969, Britain's exit in 1971, and the Iranian revolution in 1979.

In January 1968, Britain announced its withdrawal from the east of Suez by 1971, prompting the U.S. to recognize the impending power vacuum in the region. The British decision highlighted several problems: the fear that the Soviets might exploit the decline of the Western presence in the Gulf, increasing their influence in the area; and at the same time that the vacuum, created by the British, would lead regional powers to fight for hegemony in the area and the pursuit of their interests (Felci, 2013). To complicate matters, the British announcement was followed by the appearance of Soviet warships in the Indian Ocean. American policymakers saw this as a clear willingness by the USSR to expand its influence. The top priority then for the U.S. was to maintain the status quo in the area, to prevent both Soviet advancement and to continue to have access to oil resources in the region.

However, the physical and psychological consequences of the Vietnam War prevented the US from playing an active role in Gulf defence.

The shift from British to American influence in the Gulf was due to regional concerns about direct imperialism, as policymakers viewed political instability and subversion as the most immediate threats to Gulf security (Noyes, 1982). In response to this power vacuum, US President Richard Nixon announced the Nixon Doctrine (initially called the Guam Doctrine) in 1969, during the Vietnam War (1954-1975) and later applied to other states, including Iran:

“First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments. Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security. Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defence” (Nixon, 1969).

The US president affirmed with this doctrine that the US would support economically and militarily those allies that faced military threats but could not continue to defend them completely. This doctrine showed a change of direction in US foreign policy away from a bilateral view of international relations led exclusively by the USSR and the USA. The US could no longer defend all its allies through the deployment of physical troops and consequently, its allies would become the main defenders against external threats. And subversions from within would no longer involve the US directly. The Nixon Doctrine emphasised the limits of US involvement, giving greater reliance to regional power. According to Raymond Garthoff, the US, following this doctrine, wanted to create regional powers that would compensate for the vacuum created in the Gulf area. Iran, under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, became one of the main nations on which Nixon decided to focus to strengthen regional security:

“Iran was one of the countries Nixon had in mind, based on an internal study on the Persian Gulf situation, and when the Shah, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, visited Washington in October 1969, Nixon made clear his policy decision to make Iran one of the strongest regional powers” (Raymond, 1985).

As part of the Nixon Doctrine, the US promoted the Twin Pillars policy in 1972, making Iran and Saudi Arabia the pillars of regional security in the Gulf. The main aim of this policy was to entrust the security of the region to two regional powers, which were supposed to guarantee stability and protect US interests, especially access to oil resources. Iran with its solid economy and well-equipped army (Kenneth, 1987) was recognised as a dominant partner between the two, while Saudi Arabia was mainly considered for its great oil wealth worldwide, also being a member of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

On 30 and 31 May 1972, President Nixon, accompanied by foreign policy advisor Kissinger, visited the Shah in Tehran. During the meeting, a *‘blank check’* was granted and Iran was assured of the possibility of buying any conventional weapon available on the US market. Iranian ambitions were then combined with US interests and for the first time, the US decided to sell Iran the F-14 and F-15 jet fighters and some of the most advanced weapons in the US arsenal. After the meeting, the US president abandoned the policy of restricting arms sales to Iran. A policy implemented in the 1960s by the US, France and Britain, fearing that the Shah might take too much control over the region. Iran's military build-up became evident through arms purchases from the US and between 1972 and 1977 Iran bought \$16.2 billion worth of US military armaments statistics from 1969 to 1978 show a 580% spike in annual Iranian defence spending: from \$1.8 billion to \$10.6 billion over 10 years (Cordesman A. , 1984). The increase in military expenditure came from oil revenues during the Arab oil embargo in 1973, under Nasser. This brought Iranian revenues from 4 billion to almost 20 billion in 1974 (Bill, 1988). A decisively important military support that allowed the Shah to expand his influence in the area, becoming one of the main guarantors of security in the Persian Gulf.

The Twin Pillars policy, however, concealed risks that could not be underestimated. The more the US relied on another regional actor, the more the latter would gain more autonomy and influence in the area. As happened with Iran. In the 1970s, the Shah began to pursue ambitions that were not always in line with US policy, such as Iran's pursuit of a nuclear programme. The twin pillar policy was an effective choice, but for a fairly limited period, and the greatest risk lay in dependence on regional allies and their leadership. In 1979, the outbreak of the Iranian revolution demonstrated the precariousness of this policy, striking a blow that was unlikely to be healed. Gregory Gause describes this moment in history as 'an unmitigated disaster for the United States, the most damaging single blow to American interests in the Middle East in the post-World War II period' (Gause G. , *The International relations of the Persian Gulf*, 2009), leaving the United States in a highly vulnerable and exposed condition in the Persian Gulf

2.4.1 Evolution Of The Persian Gulf As A Security Subcomplex

The evolution of the Persian Gulf as a security sub-complex began following the British withdrawal in 1971, east of Suez. This withdrawal was a crucial turning point that caused a power vacuum in the region, increasing local geopolitical realignments. Britain's exit from the Gulf led to the development of new dynamics, increasing the presence and power of regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq who began to vie for regional dominance and control of strategic resources. As Ruth Hanau Santini shows, the British withdrawal together with major international changes such as the oil crisis and the Iranian revolution triggered a competition among the Gulf powers to spread their power and regional hegemony.

In the 1970s, the geopolitical landscape was shaped by a tripolarity formed by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Iran had an advantage over the other two states due to its strategic location, control of important oil fields, and its military and demographic power. Moreover, Tehran's growth as a regional power was supported and financed by the US under the Nixon Doctrine through the Twin Pillars policy. Saudi Arabia, thanks to its oil fields, also gained importance and value in the area. The oil boom in the 1970s led outside powers to take an increasing interest in the region, on the one hand wanting to counter the Soviet presence during the Cold War, and on the other hand for oil resources. The rise

in oil prices between 1970 and 1974 made oil the main resource for the economic and strategic well-being of the West. At the same time, oil-producing countries began to take direct control of resources through the nationalisation of these resources. A change that led the Gulf to become an important strategic node for international security. Finally, Iraq, despite being the third main regional player, was weakened over the years, playing an increasingly marginal role in the geopolitical dynamics in the area. The war against Iran (1980-1988) and the subsequent invasion of Kuwait in 1990 severely damaged Iraq's role and consequently its regional control. It lost much of its hegemony in the Gulf following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The British withdrawal then reshaped the area, creating new independent states and sovereign entities such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman in 1971. Smaller states had to manage their security in a complex regional environment, influenced by the ambitions of more powerful neighbours such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a result, the balance of power in the Gulf increasingly became a dynamic and unstable concept.

2.5 From the White Revolution to the Rise of Khomeini

In Iran between 1963 and 1979, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi initiated the “White Revolution,” a modernization program for the country supported by the Kennedy administration. The social, political and economic reforms in the program altered rural economies, leading to rapid urbanization and Westernization in the state. The modernization program sought to emulate the West to put Iran on an equal footing with the major international powers. While the “white revolution” brought some economic benefits by increasing productivity and expanding the industrial sectors, it created a major gap in the redistribution of the latter. Farmers, following land reforms, migrated to the cities seeking opportunities, often facing high unemployment rates and lack of services. The change from a conservative, predominantly rural society to a modern, “Westernized” one began to raise tensions among the population.

Starting from the 1970s, the first signs of instability began to appear in the economy, where inflation and fluctuating oil prices created a major economic crisis in Iran. A crisis

that not only spilled over to the economy but directly to the Shah, creating fertile ground for the development of strong tensions. The Shah, however, chose repression of opponents as a weapon to contain dissent in the country. He used censorship against socio-political protests, marginalizing opposition parties such as the National Front and the pro-Soviet Tūdeh. Party members then decided to ally with the ulama, forming a broad opposition to the Pahlavi dynasty regime.

Among the most prominent leaders in the opposition emerged the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini between 1963 and 1964. The Ayatollah was exiled in 1964 for harshly criticizing the Shah's choices and implementing reforms. Khomeini condemned the Shah for both corruption and submission to foreign powers and began coordinating opposition initially in Iraq and then in France, in Paris, from 1978. The latter move brought greater media visibility worldwide. Social tensions grew stronger, turning into protests and violence. In January 1979, the Shah fled to the United States along with his family, and on February 1 Khomeini returned to Tehran greeted by crowds of more than 7 million who welcomed him as the saviour of the homeland. On April 1, the Islamic Republic of Iran marked by strong anti-Western sentiment toward the United States was officially declared.

2.6 Iranian Revolution as a Turning Point

The rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh has its roots in 1979, with the Iranian Revolution, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, transforming Iran into an Islamic republic. One of the most important historical events in the Gulf region, it radically changed the dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, setting the stage for a hegemonic struggle in the region in the years to follow. The Shiite Islamic revolutionary model, brought a radical change in socio-political relations between Tehran and Riyadh, permanently souring relations between the two states. The Ayatollah wanted Iran to become a model for the entire Islamic umma, based on the doctrine of governance (*velayat-e faqih*), which stipulated that the responsibility of government should be entrusted to the expert in religious law (*faqih*), equated with the Imams (infallible figures according to Shiite Islam).

Before 1979, however, relations between the two countries were characterized by a solid strategic alliance based on common interests and regional security. Tehran and Riyadh were also supported militarily by the US and the West during the Cold War against the USSR (Al-Raashed, 2010). During the Shah's reign, in fact, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran had developed through cordial relations based on mutual respect and cooperation. Iran before the revolution broke out, played a key role in the region, avoiding possible conflicts with other states and cooperating especially with the Saudi kingdom. With the outbreak of the revolution, however, the dynamics changed and Saudi Arabia underestimated the possible consequences.

Following the fall of the Shah, The Iranian Transitional Government of Khomeini, led by Iranian Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, announced that Iran would no longer act as a regional enforcer to maintain regional order and protect U.S. interests. The new government's priority was to end the alliance between the Shah and the U.S. and establish a relationship of “parity” between the two countries. Bazargan advocated the principle of balance - a different concept from the West - as it aimed to maintain Iranian independence from the great powers, such as Britain and the U.S. superpower (Ramazani, 1989). Two policy decisions specifically indicated Iranian detachment from the United States, highlighting the repudiation of old strategic alliances:

- withdrawal from the CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) on March 12, 1979, a mutual security organization based on the military alliance between the UK, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey to counter the USSR.
- cancellation of the Iran-US defence agreement on November 3, 1959, and previously signed by the Shah in 1959. The Bazargan government's foreign minister, Ebrahim Yazdi, decided to terminate the defence agreement with the U.S.

Khomeini had strongly criticized monarchy, arguing that Islam was incompatible with any form of monarchy, and during the Islamic government, he said that “Islam proclaims monarchy to hereditary succession wrong and invalid,” calling hereditary succession wrong and invalid.

Saudi Arabia, however, initially underestimated the potential impact of these decisions and the Iranian revolution on its stability and leadership in the Islamic world. The Saudis demonstrated a certain naiveté as they believed that Iran condemned the Pahlavi monarchy, not realizing that this hostility was directed at all monarchies in the region. Riyadh believed that the fall of the Shah was due to the rapid modernization program implemented and not given by broader opposition against the monarchies in the region as a whole. During this initial phase, Riyadh wanted to establish a peaceful diplomatic relationship with the new government and as reported by Nadav Safran:

“On April 2, 1979, on the occasion of Khomeini's proclamation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Khaled sent him a note of congratulations in which he stressed that Islamic solidarity could form the basis of close ties between the two countries. Later that month Abdallah elaborated on the potential for Saudi-Iranian cooperation...in which he indicated that Saudi Arabia actually preferred Iran's new regime to the Shah's” (Safran, 1985)

While the change in leadership was initially welcomed by some states, opinion soon changed. Iran's revolutionary government condemned many of the policies supported by the other Gulf Arab states, a divergence not only ideological but political that led Iran to become an adversary of Saudi Arabia. For Khomeini, the revolution would not be limited to Iran, but spread throughout the entire Arab world. A goal not yet fully understood by Saudi Arabia.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini began to question Saudi Arabia's role as the main leader of the Islamic world. The Ayatollah harshly criticized the Saudi royal family, deeming them puppets of the United States and calling them “traitors to the two holy places” (Medina and Mecca), arguing that they were unworthy to be in charge of the hajj and the affairs of the Kaaba and incompatible with the true teachings of Islam¹. Statements that led to a rupture and a major impact on the Saudi perception of Iran, posing a direct challenge not only on religious soil but also toward regime stability. In this case, Khomeini's rhetoric turned out to be crucial in understanding the formation of the strategic thinking behind

¹ Excerpts from Khomeini speeches, The New York Times, August 4, 1987

Iranian behaviour (Al-Badi, 2017). Saudi Arabia's strategic thinking described Iran as a malignant force that wanted to exploit the power vacuums created by conflict and political instability while marginalizing the Shiite community to build a network of proxy groups, militias and political organizations, to export the Khomeinist revolution and increase its geopolitical influence.

This ideological denunciation led to the deterioration of relations between Riyadh and Tehran, turning an initial alliance into a lasting security dilemma. Iranian accusations combined with revolutionary rhetoric set the stage for strong suspicions and tensions between the two states, creating a rivalry that would last for decades (Gause G. , 2009). The Iranian revolution marked a new phase in relations between the two states, showing how although sectarian difference was an important element, in reality, this political clash began to lead to instability in the region. Mutual fear of the other state's possible intentions led both nations to seek to expand their power, especially in the Persian Gulf, and inevitably increasing the already existing tension (Wehrey F. , 2014).

In this regard, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution declared, in 1980:

“We must endeavour to export our revolution to the world. We should set aside the thought that we do not export the Revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is a supporter of all the oppressed peoples of the world. On the other hand, all the superpowers and the (great) powers have risen to destroy us. If we remain in isolation, we shall undoubtedly face defeat.”²

In this speech, the ayatollah expresses his concept of revolutionary Islam, emphasizing both the political and ideological dimensions. The Islamic revolution according to Khomeini must not be limited to Iran, but spread throughout the Muslim world to support oppressed peoples. In this brief quotation, it is evident that there are several basic principles: first, the universality of Islam, where no distinctions are made between Islamic countries; second, the support of the oppressed who suffer injustice under Western

² Official quotes from the speech “We shall Confront the World with our ideology” by the Ayatollah Khomeini, June 1980

regimes and pro-Western Arab regimes; and finally, the connection to global superpowers as forces seeking to destroy the revolution.

Those who had most to fear from this revolutionary rhetoric were the pro-Western Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, particularly those where Shiites made up a significant percentage of the population, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Soon after the revolution, mass demonstrations broke out in these states as well, followed by violent attacks on government installations.

The revolution also marked the end of the U.S. policy of “twin pillars,” destabilizing the balance of power in the region and leading to a new phase where new alliances were created. Tensions were not marginalized in Iran, but spread to the Middle East and also to Saudi Arabia (Mabon S. , 2016). In the Saudi kingdom, instability was intensified by several major events during the decade, such as the seizure of the Grand Mosque, the Hajj incident, and the Iran-Iraq war, which led to a change in both the country's domestic and foreign policy. The Islamic republic in Iran was perceived by the Saudi kingdom as an ideological threat, where the Saudi Shiite minority, following in the footsteps of the Iranian revolution, began to demand more rights and political reforms, creating further internal tensions (Al-Raashed, 2010). The Saudi regime's authorities were challenged and with them the country's identity and ideological security. A threat not characterized by a direct military presence, but as much as the risk of destabilization of its own internal political and identity order.

The Iranian revolution soon transformed the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh into a hegemonic struggle that began to go beyond geopolitical conflict, characterized by an ideological dimension that should not be underestimated. Iran, through the spread of its Shiite revolutionary ideas, began to challenge the legitimacy of the Saudi kingdom as the leader of the Islamic world. The peculiarity of the Islamic revolution shows how Iran, not through military force for example (hard power), but through soft power, became in effect a transnational religious power, projecting its ideological influence among Shiite minorities (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018)

The concept of leadership of the umma (the global Islamic community) began to occupy a central position. Position occupied by Saudi Arabia through its control over the two holy places of Islam: Mecca and Medina. Iran sought to delegitimize the Saudi royal family, believing it was not up to the role of guardian of the holy sites. Iran proposed a revolutionary Islamic model that not only represented Shiites but all Muslims, and also criticized the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the US. For Iran, Saudi Arabia was led by usurpers who betrayed true Islamic values by selling oil to Western countries in exchange for military protection. Tehran claimed that Riyadh was corrupt and subservient to the U.S., a narrative meant to challenge both Saudi religious legitimacy and political autonomy.

Banafsheh Keynoush, a geopolitical scholar, explains how Iran began to see Saudi Arabia as an obstacle to spreading its revolution to neighbouring countries. Both nations began to compete for the leadership position in the Islamic world. The Iranian aim was to export its Shiite revolutionary model, however, clashing with the Saudi kingdom, which asserted its religious authority through its Sunni tradition. Keynoush shows how both states were using Islam as a political legitimation tool to consolidate their power and legitimize credibility internationally: “*Naturally, after the revolution, Tehran viewed the Arab States as the main rival in its drive to attain leadership in the Islamic world. From the outset, Iran's goal to export its brand of Shi'ite revolutionary Islam collided with the Saudi claim over leadership of the Islamic world*” (Keynoush, 2007).

2.7 Iran – Iraq War (1980-1988)

The Iran-Iraq War represented one of the most significant conflicts in the contemporary history of the Middle East, arising as a result of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's decision in 1980 to withdraw from the 1975 Algiers Accords. Agreements that developed to resolve the territorial boundaries between Iraq and Iran, demarcating the border along the Shatt al-Arab River and border control. Hussein saw the new Iranian revolutionary regime as a direct threat to his regional stability. At the beginning of the Iranian revolution, the Iraqi government had maintained a neutral stance to preserve the balance of power in the region. However, the situation changed dramatically when Tehran began exporting the

revolution to Baghdad as well, inciting a popular uprising in Iraq to overthrow Hussein's Ba'ath government.

Baghdad decided to attack Tehran for three different reasons: to weaken the Iranian revolutionary government until its eventual fall; to increase Iraqi prestige as a dominant power in the Gulf region; and to establish full control over the Shatt Al-Arab River. On September 22, 1980, Iraqi troops crossed the Iranian borders, north into Kurdistan and south into Khuzestan. The purpose was the occupation of the southern part of the Shatt al-Arab River, which served as a natural border between the two states. While Iraq had prepared for a short campaign that would overthrow the Iranian revolutionary regime, in reality, the war quickly turned into a conflict of attrition.

If during the early years of the conflict. From 1980 until March 1982, Iraq was in a favoured and dominant position, the situation reversed, leading to the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from the city of Dezful on March 22, 1982. An event that represented a turning point in the war, leading Hussein to call for a cease-fire, supported by the GCC. On June 21, 1982, however, Khomeini rejected the request, launching a military counteroffensive in Iraq. The failure of the Iranian offensive in Iraq led to another long period of war of attrition, following Iranian failures at Basra in 1982 and al-Amarna in 1983. Iranian strategy initially focused on small-scale attacks along Iraqi lines changed with attempts to achieve a conclusive victory by trying to remove Saddam from command. Hopes proved illusory as between 1983-86 the conflict stabilized, with neither side achieving significant results. From 1987 Iran concentrated its forces on the Basra offensive, yet another failure that led this time Khomeini to consider a cease-fire. In July 1988, the Ayatollah allowed Iranian President Khamenei, to accept UN Resolution 598 and the cease-fire.

2.7.1 The Balance of Threat Theory

Although the Iran-Iraq war was a high-intensity and protracted conventional interstate conflict, its scope went beyond that (Segal, 1998). There are three distinctions from other conventional wars:

- it was protracted, lasting longer than the two world wars

- it was an asymmetrical conflict, involving a disparity in the capabilities of the two states
- It was a hybrid war, with the use of advanced weapons such as missiles and chemical weapons.

There are different actors in the contemporary international system and Riyadh's position during the conflict played a key role by supporting Iraq economically, militarily and diplomatically, trying to stabilise the region and prevent the spread of Iranian revolutionary ideology. This role, therefore, can be analysed through the lens of Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat Theory (BTT), which provides a framework for understanding why states create alliances in response to perceived threats. The BTT is a theory that seeks to explain the reasons why states form alliances. Stephen Walt, in his 1987 book *The Origin of Alliances*, attempted to show the reasons behind these alliances. This theory competes with the balance of power theory (BPT), according to which states build their power and define their threats based on the power of other states. A concept that emphasises mutual security rather than the accumulation of power in a few states (Walt S. , 1987). According to Walt, states behave according to the security threat perceived by other states. There are several indicators to calculate a threat:

- *the aggregate power* of the opposing state, which describes how powerful the state's threat is;
- *the geographic proximity* of the adversary state, which describes how close the threat of the state is;
- *the offensive capabilities* of the adversary state, which describes how much military power is capable of posing a credible threat to that state;
- *the offensive intentions* of the opposing state, i.e. how aggressive its behaviour is.

Stephen Walt believes that these indicators can calculate the perceived threat from an adversary state. The more aggressive or expansionist a neighbouring state appears, the more likely it is to trigger an opposing coalition (Walt S. , 1987). To better understand the concept, one can think of the example of the Franco-British alliance based on Nazi Germany's perceived threat; these states balanced their threat by posing a collective threat to their common enemy. Both countries saw Hitler's growing military power and aggressive expansion as a threat to their national security and the balance of power in Europe. This common fear drove them to cooperate, despite their historical rivalries.

