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The Saudi Arabian-Iranian Relations and the Security

Dilemma

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Υπεύθυνη Δήλωση

Δηλώνω ρητά και ανεπιφύλακτα ότι η διπλωματική εργασία που σας καταθέτω αποτελεί προϊόν δικής μου πνευματικής προσπάθειας, δεν παραβιάζει τα δικαιώματα τρίτων μερών και ακολουθεί τα διεθνώς αναγνωρισμένα πρότυπα επιστημονικής συγγραφής, τηρώντας πιστά την ακαδημαϊκή δεοντολογία. Οι απόψεις που εκφράζονται αποτελούν αποκλειστικά ευθύνη του/ης συγγραφέα/ως και ο/η επιβλέπων/ουσα, οι εξεταστές, το Τμήμα και το Πανεπιστήμιο Πελοποννήσου δεν υιοθετούν κατ' ανάγκη τις εκφραζόμενες απόψεις ούτε φέρουν οποιαδήποτε ευθύνη για τυχόν λάθη και παραλείψεις.

TABLE OF CONTEXTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

USA: United States of America

NGOs: Non-Governmental Organizations

IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

UAE: United Arab Emirates

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

IR: International Relations

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa

UAVs: Unmanned Aerial Vehicle

MbS: Mohammed bin Salman

ABSTRACT

After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been hostile. Both their conflicted geopolitical interests and sectarianism have triggered this very hostility. The two states are used to playing a "balance of power game", which may easily lead them to an escalation of the conflict. More particularly, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been competing with each other to expand their spheres of influence either in the Gulf region or in the wider Middle East and North Africa. So far, Saudi Arabia and Iran have participated in proxy wars in the region. Nevertheless, nowadays, this competition has been moderated due to negotiations taking place after a Chinese initiative. In the current assignment, we will examine the developments of their relations from the Iranian Revolution (1979) up to the signing of the "Joint Trilateral Cooperation Agreement" (2023). Based on the theoretical approach of realism, we will try to answer the question whether there is a security dilemma between the two states. After thorough analysis, we will conclude that there is actually a security dilemma between them which has, nowadays, been moderated after a Chinese initiative.

1. INTRODUCTION

The "Joint Trilateral Cooperation Agreement" signed by Iran, Saudi Arabia and China, in 2023, has undoubtedly attracted the interest of the whole international community. China achieved to promote dialogue and cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have been competing with each other since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This competition was over their domination in the Gulf and in the wider Middle East region and has been proved by their participation in proxy wars in the area. Furthermore, in this conflict a sectarian element is present as well, that is to say, a conflict between "Sunni and Shia Islam".

The goal of the current assignment is to examine if there is a security dilemma between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the following lines, we will try to answer questions such as: How is a security dilemma defined? How have the Saudi Arabian-Iranian relations evolved? Is there any security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran? Which role does China play?

As far as the methodology to be followed is concerned, we will go through a qualitative analysis of data, as they arise from primary and secondary sources. More specifically, we will emphasize on historical data in order to examine the development of Saudi Arabian-Iranian relations. Additionally, we will present a comparative analysis concerning the power of Saudi Arabia and the power of Iran, taking into account their geography, their military forces, as well as their alliances. Last but not least, in order to understand their relations, we will be based on the theoretical approach of realism. Certainly, there is a sectarian element in this relation, based on the Sunni Arab and Shia Iranian conflict, which may represent an element of a constructivist point of view. Nevertheless, their conflict is mainly geopolitical. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, "security" plays an important role for the two Gulf states, which interpret it in a realistic point of view, in terms of a "zero-sum" game. To be more specific, the fact that the two states have conflicted interests has gradually led them to trying to increase their power not only by enhancing their military forces but also by reinforcing their alliances with the Great Powers.

In the following lines, we will uphold the position that there is a security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia is a status quo state whereas Iran

is a revisionist state. Undoubtedly, the "Joint Trilateral Cooperation Agreement" may moderate their security dilemma but it cannot eliminate it altogether.

