

## DeSecuritization and Pragmatism in the Persian Gulf: The Future of Saudi-Iranian Relations

Since 1979, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have oscillated between periods of overt hostility and apparent rapprochement, yet since 2003 the two have engaged in a vitriolic competition that has spread across regional affairs, to devastating effect in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen. Central to much of this are efforts to securitise the other to external audiences, discursively presenting the rivalry in the language of security. Yet despite the two presenting competing claims to Islamic legitimacy and leadership, there are strong pragmatic reasons for the two states to engage with one another. Driven by political and economic concerns - notably around Saudi Arabia meeting Vision 2030 targets and Iran circumventing the damage done by the sanctions regime - the two states could gain more from working with one another rather than being rivals. Underpinning this, however, is a need to engage in de securitization moves, reducing tensions between the two through framing relations in terms of 'normal' politics rather than the language of security.

On 18 April 2021, the *Financial Times* carried a report suggesting that long standing rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran had opened up a direct line of dialogue, facilitated by Iraq, in an effort to reduce tensions between the two states. While the story was quickly dismissed by Saudis, Iranians and Iraqis, less than two weeks later Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) appeared on a state run TV channel declaring that "Iran is a neighboring country, and all we aspire for is a good and special relationship with Iran, We do not want Iran's situation to be difficult. On the contrary, we want Iran to grow and prosper". Later in the interview MbS articulated a hope that the Kingdom would overcome differences with its neighbour "and build a good and positive relationship with Iran that would benefit all" (Luck, 2021).

Fusing competition over claims to Islamic legitimacy and geopolitical aspirations, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has played a central role in a number of conflicts across the Middle East in recent years, including (but not limited to) wars in Yemen and Syria, violence in Iraq, and instability in Bahrain and Lebanon. After a decade of overt hostility prompted by the fragmentation of political projects post 2011, the Crown Prince's latest remarks reflect a dramatic shift in Saudi perceptions of Iran. This change reflects the shifting (geo)political environment in which both Saudi Arabia and Iran are operating, amidst increasing financial pressures - brought about by the combination of demographic changes, the price of oil, the covid19 pandemic, and sanctions on the Iranian state - and changing US policy in the Middle East.

In this article we argue that there are pragmatic reasons for both Saudi Arabia and Iran to engage in dialogue and cooperation, albeit acknowledging the importance - and complexity - of moves to reduce tensions, stemming from economic pressures (and opportunities) and fears about regional security. Indeed, with Saudi Arabia moving towards its Vision 2030 and Iran facing an array of economic challenges, the need for a pragmatic form of cooperation is deemed essential to meet these goals and create a more stable regional security environment.

Whilst somewhat aspirational – and contentious to many – this article offers a justification for such moves along with a conceptual approach that can help support these efforts. In pursuit of this, we draw on the work of the Copenhagen School and, in particular, ideas of *desecuritization* as a means of returning the rivalry – and discourse around it – from the realm of security politics to the realm of normal politics. Using the ideas of Ole Waever and Lene Hansen (in particular) we argue that relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have long been viewed in terms of security, which has created a cycle of distrust between the two states and as a consequence, security politics has become the *normal* politics of relations between the two, albeit not of global politics. To facilitate a lasting rapprochement, a rigorous deconstruction of the apparatus of security is needed. In doing this, we present one of the first academic articles of its kind on the topic, written by scholars affiliated with SEPAD<sup>[1]</sup> - including one from Saudi Arabia and one from Iran alongside an external voice – who collectively suggest that a pragmatic engagement with the other is an integral step in aiding the political development in both states and the wider regional security environment. We argue that this

process of desecuritization is in the pragmatic interests of both states and can occur in three areas: linguistic, economic, and energy.

### **Saudi-Iranian Relations**

In the years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have had a devastating impact on regional politics (Chubin and Tripp, 1996). The fusion of a political rivalry with a competition over leadership of the Islamic world has resulted in a rivalry that cuts across the Middle East, exacerbating political and religious divisions across the region. Yet as scholars of the rivalry acknowledge (Keynoush, 2016; Mabon, 2013; Mason, 2014; Chubin and Tripp, 1996; Fraihat, 2020; Rubin, 2014 amongst others), the rivalry is not static but rather is shaped by the peculiarities of time and space.

Underpinning much of this geopolitical tension is an incongruent vision of the organisation of security in the Gulf. For Saudi Arabia, security in the Gulf is maintained through a long-standing network of relations with the United States. However, from Iran's perspective, security should be maintained solely by those within the region. This contradiction was exacerbated in the years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, where Saudi officials urged their American counterparts to curtail the burgeoning Iranian influence across the state; indeed at the height of the violence in Iraq the late King Abdullah urged the US at the time to "*cut off the head of the snake*". (Wiki leaks, cited in Mabon, 2016).

During the presidency of Barack Obama, US diplomatic overtures to Iran caused a great deal of consternation amongst many in Saudi Arabia, prompting a more proactive foreign policy that sought to curtail Iranian influence across the region (Mabon, 2018). Saudi fears were exacerbated by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal agreed by the permanent five members of the UN Security Council, Germany, and Iran. Under Obama's successor, the vociferously anti-Iranian Donald Trump, relations with the Saudi Kingdom – and the Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in particular – dramatically improved, in no small part due to the decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal.