2.7.2 *The Case of Saudi Arabia*

Before the Islamic revolution, Saudi Arabia did not see Iran as a security threat, a perception that changed after 1979. States define their actions with security-based objectives, which means that states choose political and strategic decisions based primarily on their security. Their actions, such as alliances with other states and interventions, are motivated by the need to protect themselves from external threats in order to maintain internal stability (He, 2012). Walt argued that states with an aggressive posture tend to provoke more opposition than those that primarily seek to maintain the status quo (Walt, 2010). Initially, with the two-pillar policy, Riyadh sought to create alliances with regional powers such as Iran, which was not seen as a threat by Saudi Arabia. A policy that collapsed as the revolutionary regime spread.

In response to growing Iranian influence, the Saudi kingdom began to strengthen its alliances in the region, creating the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in May 1981. This regional body, consisting of six monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman) was created to contain and counter Iranian influence in the area. One of the main aims was to ensure the stability and interests of the Sunni monarchies in the region. The former Iranian ambassador to the UN, Rejai Khorassani, explained the Iranian perception of the GCC: *“It was not seen as pro-Iranian. It was an Arab regional entity and not intercultural. We thought the GCC was directly influenced by Saddam Hussein and would play a role in his service”* (Mumtaz, 2005).

From the inception of the GCC, one of the main problems was the war between Iran and Iraq. All GCC members hoped for an Iranian defeat, so as to increase the collective security of the region. The first Secretary General of the GCC, Abdullah Bishara, saw the Iranian desire to dominate the Gulf as the main threat to the stability of the GCC states.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Riyadh became an ally of Baghdad to offset the threat from Tehran, perceiving that Iran would fight against its status quo in the region. According to Walt, states tend to accept the growth of less aggressive countries, instead trying to balance the threat posed by less powerful but more aggressive countries. Saudi Arabia accepted Iraq as an ally to counter Iran's aggressiveness, while Iraq was not as aggressive

as Iran for Saudi stability. Therefore, states create alliances based on the threat to their security, rather than just the superior power of a nation. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia balanced the perceived threat from Iran by supporting Iraq during the war. This trend sought the Saudi concerns behind Iran's revolutionary regime (1979). Iraq was seen as a credible defensive shield for the other Gulf states, as it represented a momentous dent for Iranian military power in the ongoing war. States usually only align when faced with a common threat and such alliances help them counter threats from other states. In this particular case, Saudi Arabia balanced the perceived threat from Iran through strategic positioning during the Iran-Iraq war (Cooper, 2003). Under the Shah, Iran's aggregate military power was far greater than that of the Gulf Arab states; thereafter, Iran's revolutionary leadership continued the Shah's defensive activism in the region and also criticised the position of the monarchs, particularly the Saudi family. Riots began among the Shia population of the KSA and Iranian pilgrims protested against the Saudi family. The KSA began to react harshly to these demonstrations, confiscating leaflets and propaganda materials and controlling surveillance. Riyadh saw Iran as a real threat and therefore started to support Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.

2.8 Hajj Pilgrimage 1987

During the annual pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) in 1987, Iranian pilgrims clashed with Saudi security forces, leaving an indelible mark on the country's history. Iranian pilgrims in the 1980s organised political demonstrations against Riyadh and Washington during the Hajj. The protests turned violent in 1987, when clashes between Iranian Shiite pilgrims and Saudi security forces led to the death of 275 Iranians and 303 wounded (Kramer, 1996). This tragic event led to an exchange of statements and actions between the two states. The chairman of the Iranian Parliament Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani states that:

“Iran must uproot the Saudi rulers... and divest the control of the shrines from them. [...] The martyr's blood must be avenged by burning the roots of Saudi rulers in the region. The true revenge is to remove the colossal and precious wealth belonging to the Islamic world which lies under the soil of the Arabian Peninsula from the control of the criminal, the agents of colonialism. The Saudi

rulers have chosen an evil path, and we will send them to hell.” (Mohaddessin, 2003)

Using aggressive rhetoric, he believed that the Saudi dynasty was unable to have control over the holy places of Islam, attacking Saudi Arabia's role as guardian of the holy places. According to the prime minister, the Saudi government was perceived as “agents of colonialism” and a pawn in the hands of the United States.

Ayatollah Khomeini incited the Saudis to overthrow the Saudi royal family to avenge the death of the pilgrims, saying:

“Even if it were possible to forgive Saddam Hussein, it would never be possible to forgive Saudi Arabia. [...] these vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back [...] Mecca is in the hands of a band of heretics” (Ismael & Ismael, 1994).

The statement about not forgiving Riyadh is a very important point to analyse because, despite the war against Iraq led by Hussein, Iran perceived Saudi Arabia as an even bigger threat.

The clashes between 1986-1987, aggravated by the political representatives, led to an escalation of tensions between the two states. Tensions broke down completely in 1988 with the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran, creating a rupture in diplomatic relations. This incident leads to an attack on Saudi Arabia's embassy in Tehran and a reduction of the Iranian quota to the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Diplomatic ties were eventually severed and the Hajj was completely suspended in 1988.

2.9 Diplomatic Relations between Riyadh and Tehran

Diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran formally began following the establishment of the al-Saud dynasty in 1928, following the promulgation of a friendly treaty between the two governments, which provided for mutual recognition and the establishment of full diplomatic relations. This event laid the foundation for cooperation between the two ruling dynasties, the Al Saud in Saudi Arabia and the Pahlavi in Iran,

who forged an inviolable peace and a sincere and lasting friendship. However, many events changed the course of this foreign policy.

An early sign of dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran occurred in 1925 when Abdulaziz sent a telegraph to Iran to congratulate Reza Shah on the founding of the Pahlavi dynasty. In response, Reza Shah, through the Iranian consul general in Syria, Habibollah Hoveida, conveyed a message of friendship to Abdulaziz, stressing the importance on Iran's part to maintain good relations with the Hijaz kingdom. Showing common interest in establishing ties with Saudi Arabia while ensuring access for pilgrims during the Hajj (Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca).

*“Express gratitude ... offer a reminder that ... Iran has absolute interest toward Madinah and Makkah, and a desire to establish ... relations with ... Hijaz.”*³
(Hijaz is the territory where the cities of Mecca and Medina are located.)

Abdulaziz in 1926 sent a delegation to Iran to seek formal recognition of his kingdom. Following diplomatic negotiations, Reza Shah sent a letter in response in 1928 outlining the terms for official recognition by Iran. Iran granted recognition to the Hijaz and Najd government on August 13, 1929:

*“We are pleased to inform you that the Imperial Government of Iran has as of the date today extended its recognition to the Government of Hijaz and Najd.”*⁴

This act led to the signing of a treaty of friendship on August 24, 1929, in Iran, exchanged in Jeddah and recorded in the archives of the League of Nations. These events marked a period of cooperation between the two countries, despite religious and political differences, which nevertheless underwent major changes as events evolved that marked the 20th century.

³ Archives of the Foreign Ministry of Iran, telegraph no. 588, container 30, file 1, 29, 1304 sh.

⁴ Relations Between Iran and Saudi: Agreements of Iran and Hijaz,” Archives of the Foreign Ministry of Iran, container 13, file 113, 1308.

Following the Treaty of Friendship, official diplomatic relations were established between the two states, consolidating a period of cooperation although political and religious differences existed between the two countries. Some outstanding disagreements had remained, such as the political status of Bahrain.

Bahrain, located in the Persian Gulf, was disputed between Tehran and Riyadh because of its strategic location. Iran considered Bahrain its province, making historical and geographical claims, while Saudi Arabia supported Bahrain's independence. The issue created high tensions between the two countries, where disagreement reflected geopolitical influence in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia wanted to contain Iranian expansionism, seeking to maintain its role as a power in the Arab world. Despite the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, the Bahrain issue represented one of the reasons for tension in the dynamics of bilateral relations, showing differences that would increase over time, eventually erupting with the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

2.9.1 1960s: A Decade Of Diplomatic Consolidation

In the 1960s, Tehran and Riyadh began to consolidate their bilateral relations in response to several internal and external factors, including the civil war in North Yemen (1962-1970), which was a major reason for Saudi-Iranian cooperation, where both monarchies were particularly susceptible to revolutions and feared that instability might spread beyond Yemen's borders. In 1962, a revolution broke out in the northern part of Yemen that soon turned into a civil war. On one side was the revolutionary command council supported by the USSR, Syria, and Nasser's Egypt, who wanted to expand their influence in the region. On the other side, the royalists were supported by Saudi funding from their oil resources. This conflict not only represented a power struggle in Yemen, but also reflected the broader tensions between conservative monarchies and revolutionary governments in the region. Riyadh feared that the fall of the monarchy in Yemen could project into its borders as well, fuelling similar uprisings and undermining its internal stability. Regionally, the expansion of Egyptian influence always posed a threat to Saudi Arabia, fearing that it could reach the Gulf as well, especially following the declaration of the United Arab Republic in 1958. Although Iran supported the secular and modernizing nationalism of the Shah, Saudi Arabia represented conservative Wahhabi Islamism. Both countries aligned to address common threats, especially related to pan-

Arabism to Arab socialism promoted by Nasser. During the 1960s, Iran-Saudi relations increased, with Iranian intervention in support of Riyadh during the Yemeni civil war.

Between 1962 and 1965, Iran offered financial support to Saudi Arabia in its fight against the Republicans, backed by Nasser's Egypt, showing how fear of communism could overcome traditional sectarian rivalries. An intervention that led to a strengthening of ties between Tehran and Riyadh and showed how maintaining domestic and regional stability was the main purpose. The military alliance between the two countries was also implemented through high-level diplomatic exchanges. For example, Iranian Prime Minister Ali Amini received a warm welcome from King Saud, followed by several reciprocal visits. Highlighting the intention to strengthen ties on the political and personal level.

The common threat posed by Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser moreover, and his possible expansion in the region, was one of the main reasons that prompted the Saudi and Iranian kingdom leaders to strengthen diplomatic relations. The alignment of the two countries included the containment of Nasser's influence, which was perceived as a threat to both political and economic stability in the Middle East. Iran's prime minister, Ali Amini, in a statement made on April 11, 1962, to the Foreign Reports Bulletin, highlighted the importance of Saudi Arabia's stability. Showing how the latter, unlike other Arab countries, seemed to remain stable despite the unrest in the region created by Nasser. Amini declared:

“The Arab countries seem to be getting more and more unstable with the exception of Saudi Arabia, which I have heard is in good shape. Nasser is fomenting all this disorder now that has virtually ruined his own country. I hear the conditions in Egypt are very bad. Iran must save itself from being infected by the disorders in the rest of the Middle East.”⁵

⁵ Prince Saud AlFaisal, Role of Saudi Arabia in O.I.C.: Memoirs (Arabic) (Riyadh: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000).

This statement reflected Iran's fear of becoming embroiled in external tensions and regional tensions, supporting the priority of maintaining strong ties with the Saudi kingdom, seen as a possible partner in a turbulent situation. Through a telegram, sent May 23, 1962, from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran to the State Department⁶, documentation emerged of a conversation between Iranian Prime Minister Amini and U.S. diplomat Rockwell, showing further regional tensions. The prime minister, who had returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca, had met with King Saud and Prince Faisal, who were intimidated by U.S. support for Nasser's United Arab Republic (UAR), not understanding why the U.S., considered their ally, was supporting Nasser. Indeed, the Saudis saw Nasser as a direct threat to their government. Amini tried to reassure the Saudis by explaining that U.S. support for Nasser did not mean a decrease in the value of friendship with Saudi Arabia. Therefore, U.S. diplomat Rockwell clarified that U.S. policy was driven by the internal crisis in Egypt and the fear that Nasser's fall could lead to the creation of a communist regime. This discussion represented the importance of the Iranian role in mediating between Saudi fears and U.S. strategy, strengthening ties between Tehran and Riyadh.

With the accession of King Faisal to the throne in 1964, relations between the two countries were initially strengthened. Iran and Saudi Arabia supported common interests, such as opposition to Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism and growing Soviet influence in the region. King Faisal's foreign policy supported pan-Islamism and anti-communism, seeking to strengthen ties between Muslim countries, while the Shah pursued modernization of Iran, initiated by his father, and secular nationalism (Badeeb, 2007). Despite the presence of some tensions, such as the competition for Bahrain and differing views on Israel, cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia showed itself in several areas: military and OPEC especially.

Tensions related to the Bahrain archipelago began to arise as early as the early 20th century when the Shah's father made a formal claim on Bahrain's sovereignty to the League of Nations in 1927. Bahrain, 16 km from Saudi Arabia's east coast and 786 km

⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Iran to the department of State, November 5, 1961, Foreign relations of the US, 1961-1963, Volume XVIII

from Iran's, with a Sunni minority ruling the Shiite majority, represents a sensitive issue for Iran-Saudi relations (Mabon S. , 2018). In 1957, Iran declared Bahrain to be its fourteenth province, creating a strong reaction from Saudi Arabia and the other Arab states, which saw Bahrain as part of the Arab world. Relations soured in the late 1960s, when Britain formalized the withdrawal of its troops from the Persian Gulf, creating a power vacuum. In 1965 the prime minister of Bahrain, Shaikh Khalifah bin Salman Al Khalifah visited Saudi Arabia. To try to find a balance in diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Manama, which was consolidated with the King Fahd Causeway bridge connecting Saudi Arabia to Bahrain (Gordon, 1971).

In 1968 the Shah decided to cancel a state visit to the Saudi kingdom specifically to protest the proximity between Riyadh and Bahrain. Despite these tensions, a turning point was reached in 1969 when the Shah and King Faisal, along with the leaders of twenty-three other Muslim states, met in Rabat, Morocco, and participated in the founding of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict. a forum that would facilitate dialogue among Muslim countries and show a strong commitment to promoting common interests in international organizations. With its headquarters in Jeddah, the OIC, with its headquarters in Jeddah, asserted its allegiance to the values of Islam vis-à-vis the international community both economically, politically and strategically. It gave greater authority to Saudi Arabia, which was given the role of leader of the Arab and Muslim world.

In 1970 through the intervention of the United Nations, a peaceful solution was reached where the people of Bahrain demanded independence and Iran decided to withdraw its claims in response to Resolution 278 (1970). The UN report concluded that:

“The overwhelming majority of the people of Bahrain wish to gain recognition of their identity in a fully independent and sovereign State free to decide for itself its relations with other States.”⁷

⁷ Security Council resolution 278 (1970), The question of Bahrain, UNHCR

Bahrain officially obtained membership in the United Nations on August 18, 1971, through Resolution 296, ending Iranian claims. An event that led Iran and Saudi Arabia to focus on other priorities without having to compromise regional security.

Visits between the leaders showed fertile territory for relations. In March 1964, the Iranian foreign minister returned from a trip to Saudi Arabia with a positive impression on the Saudi king. It was a favourable climate that led King Faisal to go to Iran on Dec. 13, 1965, as part of a tour of Islamic states, showing how both countries sought to forge stronger ties to ally against common threats. During this visit, the need to contain Nasser's expansion was discussed. Saudi Arabia, in fact, was afraid that Nasser could lead to major instability in the region. One of the main topics discussed during the meeting was cooperation in Yemen, where Nasser's presence and support for insurgent movements seeking to overthrow the Yemeni monarchy were seen as a direct threat to the Saudi and Iranian governments (Gordon, 2015). The day after the visit, the Iran-Arab Friendship Association was established on December 14, 1965, chaired by Iranian Prime Minister Amir Abbas Hoveida and with branches in both Tehran and Riyadh. Aiming to strengthen bilateral ties and relations between the two countries while facilitating issues in the Gulf.

Another glaring example of active and peaceful cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be traced back to October 27, 1968, when the agreement on the islands of al-'Arabiya and Farsi was signed, showing how the two states could resolve territorial disputes peacefully. The agreement concerned the sovereignty of the two islands and the delimitation of the sea borders that separated Iran and Saudi Arabia. Official U.N. archives show how the agreement established in detail Iranian sovereignty over the island of Farsi and Saudi sovereignty over the island of al-'Arabiya, defining maritime boundaries in their respective areas of responsibility. It was another turning point in bilateral relations as it showed the ability of the two states to diplomatically address tensions.

2.9.2 70s Period of Cooperation And Competition

In the 1970s, cooperation between the two countries reached its peak fostered by the context marked by the Cold War and the convergence of interests related to U.S. foreign policy. With the U.S. Twin Pillars policy, the shah and King Faysal, perceived as pro-Western regional powers, had three goals in common: the maintenance of regional

stability, the containment of Soviet and communist advances in the Gulf area, and the repression of revolutionary and socialist movements in the Middle East. For the first half of the 1970s, the two states maintained a stable relationship, despite the presence of some disagreements. Cooperation between the two countries was supported by the United States, which saw them as strategic partners in containing communism and the USSR in the region. Tehran and Riyadh through support through military and technological aid from the U.S. therefore, were encouraged to form an alliance in the area. A bond that allowed the two states to simultaneously consolidate and increase their geopolitical positions in the region.

However, the Shah's ambition to attain a position of military dominance in the Gulf area had been widely acknowledged since the early 1970s, causing great concern in the Saudi kingdom, which was fearful of the Sha's expansionist aspirations. An important event can be traced back to November 30, 1971, when Tehran militarily took control of three islands in the Persian Gulf-Abu Musa and the Tunb (big and little Tunb) islands, claiming sovereignty over all three islands. Although small in size, these islands were considered very important strategically, as they controlled maritime movements at the entrance to the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz (Esmacili, 2024). The occupation of the three islands was an event that brought an arms race from both Saudi Arabia and Iran itself. The Shah initiated a military modernization program, purchasing advanced armaments from Britain in 1972 including tanks and fighter bombers. This decision led Riyadh to equip itself in turn with as many armaments between 1973 and 1974. A decision that led to increased military spending in both countries. In addition to military spending, regional competition was also noticed on the diplomatic level when in 1973 Saudi Défense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz visited Qatar, Bahrain and Oman to discuss possible closer regional military cooperation. Indeed, Saudi Arabia was seeking to weave alliances with neighbouring Arab countries to counter Iran's growing influence in the region.

Despite tensions related to the Shah's expansionist ambitions, Iran and Saudi Arabia continued to cooperate against communist and Soviet expansion in the region. Both countries, for example, became active in the Dhofar crisis in Oman (1963-1976), where they countered the communist rebellion by supporting Oman's Sultan Qabus. On the one

hand, Riyadh sent financial aid in 1971, seeking to support the monarchy, while Tehran sent troops to the field and weapons in 1973, where direct Iranian military intervention represented the ambition to expand its hegemony and military influence in the region. The deployment of Iranian troops worried Riyadh and The Saudis, as explained by historian James F. Goode, suspected the shah's motives, fearing that he might bring the entire Gulf under Iranian control and extend his influence over the small Arab sheikhdoms bordering its shores (Goode, 2022). Leading to the belief that the competition for regional hegemony was linked to a rather fragile and circumstantial alliance between the two countries. Fearing that Iran could use military force to achieve hegemonic control in the Gulf region.

During the 1970s, there were several meetings between senior officials such as the visit of the Iranian finance minister to Saudi Arabia in 1973 to deal with joint investments. Meetings that strengthened economic ties between the two powers, increasing their influence in global economies and the oil sector in particular.

In 1972-73 Saudi Arabia, under Oil Minister Yamani, abandoned its traditional low-profile policy within OPEC. This decision came about as a result of pressure from Iran to support a more assertive attitude on the part of the organization. The aim was to use oil as a means to achieve political and economic power. In 1973 Yamani and Amouzegar came together and decided to revise the terms of the Tehran Agreement, which was critical to the stability of oil prices and the management of OPEC's energy resources. The context, however, was affected by the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in October of that year, which led the organization's Arab members to impose an embargo on countries that militarily supported Israel. This decision affected both global market dynamics and internal dynamics among OPEC members, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Iranian and Saudi Arabian governments wanted to manage energy resources and pricing policy within OPEC differently. Iran wanted to increase oil prices to finance modernization and military strengthening programs, while Saudi Arabia preferred to keep prices stable to protect its economy and domestic consumption. Saudi King Khaled, wanting to limit Iranian nuclear ambitions and military power, began to consolidate diplomatic relations with the Gulf Arab states. In April 1976, he initiated official visits to all Gulf states, laying the groundwork for the future creation of the Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC), which came into being in 1981 (Castiglioni, 2016). A regional-type alliance that not only concretized the ties between the Arab countries but also sought to balance Iranian influence. As Saudi Arabia sought to consolidate its influence, Iran was beginning to face major internal challenges within the country. Growing popular dissatisfaction would forever change the regional dynamics and dialogue between Tehran and Riyadh, leading to an increasingly obvious rivalry.

2.10 Buzan's RSCT: Understanding the Persian Gulf as a conflict formation

After having explored the historical events and diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran, it is useful to consider Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) model to explain how security complexes are created when the security problems of states in a given region become interdependent and interrelated, as they cannot be solved individually (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). It is a structured conflict formation, where interdependence and competition over security issues between the two states are inevitable. Diplomatic relations are influenced by one country's perception of the other, an important characteristic of conflict formation for Buzan.

