

THE MOTIVATION OF SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN IN NORMALIZATION PROCESS: A STAG HUNT ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia has shifted its relations with Iran. Since the death of Shia preacher Nimr al-Nimr in 2016, these two countries have cut their diplomatic ties and increased tension; however, up until 2023, Riyadh and Tehran had agreed to normalize their diplomatic ties. In regard to that dynamic, this research will analyze why Riyadh and Tehran decided to normalize their relations. It aims to understand the dilemmatic condition between these two countries. Using the qualitative method and Stag Hunt, this research collects data from books, journal articles, mass media articles, and other relevant sources, analyzes them, and results in the findings. Eventually, this research finds that the reason why Saudi Arabia and Iran decided to normalize their relations is due to the essential need for fostering economic development and ensuring socio-economic resilience in the face of external challenges. For Saudi Arabia, its decision to cooperate with Iran is in its national interest to avoid the cost of wars and to achieve its 2030 vision. Besides, for Iran, its conflict with Saudi Arabia has bothered their national interest amid Western countries sanctions.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Stag Hunt, Rational Choice, Normalization Process

Abstrak

Arab Saudi telah mengubah hubungannya dengan Iran. Sejak wafatnya ulama Syiah Nimr al-Nimr pada tahun 2016, kedua negara telah memutuskan hubungan diplomatik dan meningkatkan ketegangan. Namun, pada tahun 2023, Riyadh dan Teheran telah sepakat untuk menormalisasi hubungan diplomatik. Terkait dinamika tersebut, penelitian ini akan menganalisis mengapa Saudi Arabia dan Iran memutuskan untuk menormalisasi hubungan mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami kondisi dilema yang dihadapi kedua negara. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan Stag Hunt, penelitian ini mengumpulkan data dari buku, artikel jurnal, artikel media massa, dan sumber relevan lainnya, menganalisisnya, dan menghasilkan temuan. Terakhir, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa alasan mengapa Arab Saudi dan Iran memutuskan untuk menormalisasi hubungan mereka adalah karena penting untuk mempromosikan pembangunan ekonomi dan memastikan ketahanan sosial-ekonomi dalam menghadapi tantangan eksternal. Bagi Arab Saudi, keputusannya untuk bekerja sama dengan Iran adalah cara untuk mencapai kepentingan nasionalnya untuk menghindari biaya perang dan untuk mencapai visi 2030-nya. Selain itu, bagi Iran, konfliknya dengan Arab Saudi telah mengganggu kepentingan nasional mereka di tengah sanksi dari negara-negara barat.

Kata kunci: Arab Saudi, Iran, Stag Hunt, Pilihan Rasional, Proses Normalisasi

A. Introduction

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is rooted in ideological, sectarian, and geostrategic dynamics which go back to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Post Iran's Islamic

revolution, it pursued export of its Islamic model and confronted Sunni monarchies whom Saudi Arabia, as an immediate rival, considered posing a threat to its regional hegemony and legitimacy (Ezbidi, 2023). Iran and Saudi Arabia had and still maintain, a sectarian rift, due to their long-lasting conflict solidarity between the two (since Iran was a main supporter of Shia power and opposition, and Saudi Arabia was the leader of Sunni Islam and protector of their holy places) (Adısönmez et al., 2023; Ardovini, 2022). The power struggle of the two became the war for regional hegemony, through proxy conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq as well as Bahrain. Saudi Arabia's execution of the Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016 and the subsequent attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran led to the full breakdown of diplomatic relations and was the peak of the hostilities (Adısönmez et al., 2023).

However, in 2023, these two countries made headlines by reestablishing diplomatic ties, with China playing a central role in facilitating the agreement—a decision driven more by practical needs than political ideology. For Saudi Arabia, calming regional tensions is crucial to the progress of Vision 2030, a national plan focused on reducing oil dependency and building a more resilient, diverse economy. Iran, meanwhile, seized the opportunity to ease international sanctions and reconnect with the global community (Ezbidi, 2023). This research examines the rational choices behind this reconciliation by applying the Stag Hunt, which helps illuminate how long-standing rivals can shift from conflict to cautious cooperation when the rewards of working together begin to outweigh the cost of prolonged hostility.

B. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative method, which involves the study of documents, archives, and literature reviews along with behavioral and contextual observations. Generally, qualitative methods collect different types of data, such as observations, interviews, and documents. It analyzes the entire dataset, interpreting it and categorizing it into themes or patterns that span across all data sources (Creswell, 2013). The primary aim of this study is to explain the change in the normalization between Riyadh and Tehran. The data is analyzed by identifying commonalities across the literature, which are subsequently organized to establish a coherent pattern. This article employs Stag Hunt game theory to analyze dilemmatic options that have been faced by both countries. It begins by describing the background of the relations between Riyadh and Tehran, which are well-known as conflictual, even though there is a little

piece of hope of normalization among them due to reopening diplomatic relations. Subsequently, it analyzes some determinant factors that influence their consideration in the normalization process by using Stag Hunt theory. This analysis is crucial to understanding the rational choices that have been made by both countries during their normalization process. Finally, this research will result in findings based on the analysis.

C. Discussion and Findings

The Root of Conflict Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

From the last revolution to the present, the ideological component has shaped the relations between Riyadh and Tehran. Prior to 1979, the major source of tension between these two countries had been worries about the regional order, which have become worse since the Iranian Revolution because Riyadh has been wary of Tehran and its regional policies and witnessed it start to extend its influence in the region after its rebirth as an Islamic republic with different ideological views, which was then seen as a danger and countered by Saudi Arabia with an anti-Shia agenda (Adısönmez et al., 2023; Alam, 2017, p. 148; Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2023, p. 15; Houghton, 2022, p. 126; Manjang, 2017, p. 46; Naqvi & Mansab, 2023, p. 3; Rab et al., n.d., p. 88). Since Iran's revolution, both governments have attempted to portray themselves as leaders in order to ensure their security and surpass their adversary, capitalizing on the numerous religious, political, and irreconcilable ideological divides in the area to obtain the upper hand and then perceiving each other more as rivals than as friends (Adami et al., 2013, p. 154; Cerioli, 2018, pp. 295–296; Ekhtiari Amiri et al., 2011, p. 679; Huwaidin, 2015, p. 72). In the early years of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, Iranian leader, consistently advocated for the fall of Gulf monarchies. As a result, fear of Iran motivated the Saudis to assist Iraq throughout its protracted war against it, which intensified Iran's hostility against Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, both countries claim leadership in the Muslim world. The supreme leader of Iran is known as the Guardian of Muslims, while the Saudi King is known as the servant of the two holy sanctuaries (Litvak, 2017, p. 50). The rivalry for regional hegemony, which is essential to both nations' identities, foreign policies, and very existence, and religious-ideological hostility and conflicting political and geostrategic goals have defined Riyadh and Tehran's relations in recent years (Ardovini, 2022, p. 69; Berti & Guzansky, 2014, p. 25). Briefly, it can be generally assumed that political and security concerns, together with ideological rivalry between Sunni and Shia, are the fundamental sources of the struggle,

disparities, and conflict between the two nations (Alikhani & Zakerian, 2016, p. 178; Moosavian & Zohreh, 2022, p. 20; Tzemprin et al., 2015).

Ideological differences between both of these countries have been worsened by sectarians. This term is defined as a strict adherence to specific doctrines or disagreements or divides within a religious organization that frequently result in violence or discrimination based on opposing beliefs or practices, which includes several religious sects, such as Sunni and Shia Muslims, or different Christian denominations (Majeed & Hashmi, 2014, p. 104). Historically, sectarian enmity and violence have plagued the Middle East, Gulf, and South Asia since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and reached perilous and high levels as Iran embraced the plan of Shia expansion while Saudi Arabia developed an anti-Shia agenda (Ahmadian, 2018, pp. 137–144; Postel & Hashemi, 2018, p. 62; Rab et al., 2022, p. 88). Practically, the combination of this long-standing ideological struggle with contemporary conflicting geostrategic and political objectives helps to explain Saudi and Iranian aims and strategy in Syria, as well as their role in fostering sectarianism in the area, which influences both sides' rhetoric and methods (Berti & Guzansky, 2014, p. 26; Ezbidi, 2023, p. 14). As a result, these two countries' traditional sectarian rivalry and indirect rivalry have served as an important area of disagreement and tension, not only at the bilateral level but also to some degree throughout the region and, in a sense, an entire Islamic community (Sadeghi & Ahmadian, 2011, p. 143). In fact, it effectively described Iran as a 'Shia' force, contradicting Iran's past claims to regional leadership across the Muslim world, including its relations with Hamas (Phillips, 2022, p. 153). Furthermore, the existence of the Shi'a population domestically has been a continual concern for Riyadh, fueling tensions between religious and ethnic minorities (Pasha et al., 2021, p. 500).