In such precarious contexts, it is hardly surprising that tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have increased, playing out across political, social, economic and religious arenas. While some point to sectarian tensions as a source of this long standing animosity between the two states (Nasr) and others point to national interest (Furtig, 2002; Keynoush, 2016; Chubin and Tripp, 1999) we argue that the fusion of material and ideational concerns are central in shaping the rivalry, while the fragmentation of state projects across the region provide arenas in which Riyadh and Tehran can engage in competition (Gause; Mabon, 2019). This fusing of local and regional politics had a dramatic impact on relations, opening new areas of competition and leading to the escalation of tensions between the two and the framing of relations in the language of security.

Unsurprisingly, speeches from elites in Riyadh and Tehran sought to frame the other as a threat to regional security and stability (Mabon, 2018). Yet such language was also used publicly: Adel Al Jubeir, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, suggested that Iran sought to "obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies, as well as its support for terrorism, by levelling unsubstantiated charges against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia". He later suggested that Iran is "the single- most belligerent actor in the region" (cited in Mabon, 2018). Similarly Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif declared that Iran "has intelligence that Saudi Arabia is actively engaged in promoting terrorist groups (REFWorld, 13.06.17).

In such precarious conditions of regional fragmentation and instability, calls for dialogue between the states are a necessary but not sufficient step to improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While such calls are important, alone they do not create conditions that are conducive to diplomatic

efforts. Moreover, as Gause (2014) has observed, the fragmentation of states across the region - notably in Syria and Yemen - has created conditions which have entrenched and exacerbated divisions, posing further challenges to those seeking to improve relations between the two, as local and regional politics become imbued with security concerns.

In spite of the challenges, there remain pragmatic reasons for seeking to improve relations between the two states (SEPAD, 2020). Aside from the long-standing concerns about an escalation of conflict - perhaps best seen in the aftermath of the 2019 attacks on Saudi Aramco which were widely believed to have been conducted by Iran. For many in the Kingdom, the attacks were the latest instance of an increasingly precarious regional security environment which prompted moves to ease tensions (Faucon, Said and Strobel, 2019). As one US official observed that to “begin easing the various conflicts in the region, one of the single biggest things you can do is to start a dialogue between Riyadh and Tehran that could bring down the tensions” (Ghattas: 2015).

As Hussein Ibish notes, the groundwork for diplomatic efforts takes time to develop and, in the case of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, are believed to have taken over two years (Ibish, 2021). This groundwork was multifaceted, taking place in the guise of track II diplomatic efforts, mediatory processes, and the publication of two high profile opinion pieces written by Hossein Mousavian and Abdulaziz Sager, who possess relations with prominent officials in Tehran and Riyadh respectively. Additionally, one area that has routinely provided a modicum of hope is the ongoing dialogue over the allocation of pilgrimage visas which brought officials from the two states together. That being said, as Mabon and Ardochini argue (forthcoming), there is little scope to use this dialogue as an opportunity to further dialogue due to the importance of retaining the *apolitical* nature of the pilgrimage. Despite this, there are areas of possibility, albeit requiring a number of developments in order to facilitate such efforts.

Diplomatic efforts designed to improve relations between the two states have been ongoing over recent years, in a range of different forms including track II programmes, cultural exchange, and educational developments. Yet in recent months these efforts have taken on an official component. Acknowledging this, Khatibzadeh, the Spokesman of Foreign Affairs in Tehran, declared that “Iran has embraced negotiations with Saudi Arabia. Peace and regional stability between Riyadh and Tehran are in the interests of people of both countries.” (EN News, 2021). Yet challenges remain, given complexity of regional politics and the challenges to desecuritization.

### **(De)Securitization**

Central to improving relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is the need to transform the discourse around the rivalry from one of security to one predicated on less antagonistic forms of politics, referred to by scholars identifying with the Copenhagen School as a process of desecuritization. Literature on desecuritization emerged in response to a growing body of work that looked at the ways in which security was constructed – a process of securitization – to examine the processes through which security could be deconstructed. The securitization approach focuses on the construction of security and the repercussions of such moves for politics. The process of securitization occurs across a number of stages, beginning with a ‘speech act’ from a securitizing actor that *names* a particular issue as an existential threat, prompting a move from normal politics and the legitimization of the *extraordinary*. Such moves take place within what Matt McDonald (2008) terms the ‘facilitating conditions’, that which gives such processes traction, and for particular audiences (both intended and unintended).

In contrast to securitization, desecuritization looks at the ways in which issues can be moved from their position on the “security agenda” (Waever, 1995, 58). For Buzan and Waever,

security should be seen as negative, as a failure to deal with issues as normal politics. Ideally, politics should be able to unfold according to routine procedures without this extraordinary elevation of specific 'threats' to a prepolitical immediacy. In some cases securitization of issues is unavoidable, as when states are faced with an implacable or barbarian aggressor. Because of its prioritizing imperative, securitization also has tactical attractions – for example, as a way to obtain sufficient attention for environmental problems. But desecuritization is the optimal long-range option, since it means not to have issues phrased as 'threats against which we have countermeasures' but to move them out of this threat-defense sequences and into the ordinary public sphere (Buzan & Waever, 1998: 29)

Building on this, Ole Waever articulates three forms of desecuritization: the first is not speaking about an issue as a threat; the second is managing the securitization process to avoid a spiral; and third, returning the previously securitized issue to the realm of normal politics. Similarly, Lene Hansen suggests that there are four approaches: stabilization, replacement, rearticulation and silencing. (2012, 529)

Of course, the challenges involved in facilitating such processes are vast, conditioned not only by the ways these issues are defined by elites, but by the very essence of elites themselves. Indeed, as Buzan and Waever acknowledge, at the heart of securitization are questions about "identity politics of self and other". (2009, 261). Conversely, desecuritization then requires traversing the "friend-enemy distinction" (Hansen, 2012, 533).