In the case of the Persian Gulf, events such as the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war show how the actions of a single state inevitably affect the balance of power in the entire region. In this regard, Buzan identifies three different types of security complexes and cooperation between states in a region:

- *The conflict formation*: refers to a 'pattern of security interdependence shaped by the fear of war and the expectation of the use of violence' (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Relations between the major regional powers are characterised by violence or the threat of it. States mutually perceive a potential threat and create alliances to reduce the security dilemma. This model describes the situation in the Middle East and more specifically in the Persian Gulf, where the rivalry between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq has often led to violent clashes, such as the Iran-Iraq war, and to tensions over religious, ideological and political differences that were amplified with the outbreak of the Islamic revolution in 1979.

- *Security regime*: states continue to perceive others as a potential threat, but use alternative measures to reduce the security dilemma and decrease mutual tensions. This pattern can manifest itself through cooperation agreements or mediation by external actors, such as the US. Although there is rivalry, dialogue and cooperation between regional actors are sought, albeit rarely lasting.
- *Multilateral security community*: states do not expect aggressive situations on the part of other states and do not plan to engage in any in turn. This is a far cry from the dynamics in the Persian Gulf, as the region is characterised by conflicts and high tensions between the main regional players.

According to Barry Buzan, the Middle East can be considered an example of conflict formation, as it is a region characterised by a dual matrix: on the one hand there are modern post-colonial states, on the other hand, it is influenced by pre-modern structures such as clans and tribes. In detail, the Gulf subcomplex can be interpreted for all intents and purposes as a conflict formation subcomplex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The historical events analysed and the diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have shown how the competition for regional influence is continuously fuelled by ideological and geopolitical rivalries. These factors not only increase distrust between the two actors, but also create a cycle of actions and reactions that make it difficult to establish lasting stability in the region.

Buzan's analysis, in conclusion, suggests that as long as key regional actors perceive the actions of other actors as a threat, the Persian Gulf will remain an unstable area riven by growing conflicts and tensions.

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter aims to trace a timeline of the dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, starting in the 1960s and developing up to the end of the Iran-Iraq war. The Islamic revolution of 1979 represents one of the most crucial moments as well as a real turning point since it caused a change in the geopolitical vision of the Gulf region, directly threatening the monarchies, specifically the Saudi one. A conflict that was not only religious, but had its foundations in two opposing models of governance: Iranian revolutionary Islam on the one hand and Saudi monarchical conservatism on the other.

The Security Dilemma theory emerged during the chapter, an uncertainty that fuelled tensions and fears between the two states. Where every decision and move made by a state was perceived as a threat to internal security.

The Iran-Iraq War not only had direct consequences between the two states, but also led to a change in the geopolitical balance in the Gulf region. Saudi support for Iraq showed the latter's concerns about Iranian expansion, in line with Stephen Walt's BTT, motivated by fear of the Saudi monarchy's stability in the area. According to Walt's theory, states create alliances in response to a concrete threat to their security. And although Hussein's regime was authoritarian and unpredictable, for Riyadh it represented a barrier against the expansion of Iranian influence in the Gulf. The use of primary sources including Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) documents and official Saudi and Iranian statements show how the Saudi perception of the Iranian threat was tangible. This historical phase not only highlighted the fragility of interstate relations in the Gulf, and especially those between Iran and Saudi Arabia, leading to the creation of new alliances such as the GCC and support for Iraq. Moreover, events such as the Hajj pilgrimage of 1987 and the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran show how tensions between the two states were not just limited to a territorial issue, but purely ideological and territorial.

In the next chapter, the new dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia marked mainly by the end of the Cold War will be analysed. With the collapse of international bipolarism to the evolution of the international and regional geopolitical system.

CHAPTER III: NEW REGIONAL DYNAMICS BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA (1990-2018)

3.1 The end of bipolarity in the Middle East

The Middle East, in the decades following the Second World War, has been the site of several geopolitical transformations, where the most important changes have been influenced by the presence of external actors, first the Europeans, then the USA and the USSR (Harrison, 2018). Today, however, there has been an evolution of the actors and dynamics in the area, giving much more importance to regional and local factors. To understand the evolution of the new relations, it is necessary to analyse the historical and political factors that led to the current situation, starting with the analysis of the end of the Cold War and the bipolar world.

The US and the USSR saw the Middle East as a fertile ground for projecting global ambitions. In particular, both competed with each other, seeking the support of Arab countries to expand their hegemony and contain the expansion of the other superpower (Harrison, 2018). Arab states and conservative monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan received large amounts of aid and funding from the US; while Syria, Lebanon and Egypt aligned with the USSR (Hinnebusch, 2012). While non-Arab states such as Iran, Turkey and Israel placed themselves in the US camp, leading the region to mimic the bipolar structure of the international system and the creation of an Arab Cold War that mirrored the global superpower conflict (Harrison & Salem, Preface, 2017).

Transitions from one era to another are always delicate and chaotic. The political and regional order established during the Cold War began to crumble even before the official collapse of the USSR in 1991. One only has to consider events that disrupted regional dynamics, such as the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979, subverting the decades-long alliance with the US, or Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, testing the prevailing regional order (Harrison, 2018). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, former Soviet allies had to reconfigure their foreign policies. In contrast, American allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, maintained relations with the only remaining superpower, which guaranteed them security. The regional balance at the end of the Cold War was turned

upside down. Iraq under Saddam Hussein, for example, saw an opportunity to invade Kuwait, thinking that the US would be less attentive to the regional political order with the end of the Cold War and as reported in a message sent by US Ambassador April Glaspie, who claimed that the US was silent on the growing conflict between Iraq and Kuwait (Glaspie, 1990).

With the collapse of the USSR on 26 December 1991, the Middle East found itself without one of the two poles of influence that had determined its geopolitical structure for years. The end of the Cold War created a new power structure in the region, dominated by the only remaining superpower: the USA. This change affected international relations in the area, where countries that had previously had relations with the USSR had to seek new regional alliances and new rivalries developed. States such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt had interactions with the US. In contrast, the revisionist front consisting of Iran and Syria along with non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas, lined up to resist US plans in the Middle East (Hubbard, Kershner, & Barnard, 2018).

3.2 The Gulf War (1990-1991)

The Persian Gulf crisis started with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 and ended with Iraq's defeat in the war with US-led forces. The decline of bipolarity and the rise of multipolarity brought instability to the region (Hsiung, 1991). During the Cold War, for example, Iraq was in the Soviet camp, where the USSR supplied sophisticated advanced war technology to Saddam. It was a Soviet geopolitical strategy that sought to establish alliances in Middle Eastern countries to counter American influence in the area. The Soviets, however, were interested in avoiding becoming involved in an unwanted proxy war and, for this reason, had an incentive to keep Hussein under control to avoid becoming directly involved in a war (Hsiung J. , 1991). Reaching the period that would lead to the end of the Cold War, the USSR no longer had any reason to maintain influence over Iraq, leaving Saddam Hussein free to act without robust Soviet control. Although Soviet influence had diminished, Iraq had an advanced arsenal, previously supplied by the USSR, making it a significant threat to neighbouring countries.

The eight-year war against Iran had created a deep crisis in Iraq, prompting Saddam to seek solutions to heal the economy of the country. The invasion of Kuwait became his new goal: to settle the debts, which amounted to around 50 billion dollars, and to obtain the necessary oil resources to finance the country's reconstruction (Sciolino, 1991). The Iraqi economy had suffered a severe loss due to falling oil prices in the mid-1980s, and Saddam had tried to convince OPEC to reduce production to raise prices without success. Kuwait's refusal to comply with this request, together with accusations of illegally extracting oil from Iraqi fields on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, led to new tensions (Al-Saif, 2021).

Saddam Hussein decided to invade the small and neighbouring Emirate of Kuwait, overlooking the Persian Gulf and one of the world's largest oil producers, in 1990. The invasion of Kuwait, also known as the Gulf War - rooted in ancient territorial claims – but, in reality, aimed at controlling the entire Arabian Peninsula with its oil resources (Vidotto & Sabbatucci, 2019). Besides the economic factor, the Iraqi intention was to restore the regional power lost after the war against Iran. Indeed, Saddam, wanting to pursue his ambition of becoming a major regional power, could “*control 20 per cent of OPEC production and 25 per cent of the world's oil reserves... which would make him the dominant power in the Persian Gulf*” (Schaeffer, 2005). With this occupation, Iraq, therefore, wanted to revive its prestige as the most powerful Arab country in the region. Although the Iraqi economic and political situation had been weakened following the war against Iraq, the military force was still considered powerful (Gettleman & Schaar, 2003).

The invasion of Kuwait lasted seven months, from 2 August 1990 until 28 February 1991 (U.S. Department of Defence, 1991). Iraqi forces took advantage of the surprise effect to seize territory and, after overcoming border defences, captured the capital al-Kuwait (Kuwait City) (Warbrick, 1991). With Iraqi troops on the Saudi border, King Fahd called for support from Western and Arab forces. The US sent an expeditionary force of over 400,000 men to Saudi Arabia, both to defend the threatened Arab states and to force Hussein to withdraw from the war (Vidotto & Sabbatucci, 2019). Other European states and several Arab countries, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, joined the expedition, while Iran maintained a neutral stance.

On 29 November 1990, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 678 - also supported by the USSR - which demanded that Iraq withdraw its troops from Kuwait by 15 January 1991, authorising the use of force otherwise. Hussein, however, did not comply with the request. A coalition of 34 countries led by the United States and consisting of Arab League members, Western, Asian and African countries joined forces in Operation Desert Storm on 17 January 1991 to oppose Iraqi aggression (U.S. Department of Defence, 1991). The multinational force initially unleashed a violent air attack against military targets in Iraq. It occupied Kuwait, leading Saddam to respond with more missiles on Saudi Arabian cities, threatening the use of chemical weapons. After forty days of bombing, the ground offensive against Iraqi forces in Kuwait took place, where Saddam's army was forced to surrender due to wartime inferiority (Vidotto & Sabbatucci, 2019). The operations ended on 28 February 1991, with the approval of UN Resolution 687 on 3 April that sanctioned the ceasefire and was officially accepted by Iraq on 6 April 1991 (U.S. Department of Defence, 1991).

Although the invasion of Kuwait was a relatively short war, the consequences had a strong impact both in the Gulf region and on relations between Tehran and Riyadh. Indeed, the Iraqi invasion posed a major threat to the Saudi kingdom.

3.2.1 Iran's Neutrality

In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini died, leaving Iran in a rather delicate situation due to internal economic problems. That same year, Ayatollah Khamenei came to power and became the new supreme leader of Iran, and in August, President Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected. This change of leadership was decisive in trying to rebuild both the economy and Iran's image.

Tehran was thus faced with three different possibilities: on the one hand, it had the option of siding with Iraq; on the other, it had the option of allying with the US and inflicting a decisive defeat on Iraq, or it could choose to maintain a neutral stance.

In reality, Rafsanjani's administration had chosen:

“Active neutrality in order to maximise Iran's national interests by standing on the sidelines without antagonising either Baghdad or Washington” (Al-Suwaidi, 1996)

Following this, Velayati, the Iranian foreign minister, later declared that Iran would not take sides in the war and would not allow them to use Iranian territory or Iran's air or sea space (Marschall, 2003). Iran, therefore, decided to maintain a position of neutrality, trying to solve the internal problems caused by the long war against Iraq, including regional and international isolation. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraqi troops, however, provided an opportunity to show how dangerous Saddam and his security policy were. Iran tried to use the Iraqi aggression to show both the Gulf Arab states and the international community that the real threat to regional peace and security was Iraq and not Iran itself (Parsi, 2008). The Iranian decision in this case turned out to be positive because it presented Tehran as a rational and responsible actor in the eyes of other Arab states and international actors, improving relations with neighbouring countries and increasing revenues to the government (Marschall, 2003).

Iran, aiming to develop relations with other states and especially to improve national development by normalising international ties, sought to pursue three objectives: to contain Iraq, improve relations between the Gulf states and Riyadh, and finally increase Iranian influence on oil policy to reduce the inflation created during the war against Iraq and overcome the economic crisis (Amiri & Soltani, 2011). In December 1990, GCC members welcomed the possibility of future Iranian participation in regional security arrangements, considering Tehran for the first time an acceptable partner in Persian Gulf security (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 1997).

Despite its neutrality, Tehran was among the first countries to condemn the invasion of Kuwait and offer shelter to thousands of displaced people (Alsultan & Saied, 2017). It was a foreign approach that led Iran to improve its international standing and caused a change in relations and alliances in the Gulf region.

3.2.2 Saudi-Iranian Relations during the Gulf War

Initially, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was not perceived as a danger to Saudi regional security; however, as Iraqi troops advanced to the Saudi border, the perception of risk changed dramatically. Riyadh began to be intimidated that it could be the next state to be penetrated by Iraqi forces, mainly due to the increase of military forces on the Iraqi-Saudi border.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq in an attempt to counter Iranian expansion in the region; however, the outbreak of the Gulf War reversed this scenario, leading to a gradual rapprochement between Tehran and Riyadh to counter Saddam's expansionist ambitions (Jahner, 2012). The war led to a detente between the two countries, although diplomatic relations would not be restored until 19 March 1991 (Furtig, 2007).

The Iraqi invasion brought the two states closer together as Iran remained strongly anti-Iraq following the end of the Iran-Iraq war, and Saudi Arabia began to perceive Baghdad as a more significant threat to its security than Tehran. The war led Iran to have some internal socio-economic problems, such as unemployment and high inflation. President Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, aware that he had to guarantee Iran a position of stability in the Gulf, tried to address these problems, emphasising that:

“The normalisation of relations with the neighbouring states of the Persian Gulf [was] at the top of Iran's political agenda.” (Amiri, Samsu, & Fereidouni, 2011).

Where the rebuilding of relations between Riyadh and Tehran post-Iraq-Iran war was instrumental in reviving the economic situation in Iran, including through the world's oil reserves from Saudi Arabia. Iran therefore began to consider relations with the Saudis extremely important because of its influence in the region and on Opec (Okruhlik, 2003).

The Saudi Kingdom's fear of the Iraqi threat led it to initiate mutual negotiations between Tehran and Riyadh. King Fadh argued that support for Iraq was aimed at defending Iraq rather than attacking Iran. Hashemi's position was also critical in this context as he declared that:

“Iran does not accept geographical changes. Iran just intends to solve regional problems. So, regional countries should not be worried” (Ettelaat, 1990).

The policy adopted by Iran was not aggressive but was trying to find balance and stability in the region. The Iraqi invasion, as argued by the writer Kaim, laid the foundation for detente between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as they began to see Baghdad as a common enemy, leading the two states to normalise their relations a few months after the end of the war (Kaim, 2008). The Iraqi invasion thus represented a real turning point in regional

developments and bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, changing the dynamics in favour of Tehran. The latter managed to emerge from the international isolation and economic problems caused by the war against Iraq and, at the same time, improved relations with the Persian Gulf states and Saudi Arabia in particular. The Gulf War redrawn the balance of power and laid the foundation for a new phase of bilateral relations between Tehran and Riyadh in the years to come.

3.3 The rapprochement of the 1990s

In the early 1990s, internal and external factors led to the emergence of pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy arena (Khelghat-Doost, 2021). The main domestic factor was Iran's acceptance of the UN's ceasefire in 1988, underlining its support for peace. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 1989 led to a weakening of ideologists who followed him; and his successor Khamenei; the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani in July 1989, the amendment of the Iranian constitution, supported the President's position (Jahanpour, 1990).

The 1990s represented a period of *détente* in diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, marked by both critical internal and external transformations. On the Iranian side, a more pragmatic foreign policy was adopted, and internally, the acceptance of the UN ceasefire in 1988 marked the end of the long and tedious war against Iraq (Khelghat-Doost, 2021). The decision expressed Iran's willingness to seek peace and regional balance. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 1989 weakened the influence of the more radical ideologues who followed him, paving the way for a more moderate approach under the leadership of his successor Ayatollah Khamenei and the new President Hashemi Rafsanjani, elected in July of the same year. The constitutional amendments passed in 1989 strengthened the role of the president, allowing Rafsanjani to steer Iran's foreign policy towards a path of normalisation of regional relations. The Rafsanjani/Khamenei duumvirate in Iran marked a new era in Iran: Khamenei, already president (1981-1989), became the Supreme Guide, while Rafsanjani from the beginning of his term proposed a policy of openness in Iran's international trade, envisaging a relaxation in foreign relations to rebalance the Iranian economy (Axworth, 2019).

In this context, relations between Tehran and Riyadh began to develop towards greater dialogue and cooperation. The presidency of Rafsanjani (1989-1997) was decisive in this process, followed by Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Each advocated different foreign policy lines that shaped the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia over the following years. Among the main events that have shaped the dynamics between the two countries, particular importance is given to Rafsanjani's presidency, the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam's Iraq that led Saudi Arabia and Iran to reconsider their rivalries, and the issues surrounding oil prices within OPEC.

After Khomeini died in 1989, the political struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia seemed to have subsided. Iran's actions demonstrated a national interest perspective, with pragmatic choices of alliances and relations mainly oriented towards stabilising and maintaining the regime. However, the rivalry between the two states intensified again with the invasion of Iraq (2003) and the Arab Spring (2011), events that led to a new rift in geopolitical tensions in the Gulf area.

For the first time since the rupture of relations on 26 April 1988 (following the Hajj incident of 1987), in September 1990, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Valayati and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al Faisal met in New York to discuss the possible resumption of diplomatic relations between the two states, under the mediation of Syrian President Hafez Assad, Iran's main Arab ally. The meeting was a very positive sign for a rapprochement also in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 (Times Archives, 1990).

From 17 to 19 March 1991, Minister Valayati visited Prince Saud al-Faisal in Jeddah. Valayati said:

'The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran have reached understanding on solving all problems between them and will be restoring diplomatic ties within the next 48 hours' (Wilkinson, 1991).

The meeting culminated in issuing a joint statement that established an understanding of solving bilateral problems and the Hajj issues on the annual pilgrimages to the Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina. This was a very important meeting as the two countries agreed on principles. Iran began boycotting trips to Mecca in 1987 after the tragic episode of the

Great Mosque, a factor that then led Riyadh, in turn, to break off diplomatic relations with Tehran in 1988 (Wilkinson, 1991). Also in the same year, in June 1991, Prince Saud al-Faisal visited Tehran, the first visit by a senior Saudi official since the outbreak of the revolution.

President Rafsanjani welcomed this, believing cooperation between the two states would bring positive economic and political consequences (Marschall, 2003). In 1992 Rafsanjani declared:

“Iran's foreign policy is based on development and expansion of friendly relations with neighbouring countries in particular Persian Gulf countries” (Ettelaat, 1992).

This shows a willingness to initiate a change in Iran's foreign policy by making it less confrontational and emphasising the importance of developing trade relations with the Gulf countries, reducing possible regional conflicts. It is a gesture of openness, especially towards Riyadh and the GCC members.

However, relations between Riyadh and Tehran underwent a further positive development with the election of the new Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 (1997-2005). Khatami advocated dialogue to resolve international conflicts. According to the Saudi journalist Al-Toraifi, Khatami advocated rejecting any unipolar form of international order and argued that the logic of dialogue was the only viable way to resolve differences between peoples and nations (Petito, 2007). It showed Tehran's approach and its vision of foreign policy that sought to overcome international isolation through a more open dialogue.

Among the most important developments in the rapprochement between the two states in the late 1990s, Crown Prince Abdullah spoke of the positive impression during the 8th Islamic Summit (OIC Summit) in Tehran between 9-11 December 1997, stating in an interview with Time Magazine (Time, 1988)

“I came out of the Islamic Summit in Tehran in December 1997 with a strong impression of their desire for dialogue and to adopt a different approach. I felt that many of them are looking seriously for better ways to emerge from isolation and open a window through which they can reach out to others” (Time, 1988).

Abdullah felt that Tehran, under Khatami's leadership, was seeking dialogue and to reduce isolation. A statement in which the rivalry that had characterised relations between Iran and Tehran since 1979 seemed to show improvement.

Despite the tensions that erupted in 1979, the late 1990s showed a détente in 1991, and the rapprochement in 1997 brought about by a change in the regional normative order desired by both states, led foreign policies to be less aggressive and more aligned, forging more solid cooperation. Between 1998 and 2001, several diplomatic exchanges strengthened the dialogue between the two countries. The result of these visits led to the creation of joint bodies, such as the Joint Economic Commission (Okruhlik, 2003). Important agreements were signed, including *the 1998 Cooperation Agreement* and *the 2001 Security Agreement*, which required diplomatic efforts from both sides (Curtis & Hooglund, 2008). The Cooperation Agreement was signed to emphasise Riyadh's and Tehran's willingness to cooperate in economic, social and political issues, strengthening dialogue. And in this context, Saudi King Fahd urged the other Gulf states to improve relations with Tehran, saying:

“It is in the interest of all the countries of the Gulf to improve relations with Iran. [...] all the other countries should follow Saudi Arabia's lead” (Gaub, 2016).

Recognising that an improvement in relations with Tehran should not be limited to a bilateral issue exclusively with Riyadh, but extend to the other Gulf states. A declaration was seen as a necessity for developing the entire Persian Gulf and limiting geopolitical rivalries. Finally, under President Khatami, despite the previous tensions, the years between 1997 and 2001 increased the dialogue and dynamics between the two states, leading to new diplomatic developments and greater cooperation.