The third factor is geopolitics caused by the rivalry of Riyadh and Tehran, which determines their behavior in the region. Nowadays, the approach of geopolitics is concentrated on a state's conduct and relations within their geographical position, which might be used to a great extent in order to influence international relations and be able to express the national interests (Omelchenko et al., 2022). By maintaining the balance of power and regional leadership in the region, these two countries have shaped geopolitical issues in the region where they have their own national interests and deepened the Shia-Sunni divide and direct conflict (Ahmadian, 2018, pp. 143–144; Ekşi, 2017, p. 151). Furthermore, by pursuing a more expansive agenda in the region and beyond, Riyadh and Tehran have attempted to capitalize on

the increasing regional disintegration to increase their political image and also use the chaos in the area to maintain political stagnation both domestically and internationally (Bahi, 2018, p. 26).

Despite the rivalry of both countries, which results in significant attention at regional and international levels, the probability of de-escalation among them is not impossible. Even though the conflict is really a geopolitical battle for religious legitimacy as well as political, economic, and military dominance, especially Sheikh Nimr's death, it is hardly impossible that the two powers would go to war directly because of the statement of Saudi Arabia Prime Minister Mohammed Bin Salaman, who expressed his opinion that war on Iran is not a good option for them (Heiden & Krijger, 2018, p. 11; Pasha et al., 2021, p. 495). Furthermore, proxy wars are the factor discussed in influencing the relations between these two countries. They occur when a benefactor, either a state or non-state entity, provides weapons, training, and cash to proxies involved in an ongoing conflict in order to effectively achieve governments' strategic goals without participating in direct, expensive, and destructive warfare (Mumford, 2013, p. 40). In reality, Riyadh and Tehran have been involved in proxy conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Iraq, leading to the rise of terrorist groups such as ISIS. These conflicts could significantly alter the dynamics of politics in the region, impacting the national security of the region (Mohammed & Moorthy, 2020, p. 10).

The Diplomatic Break after the Murder of Nimr al-Nimr

Tensions between Riyadh and Tehran have increased since early 2016. Riyadh confirmed the death of Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr (Shia religious leader) and 46 other detainees on January 2, 2016, and then raised tensions between Saudi Arabia, which sees itself as safeguarding Sunni Muslims, and Iran, which claims Shiite leadership (Teitelbaum, 2016). Subsequently, protests and criticism of the death were widespread, especially from nations with a Shia majority, like Iran. In the same day, hundreds of protestors in Tehran set fire to Riyadh's embassy, sparking a foreign policy crisis (Mamadkul, 2016, p. 75). On January 3, 2016, Riyadh broke diplomatic relations with Tehran following the attack on its embassy (Pawlak, 2016, p. 2). As a retaliation from Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Muslim community was unable to perform the worship Hajj in 2016 (Mustahyun, 2017, p. 108). Moreover, the Arab Spring, decades of authoritarianism and instability, and state shortcomings in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria gave Saudi Arabia and Iran an opportunity to wage proxy war, while Sunni and Shi'a groups exploited their

identities to obtain influence and power through sectarian military groups (Crepay, 2019, p. 33; Maashi, 2017, p. 47; Manjang, 2017, p. 46). This incident has become a concern about the rising tensions in the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and called for de-escalation of the situation.

Up until 2023, all relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were disturbing due to this attack, which brought proxy wars and influences from outside. Saudi Arabia shot down a ballistic missile over Riyadh International Airport just hours after Hariri stepped down, said to be supplied by Iran and fired from Houthi rebel territory in Yemen (Voa News, 2017). In an interview, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman also stated that his nation would develop a nuclear weapon as soon as possible once Iran does so because Saudi Arabia would feel threatened by Iran acquiring one and would lose its standing and power in the region (Moosavian & Zohreh, 2022, p. 10; Reuters, 2018). In 2019, Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for a spate of attacks on Saudi targets, including one against the kingdom's petroleum industry, which briefly knocked petroleum production in half in the country, whereas Houthi rebel groups from Yemen claimed responsibility for the attacks themselves (Aljazeera, 2019; Wong et al., 2019). Moreover, Saudi officials applauded the murder of Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani in 2020 (Farouk, 2020).