In the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is easy to see the ways in which elites in both Riyadh and Tehran have embraced processes of securitization, with devastating repercussions for regional politics. Here, the spiral of the security dilemma risks consuming all in its path and creating an environment from which there is no escape. In the context of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, ideas of desecuritization then necessitate the movement of particular issues out of the realm of 'threat-defence sequences' and into the ordinary public sphere.

In pursuit of desecuritization in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, we now explore the pragmatic areas for collaboration in both states, with a consideration of the language used for desecuritization. Here, we argue that it is *pragmatically* in the interests of both states to return these issues to the realm of normal politics through a combination of stabilization and rearticulation. Through this, it is possible that the two states are able to embark on a broader process of desecuritization.

As McDonald suggests (2008: 580), security need not solely be the failure of normal politics, but can also be a site of contestation and competition, necessitating a broader reflection of competition rather than solely focusing on the designation of threats. It is such a view that is of interest in our case. Indeed, as we shall see, the roots of such moves are already apparent in the actions of both states. In what follows, we identify the pragmatic areas pushing de-escalation and the possible shifting discourses in both states.

### **Saudi Arabia: Regional Pragmatism and Vision 2030**

In October 2018, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman announced his aspirations for the future of the kingdom and the wider Middle East to be "the new Europe". The Crown Prince was speaking at the Future Investment Initiative conference, an international gathering hosted annually in Riyadh, to attract global investments as a part of its framework to diversify its economy to realise Vision 2030. During this meeting, he expressed "... that the new Europe will be the Middle East. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the next five years will be totally different," (Kane, Frank; Ben Gassem,

Logien, 2018). However, for this socio-economic and political dream to be attained, Saudi Arabia must navigate away from a number of conflicts and lead efforts to de-securitise the region. Central to this is the Kingdom's Vision2030 which requires dramatic financial investment.

As noted by Mohamed Nuruzzaman, "Whether it succeeds or fails, 'Vision 2030' may prove to be a double-edged sword: its failure may unleash domestic chaos and instability with regional spillover effects; its success may further embolden ambitious Mohammad bin Salman to promote Saudi nationalist narratives to strongly push for a regional preeminent position breeding more conflicts and violence in the Middle East." (Nuruzzaman, 2018). This section discusses the necessity of de-securitisation of the regional system from conflicts involving Saudi Arabia in order for the country to achieve social and economic plans detailed in Vision 2030.

In September 2019, oil refineries in Abqaiia-Khuraiis, in the east of Saudi Arabia were damaged in a drone and ballistic missile attack. In 2020 and 2021, further attacks were launched revealing a serious threat to the Kingdom's national security. Reports emerged that the Yemeni insurgent Houthi group had carried out those assaults, while other media sources pointed out to an Iraqi militia that belongs to the Popular Mobilisation forces - both paramilitaries possess relations with Iran – while a UNSCR confirmed the involvement of Iran.

To deal with those challenges in the best possible manner, Saudi Arabia must engage in a political dialogue with Iran, in which both players need to offer political concessions to the other side by pragmatically resolving conflicts across the region. This is a necessary step for the Kingdom to implement internal socio-economic transformations, known as Vision 2030.

All significant regional conflicts, from Yemen to Syria, have been securitised by Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, this status quo must change if Saudi Arabia wants to achieve the ambitious set of targets suggested by the Vision; as argued by Alrefai and Nasirzadeh "It is evident that Saudi Arabia and Iran will benefit more from direct dialogue than hostile rhetoric. Through discussing and working together on domestic, regional and international issues, it is in the interests of both states – and the wider region – to reduce conflict and increase cooperation through diplomatic ties." (Alrefai & Nasirzadeh, 2019).

Positive recent developments in the Kingdom's rhetoric and political discourse towards Iran are constructive and necessary steps to moving forward the realm of 'normal politics', a point recently acknowledged by MbS in his interview on 27 April 2021. On 5 May, the Iraqi President Barham Salih declared that "Iraq has hosted more than one round of talks between regional foes Iran and Saudi Arabia." (Davison, 2021). Such remarks also tally with a softening of rhetoric which can be seen in the content of Saudi newspapers and media outlets over recent months. For instance, in May 2019, after the attacks on Aramco's oil refineries, an Op-ed titled 'No to War!' in Okaz – a very influential Saudi newspaper -written by a leading Saudi intellectual, Khaled Al-Suliman noted that

As for those who are enthusiastic about wars, they should reflect on the results of the Iraq war and the wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, to realize that the start of wars and the enthusiasm of their slogans and chants is easier than stopping them, compensating for their losses and healing their wounds! Demonstrating force and achieving the deterrence equation is one of the military means to achieve political ends, and in the Iranian case we are faced with two options; Either a devastating war that will pay an exorbitant bill to the region while it is drowning in debts of its crises' bills, or pressure military deterrence and a stifling economic blockade that leads to new negotiations that remove the danger of the nuclear project and re-limit Iranian influence! (Al-Suliman, 2019).