3.4 The Aftermath of the US Invasion of Iraq (2003-2011)

Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Washington Pentagon by Al-Qaeda, the US began planning an invasion of Iraq (BBC, 2023) and US President George W. Bush declared in 2002 that Baghdad possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and posed a threat to international peace:

“[...] While there are many dangers in the world, the threat from Iraq stands alone because it gathers the most serious dangers of our age in one place. Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are controlled by a murderous tyrant who has already used chemical weapons to kill thousands of people. This same tyrant has tried to dominate the Middle East, has invaded and brutally occupied a small neighbour, has struck other nations without warning, and holds an unrelenting hostility toward the United States’” (Bush G. W., 2002).

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, in February 2003, argued before the UN that the main motivation for the war against Baghdad lay in the presence of mobile biological weapons laboratories in Iraq. However, he later admitted that the evidence he presented to the UN, may have been wrong and not so solid, undermining US credibility worldwide (Borger, 2022). On 20 March 2003, US President George W. Bush declared that US forces had launched a military operation in Iraq, intending to overthrow Saddam Hussein and establish a democratic model in the country (Altoraifi, 2012) and destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, showing how the war was part of a broader anti-terrorist campaign, known as the Global war on terror (Archives, 2004).

On 13 December of the same year, Saddam Hussein was captured by US special forces and subsequently sentenced to death for crimes against humanity in 2006 by an Iraqi court. The sentence was carried out on 30 December 2006 (Archives, 2004). During the Iraq war, the US was faced with significant violence and sectarian insurgency, leading to an increase of troops deployed in Iraq 20,000 in 2007. It then completely withdrew its military forces from Baghdad on 18 December 2011, following a phased withdrawal that had already begun in 2009 under President Obama (Archives, 2004).

The Iraqi invasion created a power vacuum in the country, leading Iran and Saudi Arabia to want to expand their influence in the region by supporting proxy wars and radically changing the balance in the Gulf.

3.4.1 The fall of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of a new regional balance of power

According to scholar Henner Fürtig, the regional order in the Gulf has been shaped for decades by three main actors: Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. This strategic triangle was based on a logic of power balancing, in which if one of these states gained too much geopolitical weight, the other two tried to compensate and rebalance the situation. For example, Hussein-led Iraq had historically played a key role in containing Iran in the 1980s. However, with the fall of Hussein's regime following the US invasion, the aforementioned order was disrupted, no longer containing the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran. The US military presence in the region contributed to weakening Baghdad's role in the regional context, initially transforming the triangle into a kind of square, with Washington joining Tehran and Riyadh as the dominant actor and then leading the US to replace Iraq as the third main actor in this power dynamic (Fürtig H. , 2007). Despite the two previous wars (Iran-Iraq war 1980-88; Gulf war 1990-91) that had only altered the power triangle between Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia; with the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq definitively lost its role as a central player in the Gulf, creating a power vacuum that destabilised the entire region (Fürtig H. , 2007).

The Iraq war strongly contributed to the creation of a new regional order, with Iran seeing a decisive shift to expand its regional ambitions (Salloukh, 2013). Fürtig claimed that the US had created a favourable environment for Iran, allowing the latter to strengthen its hegemony in the Gulf region. Although the US had eliminated a historical enemy of Tehran, namely the anti-Iranian government led by Saddam, this event simultaneously undermined US credibility in the area. Indeed, the US proved incapable of controlling and stabilising post-Saddam Iraq, worsening local and regional stability, and the removal of the Baathist government in Iraq allowed Iran to consolidate a relationship with the fledgling democracy that was 65% Shia (Furtig, 2007). The rise of a Shia-dominated Iraqi government thus favoured an alignment between Baghdad and Tehran, consolidating a Shia axis that stretched from Iran to Syria and Lebanon, thanks also to the support of groups such as Hezbollah. This change in the regional balance of power worried the Sunni monarchies in the Gulf especially Saudi Arabia, which feared a strengthening of Iranian influence in the region (Fawcett, 2023).

In addition to its attempt to consolidate power in Iraq, Tehran began a campaign against the al-Saud dynasty, claiming that they were agents of the US within the region. The rhetoric began to undermine the trust between the two countries, challenging Saudi Arabia's leadership in the area.

For Saudi Arabia, the fall of Saddam was a major setback for its regional policy (Al-Marashi, 2015). Although Saddam also posed a threat to Riyadh, at the same time he represented a balancing force against Iranian influence in the Gulf (Bayman, 2007). Indeed, Riyadh feared that the new Shia alliance between Iraq and Iran could jeopardise its leadership in the Arab world by destabilising the region. One of Riyadh's main interests was to prevent instability and conflict in Iraq from threatening the internal stability of its country, to prevent the repression of Iraqi Sunnis by the Shia majority, and to limit Iranian influence (Blanchard, Katzman, Migdalovitz, & Sharp, 2009). Saudi Arabia therefore tried to contain Iranian influence by promoting Sunni influence and trying to support Sunni groups in Iraq to limit emerging Shia power.

3.4.2 Iranian and Saudi rivalry in Iraq and the election of the new Iranian President Ahmadinejad

At the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq, Iran decided to increase its intelligence activity and covert action in Baghdad, albeit through a limited role, to avoid direct US action. Furthermore, there was no evidence that Iran was actively encouraging attacks in Iraq. The US thought the Iranians were using an intelligence-gathering network in case they were directly threatened and faced a US invasion (Pollack, 2011). From 2005 to 2006, however, Tehran's policy towards Baghdad changed, developing a more direct and aggressive approach to strengthen its hegemony. Iran no longer perceived Iraq as a threat but as a weak state that could become a breeding ground for Iranian ambitions, where the US had failed to stabilise Baghdad and the possibility of a civil war breaking out in a short time.

During this period, the network of intelligence and covert actions in Iraq became kinetic, moving from intelligence gathering to active promotion of Iraqi armed groups, especially Shia ones, demonstrating the solid Iranian involvement in Iraqi politics (Pollack, 2011).

This active support took the form of financing, training and supplying weapons to these groups. One of the main groups that received the most support was the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and its militia, the Badr Brigades. Following the US invasion, the ISCI grew stronger and gained more influence in the new Iraqi government. Iran also supported other Shia militias, such as Fadhila and Jayesh al-Mahdi (JAM), leading to new violence and unrest in the country (Pollack, 2011). Several splinter groups emerged from the JAM, including the militant organisation Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) which promoted pro-Iranian ideology and the Kata'ib Hezbollah formed by the Quds Force and the foreign wing of the Revolutionary Guards. All groups closely linked and loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei.

General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, played a direct role in shaping Iraqi domestic policy. In 2005, a Shia-majority government was elected in Iraq, adopting a pro-Tehran constitution. Commander Soleimani mediated dialogue between Shia parties and militias through supervision and support of funds for political leaders, showing how Iranian influence had increased in Baghdad and the Gulf (Nader, 2015).

From the Saudi point of view, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards were infiltrating Shia militias, trying to influence the Iraqi political process to the detriment of Sunnis. On 23 September 2005, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, visiting Washington, expressed his concerns about Riyadh's growing Iranian support for Iraqi Shia groups, claiming that:

“Iraqis are complaining of interference by Iran. If there is indeed such interference, especially in southern provinces neighbouring Iran, that would be quite serious [...] these concerns include people coming in, money being brought in, weapons too, and interference in the political life” (Press Conference, 2005).

In response to Riyadh's accusations, Hamid Reza Asefi, the spokesman for the Iranian Foreign Minister, said he was surprised and at the same time disappointed by the Saudi allegations of interference in Iraq, calling Riyadh's fears “surprising and irrational” (AFP, 2005). Asefi further declared that:

“The Islamic Republic of Iran does not expect such remarks from its friends at such a sensitive time in the region [...] there suspicious hands that are seeking to spread differences among Muslim groups and sects in the region and in Iraq [...] Instead of making accusations, we should support the Iraqi government and nation to reach stability and reinforce security” (AFP, 2005).

Despite the initial tensions related to Iraq, the Saudis welcomed the outcome of the Iranian elections in 2005. During the first term of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, Saudi King Abdullah chose to send his congratulations to Tehran, demonstrating a possible cooperation between the two states. And the other GCC leaders followed in the Saudi footsteps. The Iranian president, in response, promoted a friendly message to his Arab neighbours, saying he wanted to continue the rapprochement with Riyadh and its neighbouring states, as predecessors Rafsanjani and Khatami had done:

“Considerable progress has been made thus far and more progress will be made. We will witness expansion of relations with the Muslim world and regional states[...] The Persian Gulf is the Gulf of peace and justice and we seek understanding with the Persian Gulf states and friendly relations to defend its interests” (Hafezian, 2010).

Furthermore, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, sent a message to Saudi King Abdullah assuring the Saudi kingdom of continued support for the rapprochement process. The Saudi king replied to Iran claiming:

“The message by Ayatollah Khamenei is a valuable move. The relations between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are very long-standing and solid, and we have a great deal of respect for the Iranian leadership and nation. We value the viewpoints and moves of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran towards the objective of bringing the Islamic countries closer to one another, and fostering the resolution of the current issues of the Muslim world” (Daily, 2005).

Ahmadinejad's foreign policy sought to address the new security dilemma created by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Barzegar, 2010). The rapprochement phase between Riyadh and Tehran, initiated during Ahmadinejad's first term, seemed promising through

exchanging friendly messages and hope for greater cooperation. However, it turned out to be short-lived, starting with the highly contested re-election for the Iranian president's second term in 2009, spreading protests in the streets of Tehran calling for re-election and aggravating tensions with Saudi Arabia (Black & Dehghan, 2009). There were several causes for this deterioration: Tehran increased its support for Shia-based groups in the region, expanding its influence; and following the adoption of a tougher foreign policy stance, Tehran and Riyadh began to support proxy wars, where each supported opposing groups in countries such as Syria and Yemen.

Scholars Alsultan and Saeid argued that the new Iranian president's approach was more confrontational. In addition to reorienting the country's foreign policy, it showed hostility towards the US and a determination to acquire nuclear energy. Although Iran sought to maintain a conciliatory relationship with Riyadh, there were clear signs of a desire to expand its influence in the Levant, intensifying the regional rivalry between the two states (Alsultan & Saeid, 2017).

After the overthrow of Saddam, which allowed Iran to expand its regional influence, taking advantage of the vacuum in Iraq and sectarian tensions in the country, Iranian influence also led to a proliferation of terrorism, threatening territorial integrity in the region also through alliances with non-state actors such as Hezbollah and allied states such as Syria (Heiran-Nia, 2023). The primary purpose of these alliances was to consolidate its hegemony in the region and protect its strategic interests in the face of pressure from Riyadh and the American presence in the Gulf. Iranian hegemonic strategies included the use of Shia proxies and militias to expand power outside its borders (Fawcett, 2023).

The Saudi kingdom's fears continued to intensify as relations between Iran, Lebanon, and Syria began to strengthen, and Tehran began to forge ties with non-state armed groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas (Doran, 2011). Increasing Iranian influence led Saudi Arabia to start providing support to Sunni factions in Iraq against Shia groups, leading to increased unrest in the region. Riyadh financially financed Sunni insurgents to buy weapons, including shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles. Some reports showed unofficial support from young Saudis motivated to fight jihadis in Iraq, called 'the Saudis of Iraq'.

Some of the money, collected through donations called Zakat, went to the insurgents and religious leaders, who then gave it to the Iraqi rebels (Baker & Hamilton, 2006).

Iran and Saudi Arabia used Iraq as a battleground for their geopolitical rivalries, turning the country into a breeding ground for clashes between Shia and Sunni militias, contributing to an increase in sectarian violence and creating more instability in the Gulf. This power struggle did not only affect Baghdad but destabilised the entire region. The competition intensified especially with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, where popular uprisings opened a new avenue to project influence. A scenario of growing rivalry turned into a series of regional conflicts between the two powers. Leading both states to use proxy wars as a central instrument of their foreign policy to spread their hegemony in the region. The end of the period of rapprochement thus led to an era of competition in trying to influence the balance of power in the Gulf.

3.5 The Arab Springs and the New Regional Confrontation (2011)

After the fall of Saddam Hussain until the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Persian Gulf regional security complex was characterised by a bipolar rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran and their expansionist and leadership ambitions in the region. These two powers associated regional supremacy with their own political survival and regime security (Cerioli, 2018).

With the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in the Middle East, numerous states faced instability and tensions, creating power vacuums and, in some cases, civil wars. Bahrain, Syria and Yemen represent three emblematic cases of proxy wars, which are important for understanding the evolving dynamics between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, this historical period represents a new turning point for relations between these two states, creating new power dynamics in the region and space for new non-state actors such as Hezbollah and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Abbasi & Khan, 2016).

Both Riyadh and Tehran, during proxy wars, partly followed in the footsteps of the strategic dynamics of the Cold War between the USSR and the US, never directly confronting each other on the battlefield but supporting opposing factions in local

conflicts. According to Gause, “*The seriousness of a regional cold war is determined by the number of domestically weak states that exist at a given time*” (Gause F. , 2014). When a state loses domestic control, local groups, often divided for sectarian and ideological reasons, intensify competition for power, offering external powers an opportunity to intervene to expand their competition. In proxy wars, neither Riyadh nor Tehran support local groups out of religious solidarity when a power vacuum arises but do so more for geopolitical purposes: preventing a possible expansion of the other state and protecting their own interests and regional security (Naghizadeh, 2019).

The Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia on 18 December 2010, triggered a revolutionary wave through protests and demonstrations in North Africa and the Middle East (BBC, 2016). What initially appeared to be a political act by a single individual - 26-year-old Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi - gradually turned into a transnational political movement, leading to the spread of movements against authoritarian regimes in the region, as happened in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. While the wave of protests was extinguished in 2012 by the authorities, in some states, such as Syria and Yemen, the situation worsened drastically. The overthrow of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya changed the geopolitical balance in the Middle East, similar to what happened with the fall of Saddam in 2003. However, whereas the US intervention in Iraq was caused by the presence of external factors, the revolutions of 2011 were caused by internal mobilisations by national populations tired of waiting for political reforms (Jahner, 2012).

In this historical context, Tehran initially supported the protests, seeing them as an extension of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which had overthrown the pro-Western monarchy of Shah Pahlavi. For Iran, the Islamist protests, which were developing in several countries, would challenge conservative and pro-Western governments in the region, leading to the emergence of new Islamic governments (Goodarzi, 2013). According to scholar Mohsen Milani, Iran enthusiastically supported the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, calling them the Islamic awakening inspired by its revolution (Milani, 2013). However, when the uprisings reached Syria, Tehran's strategic ally, there was a narrative change. The uprisings were seen as a plot organised by the US and Israel to depose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a key player in the Iranian axis of resistance (Milani, 2013).

Saudi Arabia, on the contrary, immediately adopted an opposite position. The protest movements were perceived as a direct threat to the maintenance of the regional status quo and the stability of the al-Saud monarchy. The Saudi royal family feared that regime change in neighbouring countries might encourage similar actions among Saudi citizens, marking the end of the Saudi monarchy. According to the Senior Fellow in National Security and Defence Michael Doran, the uprisings were not the result of religious and ideological divisions, but were consequences of socio-economic issues. The people sought economic and political improvement through greater participation in the political process (Doran, 2011). Requests seen as a major risk for monarchies in the Middle East, including the Saudi monarchy. Riyadh's fear lay in the possibility that Saudi citizens might also start demanding similar changes, jeopardising the Saudi monarchy's control and legitimacy.

The Arab revolutions were not only a geopolitical threat to the regimes, but a real risk of internal instability. The same social and economic dynamics that had fuelled rebellions in other states could easily spread to Riyadh and Tehran, leading regimes to actively intervene in regional crises to protect their own security.

3.5.1 The Arab uprising in BAHRAIN and the Iranian and Saudi reaction

Bahrain is an interesting example of how sectarian tensions and regional geopolitical influences complicated the situation during the Arab Spring, where both Riyadh and Tehran used Bahrain as a theatre for their clashes. A significant example of the proxy wars between the two states, where both supported local conflicts to expand their hegemony.

With a Sunni minority in Bahrain, the Al Khalifas ruled over a disadvantaged Shia majority, highlighting the presence of a sectarian divide, which was destined to become the basis for conflict between the population and the government (Terrill A. , 2011). Protests in Bahrain erupted in February 2011, with a variety of complaints extending from the expansion of political rights to the fall of the monarchy. Demonstrations increased following the failure of dialogue between the government and the opposition and started to support the fall of the al-Khalifa monarchy. The main motivations were related to improved living conditions, more rights and the limitation of the monarchy (Davidson, 2012). As the protests intensified, so did the regime's repression, which supported a narrative that positioned Iran as the driving force behind the unrest (Matthiesen, 2013).

Indeed, the authorities of the kingdom accused Iran of supporting the Shia demonstrations to destabilise the regime and overthrow the sovereignty of the Al-Khalifa (Terrill A. , 2011).

A month after the protests and violence began, Bahrain invoked the GCC mutual defence pact led by Riyadh, asking for support to quell the protests, believing that the Iranian threat was also projecting onto the other GCC countries (Joyce, 2012). On 14 March of the same year, the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) was activated, where more than a thousand Saudi soldiers crossed the border into Bahrain, increasing the repression, and leading the monarchy to regain control.

Ayatollah Khamenei initially saw the Arab springs as an Islamic awakening, arguing that the revolutions could change the regional status quo. Although the Bahraini regime accused him of involvement against the monarchy, Iran argued that the rebellions were independent movements linked to a “population dissatisfied with its government” (Chubin, 2012). Khamenei further stated that:

“The revolts of people of Bahrain are primarily the same as those from the people of Egypt, Tunisia or Libya. They want free elections, is that asking for too much?” (Zarrabi-Kashani, 2014).

Where later, parliament speaker Ali Larijani argued that:

“Those people are looking for changes in their governments, they want to see their legit demands recognised and this is the main reason why the Islamic Republic is supporting them” (Mehr, 2011).

As can be deduced from these statements, Iran argued that the outbreak of demonstrations in Bahrain stemmed from discontent among the population rather than being motivated by sectarianism. Tehran, in this case, did not just want to be recognised as the protector of the faith, but as an advocate of the rights of the Bahraini people to be able to protest. When the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) reached Bahrain, Tehran condemned it, claiming it was a decision made out of fear that the real revolution would reach its borders (Fürting H. , 2013). However, the Iranian reaction to the uprisings in Bahrain was limited to official statements: it opposed violence and military intervention but did not open a direct

confrontation. According to Chubin, Iran was not prepared for the Arab Spring and was displaced by the speed of the military operation in Bahrain by the GCC (Chubin, 2012).

For Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, the protests represented a direct threat to its status quo, fearing that Tehran would gain more and more power in the kingdom of Bahrain with an overthrow of the Saudi monarchy. This was the main motivation for Riyadh to actively work to ensure stability in the small kingdom, including through the deployment of Saudi troops. According to Al-Rasheed, the Saudis began to justify their regional interference in Bahrain using sectarian discourse as an opportunity to achieve their own ambitions. Indeed, Riyadh discarded the possibility of a pan-Islamic solution in Bahrain, fuelling the sectarian divisions already present (Al-Rasheed M. , 2011).

According to Mohsen Milani, moreover, sectarianism was not the main cause of the conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but a consequence of the power struggle in the Gulf:

“Sectarianism, or the so-called Sunni-Shia schism, is not the cause of this persistent cold war. The reality is that the two countries have been engaged in a relentless rivalry for power or expansion of influence in the region for decades. This is not to downplay the importance of sectarianism. Rather, it is to suggest that sectarianism is only one of many tools available to the two countries to achieve their strategic goals. In this sense, sectarianism is not the cause of the Cold War between the two countries; rather, it is a symptom of the conflict” (Milani, 2016).

Both states used sectarianism as a strategic tool to achieve their goals. Al-Rasheed highlights one concept in particular: how reducing the conflict to a religious issue, and thus to sectarianism, would obscure the complex realities, where both countries used this division to distract themselves from the internal uncertainties of their regimes (Al-Rasheed M. , 2017).

3.5.2 The Arab uprising in Syria and the civil war (2011-2018)

The conflict in Syria represents one of the most critical and bloody events related to the proxy wars that characterised the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran during the 21st century. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Syria was already

torn by severe social and economic tensions under the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The desire for more freedom and democracy led Syrian citizens to protest in the main squares of Damascus and Aleppo in 2011 to assert their rights (Laub, 2023). Initially, the demonstrations were peaceful and non-violent, but they soon changed their approach and turned into an armed conflict following the brutality of the repression by the Syrian regime (Droz-Vincent, 2014).

In April 2011, Assad launched a campaign to eliminate the forces that were opposing the Syrian government. Through the Shabiha militia and the Syrian police, there was strong repression against Syrian protesters, resulting in the death of hundreds of them. In July 2011, a rebel group formed by military defectors founded the Free Syrian Army intending to create a military opposition against the authoritarian Assad regime. In 2015, the Syrian uprising turned into a bloody sectarian civil war, killing more than 160,000 dead, 6.5 million internally displaced persons and 2.7 million refugees in Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan (Gordts, 2014).

Within a few months, the Syrian conflict turned into a proxy war, in which the two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, clashed indirectly. They avoided a direct confrontation that might be too risky by supporting local and regional actors to pursue their own geopolitical interests. In this context, it is possible to see how Iran and Saudi Arabia's involvement, therefore, was done to strengthen their political power and hegemony in the region. Both countries used a regional crisis for their own expansionist ambitions in the Gulf and the Middle East.