Concerning the structure to be followed, in the first section, we will explain the theoretical approach of realism and we will juxtapose it with the main elements of liberalism and constructivism. In the second section, we will present the development of Saudi Arabian-Iranian relations, whereas, in the third one, we will examine if there is a security dilemma between the two states. Additionally, in the fourth section we will refer to the role of China. Lastly, in the fifth section, we will come to conclusions.

2. REALISM
2.1 Classical Realism

The theoretical approach of realism is a theory of survival (Wight, 1960, p. 48). Classical realists adopt a rather pessimistic point of view as for the relations among people and among states (Kouskouvelis, 2004, p. 63). They believe that conflict is deeply rooted from the beginning in relations among states. This very point of view is further strengthen by the fact that the struggles of power and the wars are a dominant feature, in the international system (Grieco, Ikenberry, & Mastanduno, 2015, p. 72). On the other side of the coin though, the theoretical approach of liberalism adopts an optimistic point of view and supports that international relations could be based on cooperation among states and technological, cultural and financial progress, in general (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, p. 164).

According to classical realist Hobbes, we should assume that people used to live in a "state of nature", where there were neither sovereign states nor nations. As a result, people used to be against one another. They felt insecure concerning their safety and their future, living under a state of fear. People, in order to reduce hostility and increase safety, decided to cooperate with each other and as a result, states were created. The interests of each state are not common, resulting, thus, in the cultivation of fear and insecurity. This insecurity creates a situation which is called "security dilemma". That is to say, a situation in which state A feels insecure, due to the fact that state B in an effort to increase its security, it also increases its military and financial potentials (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, pp. 118-120). This "security dilemma" is to be examined more thoroughly, further on.

In addition, realists observe that there is no single higher authority to rule the states worldwide, that is to say anarchy is a major characteristic in the international system (Grieco, Ikenberry, & Mastanduno, 2015, p. 72). In this anarchical international system, the primary concerns of a state should be both the security and the survival of itself (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, p. 110). States are themselves responsible to provide them with protection and the ace up their sleeve is power. The more powerful a state is, the more interests are served. Should they manage to be powerful, they prevail. Otherwise, they are submitted to the stronger. Needless to say, it is not enough for a state to ensure its resources, in order to be regarded as powerful. The willingness to use them and their credibility are significant criteria (Kaufman, 2022, p. 44).

States who are the main actors in the international system, act reasonably. That is to say, they are able to estimate the benefits and losses in each case, to avoid potential risks and to take full advantage of the opportunities. In this context, states not only cooperate with each other, but also they make alliances, in order to maximize their power or to protect themselves (Grieco, Ikenberry, & Mastanduno, 2015, pp. 72-75). However, we should point that alliances may last as long as the interests of the states are common. Consequently, allied states may be transformed to opponents when their interests are in conflict. Undoubtedly, peace and cooperation may be temporary and International Law, despite being a creation of states, is to be followed as long as the states want to comply with it and more specifically, as long as it serves the interests of Great Powers (Kouskouvelis, 2004, p. 63).

As for liberalists, they believe that the first priority of the states is the freedom and wellness of their citizens. International Law and cooperation are the key elements to achieve these goals. Further on, besides states, people, NGOs and International Organizations are considered to be the main actors in the international system, who can promote peace and cooperation among states. Liberalists believe that, nowadays, the states are dependent on each other. Actually, in the past, they used to try to increase their military power and their territory, but, today, they try to improve their economy and increase their industrial power as well as their commercial relations. These goals may lead states to cooperating with each other (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, pp. 167-180).

A further point to mention is that, according to political scientist Charles Kegley, the primary obligation of each state is to promote its national interest (Kegley & Wittkopf, 1998, p. 28). Realists, such as Morgenthau, consider national interest to be defined by power whereas Barry Hughes supports that the core interest of a state is to preserve its population, territorial boundaries, government and, in a general sense, its sovereignty. Moreover, Hughes believes that security may be accomplished using military and financial terms as well as the values of the state (Kaufman, 2022, p. 36). Emphasizing on military terms, the increase of military equipment as well as the military expenditure are basic elements of "Realpolitik", that is to say "the policy of power". This emphasis on arms is based on the Roman author, Publius Flavius' quotation "quid desiderat pacem preparet bellum" or "si vis pacem para bellum" which

means "everyone who desires peace, should be prepared for war" (Heraclides, 2015, p. 84).