Moreover, in a piece analysing Saudi op-ed discourses towards Iran, Andrew Leber observes that "a broader view of Saudi op-ed commentary reveals a range of articles that have emphasized deterrence

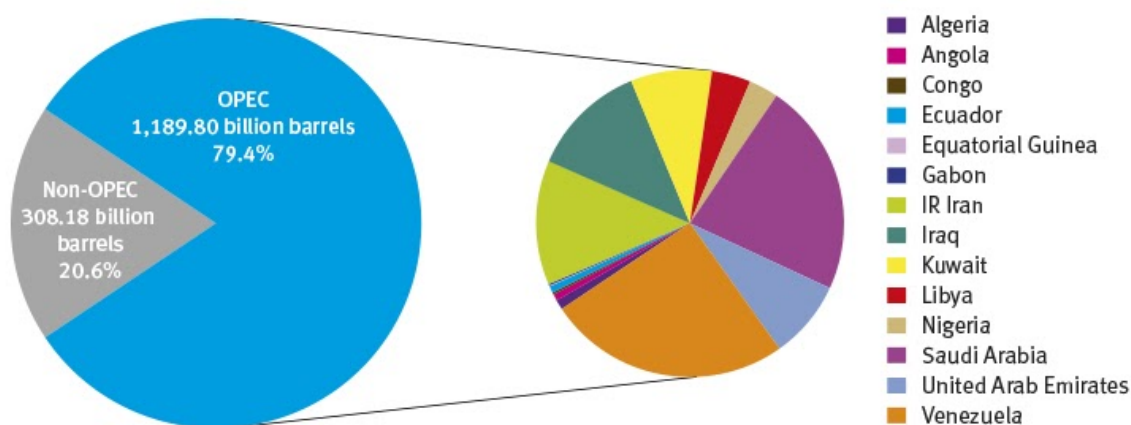
and international action against Iran rather than an open use of force. While “elite opinion” of any kind is hard to pin down in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where state-licensed media faces complex red lines and there is no right to free speech, these subtle differences suggest there is less policy consensus.” (Leber, 2019).

### Why does Saudi Arabia need to reduce tensions with Iran?

Resolving regional disputes will enhance the global image of Saudi Arabia and Iran as states who are worthy of leading the region in future years, which will have positive outcomes for both states, their budgets, and their global reputation. More importantly, and pragmatically speaking, the aim of the process of peacebuilding and conflict resolution must be focused to pave the way for new investments and financial opportunities. Central to the need for reducing tensions and bringing about stability to the Middle East is an urgent need for domestic socio-economic changes that lead to societal and economic developments. As Nada Aggour argues the ‘COVID-19 Crisis Has Catalyzed Vision 2030: The pandemic has prompted a much-needed agenda re-evaluation, pushing Saudi leaders to move with a greater sense of urgency toward economic diversification.’ Moreover that it is finally time for the Kingdom “to reinvent itself as the business hub of the Middle East, the kingdom must rein in its regional military interventions, a massive burden on both its budget and international image. In order to truly convince investors, Saudi must actively channel its efforts away from conflict and toward long-term economic reform.” (Aggour, 2021).

The potential of economic cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is very promising. When it comes to natural resources, oil is a great example to study how an enormous potential can be achieved through reconciliation. Instead, as previously noted, oil is being used as a tool in the struggle. Both nations share over a third of the world's proven reserves of oil; "Approximately 79.4 percent of the world's proven oil reserves are located in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the biggest portion—64.5 percent—is in the Middle East, as the following illustration shows that Saudi Arabia and Iran account for 35.5 percent of OPEC's reserves.” (OPEC, OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves, 2020)

### OPEC share of world crude oil reserves, 2018



OPEC proven crude oil reserves, at end 2018 (billion barrels, OPEC share)

Venezuela	302.81	25.5%	Kuwait	101.50	8.5%	Algeria	12.20	1.0%	Gabon	2.00	0.2%
Saudi Arabia	267.03	22.4%	UAE	97.80	8.2%	Ecuador	8.27	0.7%	Equatorial Guinea	1.10	0.1%
IR Iran	155.60	13.1%	Libya	48.36	4.1%	Angola	8.16	0.7%			
Iraq	145.02	12.2%	Nigeria	36.97	3.1%	Congo	2.98	0.3%			

Source: OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2019.

(OPEC, OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves, 2018).

There is little doubt that the rivalry negatively affected prices of oil with damage to the Abqaiq facility and precarious nature of supply routes through the Persian Gulf. Given the impact of oil on both economies, creating a more stable environment to secure prices will have a dramatic impact on both states and their socio-economic development. From this, a range of other activities can emerge, including tourism, a central tenet of Vision2030 which can benefit both states, while also aiding the broader desecuritization of relations.

Yet on-going regional struggles play a prominent role in preventing such developments. The implementation of Vision 2030 assured a new age of social and economic liberalisation in the country's journey. This leaves Saudi society under constant pressure from conservative and extremist currents opposed to the vision. Opening up the society was the most critical internal social challenge facing the Saudi leadership for years. At least since 1979, the country and after the implementation of strict interpretations of Sunni Islam to please extremists who were unsatisfied with the process of social liberalisation went through one of the most complex and violent phases in its history. This has, historically, affected relations with Iran, particularly through the treatment of the Kingdom's Shi'a Muslims (Keynoush, 2016). A move towards a more nationalist and apparently inclusive Saudi identity provides opportunities here, albeit opposed by many.