Previously, the negotiation between Riyadh and Tehran involved some countries. During April 2021 to September 2022, four rounds of discussion between them have been conducted, in which Iraq plays as a mediator (Reuters, 2023). In 2022, Tehran and Riyadh participated in many rounds of discussions, mediated by Iraq and Oman, in an effort to reestablish diplomatic relations (Shine et al., 2023, p. 2). Subsequently, in 2023, they decided to re-establish ties and reopen embassies seven years after their relations were cut (Motamedi, 2023). They also decided to restart diplomatic ties (Wintour, 2023). Furthermore, Iran attended an extraordinary joint Islamic-Arab summit in Saudi Arabia after a long-time rivalry (DW, 2023). They seemed to look back on what happened in the past among them, even though the world sees it as a painful and bloody relations. Briefly, diplomatic efforts and open discussions have proven that there are opportunities to improve relations between the two states, despite several hurdles (Mabon, 2019, p. 79).

Stag Hunt Analysis

Saudi Arabia and Iran have faced a dilemmatic situation and fixed their relations in the high-tension Middle East, so their rational consideration becomes interesting to discuss. By using the Stag Hunt as a game theory, this research comprehensively understands and analyze the motivation of Saudi Arabia and Iran in normalization process. First, at the beginning of the discussion, this part describes Stag Hunt's assumptions because it can be used as guidance in understanding and analyzing the rational choice of Riyadh and Tehran in their normalization process. Second, Stag Hunt's assumption will explain and analyze their considerations in the process of normalization based on the fundamental political orientation of both countries. At last, this part will propose one main argument for answering the research's problem based on the analysis.

Based on the Stag Hunt assumption, Riyadh and Tehran will be classified as hunters because they have carefully considered some external and internal factors in the normalization process. Both of them have different ideological and political perspectives which are known from the competition between Sunni and Shia. The difference in their perspective on ideology has resulted in propaganda, tension, conflict, and other disputes between both countries. Besides, the great power such as the United States (US) and its allies significantly influences them in politics, economy, and security. The appearance of China and Russia has made the situation more complex. In 2023, China became a broker of both countries' reconciliation, which made a significant change since the cutting of their diplomatic ties in 2016. The conflict escalation between Hamas and Israel has influenced the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel (Palik, 2023). Furthermore, proxy wars have become a determinant factor in relations between them, and mostly Iran has influenced their proxies, such as Hezbollah, Houthis, Hamas, and others, to achieve its interest in the region, so Saudi Arabia has been concerned and considered its relations to Iran in regard to it. They have tried to normalize their relations, even though the implementation of it is yet challenging due to uncertain external and internal factors.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's Cooperative Behaviors

Riyadh and Tehran have shifted their relations in these days and resulted (20, 20) as the payoff. First, political and security conflict between two countries has been exhausted, so the shifting is needed to rebalance the situation. Historically, Iran has backed opposing factions throughout the Middle East, notably in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and most prominently in Yemen

(Steinberg, 2021). It has provided support to the Shia Houthi rebels, who ousted the Saudi-supported government in 2014, while Saudi Arabia has conducted a relentless air campaign against the Houthi since the following year, accusing Iran of assisting the Houthis in their attacks against it. These factions have threatened Saudi Arabia's security in the region if it continues its opposing maneuver against Iran. On Houthi's attack, Saudi Arabia successfully intercepted a ballistic missile above Riyadh International Airport shortly after Hariri's resignation, which is supplied by Iran (Voa News, 2017). Supported by Iran, Hezbollah also becomes an enemy of Saudi Arabia, which threatens Saudi Arabia's interests with its track record of attacks (Levitt, 2016). These two countries conflicts have brought them into a hard situation, which is expensive and bloody (Berg, 2023). In 2023, They have committed to restoring their diplomatic relations after January 2016's tension, which Riyadh's embassy was invaded in Tehran as a response to Riyadh's execution of a notable Shia cleric (Reuters, 2023). They have built communication, exchanged envoys, and formally reopened their embassies, even though the implementation is challenging, and the operation of the Saudi Embassy in Iran is yet to resume while the Iranian Embassy is not open (France 24, 2023). Furthermore, in this case, the external actor that influence Saudi Arabia's politics are the US and Israel. In its relation to Saudi Arabia, the US is considering its interest in Riyadh's plans for a nuclear energy program, while Riyadh refused to talk with Israel until the independence of Palestine and also denounced Israel's attack on Iran as a violation of its sovereignty (Aaron, 2024; Palik, 2023). Besides, the escalation of the Israel and Hamas-Palestine conflict has worsened the Iran-Israel relations because of Iran's support for Hamas-Palestine.