Liberalists also emphasize on national interest, power and political, financial, territorial etc. gains but they believe that cooperation and not military expenditure is the key element to achieve this. To be more specific, they support that states have certain common interests and the only way to pursue them is cooperation. Last but not least, liberalists reject the opinion that when state A increases its power and gains, may lead to the fact that state B faces a decrease in its power and gains (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, pp. 196-197).

2.2 Structural Realism

"Structural realism" or "neorealism" is the continuation of realism. Neorealists agreed on the Realists' pessimistic point of view of IR as well as on the inherent competition among the states. The main difference between those two schools of thought is that realists emphasize on states actors whereas neorealists emphasize on the structure of the international system. Neorealists also underline the importance of power and its distribution in international politics. To be more specific, they believe that power shifts among states and thus, states always try to balance that distribution of power (Kaufman, 2022, p. 53). Structural realists can be offensive or defensive. Offensive realists, such as Mearsheimer, support that the states always try to maximize their power and minimize their losses (Grieco, Ikenberry, & Mastanduno, 2015, p. 72). On the other hand, defensive realists, such as Waltz, support that states try to maximize their security (Baylis & Smith, 2007, p. 240).

2.2.1 Constructivism

The theoretical approach of Constructivism, born in the 1980's, was an answer to neorealism and neoliberalism and recognizes the significance of the structure of the system. Nevertheless, constructivists believe that the agency of the states is as important or even more important than structure is. According to constructivists, structures are not necessarily defined only in terms of military power—as neorealists support—but are also defined by ideas, rules, and norms. Moreover, they support that structures, such as the international community, create entities, such as states, and these entities could also create or transform these structures, depending on the way they interact (Baylis & Smith, 2007, pp. 335-338).

Additionally, constructivists emphasize on intersubjective views of people. That is to say, emphasis is placed on the way people view themselves as a nation, view their state as an independent entity and their history and religion in relation to others. Constructivists examine not only these differences among people but also, the way that people try to maintain their relations despite their differences. Finally, they support that state sovereignty, international organizations, NGOs as well as commercial ties may help people cooperate with each other (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, pp. 373-374). Actually, the very fact that constructivism focuses on different identities is the main reason why it is presented in the current assignment.

2.3 Power

As it has already been mentioned, realists concentrated their interest on the concept of power. According to Machiavelli, power and guile are considered to be indispensable for a successful foreign policy. A leader needs to be ingenious in order to perceive a threat in time or to seize an opportunity should it arise and take full advantage in both cases (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, pp. 116-117). As far as the military power is concerned, Mearsheimer, a contemporary realist supports that both the nature and the distribution of military power constitute the key elements of peace or war (Jackson & Sorensen, 2006, p. 141).

"Power" is a controversial concept, on the grounds that academics have not concluded in a common definition. Undoubtedly, they all agree that power is constantly changing. By and large, power is the ability to influence the outcome of the events. Moreover, it is the ability of states to influence the behavior of other states. More specifically, the ability of state A to oblige state B to do something -which it would not have done otherwise- or to dissuade it from doing something –which it would have done otherwise- (Heywood, 2013, pp. 364-368).

In terms of international politics and diplomacy, power is regarded as the goal of a state. In addition, it is a way to estimate the control of a state over resources, capabilities, events or other actors. Last but not least, power is a status which some states have whereas some others do not and they try to obtain. The most powerful states are defined as regional powers, great powers or hegemons (Heraclides, 2015, p. 80). Their power is defined not only by military and financial factors but also by their

population, geography, natural resources as well as their per capita income which are considered to be very important for a state (Heywood, 2013, p. 366).

Moreover, according to constructivists, power is projected not only in military and economic terms but also through ideas and identities. Thus, ideas and identities may define power when states are forced to change their behavior in favor of or against a state over some other state (Baylis & Smith, 2007, p. 345).