The struggle over the role of religion in the Saudi state is not new (Nevo, 1998; Commins, 2015; Mabon, 2019; Teitelbaum, 2017). When asked by the Atlantic's Jeffery Goldberg in 2018: "Is the problem in your mind religious?" MBS responded: "As I told you, the Shiites are living normally in Saudi Arabia. We have no problem with the Shiites. We have a problem with the ideology of the Iranian regime. Our problem is, we do not think they have the right to interfere with our affairs." Yet in recent years, such views have softened, as seen in comments by the Crown Prince in April 2021, albeit with some remaining concerns about the broader role of religion in the foreign policies of states across the Middle East, including Iran, necessitating a broader process of desecuritization.

Accordingly, for confidence-building and to de-escalate tensions across the Middle East, it is crucial to resolve the Yemen war in order to achieve a regional security framework (Vakil & Quilliam, 2021). Meanwhile, the emphasis of the new President of the United States that "war on Yemen has to end, a war which has created humanitarian and strategic catastrophe" (Reuters, 2021) reinforces the need for a security framework to end conflicts in the region. The Saudi proposal to end the war in Yemen last March was a significant milestone in the rivalry, as it includes a "... nationwide ceasefire under U.N. supervision and the reopening of air and sea links... the reopening of Sanaa airport, and would allow fuel and food imports through Hodeida port, both of which are controlled by Riyadh's enemies, the Iran-aligned Houthi movement. Political negotiations between the Saudi-backed government and the Houthis would be restarted...".

## **De-Securitisatation applied in the Saudi Regional Approach**

Saudi Arabia knows that the war in Yemen is harming its image globally, and recent attacks might add suspicions to global investors. The implementation of Vision 2030 will be affected if the situation continues as it is without a political solution in Yemen. International investors need to operate in a safe environment. Surely, by now attacks carried out by the Houthis did not manage successfully to target significant areas in large Saudi cities that might scare the business community, but on the medium and the long term, if the conflict is not politically sustained and pragmatically solved, when attacks hit main streets of Jeddah and Riyadh, they will surely rush to flee out of the country, and as the famous saying goes "Capital is a coward". The report titled '*Saudi Arabia: Will Two Global Crisis Stop Its War in Yemen*' highlights a "double-edged economic crisis":

The war is now reaching its sixth year and is looking increasingly unwinnable and costly for the Saudis. With Houthi forces maintaining a strong hold on northern Yemen and the capital Sanaa, neither of the factions are able to achieve a definitive victory. The kingdom has also been severely affected by the virus, which has caused both a contraction of the global economy and a dramatic fall in oil prices. With over 80 percent of Saudi Arabia's GDP reliant on oil revenue, a prolonged crisis has the potential to cripple the Saudi economy. (Solace Global, 2020).

Therefore, on 22 of March 2021, "Saudi Arabia has offered Yemen's Houthi rebels a nationwide ceasefire in a series of proposals aimed at ending the brutal six-year war in the country, including the partial lifting of the blockade on Sana'a international airport and some seaports." (Wintour, 2021)

Moreover, in the April 2021 interview with the Crown Prince, he spoke in a positive tone to a large extent in comparison to other discussions, by mentioning their Arab roots, MbS attempted to relink the communal aspect of Arabism, the Crown Prince said about the Houthis "No country in the world accepts militias on its borders. We hope that the Houthis will sit at the negotiating table to reach solutions that guarantee rights for all. While there is no doubt that the Houthis have a close relationship with Iran, there is no doubt that the Houthis are Arabs at the end of the day, and it is inevitable that they will have to work with their brothers to end this conflict." (Radwan, 2021). After two months, the Saudi government and the Houthi movement are engaged in a serious round of talks facilitated by Oman.

In Iraq, Saudi Arabia re-established its position and went successfully beyond sectarian alliances that persisted in the last four decades in cultivating relations with Shi'a figures (Harvey, 2021). The governmental and public relations between both the Saudis and the Iraqis are noticeably developing and they are clearly now in the realm of 'normal politics'. This can be seen with the last three Prime Ministers, Haider Abadi and Adel Abdel-Mahdi, including the current one Mustafa Al-Khadimi, who are Shias and represent Al-Dawah Party, an ally to the Islamic Republic. This has already proved to be fruitful for the Saudi and the Iraqi economy. Saudi Arabia donated a football stadium and reopened two border crossings, and it entirely financed the reconstruction process. Saudi brands, like Al-Marai for dairy products, are flooding the Iraqi market, which satisfies one of Vision 2030 targets to diversify the Saudi economy.

### **Iran: Regional Pragmatism and *HOPE* Initiatives**

The statement from the Iranian Government to 'invest in hopes towards a better future' declared by President Rouhani in the 74<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly in September 2019 sent a message of 'peace, promises and negotiating tables' to the world (UN News, 2019). Considering several multilateral regional security frameworks which have been proposed by Iran, Tehran emphasises a culture of regional security and calls for a reduction in foreign interventions in the region, underpinned by a quest for pragmatic solutions to peacebuilding and reconciliation between Iran and its neighbours. The proposal is driven by the 20-year vision document of the Islamic Republic of Iran, emphasising the knowledge, security, societal, economic, and cultural developments of Iran by the 2025 horizon, through which the engagement and integration with its neighbours is highlighted. The vision significantly proposes a constructive relation with countries in the region (2025 Vision, 2005: 6).