3.5.2.1 The Role of Iran

Syria has been a major Iranian ally since the Islamic Revolution, supporting Tehran even during the war against Iraq in the 1980s. The Syrian-Iranian bond is based on common strategic interests such as Hezbollah and distrust of the US. The Syrian government is led by the Alawite minority, the same faith derived from Shiism and when the uprising broke out in 2011, it worried Iran greatly (Khaddour, 2015). The latter used Syria as a gateway to finance, train and provide logistical assistance to Hamas and Hezbollah. The removal of Assad would have threatened Iran's hegemony in the region and its access to Hezbollah, compromising its role in the Gulf. In 2011, Tehran therefore began supporting the Syrian

government through aid and training and then sent Iranian fighters, members of the Quds Force and Hezbollah, to help Assad suppress the protests (Terrill W. , 2015).

With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Iran mobilised thousands of Shia militias to support the Syrian political regime (Joobani & Adisonmez, 2018). Tehran also convinced Shias in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq to fight together in Syria against opponents. Hezbollah also played a key role in supporting Syria, publicly acknowledging its presence in Syria in 2013 by increasing its engagement on the ground and training Syrian fighters (Sullivan, 2014). It reciprocated the support Syria had received in previous years, when in 2006 together with Iran they had sent weapons to Hezbollah during the conflict against Israel (Rotella, 2008). Moreover, the Assad regime played a crucial role in sending arms and funding from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Sullivan, 2014).

Iranian policy towards Syria was not limited to National Security but was also based on Iran's ability to project its power throughout the Middle East. In this regard, Professor Jubin Goodarzi argues that if there were to be a regime change in Syria, “Iran would lose not only an Arab ally but also its ability to provide support and backing to Hezbollah, limiting its power in Lebanon and on the Arab-Israeli issue” (Goodarzi, 2013). Syria's border with Lebanon represented a strategic importance not to be underestimated: Tehran used Damascus to transport weapons and advisers to Lebanon for Hezbollah. The war in Syria posed a significant threat to the strategic alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah: Iran did not want to lose its most important foothold in the Levant and Hezbollah could not lose Iranian and Syrian support (Sullivan, 2014). Scholar Terrill describes Iranian involvement in Syria as follows:

“Iranian military support for the Assad (sic) regime then rapidly expanded in fields such as training, advising, and intelligence gathering and analysis. Iran has also provided badly needed financial support to the Syrian regime, which has allowed it to keep its military largely intact despite significant desertions early in the conflict and to provide for the economic needs of loyalists” (Terrill W. , 2015).

Should Assad fall, the possible replacement would have been less inclined to support Iran in promoting Hezbollah against Israel. Iran therefore decided to support the Assad regime to protect Hezbollah and Iranian foreign policy interests. Supporting a possible Sunni-

dominated government in Syria would lead to greater cooperation with other Arab states against Iran itself and also with the United States. For Goodarzi, this would seriously affect Iranian security, creating major internal problems (Goodarzi, 2013).

3.5.2.2 The Role of Saudi Arabia

The alliance between Iran and Syria began to cause concern in Saudi Arabia, but there were more significant concerns. In September 2006, for example, before the rebellions broke out in Syria, King Abdullah informed the US ambassador in Tehran that Syria was a minor problem compared to what was happening in Iraq (U.S. Embassy, 2006). Between 2009 and 2010, there were mutual visits between Assad and Abdullah, marking a phase of rapprochement, a short-lived period when demonstrations and protests against Assad in Syria began to intensify (Lima, 2023).

Initially, with the outbreak of civil war in Syria, Saudi interests were not clear. On the one hand, Riyadh, adopting a cautious approach, was hesitant to remove Bashar al-Assad, partly because Riyadh firmly supported the status quo and did not want it to be changed. Professor Andrew Terrill in this regard argued that even if the Assad regime were to be toppled or replaced by an anti-Iranian one, the Saudi leadership would not see this change as a victory for their country, fearful that it would trigger a revolutionary upheaval that would jeopardise Riyadh's status quo in the Middle East (Terrill W. A., 2015). A position that well lent changed attitude as argued by Milani:

“Riyadh is determined to overthrow Assad and bring to power a Riyadh-friendly regime willing to terminate its strategic cooperation with Iran and disallow Tehran to use Damascus as a reliable conduit to transfer money and weapons to Hezbollah. And, perhaps most importantly, Riyadh seems to believe that a friendly Syria would provide the kingdom with a backdoor re-entry into Iraq with the ultimate goal of undermining a Tehran-friendly government in Baghdad” (Milani, 2016).

Riyadh quickly decided to take a hard line against Assad, where it not only wanted to isolate Assad, but to remove him from power, a decision also motivated by wanting to contain the Arab uprisings. Saudi King Abdullah demanded an end to the repression and

in August 2011, together with Kuwait and Bahrain, decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Syria as a sign of protest (Lima, 2023). The first signs of Syrian militarisation appeared in June 2011, when the Assad regime put down an armed uprising composed mainly of civilians. Saudi Arabia financed the Syrian rebels to encourage them in their rebellion and sent weapons to supply the anti-Assad groups. A strategy based on the certainty that the US would seek regime change in the country (Lima, 2023). Saudi Arabia also condemned Hezbollah, accusing it and the GCC of being a terrorist organisation that carried out hostile acts in the six GCC member states and of engaging in campaigns of terror and incitement in Syria, Iraq and Yemen (BBC, 2016). Campaigns that, according to the Saudi Kingdom, were supported by Iran.

King Abdullah in a statement, condemned the brutal repression of protests in Syria, declaring in August 2011:

“What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia [...] Syria should think wisely before it's too late and issue and enact reforms that are not merely promises but actual reforms” (Al-Jazeera, 2016)

Showing a radical shift favouring regime change in Syria, moving away from the initial idea of caution. A change dictated by Saudi solid support for the Syrian protesters. And when Syria rejected Saudi approaches, Riyadh began to support the opposition against the Assad regime openly.

According to analyst Ana Echagüe, Riyadh saw the Arab uprisings as a chance to rebalance the region in its favour against Iranian hegemony and assert its own interests (Echagüe, 2014). Saudi foreign policy became more assertive, not so much due to gaining more self-confidence but because of the feeling of vulnerability caused by the US intervention in Iraq and the changing balance of power (Echagüe, 2014).

Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, as well as Saudi Arabia's former ambassador to the US and former head of intelligence, spoke about the relationship with Iran and their activities in Syria during the 22nd annual conference of policymakers of the National Council on US-Arab Relations on 22-23 October 2013 (Al-Faisal, 2013). During his speech, he condemned Syrian President Assad, arguing that he should be stopped by all

means, while showing the strong concern of the Iranian leadership in countries with significant Shia minority communities:

“Their invasion of Syria is underway and growing. This must end. Saudi Arabia will oppose any and all of Iran's interference and meddling in other countries because it is Saudi Arabia's position that Iran has no right to meddle in other nations' internal affairs, especially Arab states” (Al-Faisal, 2013).

According to Riyadh and the GCC states, a new Sunni-dominated regime in place of Saddam would have contributed to the creation of a new regional order to the detriment of Tehran, not least because Syria's population was composed of a Sunni majority. In this case, a new Sunni regime would have supported Saudi Arabia in regional affairs, giving it greater power and authority in the Gulf and the Middle East. Another aim of Riyadh was to close off Iran's access to Syria, preventing the Islamic Republic from continuing to actively support Hezbollah and have influence in Lebanon (Hassan, 2013). In addition, the Gulf states believed that a realignment with a Saudi regime in Syria would favour the return of the Sunni monarchies to the Gulf and harm Iran.

However, the Gulf monarchies began to support different factions, without uniting against their common enemy: Tehran. For instance, Qatar supported jihadists and the Muslim Brothers to overthrow Assad, while Saudi Arabia did not want to replace the Syrian regime with jihadists who had a different radical ideology from the Saudi ones. Riyadh initially supported regime change even militarily, changing its attitude when it realised that the forces that were taking power were jihadists (Hassan, 2013).

Riyadh stopped funding opposition groups before funding Islamic State or Jahbat al-Nusra (an Al-Qaeda affiliate) as both despised the Saudis, declaring them terrorist groups in 2014. As argued by Gregory Gause III, both groups did not tolerate Riyadh mainly because of their close ties with the US (Gause G. , 2016). Unlike the Iranians, the Saudis had no facilities to support the opposition through training, and could only send funding. A limited kind of support that was unlikely to reverse the fate of the conflict and Assad's military superiority (Hokayem, 2014).

3.5.3 The Arab Uprising in Yemen

The conflict in Yemen is an emblematic case of how an internal insurgency quickly turned into a proxy war between regional powers, justified by a process of “Sectarianization”. Social and political dynamics have been obscured by a narrative that has expanded religious factors and sectarian divisions, where both Saudi Arabia and Tehran have managed to insert themselves into the conflict to protect their regional security and expand their sphere of influence (Hashemi & Postel, 2017).

Levels of unemployment and malnutrition led the Yemeni people to protest in 2011, demanding the downfall of President Ali Abdullah Saleh (Clausen, 2015). The GCC, supported by Saudi pressure, began negotiating for the resignation of the Yemeni president and Saleh decided to step down in February 2012 in favour of Vice-President Abd Mansour Hadi (Brehony, 2015). The new administration, however, was unable to address the tensions in the country and lost popular support from the population (Clausen, 2015). Among the various groups that opposed Hadi's government were the Houthis, a Zaidi group from North Yemen, a Shia Muslim minority. Initially born in the 1990s as a political faction, they turned into an armed militia against the government following the execution of their leader Hussein Badr al-Houthi in 2004 (Brehony, 2015). Yemen accused Tehran of having links with the Houthis since the Shah's regime, due to the proximity between Zaydi and Shia (Milani, 2015).

The conflict intensified with the division of the country into two opposing factions: the south supported Hadi, while the north supported the Houthis allied with Saleh. To further complicate the dynamics, terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Isis expanded their influence (Darwich, 2018). The deposed president, Saleh, joined the insurgency to overthrow the new president, Hadi. In September 2014, the Houthis, together with some of Saleh's allies in the army, took control of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, occupying government institutions and forcing President Hadi to resign on 22 January 2015 and flee to Saudi Arabia, where he sought help for a military intervention to restore the legitimate Sunni government in Yemen (Perkins, 2016). On 25 March 2015, Riyadh together with eight other Arab states created a coalition that launched Operation Decisive Storm to help Yemen's ousted President Hadi return to power, also with the support of international actors including the US and Canada (Theussen, 2016). An operation against the Houthi

insurgency that was increasingly gaining ground, supported by Iran and, above all, to contain the perceived growing influence in the region (Kendall, 2021). All central Sunni states, such as Egypt, Qatar and Kuwait, joined this campaign, which intensified after 2017, when the Houthis launched ballistic missiles against Saudi Arabia. This triggered a humanitarian disaster in Yemen, described as ‘genocide’ by the current Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (BBC, 2015), who Arabia accused of supplying missiles to the Houthis.

3.5.3.1 *The Iranian Reaction*

Tehran was supportive of the protests in Yemen, supporting them and recognising the right of the Yemeni people to oppose an oppressive regime, supporting the overthrow of Saleh and not supporting Hadi's government (Salisbury, 2015). As in the case of Bahrain, Iran argued that protests in Yemen should not be limited to religious, but political tensions.

Following the Saudi military intervention, the Ayatollah in a televised speech on 10 April 2015 accused Saudi Arabia of committing genocide with the air strikes in Yemen against the Houthis:

“This is a crime and genocide that can be prosecuted in international courts ... Riyadh will not emerge victorious in its aggression [...] The aggression by Saudi Arabia against Yemen and its innocent people was a mistake and It has set a bad precedent in the region” (BBC, 2015).

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in the same year, during a speech in Tehran, called for an end to air strikes by Saudi Arabia and Arab allies against Yemen, arguing that they will not succeed and that the countries in the region should find a political solution.

*“A great nation like Yemen will not submit to bombing. Come, let us all think about ending war. Let us think about a ceasefire [...]”*Let us prepare to bring Yemenis to the negotiating table to make decisions about their future. Let us accept that the future of Yemen will be in the hands of the people of Yemen, not anyone else” (Evans, 2015).

Tehran offered support to the Houthis with both armaments and political backing. Iran's smuggling of weapons into Yemen, such as anti-tank missiles, aerial drones, explosives and ballistic missiles is now well established (Jones, 2019). Between 2015 and 2016, US

forces seized several arms shipments bound for Yemen, and Iran was also accused of involving Islamic forces such as Hezbollah in training Houthi militants (Feierstein, 2017).

The Saudi and its coalition's inability to restore the legitimate government and quell the insurgency led the Iranian government to a successful outcome, as support for the Houthis comes at a very low cost compared to that invested by the Saudis, undermining its international reputation and credibility (Kendall, 2017).

3.5.3.2 The Saudi reaction

Saudi Arabia had great influence in Yemen, motivated by its financial support for the Yemeni economy. Riyadh and the Yemeni government often complained about Iran's support for the Houthi rebels. The Saudis contributed to the removal of President Saleh and became involved in Yemen from the beginning fearing that the outbreak of an insurgency would affect the stability of the peninsula (Salisbury, 2015). While in the early days of Hadi's tenure, Riyadh intensified its financial efforts as a guarantor of stability (Brehony, 2015), as the conflict intensified, Saudi Arabia reaffirmed its alliance with the Hadi regime and sought to protect it.

The Saudis also saw the Houthis as a threat to Yemen's security because of their connection to Tehran. According to the Saudis, adopting a military stance against the Houthi group was a way to contain a possible Iranian expansion in the peninsula (Clausen, 2015). Saudi Foreign Minister Adel bin Ahmed Al-Juberi stated in 2016 that these internal disturbances were:

“[...] A direct result of Iran's blatant intrusion into internal Yemeni affairs.[...] It seems that Tehran is aiming to undermine Yemen's security and stability, stroke sectarian divisions and thwart international efforts seeking to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Yemen crisis” (Embassy KSA, 2016).

According to the Saudis, moreover, Tehran continued to be the world's main sponsor of terrorism, and a major problem for the various Arab states, certainly not a solution (Middle-east, 2017). Riyadh, therefore, took the lead in stopping the Houthis and, consequently, Iran. Milani, however, argued that Riyadh was magnifying Iranian power in Yemen to justify its expansionist ambitions (Milani, 2015).

The Saudis perceived the war against the Houthis as an ideological struggle against Tehran, noting that no other outcome than victory is considered acceptable (Al-Rasheed, 2015). Riyadh used a sectarian narrative to justify its intervention in Yemen. It portrayed itself as the protector of the Sunni region, framing (inaccurately) the Houthis as Shia and allies of Iran, neglecting the complex social, political and strategic motivations of the conflict. Among the multiple strategies used to limit the conflict to a sectarian motivation, the Saudis referred to the Houthis as “the Persians”, paying increasing attention to religious rhetoric and sectarian divisions (Al-Muslimi, 2015). This was an effective strategy as the media began to stop emphasising the differences between the Zayds (Houthi) and the Shia and started using the expression Houthi-Shiite.

Winning the war in Yemen was crucial for the Saudis and Mohammad bin Salman, King Salman's son, in line for succession. While losing the war would damage Saudi foreign policy and the perception of bin Salman (Al-Rasheed, 2015). The prince's main goal is to restore an allied regime in Yemen and consolidate his country as a regional leader.

3.6 Diplomatic relations after the proxy wars 2016-2018

The rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran underwent a major transformation in the period following the proxy wars in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, increasingly turning into an aggressive geopolitical competition. Both states have sought to expand their hegemony in the region by exploiting the instability of local institutions. The hostility, masked by a narrative based on a sectarian divide between Shiites and Sunnis, has been fomented by geopolitical and regional security motivations. The years from 2016 to 2018 showed a drastic deterioration in diplomatic relations between the two states, perfectly reflecting the tensions and conflicts that had developed until then.

The year 2016 marked a critical phase with the execution of Shiite leader Nimr al-Nimr, an opponent of the Saudi family, triggering a harsh reaction from Iran. Several protests spread across the region, culminating in the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran, marking a break in diplomatic ties between the two states. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al Jubeir declared on Jan. 3:

“I would like to point out that the Iranian regime has a long track record regarding the inviolability of foreign diplomatic missions, including, for example, the attack on the U.S. Embassy in 1979, the attack on the British Embassy in 2011, and, yesterday, the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and the Consulate General in Mashhad. These attacks are considered a continuation of the Iranian regime's aggressive policy in the region to destabilize security and stability and provoke conflict and war. Iran's history is full of negative and aggressive interference in the affairs of Arab countries, always accompanied by devastation and destruction and the killing of innocent lives. The Kingdom, in light of these facts, announces the severing of diplomatic relations with Iran and calls on all members of the Iranian diplomatic mission (embassy - consular - of the two offices) to leave the country within 48 hours.”

(Al-Jubeir, 2016)

Another controversial episode was the Hajj-related diplomatic crisis 2016, in which the two states failed to find a compromise for the security of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Following the 2015 disaster, where hundreds of pilgrims lost their lives during the crash, Ayatollah Khamenei accused Riyadh of not knowing how to manage the pilgrimage and of murdering Iranian pilgrims (BBC, 2016). Accusations that highlighted the seriousness of the mutual accusations, showing the divisions between the two countries, but also a more veiled struggle for moral and spiritual control within Islam. It was not until 2017 that Iranian pilgrims returned to participate in the annual Hajj.

The year 2017 marked another historic moment in relations, when on 14 March 2017 at the White House, Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, together with US President Donald Trump, showed clear changes from the strained relations between Riyadh and the Obama administration. Both Bin Salman and Trump opposed Iran's ‘expansionist moves in the region’ and support of terrorist organisations (Davis, 2017). Strengthening the strategic alliance between Washington and Riyadh and increasing tensions with Tehran.

A little less than a month later, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared that his country was ready to re-establish new relations with all neighbouring countries, including Saudi Arabia, claiming that:

“What happened in front of the Saudi embassy in Tehran was carried out by some reckless people and was condemned by all institutions” (Memo, 2017).

Referring to the protests that had erupted in response to the Saudi execution of Shia leader Sheikh Nimr al Nimr. However, Saudi rhetoric remained aggressive and during a TV interview on 2 May 2017, bin Salman declared that it was impossible to create a dialogue with Tehran due to its expansionist ambitions and control over the Islamic world (Guardian, 2017). And when bin Salman was asked if there was a possibility of direct dialogue, he replied with:

“How can I come to an understanding with someone, or a regime, that has a belief anchored in an extremist ideology? What are the interests between us? How can I come to an understanding with this? We know that we are one of Iran's main targets. We are not waiting for there to be a battle in Saudi Arabia, so we will work to make it a battle for them in Iran and not in Saudi Arabia” (Guardian, 2017).

On 4 May, Iran's UN Ambassador Gholami Khoshroo sent a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, claiming that the Saudi prince's statements were ‘illegitimate and provocative’:

“Over the past four decades, our region and the world have suffered tremendously as a consequence of Saudi insecurity and misplaced obsession with Iran, [...] This has led to irresponsible, provocative and ill-fated policies and practices of promoting and financing extremism globally and short-sighted and self-defeating adventurism in the region. In contrast to Saudi rulers, the Islamic Republic of Iran believes that peace and stability is in the common interest of every state in the Persian Gulf region and no country can attain security at the expense of insecurity for others. We have no desire, nor any interest, in an escalation of tension in our neighbourhood. We continue to stand ready for dialogue and accommodation to promote regional stability, combat destabilizing extremist violence and reject sectarian hatred. We hope Saudi Arabia will be persuaded to heed the call of reason” (Security Council, 2017).

On 13 August 2017, Saudi Arabia asked the Iraqi prime minister to mediate dialogue between Tehran and Riyadh. Within days, Iran allowed Iranian pilgrims to go to the Hajj for the first time in two years. While there initially seemed to be a period of détente, this phase was very short-lived as on 30 August of the same year, Iranian President Rouhani accused Saudi Arabia of supporting terrorists in Yemen and Syria:

“Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and their support of terrorists in Yemen and Syria are main hurdles to improve ties between Tehran and Riyadh. Saudi Arabia should stop backing terrorists” (Aljazeera, 2017).

In 2018, following the tensions that erupted with the war in Yemen and Iran's support for the Houthis, Saudi Arabia accused Tehran of escalating regional tensions, calling for a change in the Iranian regime while accusing it of failing to prevent the Houthi rebels from obtaining ballistic missiles (Shalal, 2018).

On 15 March 2018, Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared in an interview with CBS that he will develop nuclear weapons if Tehran does so, claiming:

“Saudi Arabia does not want to acquire any nuclear bomb, but without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible” (Reuters, 2018).

On 30 April 2018, following a visit with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Riyadh, Ayatollah Khamenei lashed out at the US and its encouragement of Riyadh to confront Iran. And how relations between Washington and Riyadh destabilised the region and the entire Middle East. The Ayatollah stated:

“One of the ways to confront Iran is to provoke inexperienced rulers of the region [...] Americans are trying to provoke Saudi Arabia against Tehran ... Their aim is to create more regional crisis ... to push Muslims to fight against Muslims. If these governments gain more wisdom, they will not confront Iran. If they confront Iran, they will be defeated” (Aljazeera, 2018).

The alliance between Riyadh and Washington became increasingly solid, especially when on 9 May 2018 Saudi Arabia supported Trump's decision to withdraw the Iran nuclear deal and Saudi Minister Adel al Jubeir stated that Saudi Arabia would do whatever was necessary to protect its people (Kingston, 2018).