The power of a state is always compared with the power of another state. There are two sides to this coin. Firstly, the power of a state can be seen as relative to the power of other state(s) in absolute terms. That is to say, state A may be more powerful than state B and at the same time, it may be less powerful than state C. Secondly, the power of a state can be relative in terms of commensurability and proportion. A most illuminating example is that, if a state is a nuclear power and it has to fight against terrorists or rebels, the power of nuclear weapons proves to be useless. A further point is that power can be defined as "hard" and "soft" power. Concerning the former, it is presented by military terms, by violence or by threats of using violence. As for the latter, it is based on the cooperation between two states, when state A tries to influence state B by promoting its culture, without using military power (Heywood, 2013, pp. 364-371). It is noteworthy that Nye, who coined the term of "soft power", supports that, states should combine hard and soft power, in order to achieve the optimum result. This is what we call "smart power" (Nye, 2005, p. 73).

2.3.1 The Balance of Power

The "balance of power" is the result of the anarchy which dominates in the international system. The concept of balance of power is originally described by Thucydides –although he did not use this phrase. More specifically, the cause of the Peloponnesian War was the increase of power of Athens which instilled fear into Sparta. This shift in the balance of power led to a security dilemma and unavoidably to a war in order to restore the previous balance of power (Heraclides, 2015, p. 81).

Emer de Vattel defines the balance of power "as a condition in which no state is dominant so that it could enforce the law on other states". It is worth mentioning that Vattel also supports that a potential breach in the balance of power could constitute an exception to the rule of nonintervention. The supporters of the balance of power believe that this balance effectively ensures peace and stability, protects the states and promotes

their security and their survival. Moreover, they believe that the balance of power can restrict the anarchy in the international system despite the fact that it cannot eliminate war whatsoever. On the contrary, several states have often used war so as to restore or change the balance of power (Heraclides, 2015, pp. 81-82).

2.3.2 Restoring Balance of Power

As a matter of fact, restoring balance of power is a defensive strategy, a balancing strategy, which means that state A increases its power in order to balance the power of state B and to achieve once again the previous balance of power. Balancing strategy is one of the most genial tactics in the international relations. Assuming that two states have the same power, they would not fight each other, owing to the fact that victory would be doubtful and the losses would be more than the benefits (Heraclides, 2015, p. 83).

Balancing strategy can be defined as internal or external. On the one hand, "internal balancing" or "reinforcement" is the most successful way to survive in an anarchical international system which is based on self-help. Internal balancing means that a state tries to upgrade its defensive skills and improve its socioeconomic conditions. These two key factors can also define the defensive expenditure. On the other hand, "external balancing" means that a state cooperates with the other states and makes alliances in order to have more resources at its disposal so as to restore balance and upgrading of its power. Needless to say, internal and external balancing can also be combined (Kouskouvelis, 2004, pp. 213-214).

Walt enriched the theory of balancing strategy, by supporting that the states try to balance against threats. According to Walt, threats are defined in terms of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability and aggressiveness of its intentions. Additionally, we may have an imbalance of threat when state A or coalition, being the most threatening one is considered to be much more dangerous than state B or coalition, being the second most threatening state. A state can be considered to be a threat for another state in terms of financial, cultural as well as ideological reasons. The most illuminating example is the coalition among communist Soviet Union and capitalistic Western countries against Nazi Germany. In this case, Nazi Germany constitutes a greater threat than the different ideologies between Soviet Union and Western countries (Walt, 1987, p. 265).

2.4 Security Dilemma

As it has already been mentioned, security –and by extension, safety and protection of the population- was, is and will always be the most vital interest of the states. The fear that security is threatened, inevitably leads to the cultivation of the security dilemma. Most of the times, the number and the kind of aircrafts and tanks of a country make no difference whereas, the country which is considered to be stronger (capability) and willing to use its weapons (credibility) is what really matters. It is obvious, then, that the way of perception of the situation is the factor which cultivates the security dilemma and which plays a significant role in analyzing international relations (Kaufman, 2022, pp. 36-39).