Iran's policies towards its neighbours have often been shaped by 'pragmatic, national interests rather than ideological convictions' (Menashri, 2007:156), yet demonstrating to its neighbours that such policies fit neatly within a state centric vision of regional security is a key challenge (Ibish, 2021). Since the pragmatic steps pursued by Tehran for peace and reconciliation with its Persian Gulf neighbours,



four countries have had positive reception to the Hormuz peace Endeavour (*HOPE*), including Kuwait, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, but Saudi Arabia and Bahrain remain as challenging actors to accept the initiative. For Tehran, managing tensions and trust-building with its neighbours has often been viewed as a provider of security in the region. As Zarif emphasises “the regional efforts are necessary to prevent war, conflict, violence, extremism, terrorism, and sectarian tensions.” (Tasnim News Agency, 2019). In this respect, the UAE agreed to launch dialogue with Iran on the theme of “HOPE”. Zarif said in a tweet that “Just had a very substantive, frank and friendly video conversation with the United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, discussing Covid as well as bilateral, regional and global situations. We agreed to continue dialogue on the theme of *HOPE*—especially as the region faces tough challenges, and tougher choices ahead.” (Iranian Diplomacy, 3 August 2020). More specifically, Iran’s key partner in economic trade is the UAE with 6.2% (of total exports) and remains the significant economic partner to Iran after China at 9.5% in 2019 (Nordea, 2019). Therefore, close economic ties increase the level of desire of political actors for peace and reconciliation. As the UAE embraced the *HOPE* initiative to sit at the negotiation table with Iran to reduce tensions, it may also bring Riyadh to the negotiation table with Tehran. On 18 April 2021, Saudi Arabia and Iran had opened up a direct line of dialogue, facilitated by Iraq to reduce tensions and rapprochement.

### **Why does Iran need to reduce tensions with Saudi Arabia?**

Despite the size of their economies, there is little economic trade between Iran and Saudi Arabia; export to and import from Saudi Arabia stood at \$132.2 million and \$40.3 million respectively by the end of 2015 (Financial Tribune, 2016). Although Iran and Saudi Arabia emphasised on the expansion of economic trade, the trade rate has dropped massively since 2007 between Riyadh and Tehran (Shana, 2007:98410). It is worth noting that Tehran’s nuclear dispute with the West and economic sanctions, which have had an undeniable effect on Iran’s economic relations (Habibi, 2010:10), urges Tehran to improve its regional collaboration to block sanctions impacting its economy. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran pursues regional cooperation and integration with the view of ‘the region first’. More specifically, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, led to less than half of Iranians approving the renegotiations with the West (School of Public Policy, 2019). However, President Rouhani has a vast interest in reviving the JCPOA that could ease economic sanctions to reduce blame on his administration. People have lost their trust in the negotiations of JCPOA. Instead, Iran emphasises on the ‘resistance economy’ against the ‘maximum pressure’ of the U.S (United States Institute of Peace, 2020), through which the regional cooperation with its neighbouring countries is highlighted. Accordingly, the regional security framework could open doors for trade between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a key step for peacebuilding and reconciliation.

However, the secondary regime of economic sanctions against Iran that curb oil exports, the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the mismanagement of the Rouhani administration weakened the economic situation. Tehran took ‘maximum resistance’ policy to counter the issues through relying on domestic capacities. As Nuruzzaman (2020:580) articulates the ‘secondary’ sanctions against Iran under ‘maximum pressure’ have been the ‘most intrusive sanctions in contemporary history, which was seeking to devastate its economy and society’ was responded to through ‘resistance economy’ by Iran. The IMF had estimated that Iran’s economy would shrink by 5% in 2020 but has revised upwards its estimate to a 1.5% growth in 2020 and a 2.5% growth in 2021, but the rate of inflation is still high (Reuters, April 2021; IMF Data Mapper, 2021). The figures demonstrate that attempts of the Trump administration to weaken Iran’s economy have been countered through the ‘resistance economy’ policy of Tehran. As the Supreme Leader of Iran emphasises, the economy is the priority issue of the country, which requires domestic efforts of the authorities within Iran. The Supreme Leader declared that “in my opinion, all these problems that exist in the economy today can be solved and fixed domestically. This strong strength of the country must be used” (Khamenei.ir, 2020).

However, the economic pressures of the U.S. have had a devastating impact on the Iranian people. Iran's economy is required to prosper in order to meet the peoples' demand as a wealthy country with a large portion of natural resources. To do this, Iran pursues regional cooperation rather than relying on the European countries under the JCPOA. In contrast to the Rouhani Presidency, which reduced diplomatic ties with Arab neighbours and emphasised diplomatic relations with the U.S. and European countries, the new Raisi Government presents an opportunity for improving regional ties with Arab neighbours. According to 'the region first' policy, in his speech on the Saudi-Iranian relations, Raisi declared "we are ready to reopen embassies", which reveals the desire of the new Government to improve diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia (ILNA, 2021).