3.7 Iran's nuclear programme

In the 1990s, Iran had intensified research into plutonium reprocessing and uranium enrichment. Iran's nuclear programme at that time began to develop through the Amad Plan, a secret project led by scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, which aimed to build an arsenal of five nuclear weapons by 2004 (Albright & Burkhard, 2022).

In 2002, however, the National Council of Resistance of Iran - an organisation made up of Iranian dissident groups - revealed the existence of two Iranian nuclear sites: a uranium enrichment plant in Natanz and a heavy-water production plant in Arak (Reardon, 2012). A revelation that put Iran at the centre of international attention, concerned about the ambiguous purpose of these facilities. Exacerbating the situation, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was backed by reasons of mistrust over the presence of possible Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This contributed to the Iranian decision to halt the Amad plan in late 2003 formally. This plan was only officially concluded, but it did not mark the end of Iran's nuclear weapons research activities. Contemporaneously, the possibility of Tehran gaining the status of a nuclear and dominant power in the Gulf represented an absolute nightmare for Riyadh, altering the balance of power in favour of Iran once again, and the possibility that the US could initiate an armed response (Alsultan & Saeid, 2017).

In 2007, the US Bush administration attempted to implement stricter coercive measures against Tehran, which were soon quelled following the publication of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report that Iran's nuclear programme had most likely stopped in 2003 (Reardon, 2012). Although uncertainty reigned over the report's credibility, the likelihood of a military confrontation between the US and Iran decreased, although the Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia remained concerned.

With the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, who took over from Ahmadinejad as Iran's new president, hopes were raised for a change in negotiations with the West to lift sanctions blocking Tehran's economy. Indeed, Rouhani was keen on greater openness in foreign policy and a revival of the economy (Zaccara, 2020). Two years later, in 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed by the P5+1: the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, France, Germany, the UK, China and Russia) and Iran. The UN Security Council approved the JCPOA through

Resolution 223 on 20 July 2015, highlighting the importance of ensuring that Iran's nuclear programme was exclusively for peaceful purposes (UN, 2015):

“[...]Reaffirming its commitment to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the need for all States Party to that Treaty to comply fully with their obligations, and recalling the right of States Party, in conformity with Articles I and II of that Treaty, to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination, Emphasizing the importance of political and diplomatic efforts to find a negotiated solution guaranteeing that Iran’s nuclear programme is exclusively for peaceful purposes, and noting that such a solution would benefit nuclear non-proliferation [...] Affirming that full implementation of the JCPOA will contribute to building confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme” (UN, 2015).

The JCPOA represented the result of a long international effort as it provided for the curtailment of Iran's nuclear activities and increased transparency of activities through comprehensive and extensive monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) - the UN body that was supposed to monitor compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) - in exchange for the easing of economic sanctions imposed on Iran (Hatzman, 2019). However, the JCPOA also represented yet another threat to Saudi security and spheres of interest. Having lost some of its allies to the Arab uprising and Iranian interventions, Riyadh found itself in a critical situation. Although it had shown its disagreement with and fear of the deal, the Saudi kingdom feared that the JCPOA would not prevent Iran from continuing its nuclear programme, but also legitimise it as a regional player, strengthening it economically and politically by easing sanctions and lifting its rogue-state status (Mirza M. , 2021).

The agreement did not improve relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but increased Saudi fears precisely because of the uncertainty of its exact nature and Tehran's possible development of nuclear weapons. Scholar Willis Stanley, in this context, observed that a nuclear capability would favour the current leadership remaining in power and that:

“A nuclear weapon capability also would help fulfill the leadership’s ambitions to make Iran the Islamic world’s preeminent power, a fulfillment of Iran’s self-

appointed role as regional hegemon and as a beacon for all to convert to the true Islam” (Stanley, 2009)

It would have dramatically increased Iran's sphere of influence in the Middle East, making it the predominant power in the region (Pasha, 2016) (Riedel, 2016).

Under the Obama administration, the JCPOA emerged as an option to improve security in the Gulf that would have limited Iran's nuclear capabilities and prevented an arms race. The scholar Gregory Gause emphasised the Obama presidency's willingness to cooperate and engage Iran in regional diplomacy, especially for the situation in Syria, with the primary aim of normalising relations (Gause G. , 2016).

In response to the signing of the JCPOA, the Saudis were concerned that a new dialogue could develop between Washington and Tehran, at the expense of Saudi Arabia. This relationship could have further legitimised Iranian influence in the region and increased its expansionist aims (Yamani, 2014). Furthermore, the Saudi Kingdom firmly believed that Iran's nuclear programme was not only for civil, but also military purposes (Norman, 2016). Indeed, the Saudis showed interest in developing nuclear capabilities in turn due to the balance of power theory in the region, which would risk starting a possible arms race by both states (Perkovich, 2016).

However, Riyadh's fears were calmed under the Trump administration and on 8 May 2018, after two years of implementing the JCPOA, US President Donald Trump decided to withdraw from the agreement, criticising Iran's lack of transparency and denouncing Tehran's funding and support for rebel and militant groups in the Middle East:

“The Iran deal is defective at its core. If we do nothing, we know exactly what will happen. In just a short period of time, the world’s leading state sponsor of terror will be on the cusp of acquiring the world’s most dangerous weapons. Therefore, I am announcing today that the United States will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal” (Trump, 2018).

The withdrawal of the JCPOA, welcomed by Saudi Arabia, led it to place its trust in the new American administration, believing it could counter Iran's growing influence in the Middle East. The Saudis declared:

“The need to deal with the danger that Iran’s policies pose to international peace and security through a comprehensive view that is not limited to its nuclear program but also includes all hostile activities” (Mirza M. , 2021).

Finally, relations between Riyadh and Tehran, linked to the nuclear programme, have had a significant impact on the balance of power in the Persian Gulf. The JCPOA, while a significant attempt at a diplomatic effort, has failed to ease Saudi fears. It took the rivalry between the two states to increase geopolitical competition and instability in the region.

3.8 Conclusions

The analysis of historical and political developments from 1990 until 2018 has been crucial to better understanding the current regional dynamics between the Saudi kingdom and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The historical events allowed for a greater depth of analysis, showing a continuous evolution in geopolitical relations. The end of the Cold War and a bipolarised world, altered the balance of power in the Middle East and more specifically in the Persian Gulf, leaving the United States as the sole superpower and allowing the emergence of regional powers, which began to compete for power and their expansionist ambitions.

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 showed a phase of cooperation between Riyadh and Tehran, both of which were united by the threat posed by Iraqi ambitions in the region. However, this period was short-lived as the fall of Saddam Hussein and his regime in Iraq created new power dynamics, destabilising the regional balance. The fall of Saddam in Iraq led regional states to have to reconfigure the distribution of power and relations with extra-regional states (Wehrey, Karasik, & Nader, 2009). Precisely because Saddam acted as a counterweight to Iran and Saudi Arabia felt more protected (Marcus, 2019). In this specific context, Tehran decided to take advantage of the power vacuum that had been created in Iraq by allying with the Shia-led government. The Islamic Republic's foresight allowed it to extend its influence beyond its borders, aiming at control of the Shia crescent - an Iranian alliance that stretches as far as Lebanon, crossing Iraq and Syria. Riyadh, in response to this enlargement and seeing it as a direct threat to its own security and

influence in the Gulf, implemented a policy of containment, opposing Iran's attempts at regional consolidation.

The Arab uprisings represented yet another turning point, leading the two states to initiate a new historical phase based on proxy wars, supporting opposing factions in local crises. As analysed in the chapter, the case studies of Bahrain, Syria and Yemen have shown how the rivalry has intensified over the past decade, leading Iran and Saudi Arabia to try to consolidate their influence in the Gulf and Levant region by supporting militias and rebel groups.

In 2016, hostility peaked with the execution of Shia leader Nimr al-Nimr and the subsequent assault on the Saudi embassy in Tehran, leading to a new breakdown in diplomatic relations between the two states. To the tensions created over the nuclear issue and the 2015 JCPOA, which further soured relations.

Following this geopolitical and historical analysis, it is interesting to note how tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been structurally institutionalised due to the repetitive processes of history. They represent a hostility that is projected onto their respective spheres of influence in regional and sometimes even extra-regional politics. Their competition for leadership in Islam and conflicting visions of the regional order have fomented rebellious behaviour and further tensions (Mirza M. , 2021). The sectarian dimension has influenced the hostility between the two states, but it represents a reductionist explanation of a competition that is more based on geopolitical and ideological motivations. The fall of Saddam, the Arab uprisings and their aftermath in Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, and the nuclear programme are all elements that pushed the Arab states, and especially Saudi Arabia, to take active political decisions. According to the American journalist Amanda Erickson, sectarianism has influenced the foreign policy priorities of Tehran and Riyadh, but the rivalry is not religiously motivated. *“It is a political and economic struggle, for control of resources and dominance in a politically tense region”* (Erickson, 2017).

Their hostility is not limited to the Gulf area, but is widespread in the Muslim world and the Middle East, through the proliferation of vertical and horizontal conflicts, the development of terrorist organisations such as ISIS for example, and above all to major humanitarian crises. So far, the two countries have sustained a kind of cold war through

proxy wars, but the possibility of a direct confrontation cannot be ruled out a priori, a situation that will not be favourable for the Middle East or the world as a whole.

The next chapter will analyse the US role in the Gulf region, focusing on the events triggered after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. How Bush's war on terror redefined US strategic priorities in the Middle East, and especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Through the analysis of official speeches by US presidents, the main reasons that have contributed to further regional tensions and divisions in the Gulf will be explored. Finally, how the growing radicalism and spread of terrorism and the support for it by regional powers has had a direct impact on American security strategies in the Middle East.

CHAPTER IV: THE ROLE OF U.S. AND TERRORISM IN THE GULF. IMPACTS ON IRAN-SAUDI ARABIA RELATIONS

4.1 Introduction

Historically and politically, the United States has played an important role in shaping the landscape of the Middle East and more specifically in the Gulf region, helping to create new dynamics between Tehran and Riyadh starting in the 1960s during the Cold War and developing with the war on terror (Al-Thani, 2023).

Iranian expansion into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon has shifted the balance of power, disadvantaging Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the presence of non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi rebels and Kurdish forces have created greater tensions in the geopolitical landscape. Changes are dictated by the dynamics and relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the role played by the US (Al-Thani, 2023). On the other hand, Riyadh, a longstanding ally of the US, has attempted to maintain its position as the leader of the Sunni Arab world, limiting Iranian expansion in the Gulf region.

At the same time, the presence and development of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have aggravated the level of regional security complexity. Despite their ideological and strategic differences, they have exploited the instability and fragility of local institutions to strengthen themselves and pursue their goals. The attacks of 11 September 2001 carried out by Al-Qaeda radically changed the American public's attitude towards the Middle East, including the Gulf States (Esfandiary, 2021). These events led Washington to invade Iraq in 2003 and remove Saddam Hussein from power, creating a power vacuum that on the one hand was soon exploited by Tehran, which wanted to pursue its expansionist aims in the region, while on the other hand leading Riyadh to focus on containing the possible ever-expanding Iranian threat (Esfandiary, 2021). The second attempt at reshaping the region by the US developed with the Bush administration's more focused and aggressive programme, seeking to impose American values in the Middle East and the Gulf.

To understand the changes in the Gulf following the 11 September terrorist attacks and how these have affected the regional dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, however, it is necessary to analyse in detail the US role in security and containment policies in the region. Through the analysis of the origins of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, the main events following the terrorist attack and the Statements issued by US President George W. Bush to the Nation and the new policies implemented by the US based on the global war on terror (GWOT), it will be possible to understand how the US doctrine has influenced the power dynamics and relations between Riyadh and Tehran.

4.2 The Origin of Al-Qaeda

The militant Islamist network Al-Qaeda (Arabic for the ‘base’) has its roots in 1979, following the invasion of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. This event caused a large influx of foreign fighters from all over the Islamic world (Vasiliev & Zherlitsyna, 2023). Al-Qaeda was founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden to coordinate the network of Arab veterans for the insurgency in Afghanistan of the Soviet invasion (CRS, 2024). It later linked up with various Islamist militant organisations, including the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Group, declaring holy war on the USA on several occasions.

Bin Laden publicly accused the US on 23 August 1996, declaring:

“The call to wage war against America was made because America has spearheaded the crusade against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques over and above its meddling in its affairs and its politics, and its support of the oppressive, corrupt and tyrannical regime that is in control. These are the reasons for singling America out as a target” (Bin Laden, 1996)

This statement was part of a *fatwa* - the radical jihadist ideology that uses violence and terrorism as a religious duty - issued by Bin Laden justifying the war against the US, referring to the military presence in Saudi Arabia, the land of the two holy mosques, and the support offered to the Saudi regime, seen by Al-Qaeda as corrupt and oppressive. One of the first official statements showed the US as the main target of their jihad (“struggle”).

One of Al-Qaeda's primary aims is to rebel against the existing international system, which is considered corrupt, and to inspire the Ummah - the community of Muslim believers - to replace this system with an Islamic caliphate, initiating an Islamic revolution (Gartenstein-Ross & Barr, 2018). Overall, Al-Qaeda aims to harm the West, especially the United States, in order to free the Islamic world from Western influence and control and also the regional allies that support them, such as Saudi Arabia. This mission is linked to the ideological current of Salafism (al-Salfiyyah), a reformist interpretation of Sunni Islam that later spread during the first three caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman (Ryan, 2013). Salafism believes that the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad are the legitimate religious sources to be followed in Islamic communities and Bin Laden called for a global Islamic state under the control of Muslims (U.S. Government, 2006).

However, Salafism is not part of a single bloc, but develops under a wide net, including both Al-Qaeda and other Muslims who are against the terrorist group, e.g. the rulers of the Saudi kingdom and Al-Qaeda - both of Salafist orientation - are considered mortal enemies (Ryan, 2013). Salafist jihadists cover a small percentage of the Salafist population, yet they are very influential (U.S. Government, 2006). According to scholar Thomas Hegghammer, actors labelled as Salafi may have strongly different, or opposing, political agendas (Hegghammer, 2014). Al-Qaeda in this regard represents the violent end of the Salafist spectrum.

Al-Qaeda's structure has proven to be resilient and able to adapt to geopolitical changes, despite having changed in recent years, still reflecting the strategic vision of its founders (Gartenstein-Ross & Barr, 2018). According to terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman, al-Qaeda's leadership is extremely agile and flexible, and despite its losses, continues to maintain control over its affiliates and external operations against the West (Hoffman, 2008). The organisation initially operated through a centralised leadership and a globally dispersed network of affiliated organisations, communities and individuals. A system that allowed the group to maintain ideological and strategic coherence, while allowing for a certain level of flexibility. Following the 9/11 attacks and US military operations, al-Qaeda's leadership began to decentralise the structure. It remains crucial to determine the trajectory and strategic direction of the organisation: its affiliates continue to adhere to their goals and strategies and to maintain a certain autonomy in operations, adapting their tactical approach to local dynamics (Gartenstein-Ross & Barr, 2018). This flexibility

allows groups to exploit situations of crisis, conflict and power vacuums, using principles of decentralisation.

According to Russian researcher Nechitailo, Al-Qaeda has developed in three crucial evolutionary phases: the formation occurred between 1998 and the 2000s; the second phase exploded with the September 11, 2001 attack; and the third phase continues to this day (Nechitailo, 2017). Since its creation in 1988, the Islamist militant network has gone through four phases of activity (Vasiliev & Zherlitsyna, 2023):

- *The September 11, 2001 attacks, which marked the peak of the organisation. Phase followed by a subsequent sharp decline due to the capture or elimination of many fighters in the USA, Pakistan and Afghanistan*
- *In 2003 following the US invasion of Iraq, followed by terrorist attacks in several places including Iraq, Madrid and London*
- *In 2007-2009 with the rise of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*
- *Finally, the death of Osama Bin Laden and the instability of the Arab Spring in 2011 set the stage for the fourth phase, when Al-Qaeda took advantage of the growing local conflicts and crises in Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan.*

Over the years, al-Qaeda began setting up training camps for Muslim militants from all over the world, involving them in various terrorist attacks around the world, such as the destruction of the US embassies in Africa in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam; and the 9/11 attacks, making al-Qaeda a household name (Byman, 2015).

4.2.1 The contradictory relationship between al-Qaeda and Iran

Al-Qaeda and Iran have developed a rather complex relationship over the past two decades. The Sunni terrorist organisation (al-Qaeda) on the one hand and the Shia theocracy (Iran) on the other have never been considered natural allies (Duss, 2013). Journalist Eli Lake, a national security and intelligence expert, has described the bond between these two actors as “frenemies”, leading them to work together to achieve common goals such as mutual hatred against the United States (Lake E. , 2017). However, religious and ideological differences between al-Qaeda and Iran have always prevented closer and more lasting cooperation.

The first informal contact between al-Qaeda and Tehran occurred around the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Bin Laden began moving operations to Sudan (Mir & Clarke, 2021). Here, under the influence of Sudanese President Hassan al-Turabi, both actors began to find common ground in the opposition against Israel and especially the United States, putting sectarian and religious differences on the back burner. This led to the first informal agreement of mutual support for direct actions against Israel and the United States. The agreement provided for the terrorist organisation's troops and militants to be trained by Hezbollah fighters both in Iran and in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon (Mir & Clarke, 2021). Training that turned out to be extremely important for future al-Qaeda operations such as the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on 7 August 1998, where trucks packed with explosives -a typical Hezbollah tactic- were used, killing more than 200 people and injuring more than 4,000 (US Department, 2023). The FBI linked the attacks to Al-Qaeda, tracing the perpetrators and accusing Osama Bin Laden and 21 other members of his network of the terrorist attack (FBI, 1988).

The district court in Washington DC declared that Iran and Sudan were also guilty of the 1998 Al-Qaeda attacks against US embassies, and the court stated that:

“Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran...has a long history of providing material aid and support to terrorist organisations including al Qaeda, which claimed responsibility for the August 7, 1998 embassy bombings. [...] Iran had been the preeminent state sponsor of terrorism against United States interests for decades[...] Iran regarded al Qaeda as a useful tool to destabilise U.S. interests” (U.S. Court, 2011).⁸

Judge John D. Bates also openly claimed how the Iranian government helped Hezbollah and al Qaeda launch attacks against the US using powerful suicide truck bombs, the same modus operandi previously used by Hezbollah itself in the 1983 attacks on the US embassy in Beirut, Lebanon. And how before the meetings with Hezbollah, Iran and Bin Laden lacked the technical knowledge to carry out the attacks on US embassies in Africa (Joscelyn, 2011).

⁸ For more information, full judgment at the link: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-dcd-1_08-cv-01361/pdf/USCOURTS-dcd-1_08-cv-01361-0.pdf

With the outbreak of the Afghan civil war between 1992 and 1996, relations between the two soured as Bin Laden's terrorist group sided with the Taliban, while Tehran sided with the Northern Alliance, offering arms and funding to opponents of the Taliban regime. The gap between the two actors led to a sharp deterioration of relations, especially after the Taliban on 8 August 1998 attacked the Iranian consulate in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif in northwestern Afghanistan (stronghold of the rival Northern Alliance), killing eight Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist (Mehdi, 2023).

Despite high tensions, episodes of low-level cooperation followed until 9/11. According to the 9/11 Commission report, Tehran is believed to have facilitated the transit of al-Qaeda members in and out of Afghanistan before 9/11 and following the terrorist attacks, Iran offered to open its borders to Arab fighters who wanted to go to Afghanistan (National Commission, 2004) (Mir & Clarke, 2021). In the aftermath of 9/11, Iran began to distance itself from al-Qaeda, seeing it as an increasingly complex threat to deal with, especially due to its anti-Shia ideology and alliance with the Taliban. For this reason, Iran began to be more supportive of a collaboration with the US to eliminate the terrorist group and the Taliban regime with Operation Enduring Freedom (Gohel, 2010). The operation officially began on 7 October 2001 through US bombings against Al-Qaeda forces and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Tehran collaborated with Washington, providing intelligence support to the US war effort (Gohel, 2010).

Following the events of 11 September, however, there were sporadic reports of limited cooperation. A prominent event was on 12 May 2003, when the terrorist group launched three simultaneous car bomb attacks in Saudi Arabia, accusations fell on Iran, condemning it for allowing al-Qaeda members to coordinate attacks freely on its territory (Knights, 2010). Following pressure from the international community, Iran decided to initiate a crackdown on al-Qaeda militants in Iran (Tabatabai, 2018).

In conclusion, both sides, Iran and Al-Qaeda collaborated, but only at specific historical moments and for tactical interests, however, their ideological, cultural and geopolitical differences prevented a more lasting collaboration. Their relationship was used as political leverage against the United States and Saudi Arabia, but had no real lasting basis due to the strong differences between the two actors.

4.3 The creation of ISIS: from Al-Qaeda in Iraq to the birth of the Caliphate

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent vacuum created by the fall of Saddam formed a crack in the Gulf region and the Arab world, destabilising the Iraqi Sunni minority, which was rejected by any government after being deprived of power (Israeli, 2023). The Invasion also encouraged several Iraqi soldiers to join forces with terrorist groups, including ISIS (Griffin, 2016).

The Islamic State (IS) grew out of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a transnational jihadist terrorist group with a Salafist background. Its rise dates back to the late 1990s and early 2000s from the remnants of al-Qaeda that were part of the insurgency in Iraq against the US and aimed at establishing a global Islamic caliphate and fomenting violent conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims (CRS, 2024) (Euaa, 2024).