It is impressive that the concept of "security dilemma" has engaged not only the supporters of the approach of realism but also the supporters of liberalism and constructivism. Firstly, liberalists support that the role of democratic institutions is to weaken the security dilemma, preserving peace. Secondly, constructivists support the idea that the security dilemma between two states is created due to their different identities leading them to reacting differently. As far as the opinions of defensive realists are concerned, they believe that cooperation among states is, more or less, based on the fear instilled by the security dilemma. On the other side of the coin though, offensive realists support that war is the inevitable consequence of the security dilemma. Events such as the beginning and the end of the Cold War as well as the conflict between the hegemon power of the United States of America and the rising China, are also explained by the concept of the security dilemma (Tang, 2009, pp. 588-589).

The security dilemma which is an inherent characteristic of international relations, is triggered by anarchy. The security dilemma is created when state A, in order to increase its security, tries to improve its military, financial and international status. This effort provokes insecurity to state B, which also tries to improve its status, due to the fact that it feels threatened by state A. At the same time, state A feels insecure and threatened by state B (Koliopoulos, 2008, p. 30). As a result, most of the times, the security dilemma leads the two states to an uncontrollable arm race. That is to say, the two countries reinforce their military power by obtaining more and more weapon systems and by improving their military education. The two possible consequences of an arm race are the war or the balance of power –and the maintenance of peace, by

extension (Heywood, 2013, p. 452). The worst case scenario is when a security dilemma leads to a war, which means that the two states having mutual fears of an imminent war, which may never have existed, come to eventually bring about this exact initial fear (Herz, 1962, p. 241).

In addition, conventional military power is not considered to be absolute, but relative. That is to say, the amount of security provided by a certain military force depends on what military force other states have. The main principle of the security dilemma is a "zero-sum game", meaning that when state A gets certain gains, then state B faces corresponding losses. Security dilemmas exist due to the fact that military equipment may be used for both offensive and defensive purposes. Thus, it is rather very difficult for a state to show its defensive intentions when acquiring weapons or changing force postures. As a result, other states could not be certain concerning the character of these purposes, that is whether they are defensive or offensive. This very uncertainty combined with losses in power, suspicious and fears may end up to war (Schweller, 2010, pp. 289-290).

There is another factor that may cause the security dilemma, being the fact that states may be benign today but malign in the future. Consequently, states should have the worst case scenario in mind, which in turn, may lead to serious competition. Finally, the costs and risks entailed in a cooperative policy may not be defined as greater or fewer than those entailed in a competitive policy (Jervis, 2011, p. 417).

Robert Jervis, an expert analyst on the security dilemma, claims that security dilemma is structural and is based both on physical factors such as geography and technology and on psychological factors such as misperceptions (Tang, 2009, p. 592). Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the concept of the security dilemma ceases to apply when one state effortlessly threatens another state, because of the fact that the threat is real and not imaginable. Thus, security dilemma exists solely between defensive realist states (Tang, 2009, p. 604).

3. THE SAUDI ARABIAN- IRANIAN RELATIONS FROM 1979-2022

Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Saudi- Iranian relations could be characterized as Cold War-like relations, on the grounds that they do not confront each other on militarily terms, but they compete each other in the territories of other weak states of the area, such as Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain (Gause, 2014, p. 3). In these proxy wars[1], Shia Iran seems to be at a more advantageous position than Sunni Saudi Arabia. To be more specific, since 2003, Iran has been maintaining good relations with the Iraqi government as well as the Kurdish Regional Government and has been training Iraqi militias (Gause, 2017, p. 672). Moreover, Iran has created "the Axis of Resistance" against Israel. This axis begins from Iran, passes across Shia-led government in Iraq and Assad's Syria and finally, reaches Lebanon, where Shia Hezbollah fights against Israel (Gause, 2014, p. 6). Last but not least, the insurgency of Houthis against the Sunni government in Yemen is considered to be a success as far as the influence of Iran is concerned (Gause, 2017, p. 672).