The economic situation of Iran can be developed through increasing economic trade with its neighbours. For instance, Tehran and Riyadh have high capacity to expand their economic trade. However, Saudi Arabia views the Iranian economy through the 'lens of competition rather than regional integration' (Al-Rasheed, 2018:7), both states have a large capacity for trade deals. The last economic meeting between Riyadh and Tehran returned back in May 2005 in the seventh Iran-Saudi Arabia Commission in Riyadh, but there are potentials to launch economic ties between the two countries. Regarding Iran's oil export that dropped due to the sanctions against Iran (Trading Economics, 2020) to less than 500,000 barrels per day (United States Institute of Peace, 2020), it is in the interest of Iran to diversify its economy through non-oil economic trade with its neighbours to achieve its goals under the 2025 vision. The emphasis of Tehran for 'the region first' policy could lead to strengthening its relations with Riyadh through diplomatic relations, economic trades, and cultural programs.

Although structural factors influence Iran-Saudi relations, including geopolitical differences, such as disparities in demography and geography, and consequent differing perspectives on regional issues' (Chubin & Tripp, 2014), there are political, economic, and social grounds for rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran. A survey by the Centre for International & Security Studies at University of Maryland asking public opinion in Iran about Iran's regional involvement shows that 'four in five want diplomatic discussions with other Middle Eastern countries to continue; a little under half support expanding them' (School of Public Policy, 2021). Similarly, a survey conducted by Khabar Online (10 April 2021) in Tehran about the potential peace between Saudi Arabia and Iran, although some resisted to negotiate with Saudi Arabia, most of the Iranians embraced negotiations and believed it is in the interests of both countries to achieve reconciliation. Hence, the tendency for pragmatic solutions to move from 'extraordinary' politics to 'normal' politics can be observed from 'below' (society) and 'above' (political elites) that could provide a positive path for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. It is the right time for Saudi Arabia and Iran to engage and accept each other's role in the region to make peace, as the first round of negotiations in Baghdad showed positive signs of reconciliation.

To reduce tensions with Riyadh, there are a wide range of possibilities for de-securitisation between Saudi Arabia and Iran on economic, religious, and cultural grounds, which can perhaps lead to positive negotiations and peace between the two states. For confidence-building, Tehran and Riyadh do not need to take large steps, but also small-scale economic, religious, and cultural projects would lead to future cooperation. The non-oil economic trades, religious and cultural tourism would facilitate negotiations between the two states. To facilitate de-securitisation in the Saudi-Iranian relations, economic trade can be viewed as the closer path for peace and reconciliation.

### **De-securitization in Operation: Linguistic, Energy, Economy**

In light of this need for pragmatic engagement, we propose that there are three main areas in which desecuritization can occur: linguistic, economic, and energy politics.

## **Linguistic**

Fundamental to much of what follows is the way in which language is used to refer to the other. While previously framed in security terms, a shift away from the language of security is of paramount importance. In this vein, the statement of Crown Prince MbS that “Iran is a neighbouring state.... We are seeking to have ‘good relations’ with Iran. We have interests in Iran, we aim to see a prosperous Iran”, should be recognised as a positive move given previous decisions to frame Iran in security terms (Tollast & Aldroubi, 28 April 2021).

A day after, Iran’s Foreign Minister welcomed the remarks by the Saudi Crown Prince on relations between Riyadh and Tehran. In response, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said in a statement that “Iran and Saudi Arabia, as two important countries in the region and the Muslim world, can enter a new chapter of interaction and cooperation to achieve regional peace, stability and development by adopting constructive and dialogue-based approaches” (Anadolu Agency, 30 April 2021). As Reuters (29 April 2021) reports, ‘the change of tone’ by Saudi Arabia welcomed by Iran could lead to rapprochement, as Zarif said in a tweet that there were “indications of positive signs on horizon” (Reuter, 29 April 2021).

The ‘change of tone’ is necessary to move from ‘extraordinary’ politics to ‘normal’ politics. In this respect, Balzacq et.al (2016:495) argue that in (de)securitisation theory ‘the word of security has a performative character- that is, it does not only describe the world but can also transform the social reality.’ To de-securitise an issue, softening the language (speech act) of political actors could transform issues from ‘extraordinary’ politics to ‘normal’ politics. To facilitate dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the first step is to diminish rhetorical ‘animosity’ that would open doors for rapprochement (Alrefai & Nasirzadeh 2019). Avoiding security and sectarian language would facilitate dialogue and possible desecuritization. For Tehran, the 2025 vision explicitly emphasises on the reinforcement of its relations with neighbouring countries to achieve its goals for future developments.

## **Economic**

With both states facing economic pressures, increasing trade between the two states offers an easy means of improving socio-economic conditions. Although trade between Iran and the Arab states is around \$20 billion, it can be increased through establishing a sub-regional security framework for trade and economic cooperation between Iran and the Arab states in the Eastern Middle East (Salem, 201:19). However, since 2004, Saudi Arabia has been the second largest GCC importer from Iran including agricultural products, handcraftings, natural gas, low-tech and intermediating manufacturing at \$100 million annually until 2000, grew to \$900 million in 2008; Iran imports from Saudi Arabia grew by 315% to \$274 million, albeit it declined after fall of their diplomatic relations (Habibi, 2010: :4-7).

Such developments may occur within the realm of a security framework - such as that proposed by Iran - which provides grounds for trade and economic cooperation. Iranian natural gas is the best ground for strengthening economic cooperation with Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom’s petrochemical industry has an increasing need for natural gas and Iran as the second largest gas reserves in the world can provide the needs of Saudi Arabia (Aarts & Van Duijne, 2009). It is generally accepted that “peace is good for business” (Aarts & Van Duijne, 2009: 75), the economic imperatives can be met through desecuritization to eliminate political barriers.