The second reason is related to economic aspects. The normalization of Riyadh and Tehran is not only talking about two countries interests but also about China and Russia's interests. In 2024, Saudi Arabia and Iran, among six nations, have been invited to become new members in 2025 (Euronews, 2023). Even though Iran has officially joined BRICS, Saudi Arabia is yet considering that option (Egypt, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Initiated by China, Brazil, South Africa, Russia, and India, this group portrays itself as a counterbalance to Western dominance, which constitutes almost 40 percent of the world population and results more than a quarter of the global GDP (Gerald & Mogomotsi, 2023)). This group will account for 45 percent of the global population and 28 percent of the world's GDP, fostering significant economic collaboration among its members while the core BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia,

India, China, and South Africa) contribute to around 40 percent of the trade activities of the new member states (Battaloglu, Nesibe Hicret and Kozhanov, 2024). For Riyadh, potential alignment with BRICS is primarily driven by economic factors, as it encompasses a substantial market. Riyadh's pursuit of de-escalation with Tehran is strategically linked to its vision 2030, as maintaining stability is crucial for securing the financial investments needed to achieve its ambitious socio-economic goals, so it recognizes that conflict could hinder its aspirations to become a leading regional and global hub in various sectors (Farouk, 2020).

Besides, Iran has formally joined BRICS in 2024, which is good for Iran's economic interests because it has been sanctioned by the US and its allies for many years due to political and security actions, so BRICS will be crucial for balancing western dominances (Tehran Times, 2024b). The Chinese government endorses Iran in its efforts to protect national sovereignty, security, and dignity while also promoting its economic and social progress and enhancing amicable relations with neighboring nations (MOFA China, 2024). In 2024, the discussions between Riyadh and Tehran officials highlight a mutual interest in enhancing trade and economic cooperation, particularly in the context of services for pilgrims in Mecca, and also reflect a broader commitment to fostering stronger bilateral relations, as emphasized by both nations' leadership (Tehran Times, 2024a). Based on stag hunt theory, these two countries have mutual benefit if they continue their normalization after long-term conflict because they are confident in that process and gradually building their relations for the highest payoff (20, 20). They have economic reasons that support Riyadh's 2030 vision and provide an alternative for Iran amid US and western sanctions. Furthermore, the external support from BRICS is crucial for the normalization process because that is in line with these two countries behaviors.

Partial Non-cooperative Behavior between Saudi Arabia and Iran

The second scenario is when one player chooses stag and the other chooses hare, in which one player gets 0 and the other gets 10. In this case, Saudi Arabia and Iran are not doubtful about continuing the normalization process because they have been exhausted by long-term conflicts that involve opposing factions such as Hezbollah and Houthi and cause disadvantages for both countries. In conflict with Tehran, Riyadh broke diplomatic relations following the attack on its embassy and restricted Iranian Muslims to worship Hajj in 2016 (Mustahyun, 2017, p. 108; Pawlak, 2016, p. 108). Previously, Riyadh executed Shia preacher Nimr al-Nimr on January 2, 2016, and then increased tensions with Tehran (Teitelbaum, 2016).

This long conflict has caused casualties and victims among them, so each of them still supports the normalization process amongst them. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has an ambitious 2030 vision for which the region's stability is crucial because continuing conflict with Iran is counterproductive to that plan (Farouk, 2020). For Iran, US and Western sanctions worsen its economy, and Saudi Arabia is a potential partner, even though there is no significant economic cooperation post-conflict. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia share a vested interest in regional security to promote economic development because Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing significant transformation, necessitating the maintenance of socio-economic stability and resilience through the diversification of its oil-dependent economy and the exploration of new avenues for regional collaboration, and Iran is grappling with a complex and precarious situation, characterized by diminishing financial resources and fragile social cohesion (Custers & Mirjam, 2024). Thus, this scenario has not happened because both countries have progressively implemented the normalization process, such as reopening Iran's embassy in Saudi Arabia. Besides, the normalization is beneficial for Riyadh and Iran's economies and national interests.