The main aim of ISIS was to expand global dominance in the Islamic world and build its caliphate, as also expressed in their official slogan “*baqiya wa tatamaddad*” (in English “stay and expand”) (Eckman, 2014) (Zelin, 2015). Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS did not merely represent a militant terrorist group, it aimed to establish a state that would impose an extremist version of Islamic law on both Muslims and non-Muslims (Israeli, 2023). ISIS focused on sectarian tensions and political resentments to gain support and establish itself as a radical power in the Middle East, showing territorial expansion as a defining characteristic of ISIS's rise to power (Shawn, 2023).

According to writer Robert Creamer, the war in Iraq radicalised many vulnerable young men, and the Sunni power vacuum created by US policies and then by Al-Maliki - the former Iraqi prime minister - created the basis for extremists to conquer large areas of territory. The phenomenon expanded following the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 (Creamer, 2014). Events that led to the strengthening of ISIS in the region, becoming a major threat to Iraq first and foremost and also other states in the Middle East (Holmquist, 2015). ISIS therefore, as stated by academic Fawaz Gerges represents “*A consequence of the failed politics of the Middle East and the deterioration and delegitimization of state institutions as well as the spread of civil wars in Syria and Iraq*”(Gerges, 2014).

In 2011, some ISI components created a new al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria also known as the *al-Nusra Front*. Two years later, in 2013, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that the al-Nusra Front had merged with the ISI creating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIS/ISIL (Wilson, 2019). However, al-Qaeda was not in favour of the absorption of the al-Nusra Front under its leadership and consequently cut ties within the group officially in 2014 (CRS, 2024). Leader Baghdadi established a caliphate on 29 June 2014 aimed at the state-building process of a worldwide Ummah (a community of Muslims sharing the same values) and renamed the organisation 'Islamic State' (Compagnucci, 2019).

Between 2013 and 2017, ISIS initiated a major expansion of territorial control over vast areas of Iraq and Syria, and the capture of major cities such as Raqqa and Mosul - Iraq's second largest city - allowed the group to self-proclaim a caliphate - an Islamic entity governed according to the extremist view of Islamic law. ISIS has shown the ability to govern and administer territories, while also exerting strict control over the local population, highlighting its organisational and strategic prowess (Shawn, 2023). The use of communication channels in multiple languages, especially social media, to recruit and radicalise individuals globally has been very effective, even attracting thousands of foreign fighters (Whittaker, 2022). This has allowed ISIS to grow in size, but more importantly, to increase its capacity to carry out attacks beyond its territories, creating a threat to the international landscape. The terrorist group has thus offered a sense of belonging, attracting many individuals, and showing how propaganda is not only a recruitment tool, but a real means to legitimise ISIS in the eyes of supporters, uniting jihadist fighters.

To tackle the growing threat posed by the terrorist organisation, the international community created a coalition that combined military, intelligence and financial efforts. These operations focused primarily on disrupting the group's funding streams and economic sustainability (Shawn, 2023). Despite initial successes, ISIS has been severely weakened by the international coalition and internal divisions within the organisation. The loss of important territories, financial restrictions and the elimination of leaders led to the collapse of the Caliphate and major military defeats. Although the ISIS caliphate has been dismantled and no longer controls the large territory it once did, the group's legacy and their ideology still persist today, posing challenges to international security

(Shawn, 2023). The Islamic State today continues to sustain low-intensity insurgencies in Syria and Iraq, and according to the 18th Secretary-General's report on the threat posed by ISIL, the UN stated that IS had been “effectively suppressed” in Syria and Iraq, yet remained a threat:

“[...]While Da'esh was effectively suppressed in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, it remained a serious threat and continued to wage asymmetric attacks, which have increased since November. There remained a risk of resurgence of the group should a large number of detainees return to the battlefield or counter-terrorism pressure ease” (UN, Eighteenth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member state in Countering the threat, 2024).

Emphasising the concern of ISIS continuing to pose a threat, especially through irregular and sudden attacks that have increased since November 2023, shows how the organisation continues to destabilise the region.

Finally, according to the Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. intelligence community, ISIS despite its territorial defeats in recent years, will remain a centralised global organisation despite being forced to rely on regional branches, seeking to conduct and inspire global attacks against the West and its interests (ATA, 2024).

4.4 War on terror: Implications of 9/11, the Bush Doctrine and the American response to terrorism

On 11 September 2001, nineteen terrorists hijacked four airliners. Two were crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York; the third hijacked the Pentagon in Virginia; and the fourth headed for Washington, DC, but failed to reach its intended target, exploding in a nearby field in Pennsylvania (National Archives, s.d.). The consequences of these terrorist attacks had a huge worldwide impact and the American reaction was immediate.

US President George W. Bush was visiting a primary school in Florida that same morning when he was informed that America was under attack. Bush left Florida and once he landed at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana where he received new information, he delivered his first address to the nation about the terrorist attacks that had just occurred (National Archives, s.d.):

“Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward. And freedom will be defended. I want to reassure the American people that the full resources of the federal government are working to assist local authorities to save lives and to help the victims of these attacks. Make no mistake. The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts” (The Guardian, 2001).

Following this first Statement, the president flew to Washington where he issued his second official statement:

“Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. [...] The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts. I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbour them” (Bush, 2001).⁹

Terrorist attacks offered the US the opportunity to transform its strategic national security doctrine perceived previously as containment and deterrence during the Cold War, towards a strategy that supports offensive warfare against rogue states or dangerous nations and regimes (Dolan, 2004). US President George W. Bush developed a US national security strategy, also known as the Bush Doctrine, in response to new contemporary threats such as international terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction (Francescaglia, 2003). Bush almost immediately built his doctrine around attacking states, and in his speech on 11 September 2001 it was clear that the terrorist

⁹ For more information, see the full video “Address to the Nation September 11, 2001” at the following link: <https://youtu.be/2K9mG7Eluyo>

attack was not seen as an isolated crime, but as the start of a war against states and terrorist groups (Dolan, 2004).

In the days following the attack, the US President comforted a grieving nation by assessing the damage caused by the terrorist attacks. On 13 September, two days after the terrorist attacks, Bush during a phone call with New York Mayor Giuliani and Governor York Pataki, stated (National Archives, s.d.):

“[...]But make no mistake about it, my resolve is steady and strong about winning this war that has been declared on America. It's a new kind of war [...] And this government will adjust. And this government will call others to join us, to make sure this act, these acts, the people who conducted these acts and those who harbour them are held accountable for their actions” (The White House, 2001).

On 18 September, Congress passed the Authorisation for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) with almost unanimous approval. A joint resolution authorising the use of US military force against those primarily responsible for the 9/11 attacks (Bridge, 2023).

On 20 September, President Bush, during a joint session of Congress and the American people, asked the Taliban to stop harbouring al Qaeda members and uttered the following words (National Archives, 2003):

“Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking: Who attacked our country? The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organisations known as al Qaeda. They are the same murderers indicted for bombing American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money; its goal is remaking the world -- and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.[...] Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated” (Bush, 2001).

In this speech, Bush identifies al-Qaeda as responsible for the terrorist attacks, anticipating a long campaign against terrorism that will not stop until he has eliminated the terrorists. On 7 October, George W. Bush announced the invasion of Afghanistan,

informing the nation of Operation Enduring Freedom, which would lead to the removal of the Taliban regime and the elimination of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan:

“On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime[...] The United States of America is an enemy of those who aid terrorists and of the barbaric criminals who profane a great religion by committing murder in its name” (Bush, 2001).

US President George W. Bush on 11 October 2001, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, declared a plan to stop terrorists, the Global War on Terror (GWOT). A term to describe the global anti-terrorist campaign initiated by the United States in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, representing a new phase in global political relations and international and regional security in the Middle East (Britannica, 2024). The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were included in the GWOT, but the term was later also used for diplomatic and financial matters, with the main objective of denying funding to terrorists (National Archives, 2003):

“The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilised world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terrorism, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them” (Bush, 2001).

The attack on American soil prompted the formation of a global coalition against international terrorism. During the first hundred days of the war, the US President increased the level of national security by destroying and dismantling al-Qaeda training camps and terrorist support networks (US Archives, 2001). Implementing a foreign policy against international terrorism (US Archives, 2001).

4.5 Axis of Evil

Following the events of 11 September, and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, US foreign policy began to focus on other countries in the Middle East that were considered a global threat. On 29 January 2002, President Bush in his State of Union Address introduced for the first time the concept of the Axis of Evil, referring to Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as states conducive to international terrorism and engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction:

“[...]Our second goal is to prevent regimes that sponsor terrorism from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September 11th. But we know their true nature. North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction[...]. Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility towards America and to support terrorism[...] States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United State. We will work closely with our coalition to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction. We will develop and deploy effective missile defences to protect America and our allies from sudden attack. And all nations should know: America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation's security” (Bush, 2002).

A term that had a strong impact on the political discourse in Tehran, increasing the rhetoric of conservatives against reformists and rekindling militant revolutionary language with the US referred to as ‘the Great Satan’ as the main target of theocratic and conservative forces (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007).

The publication of the National Security Strategy (NSS) document in 2002 formalised the principles of the Bush Doctrine. The document argued that enemies of the US - such as terrorists - could use weapons of mass destruction and the US must use pre-emptive

warfare to defend itself before a possible enemy attack (Bush, 2002). Among the main US goals, Bush emphasised working together to defuse regional conflicts, prevent enemies from threatening the US and our allies with weapons of mass destruction, and support alliances to defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against the US (Bush, 2002). The Bush Doctrine aspired to be a comprehensive strategy containing guidelines for US foreign policy and focused primarily on four pillars (Gregg II, 2003):

- *Pre-emptive Strike as a means of self-defence*: the doctrine justified the use of pre-emptive warfare, allowing the US to strike an enemy nation or terrorist group before they could attack.
- *Unilateral action*: the US would act alone to defend itself, should the need arise, without having to involve allies or international organisations. Other nations can cooperate, otherwise the US would be prepared to act alone (Francescaglia, 2003).
- *Promotion of democracy and economic development*: the spread of democracy and freedom globally was another key objective to be pursued, focusing on free trade and individual freedom
- *Global War on Terrorism*: US policy under President Bush was particularly aggressive, where military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq increased tensions in the Middle East. Iran, under President Ahmadinejad, condemned the US actions, fuelling tensions between the two countries and changing the dynamics in the Gulf. The US initiated global counter-terrorism programmes by training and supporting governments to counter and combat regional and national threat groups (Gunaratna, 2021).

4.6 Iran-US relations: escalation of tensions post-September 11

As analysed in the course of this thesis, it can be seen that relations between the US and Iran have been antagonistic for most of the time since the Iranian revolution of 1979, with a subsequent escalation of tensions between the two states caused by the events analysed in the previous chapters. Indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran has posed a major challenge to US foreign policy, leading different administrations to identify it as a threat to their

own interests, and major concerns include Tehran's military capabilities and support for armed factions and terrorist groups (Thomas, 2024).

Despite various US efforts - through economic sanctions, diplomacy and military actions - Iran's regional influence and strategic capabilities continued to be the focus of American attention. Therefore, in order to counter US regional influence in the Gulf, pursue its own goals and expand its hegemony in the region, Tehran began to support political and armed groups in the Middle East (Thomas, 2024). This support has been a central focus of Iranian foreign policy since 1979. However, Iranian support for these groups is often characterised by a non-transparent nature, also supported by proxy wars. This situation creates a twofold nature: on the one hand, Iran can use this ambiguity to avoid taking full responsibility for the actions carried out by the groups it supports (Jahanbani, et al., 2023), on the other hand, the US could also hold Iran accountable for actions not directly orchestrated or approved in advance by Tehran (Thomas, 2024).

The events of 9/11 shocked the US and international dynamics, triggering a global war on terror. The US sought support from key regional actors, who previously had strategic agendas that conflicted with the US vision. Iran, although having had hostile relations with the US, is a special case. Following the terrorist attacks, Tehran at this important historical moment perceived the possibility of freeing itself from the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and began to offer support in the war against Afghanistan (Ghumman, 2002).

A short-lived dialogue that seemed to create new hopes between Tehran and Washington, which soon faded with the election of President Khatami in Iran (1997-2005) and especially with the arrival of US President George W. Bush in January 2001 and his speech a year later on 29 January 2002 condemning Iran and including it in the axis of evil with Iraq and North Korea (Ghumman, 2002). George W. Bush perceived Iran as a sponsor of terrorism and an enemy of the US, as it was pointed out during the early years of the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979. For this reason, the new president, unlike the more open policies of his predecessor Clinton, decided to start a policy of containment before the 9/11 attacks (Malik).

Despite some tensions, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami was among the first to condemn the 9/11 terrorist attacks, stating:

“On behalf of the Iranian government and the nation, I condemn the hijacking attempts and terrorist attacks on public centres in American cities which have killed a large number of innocent people” (Brown, 2001).

The Islamic Republic of Iran also offered support and logistical assistance to the US following the American decision to declare war in 2001 on the Taliban and Al-Qaeda: Tehran offered the use of its territory to carry out search and rescue missions for American soldiers and to establish a new Afghan government (Ghumman, 2002) (Maloney, 2011). However, this proposal was made because Tehran saw an opportunity to counter the Taliban, with whom they had long been in conflict. The US went to war against Afghanistan, and Washington and Tehran faced an unexpected alignment of interests against the Taliban by embracing Operation Enduring Freedom launched by the US in October 2001 (Maloney, 2011) A relationship between the two states resulted in cooperation, thanks also to the support given by the Northern Alliance, the Taliban's main adversary, to Iran.

Despite this cooperation, the spirit of reconciliation was soon drowned by a growing antagonism and sense of mutual distrust between Tehran and Washington (Maloney, 2011). In fact, President Bush's speech on 29 January 2002 broke down any possibility of rapprochement, claiming that Iran was part of the axis of evil and was clandestinely pursuing efforts to acquire nuclear, biological and chemical weapons capabilities despite treaty commitments to renounce such actions (Thomas, 2024). On 31 January, two days later, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice declared Tehran's direct support for regional and global terrorism, and that its aggressive efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction belied any good intentions shown in the days following the 9/11 attacks (Frontline, 2014).

These dynamics created a strong response from Iranian leaders, leading Iranian moderates to reconsider their positions for a possible improvement in relations with the US and President Khatami to accuse the US, declaring that:

“When a big power uses a militant, humiliating, arid threatening tone to speak to us, our Nation will refuse to negotiate or show any flexibility” (Alexander & Hoenig, 2008)

The sense of betrayal was evident and particularly strong. Many Iranians changed their opinion of the US, interpreting the axis of evil discourse as a break towards a possible normalised relationship between the two states (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). This event underlined differences between Washington and Tehran that were too deep-rooted to be effectively overcome, marking a generalised American repudiation in Iran (Maloney, 2011).

A year after the Axis of Evil speech, the US received information from the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an opposition group, about Iran's nuclear programme that aimed not only to develop civil but also military nuclear power, and Washington denounced an Iranian violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) signed in 1968, which stated that member states should only use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes and declare nuclear activities to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (U.S. Department). President Bush then accused Tehran of hiding a nuclear weapons programme, arguing that Iran was a threat to global security, and decided to initiate international sanctions against Tehran (Maloney, 2011).

The post-9/11 scenario led to new regional and international security concerns. The US feared that Iran would acquire nuclear weapons, changing the balance of power in the region. Weapons that could be accessible to terrorist groups against the US and its allies. While Iran could through weapons of mass destruction compensate for its military weakness (Eisenstadet, 1999).

4.6.1 Iran's role as a sponsor of terrorism the US response

Washington has implemented various tactics over the past three decades to persuade Iran to change its policies, and 9/11 kicked off a decade marked by strong fluctuations between the two states (Maloney, 2011). Post-9/11 US policy attempted to address the threat of terrorism and Iran's regional ambitions. The discourse on the axis of evil marked a significant turning point, showing how tensions between the two countries had been entrenched for decades.

Iran has been designated as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1984, continuing to support terrorism-related activities including supporting terrorist and militant groups in the Middle East (State, 2021). Tehran has strategically exploited terrorist groups as proxies

in its foreign policy to expand its influence in the region and the Middle East. Economic support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and support for militias in Iraq and Yemen, for example, show that the primary purpose was to pursue its own regional dynamics, posing a regional and global security challenge (Hassenstab, 2024). Iran's strategic interests extend beyond religion and ideologies, and the long-term conflict with Riyadh highlights Iran's desire to be the leader of the Persian Gulf, influencing the balance of power in the area.

The expansion of Iranian influence in the region has also been facilitated by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), a paramilitary organisation established in 1979 to protect the new Islamic regime. Its special operations unit, the Quds Force, has played a key role in providing weapons, training and economic support to militias and political movements in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen (AJC, 2024). This “axis of resistance” aims to free the region from US Western influence and its regional allies such as Riyadh (Cfr, 2024).

Tensions between Washington and Tehran increased in intensity with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In 2007, four years later, then-President George W. Bush lashed out at the Quds Force, accusing it of supplying Iraqi Shia Muslim militants with bombs against US troops. Although the evidence was not conclusive, but only supposition, these accusations further soured bilateral relations. During the Arab Springs, the Quds Force actively acted on the front line alongside Lebanese Hezbollah militants and Syrian regime forces, while in Yemen in the aftermath of the civil war, the IRGC provided training and weapons to the Houthis, supporting the rebel movement to repel the country's forces and Saudi Arabia (Cfr, 2024).

The US State Department designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) in 2019, further strengthening the pressure on Tehran (Counter-terrorism, 2022).

Alongside Iranian support for terrorist groups and the development of Iran's nuclear programme increased the pressure in the Iran-US dialogue: Washington was afraid that nuclear power could facilitate the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction among terrorist groups, and economic and diplomatic sanctions became central to US policy towards Tehran, seeking to isolate it and contain its influence in the region (Maloney, 2011). US concerns with Iran could therefore be summarised in three areas: support for

terrorism, development of weapons of mass destruction and expansion of influence and power in the Gulf (Maloney, 2011).

Washington sought to reshape the political environment in Iran, using sanctions to deter and contain regime change in Tehran, including its support for international terrorism and nuclear and missile development programmes. Although US sanctions have negatively impacted the Iranian economy, the Tehran government continues to be a threat to both the US and Saudi Arabia. The US sanctions were targeted at:

- Iran's financial economic sector
- The energy sector, including foreign investment corporations
- The arms trade to or from Iran

Washington began to explain that the policy of deterrence was no longer sufficient and effective to combat terrorism, but it was necessary to be able to act militarily against a rogue state before the latter had the means to launch a terrorist or military attack on US and allied targets in the US (CPCP, 2013). A strategy that uses 'pre-emptive war' and as argued by Donald Rumsfeld - former US Secretary of Defence - when terrorists possess weapons that can harm the US, the US defence lies in anticipating them and sometimes even launching a pre-emptive war, and defence against terrorism and 21st century threats may need to launch a war (Rumsfeld, 2005).

On 26 October 2001, for example, Congress passed *the Patriot Act*, which aimed to deter and prevent terrorist attacks in the US and globally, increasing the level of investigative tools and strengthening American measures in preventing and prosecuting global terrorism and subjecting foreign jurisdictions and institutions to special scrutiny (Financial Crimes U.S.). Highlighting the aggressive policy of President George W. Bush, spreading a strong anti-Americanism already present in the Middle East. Over the years, relations between the US and Iran became increasingly complex, with the presence of tougher and tougher sanctions aimed at isolating the Islamic Republic economically. These combined with nuclear-related multilateral diplomatic pressure led to a new level of escalation of the crisis, with Iran oscillating between temporary concessions and the desire to maintain its sovereignty in the nuclear programme.

Moreover, between 2006 and 2010, four sets of sanctions were adopted by the UN Security Council (*Resolution 1696, 1737, 1747, 1929*) concerning nuclear-related activities that affected major Iranian banks such as Bank Sepah, accused of supporting proliferating activities (Bauchard, 2014). Under Obama, the start of a new dialogue between the US and Iran was envisaged, but it became a critical reaction to Tehran. During his speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009, President Obama denounced “Iran's illicit nuclear programme and its support for terrorism” (Blanchard, Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations, 2014):

“There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect. But it is clear to all concerned that when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point. This is not simply about America's interests. It's about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path” (National Archives, 2009).

The corrupt and falsified elections for Ahmadinehad's second term in August 2009 also blocked possible attempts at negotiations.

Despite initial intentions for dialogue, the Obama administration initiated economic sanctions against Iran, such as the Nuclear Iran Prevention Act of 2013, to restrict and punish Tehran for its nuclear programme. Cyber warfare against Iran including the Stuxnet virus aimed at sabotaging Iran's nuclear centrifuges (Beaumont & Hopkins, 2012). Although Obama sought a diplomatic solution, he never ruled out the possibility of the use of force, claiming in a 2012 interview for the US magazine “The Atlantic” that ‘all options were on the table’ and that the final one could also develop into a possible military intervention to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, keeping the pressure on the Tehran regime high (Memmott, 2012).

On 2 December 2015, during the 114th US Congress, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its role in creating unrest and conflict in the Middle East was discussed (House Hearing, 2015):

“From nuclear proliferation to support of international terrorism, to human rights abuses, the IRGC has made Iran the global menace that Iran is today. The IRGC is responsible for squashing democracy movements at home, for

spreading the Iranian regime's revolutionary ideology abroad, and for sparking turmoil throughout the Middle East. Its forces operate again, independent of Iran's regular army. It answers directly only to one man, Iran's Supreme Leader” (House Hearing, 2015).