Vision 2030 aspires to transform Saudi Arabia to be the most attractive market in the region. As per the Ministry of Economy and Planning in the country reporting on the Vision: “Our status will enable us to build on our leading role as the heart of Arab and Islamic worlds. At the same time, we will use

our investment power to create a more diverse and sustainable economy. Finally, we will use our strategic location to build our role as an integral driver of international trade and to connect three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe.” (the Ministry, 2021), all the mentioned economic aspects can be achieved sufficiently, if relations with the Islamic Republic improve. Traditional trade as well as new aspects like communications and high tech, which both countries have the means and the talent to capitalise on, if enhanced, can provide Saudi and Iran with a range of opportunities to diversify their economies.

Within this, education and the development of intellectual property may also feature heavily. Socio-economic transformations - particularly in the Kingdom - have prompted a dramatic rise in small businesses and the registering of new patents, something that Saudi and Iranian universities prominently engage in. Despite their short term successes, the Global Innovation Index figures of 2020, by the WIPO, the global forum for intellectual property, placed Saudi Arabia as the 66th and Iran as the 67th, highlighting scope for further growth.

## **Energy**

Iran and Saudi are interdependent, both states need a stable region as the most important OPEC members with large oil resources for production and pricing to secure oil exports. The security of Strait of Hormuz as a hub for oil export, which delivers 40 percent of oil and gas to global markets, has been provided by Iran. Security of the energy hub, installations and transport facilities is a primary concern for Saudi Arabia and Iran, because any conflict that leads to disruption of energy export damages the interests of both states in the region (Salem, 2010:12-13). Therefore, it is in the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran for de-securitisation of the ‘other’.

For Iran, high oil price meets its criteria for developments in pursuit of the 2025 vision. It could also be viewed as an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to meet its 2030 vision as a common ground for economy and energy cooperation. For instance, the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 1998 led to an increase in the oil price of barrel by approximately \$14.50 (Ramezani, 2013:147). Energy cooperation can occur through the OPEC organisation as one of the main grounds for rapprochement between the two states and as a rift emerges between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, a possible new alliance may emerge. Considering the estimation of energy experts that global energy demand will increase from 273.9 to 382.1 million barrels of oil by 2040, the ‘energy diplomacy’ can de-escalate tensions (al-Khafaji, 2018:6) and build confidence for possible de-securitisation in the Saudi-Iranian relations.

Nonetheless, another element that connects economic aspects to energy is the rapidly developing sector of green energy. Vision 2030 highlights this arena as one of the most important in the country's agenda to transform the economy and society. It aims to achieve 50% of its power from "green" sources by 2030. Renewable energy is a target to both nations, and they are committed to CO2 emissions. As clarified by Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman in a 2021 March interview, "Riyadh also plans to work with other Arab states on a "Middle East Green Initiative" to plant an additional 40 billion trees, in what would be the world's largest reforestation programme, he added. "The kingdom, the region and the world needs to go much further and faster in combating climate change," Prince Mohammed said. "We reject the false choice between preserving the economy and protecting the environment." (Reuters, 2021)

Collaboration in this regard between the Islamic Republic and the Kingdom would play a huge role in pushing the region on a green path. In Iran, Mohammad Sadeqzadeh, the chief of Iran's Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Organization known as SATBA declared that "the country was also planning to add electricity generated from renewable sources to the export basket. A total of 115

renewable power plants operated across Iran as of August 2019 and the construction is ongoing for another 37 plants to supply an extra 384 megawatts of renewables to the national power grid" (Tehran Times, 2019).

## **Conclusions**

At the time of writing, there appear to be positive improvements in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Over the past decade, several track II and track 1.5 programmes have taken place bringing Iranians and Saudis together in pursuit of an improvement in relations, facilitated by a range of international actors. Although a range of issues remain - perhaps most importantly a resolution of the conflict in Yemen - there is growing optimism for the future. As we have shown, there are pragmatic reasons behind this optimism and, if enacted, positive reverberations will be felt across the region.

While the challenges to desecuritisation and improving relations between the two states are many, there are also possibilities, as has been shown by diplomatic efforts and discursive openings. The emphasis on the end of war on Yemen by international and regional actors could open doors for negotiations and reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Similarly, questions about the role of the US also remain unresolved.

Although the multiplicity of (past and present) conflicts affecting relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran makes desecuritisation and reconciliation more challenging, this is not insurmountable. Indeed, as we have shown there are pragmatic reasons for embarking on this path. This proposal may seem idealistic, but it is an integral step in creating mutual trust, reducing tensions, and arms races between states across the Persian Gulf and, with it, to helping return relations to the realm of some form of 'normal politics'. A key outcome of desecuritisation processes could be the transformation of mutual threat perceptions between Arab states and Iran to more engaged plans to achieve a comprehensive security framework in the region.

Yet there remain a number of possible spoilers who are opposed to such moves, reflecting the myriad political and religious collectives operating in Saudi Arabia and Iran; furthermore, as Mabon argued in 2013, this demonstrates the multifaceted and multicausal challenges to improving relations between the two. If, however, spoilers can be mitigated, there remain a number of key reasons as to why Saudi Arabia and Iran can find strong and pragmatic reasons to engage in desecuritization.

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<sup>[1]</sup> SEPAD – the Sectarianism Proxies and Desectarianization project – is based at Lancaster University and brings together scholars from across the world working at the intersection of regional rivalries and sectarian politics.