Saudi Arabia and Iran Non-Cooperative Behaviors

The uncertainty of other player' option makes them both choose hunting hare (10, 10) because choosing stag is risky if they are all not confident with the prospect of cooperation. Even though the recent relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran is positive, the president-elect Donald Trump may determine the situation in Middle East. In this research, there are several reasons why they are not refusing the normalization or not hunting hare. First, the normalization is a need for Riyadh and Tehran. For Riyadh, the 2030 vision is suitable to the process of normalization with Iran because the conflict will worsen the realization of that (Farouk, 2020). In facing complex precarious situation, the need to expand its partner due to US and western sanctions is crucial for Tehran. Both of these two countries have shared a vested interest in promoting economic development (Custers & Mirjam, 2024). Second, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been many years in conflict which causes negative impact for both of them such as victims and destructions. Third, they have built trust in re-opening their embassies which Iran's embassy is now available in Riyadh and Saudi Arabia's embassy is on-going process. Briefly, this option is far from Riyadh and Tehran behavior in these days because the normalization comes from their needs and progressive actions from both parties to reconcile their relations.

Based on the analysis above, the recent normalization of relations between Riyadh and Tehran is driven by a combination of political necessity and economic strategy, as both nations seek to stabilize their regional influence and enhance economic cooperation amidst external pressures and sanctions and also overcome the detrimental effects of their prolonged conflict, which both countries believe works for their national interests (see Figure 1). This shift towards diplomatic relations is essential for fostering economic development and ensuring socio-economic resilience in the face of external challenges. It does not only aim to reduce historical tensions but also aligns with broader geopolitical interests, particularly in the context of their potential roles within the BRICS framework. In these days, these two countries decided to re-establish ties and reopen embassies seven years after their relations were cut and decided to restart diplomatic ties (Motamedi, 2023; Wintour, 2023). Besides, Iran attended an extraordinary joint Islamic-Arab summit in Saudi Arabia after a long-time rivalry (DW, 2023). In fact, Riyadh's 2030 vision is more significant than confrontation and conflict with Iran. For Iran, the normalization process opens a new hope for economic interest amid US and allies' sanctions. Thus, the first scenario, "Riyadh and Teheran's cooperative behaviors," is rational scenario for these two countries.

However, this normalization process is dynamic under both the previous and recent Trump administrations. During his four-year tenure, Trump developed a close relationship with Saudi Arabia while opposing the Iranian regime by withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA (NBC News, 2020). During his first term, the US recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, reversing over seventy years of American foreign policy and launching a plan to transfer the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to that city (Landler, 2017). In these days, the normalization of these two countries has faced challenges because the Trump administration has made a deal with Saudi Arabia. Under that deal, Saudi Arabia committed to invest \$20 billion in the US artificial intelligence industry in exchange for Washington giving Riyadh state-of-the-art warfighting equipment (Kieran, 2025). Furthermore, Trump has played a crucial role in the Israel and Hamas-Palestine conflict by supporting Israel with his policy. These conditions challenge the Saudi Arabia and Iran normalization process because Saudi Arabia's deal with the US will make this country controlled by the US, even though both countries can play a hedging strategy in this dilemmatic position.

Figure 1. Stag-hunt Payoff

		Iran	
		Stag	Hare
Saudi Arabia	Hare	20, 20	0, 10
	Stag	10, 0	10, 10

Source: Author

D. Conclusion

The conflict between Riyadh and Tehran is deep due to ideological differences, geopolitical rivalries, and proxy conflicts. However, in these days, diplomatic efforts have shown a probable shift towards improved relations. Brokered by China, Riyadh and Tehran pledged in 2023 to restore their diplomatic ties after they had been severed in 2016. The new in their relations is a correction or readjustment of the traditionally adversarial nature of their relations, impelled by the exhaustion from perpetual political and security conflicts. The communication and reopening of embassies seek to reduce regional tensions and begin to break an argumentatively complex interplay of foreign influences, especially by the US and Israel. This normalization is viewed as a breakthrough for Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 while simultaneously providing Iran with a much-needed platform to circumvent Western sanctions. In his second term, the progress of normalization has become more complicated. Moreover, in his previous term, the US significantly made a clear support and policy for Saudi Arabia and ignored Iran for negotiation (JCPOA). In fact, this research advances regional studies by demonstrating the purposeful alignment between two regional powers as they adapt to changing worldwide alliances, which shows how Middle Eastern states are able to develop independent security control outside Western influence, even though challenges remain ahead. During Trump's administration, Riyadh and Tehran better play a hedging strategy because the conflict between these two countries worsens their own interest. Furthermore, this research opens the path for future researchers to explore the concrete strategy on how to strengthen the relations between these two countries amid the influence of great powers. Overall, the process of normalization between these two countries is driven by the trust of both countries in achieving

their security and economic interest, even though the upcoming progress of it is yet uncertain after the 2024 US election.

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