During the conference, it was also discussed how a possible lifting of nuclear sanctions could offer Tehran the opportunity to invest new economic resources in terrorism. And to limit this activity, it was therefore necessary to enforce existing sanctions and cooperate with allies against Iranian-supported terrorist groups.

The analysis of Tehran-Washington relations and post-September 11 development shows a rather fragmented context. Despite initial attempts at cooperation such as the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban, the situation was quickly reversed with Bush's 2002 speech on the axis of evil. The US through a policy characterised by economic sanctions spread a sense of anti-Americanism, also aimed at its regional allies in the Gulf. Fear also of the development of the nuclear programme and Iranian support for terrorist organisations further soured relations, increasing regional and international security concerns. Finally, these events emphasised Tehran's regional ambitions and how its support for terrorist groups has led the US to be more active in the Gulf and the broader Middle East to achieve stability in the region. The IRGC and the Quds Force have fuelled further rivalries, prompting Washington to take preventive measures and sanctions, without realising how US interventions in the Gulf region, however, have indirectly led to Iran's rise as a regional power. Starting with the elimination of the old military challenger: the Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein (Kinzer, 2008). Indeed, Iran, taking advantage of the tensions and instability in the Middle East, has been able to extend its regional influence, creating a land bridge called the Shia crescent, a political alliance that extends geographically from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (Israeli, 2023).

4.7 Post-9/11 Saudi-U.S. relations and the war against terrorism

Before the attacks of 9/11 2001 and those in Riyadh in May 2003, the Saudi kingdom was often uncooperative in the fight against terrorism. Emerging only later in 2003 as a crucial US partner in counterterrorism, especially against Al-Qaeda (Byman, 2016).

The crucial turning point that marked the relationship between Washington and Riyadh occurred in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, leading to a major upheaval for Saudi Arabia. Most of the terrorists who had led the attacks were of Saudi origin, leading to a breakdown in relations between Riyadh and Washington. As a former ally, the Saudi kingdom came to be seen as a double agent, where the Saudi rulers received a lot of criticism for not doing enough to repress Islamic militants (Fahim, 2004). And the US exerted very strong pressure on Riyadh to reform its domestic policies. Saudi-baiting refers to a period when the US increased its accusations and criticism against the Saudi kingdom. Particularly in 2002, a secret briefing by the US Department of Defence described Saudi Arabia as the 'Kernel of evil', believing it to be involved in terrorism on several levels: from planning to the recruitment of militants (Mumtaz, 2004).

The 12 May 2003 attacks on three residential complexes in Riyadh began to shake the Saudi governments and the 9 November 2003 attack changed the scenario as most of the 18 victims were Arabs, including Saudis (Fahim, 2004). These terrorist attacks awakened the Saudi rulers to the presence of an enemy close to them: al Qaeda (Fahim, 2004). The Saudi government's response was swift, starting to intensify operations against the terrorist organisation, implementing a campaign to combat radicalism and through educational reforms, trying to reduce the influence of the most extremist religious leaders. Following the attacks, Riyadh faced increasing international pressure to crack down on terrorism and counter the activities of extremist groups. The conditions were ripe for Saudi Arabia to wage a war against Al-Qaeda, arresting numerous arsenals of weapons and fighting against the militants (Knights, 2004). This change marked the Saudi kingdom in 2003 and led to the development of a campaign against terrorism led by Crown Prince Abd Allah against Al-Qaeda between 2003 and 2006. Saudi Arabia also began to collaborate with US intelligence, seeing al-Qaeda as a common mortal threat (Knights, 2004).

On 16 May 2008, the two states signed a bilateral agreement on counterterrorism technical cooperation in Riyadh, where the US would support the Saudi Kingdom in the training of Saudi forces and security measures in the country, starting a period of collaboration between the two states in the fight against terrorism in the following years, against Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and other terrorist groups (Blanchard, 2014). This

decision was also motivated by the fear that the legitimacy of the Saudi royal family in the kingdom could be questioned (Blanchard, 2014).

4.8 Conclusions

The Persian Gulf has suffered major consequences due to the spread of terrorism and the 9/11 attacks. The rise of terrorism has undermined regional security, increasing extremist movements, and a sense of anti-Americanism leading to the development of proxy wars, changing the balance in the area (Khan H. , 2024). The US invasion of Iraq developed radical factions such as ISIS and civil wars, causing major humanitarian crises in several states including Yemen, Syria and Iraq for example. The intervention of external powers such as the USSR in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and the US with Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003, have profoundly changed the arrangements in the Gulf region (Khan H. , 2024).

The US role in the Persian Gulf, especially after 9/11, represented an important moment in the redefinition of regional power dynamics. The US presence was intensified as a response to terrorist attacks, with the main purpose of combating terrorism through the Bush Doctrine's GWOT and curbing Iran's expansion and support for militias and terrorist groups. However, US-initiated military actions and counterterrorism campaigns have fomented anti-American sentiment, increasing recruitment channels into militias and terrorist organisations (Khan H. , 2024). US policies, through diplomatic strategies and military interventions, such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003, have inevitably influenced the regional geopolitical environment, leading Iran and Saudi Arabia to face new threats.

The invasion of Iraq by the US military and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein altered the balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, creating a power vacuum that allowed Iran to expand its influence, including by supporting Shia groups and military forces in Iraq, changing the balance in the region. The Arab Spring and proxy wars, partly caused by failed governments unable to deal with terrorism and extremism, have created a strong impact in the Middle East. The US-initiated war on terror has worsened pre-existing regional crises, especially the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, amplifying instability and tensions between the two countries (Khan H. , 2024).

American alliances in the region eventually changed the power dynamics, elevating Iran and making it a key player in the Gulf region, and the post-9/11 era has initiated a security dilemma that has brought negative impacts and vulnerability to the region.

CONCLUSIONS

The study analyses the evolution of the complex dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia from the 1960s to 2018, highlighting how this conflict has deep roots, and how external and internal factors have characterised fluctuations in diplomatic relations between the two states. Understanding the rivalry that has marked relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is crucial to understanding the uncertainty and instability in the contemporary Gulf. Although this rivalry plays a central role in the construction of regional security, it would be simplistic to link this dynamic to purely sectarian motivations (Mabon S. , 2018). The instrumental use of religion reflects a narrative driven by expansionist and security objectives. Rather than simply aiming to defeat "the other," this dynamic should be understood as Tehran's and Riyadh's efforts to maintain their own stability and protect their survival and spheres of influence in the region (Mabon S. , 2018).

Historical analysis from the 1960s to 2018 shows that the rivalry between these two actors is not static, but has gone through several dynamic phases, influenced by specific turning points. Starting with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 up to the current contemporary period, showing how several events have represented turning points in their own right, such as the end of the Cold War, the war in Kuwait, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the Arab Springs in 2011 have radically changed the regional dynamics, relations, and alliances between the two states.

In the first chapter, the literature showed how the competition between these two actors is marked on different levels, particularly geopolitical and ideological. The analysis of the concept of security showed how the competition is characterised by mutual uncertainty and the perception of existential threats. Indeed, both countries strengthened their military capabilities and forged alliances, inevitably increasing tension and growing instability in the Persian Gulf.

The second chapter analysed the historical evolution that marked relations between the two states from the 1960s until 1990, showing how a phase of increasing tension and competition developed, where the transformation of the Persian Gulf into a security sub-complex worsened bilateral tensions. Geopolitical and historical changes such as the Iranian revolution in 1979 created new security dynamics; the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988)

made clear the perceived Iranian threat to the Saudi kingdom and how it sought support from Baghdad.

The study highlights how sectarian tensions between Shia and Sunnis were used as tools to consolidate internal power and project influence externally. The security dilemma theory is also useful for understanding the mutual uncertainty between Iran and Saudi Arabia, where every action is taken to increase their internal security, increasing the risk of escalation. Stephen Walt's balance of threat is applied to the Saudi perception of Tehran as an existential threat, explaining the reasons for Saudi support for Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime during the Iran-Iraq war. Emphasising the Saudi need for new alliances to counter Iranian influence and its expansionist aims in the Gulf. These events, also undermined by the 1987 pilgrimage to Mecca and the deaths of hundreds of Iranians, led relations between Riyadh and Tehran to a clearly problematic and increasingly tense diplomatic dialogue, making it complex to find a common point of détente.

In the third chapter, the analysis focuses on the evolution of the strategic rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, showing how the events following the end of the Cold War and the bipolar world have strongly influenced the power dynamics in the Gulf from 1990 until 2018. The diminishing influence of the superpowers - the USSR and the US - in the Middle East led regional actors - Iran and Saudi Arabia - to seek greater power and spheres of influence. The end of the Cold War ushered in a new order where already latent regional rivalries manifested themselves ever more forcefully, leading to profound changes in regional security and to regional actors seeking to consolidate their positions of power.

From the Gulf crisis that erupted in 1990 until the Arab Spring in 2011, bilateral relations between the two states fluctuated between phases of cooperation and high tensions. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq under Saddam and the subsequent defeat at the hands of the United States led to an initial phase of rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran, formalised with diplomatic relations in 1991. In the 1990s, Iranian foreign policy under Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Khamenei became more pragmatic, seeking a phase of dialogue with the Saudi kingdom.

However, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 showed the gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia, underlining how the two nations took different

positions. Direct US involvement with the Iraqi invasion upset the regional balance, contributing to power vacuums that were filled by Iran, strengthening the Shia axis in the area and leading Riyadh to see Iran as a threat to its leadership in the Arab world. In 2005, the change of Iran's conservative president started a further deterioration of bilateral relations between the two governments. With the Arab Spring in 2011, it was noted that the competition between the two states increased, resulting in proxy wars, intending to expand regional influence by supporting opposing local factions, and souring diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran. Finally, the Iranian nuclear programme is considered another crucial event for Saudi security and interests.

The analysis highlighted the Saudi perception of Iran as a threat on both an ideological and strategic level, reinforced by Iran's success in proxy wars. On the strategic level, Tehran's regional ambitions and the presence of military forces to expand its sphere of influence are viewed negatively by Riyadh, while on the ideological level, Tehran's instrumentalization of sectarian principles used to spread its influence undermines the stability of other regional states and especially that of Riyadh (Ali L. , 2022). The conflicts and tensions that developed mainly post-Arab Spring represent Iran's foreign policy stance in promoting the ideology of the Islamic Republic and its hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East. Tehran's strategy in proxy wars is based on its ability to fill power vacuums in weak states by supporting militias such as the Houthis during the civil war in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and other terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda (Ali L. , 2022). A policy that has led Tehran to establish itself as a regional power in the Gulf, consolidating strategic alliances and pursuing its geopolitical ambitions. New dynamics led to a reaction from Saudi Arabia, which decided to embrace a more aggressive policy, supporting Sunni forces and becoming an antagonist of Tehran. It showed how proxy wars were a key tool for the two states in expanding their expansionist aims and quenching their thirst for power, at the expense of other states.

Chapter four explored the role of the United States in the Middle East and more specifically in the Persian Gulf, showing how its presence has influenced regional dynamics. The rise of terrorism and the events of 11 September 2001 gave rise to a new phase in international relations, leading Washington to intensify its presence in the Gulf, launching the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) under the administration of President George W. Bush, with the primary aim of combating terrorism, limiting Iranian influence

and countering support for militias and terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. US policies since 2001 have intensified, changing the regional balance of power and inevitably increasing the spread of anti-American sentiment especially among the Iranian population, creating fragmentation between countries in the Gulf and Levant.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was an important turning point, leading to a change in the regional order in the Gulf, weakening Iraq and favouring Iran in its expansionist aims and support for Shia and military groups in Baghdad. This has increased tensions with Saudi Arabia, which is afraid of losing its hegemony in the Gulf. The proxy wars in Yemen and Syria, for example, combined with increasingly evident political fragmentation, have led to the rise of new extremist groups, such as ISIS, spreading more instability and concern internationally.

Although the American presence has attempted to bring about improvements and greater stability in regional and international security, it has simultaneously created a conflictual situation, pushing Tehran to strengthen its role as a regional power and the feeling of contempt towards the US, while at the same time leading Riyadh to support counter-terrorism campaigns in the Gulf that have led to a scenario of increasing competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, making the possibility of lasting stability between the two states difficult.

In conclusion, the dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia analysed throughout this thesis show how competition between the two actors has become a structural factor in their foreign policy, leading the Persian Gulf to be an area of tension and hostility. From diplomacy that alternated between moments of cooperation and those of hostility to the development of a security dilemma that increased mutual suspicion and mistrust, seeing the other state's actions as a threat to its own regional balance (Grumet, 2015). Internal and external alliances in the region played a key role, e.g. during the initial years of the Islamic Republic, Iran drew closer to the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, while on the other hand the Saudi kingdom consolidated relations with the US and the Gulf Arab powers to contain Tehran's influence. A dualism of alliances became particularly visible with the proxy wars, where both powers projected their expansionist aims by exploiting the weakness of countries damaged by internal crises and weak institutions, destabilising the situation in the region. These dynamics have led relations

between Iran and Saudi Arabia to be compared to a new Cold War where both states have conducted an arms race, promoting ideological and sectarian rhetoric to radicalise conflicts and fortify regional divisions (Grumet, 2015).

Both countries have often used religion as a means to legitimise their influence in the Gulf, where Tehran perceives Riyadh as an enemy and ally of the US that hampers its expansions, while Riyadh sees Tehran as a threat that is increasingly gaining power and allies. This rivalry has shaped regional security, creating new tensions between two powers that exploit indirect conflicts, strategic alliances and sectarian divisions to consolidate their sphere of influence and supremacy.

5.1 Relations Between Riyadh And Tehran Today

The historical analysis of the events that have marked relations between Riyadh and Tehran since the 1960s has laid the groundwork for understanding the contemporary rivalry that still characterises relations between the two countries today. Competition for regional power and spheres of influence, coupled with the security dilemma, have entrenched a sense of mutual distrust and suspicion over the years, still projecting this attitude in the Gulf and influencing their current relations.

Although both countries to this day continue to have a high level of mutual distrust, they are quite unlikely to fight each other directly. In 2023, they reached an agreement with the aim of normalising relations, seeking to reduce the bilateral tensions that have characterised their relations for the past 60 years (Sadjadpour, 2024). To restore diplomatic relations that had broken down in 2016 - following the attacks on the Sadjad embassies in Tehran - and reopen their embassies, wanting to respect sovereignty and not interfere in each other's internal affairs (Aljazeera, 2023). Where Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani stated:

“Removing misunderstandings and the future-oriented views in relations between Tehran and Riyadh will definitely lead to improving regional stability and security as well as increasing cooperation among Persian Gulf nations and the world of Islam for managing current challenges” (Aljazeera, 2023).

The tone of their relations has changed somewhat, seeking to embrace a more cautious and less aggressive approach (Ottaway, 2024) Despite the progress between the two states

and the new diplomatic relations, their greatest challenge lies in dealing with their internal struggles. On a global level, Iran today faces internal problems comparable to those faced by the USSR during the last years of its regime (Sadjadpour, 2024). International sanctions and rising inflation have led the country to be unable to have a stable development economically, affecting the livelihood of average Iranians (Bazoobandi, 2024). The feeling of hostility towards the West that has spread in Iran over the past fifty years has led the country to face major economic sanctions that have slowed down the economy and the sale of oil and gas. With the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979, both production and exports dropped dramatically (Sadjadpour, 2024).

It also has problems in gaining support from the population, who often rebel against the lack of civil liberties, the widespread corruption in the country and the high unemployment rate. In order to maintain control, in fact, the Iranian government relies on repression, through a security apparatus that brutally quells dissent, even limiting freedom of expression, for its own survival (Sadjadpour, 2024). Despite the presence of internal problems, Tehran has over the years extended its influence beyond its borders, increasing its spheres of influence.

Since the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Tehran has aggressively attempted to export the principles of the Revolution, even supporting subversive activities aimed at weakening and limiting its enemies, increasing its influence (Uani, 2024). A decision that inevitably fuelled sectarian differences and instability throughout the region. The use of proxy wars and Iranian-backed militias currently dominate in four failing Arab countries: Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen (Sadjadpour, 2024). A network of alliances allows Iran to pursue and expand its regional power, destabilising potential rivals in the Gulf.

Internationally, it plays an important role in security issues: its nuclear programme continues to pose a threat to the global community, with a common fear that a nuclear arsenal could be developed. Despite Tehran's claims that its nuclear programme is peaceful and that it does not want to develop nuclear weapons, since 2019 it has violated the terms of the JCPOA agreement, expanding its uranium enrichment capabilities and resuming activity in nuclear facilities that were previously banned under the agreement (Mills, 2024). Moreover, in 2023, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) declared the discovery of 87% enriched uranium particles (IAEA, 2023). Tehran also

developed disinformation campaigns and cyber-wars, seeking to destabilise potential enemies while gaining more and more influence and power in the Gulf and the Middle East (Sadjadpour, 2024). Finally, Iranian control over energy resources, especially oil and gas, leads Iran to amplify its power over regional and global security dynamics.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia shows more manageable difficulties, partly due to the country's strong economy. Riyadh has used energy production to increase its strategic vision, leading the Saudis to be much richer than the Iranians. In fact, Riyadh today has more than twice the GDP of Tehran, despite having less than half the population of Iran (Sadjadpour, 2024). The Saudi kingdom is made up of a large population of conservative Islamists who do not support the ideals and choices of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, which could lead to major problems for the kingdom. Indeed, MBS has since 2017 intensified its regional adventurism and the dissemination of its Vision 2030 (WPR, 2019). The Saudi kingdom has started to pursue diversification efforts centred on the Vision 2030 plan, seeking to decrease dependence on oil and expand into other sectors such as technology and tourism (FocusEconomics, 2024).

Tehran and Riyadh are currently driven by profoundly different agendas, where the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US and those in Riyadh in 2003 brought about yet another change in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both attacks highlighted how Islamic fundamentalism had become a major threat to the stability of the Saudi kingdom. The latter launched a campaign against terrorism and radicalisation in its own country. Furthermore, Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power led to an international shift, seeking to launch his own Vision 2030 agenda in April 2016 to improve the country's economy, break away from Islamist restrictions and create a more robust and ambitious national identity (Saudi Arabia Embassy).

Both countries are considered titans of energy, controlling almost a third of the world's oil reserves and a fifth of its natural gas (Sadjadpour, 2024). However, they pursue different goals and opposing leaders: the Saudi Kingdom's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, pursues the goal of modernising the state away from fossil fuel production. The clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia today focuses on their two strategic visions: on the one hand the Saudi kingdom's Vision 2030, and on the other the Iranian Vision 1979 (Sadjadpour, 2024). While MBS's Vision 2030 embraces a vision projected

on change and alliance with Washington, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's, which continues to support the principles of the 1979 Islamic revolution, is more focused on social repression and economic support with China (Sadjadpour, 2024). These two visions show how both leaders are seeking quite complex goals to reconcile together. Despite the global competition between China and the US, both have common interests in the Gulf - such as energy security and economic investment - preserving political stability and ensuring the flow of trade and energy resources (Marks, 2024). This could lead the two powers to collaborate on strategic issues to preserve common goals. The differences, however, may be more apparent by referring to statements by the two leaders: on the one hand, MBS referred to Khamenei as the 'new Hitler of the Middle East' in 2017, against a background of rising tensions between the two countries (BBC, 2017). Ayatollah Khamenei claimed that MBS was a criminal whose inexperience would lead to the fall of the Saudi kingdom (Sadjadpour, 2024).

The power vacuums and crises caused by civil wars, conflicts and the Arab Spring of 2011 allowed Iran to expand its hegemony in the region, creating more unrest not only in the Gulf, but also in the Levant. A situation that led Riyadh to counter Tehran's ambitions through both soft power through the use of diplomacy and alliances, hard power through military intervention and financial co-optation through the use of economic resources to gain political support, all of which, however, proved to be unsuccessful (Sadjadpour, 2024) . Over the past two decades, the two countries have supported opposing factions and rival groups as happened in Iraq, Syria and Yemen for example. In these contexts, Iranian power has prevailed over Saudi power, putting the Saudi kingdom in a difficult position. The harshest and most humiliating defeat can be linked to Yemen, when between 2015 and 2019, the Saudi Kingdom invested over 200 billion dollars in a military intervention to counter the Houthis financed and supported by Tehran (Sadjadpour, 2024). An intervention that nevertheless failed in its primary intent, i.e. to weaken and counter the group. A failure that highlighted Saudi limitations, instead consolidating Iranian influence in the region.

Finally, the thesis analysed how the US presence and the subsequent failed experiments in Afghanistan and Iraq, showed how in reality Washington is not so capable of positively influencing politics in the Gulf and the Middle East. It will therefore be the regional actors

- Iran and Saudi Arabia - that will determine which visions will prevail (Sadjadpour, 2024).

Despite the strong competition between the two countries, the attempts at dialogue and rapprochement in 2023 show a possible shift towards a more diplomatic and less aggressive approach. However, the future of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia remains uncertain, as both pursue divergent visions: on the one hand the 1979 Vision supports the principles of the Islamic Revolution, and on the other hand, the Saudi Vision 2030 aimed at modernising the country. The path to truly lasting stability still looks long and tortuous as long as there are these ideological and geopolitical rivalries in the Gulf.

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