Actually, the competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has a sectarian element of a "Sunni versus Shia" fight[2]. Nevertheless, it is a game of balancing of power which has its roots in the Iranian Revolution, in 1979, when Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's monarchy was overthrown and a theocratic state, the Islamic Republic of Iran, was then established (Heiden & Krijger, 2018, p. 13). Following that, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader of Iran, supported that the revolution should be further exported in the whole "Ummah" – the Muslim community including both Sunni and Shia. The holy places of Mecca and Medina, which belong to Saudi Arabia would be administered by Ummah. Khomeini was against monarchy and called for the overthrow of the House of Saud (Gause, 2017, p. 673). As a result, King Saud, who felt that his monarchy was threatened, denounced the Shia faith and regarded Shias as apostates of Islam. Moreover, Khomeini expressed an anti-American rhetoric and tried to finish the American influence in the region of the Gulf. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia

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[1] A "proxy war" is when a great power incites an armed conflict between states or within the territory of a state without being directly involved in it (Oxford Language Dictionary, 2023).
[2] The major conflict between the Sunnis and Shias was over the successor of Prophet Muhammad. On the one hand, Shias believed that Ali –cousin of Prophet Muhammad- and his relatives should succeed Muhammad, whereas, on the other hand, Sunnis believed that the successor should be elected. Moreover, the imams do not play such an important role in Sunnism as in Shiism (Byman, 2014, p. 83).

considered the American presence there to be vital for the security in the Gulf (Heiden & Krijger, 2018, p. 13).

Right after the Iranian Revolution, in 1980, Iraq decided to invade Iran with a view to preventing the Islamic Revolution from spreading to the Shia population of Iraq. The Iraq-Iran war lasted for 8 years, until 1988, when Iran agreed to a cease-fire. In this war, Saudi Arabia supported Iraq owing to the fact that the Iraqi government was Sunni -whereas the majority of the Iraqi population was Shia. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was afraid that the Revolution might be spreading in its own territory. This very fear and insecurity was intensified when Iraq invaded Kuwait and as a result, Saudi Arabia decided to turn to the USA for help. Consequently, the US presence in the Gulf increased. The alliance between the USA and Saudi Arabia, combined with the military expenditure of Saudi Arabia, intensified the insecurity of Iran, increasing, thus, the security dilemma between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Mabon, 2016, pp. 72-74).

Their competition was further on located in Lebanon. During the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), Saudi Arabia supported the Sunni population whereas Iran supported the Shias. It was during this war that Shia Hezbollah was born. Hezbollah is considered to be a political organization in Lebanon, but a terrorist organization for the western countries. Undoubtedly, Hezbollah is the most powerful army in Lebanon, achieving to repel the Israeli army in 1982 and in 2006. Ever since, Iran has been maintaining close ties with Hezbollah by sending them financial and military assistance through Syria. It is noteworthy that, nowadays, Hezbollah has sufficient missiles to strike against Israel, if Iran should demand it (Terrill, 2012, pp. 28-29).

A point to highlight is that Saudi Arabia played an important role as for the ending of the Lebanese civil war. To be more specific, it hosted the negotiations in its territory and it participated as a guarantor power in the Taif Accords (Kefala, 2021, p. 196). After the signing of the agreement, the pro-Saudi Lebanese Rafiq al-Hariri became the prime minister of Lebanon. Thus, Saudi Arabian influence on Lebanon was established and Saudi financial aid and investments increased (Terrill, 2012, p. 29).

In 1996, Iranian officials actively participated in training and helping Hezbollah al-Hijaz[3] members in carrying out the terrorist attack at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. A tanker truck which was carrying lots of tons of TNT used these explosives and hit near the Khobar Towers housing compound for the US Air Force in Dhahran (Matthiesen, 2010, p. 191). The casualties of this explosion were 19 US soldiers and the injured ones were hundreds. Following the attack, the Saudi government arrested hundreds of Islamists, both Sunni and Shia (Matthiesen, 2010, p. 191).

Furthermore, in the region of Levant, the two states have also been involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia support the Palestinian rights and are opposed to Israeli practices against Palestinians. As far as the conflict between the two Palestinian sides is concerned, Saudi Arabia has been offering financial aid to Palestinian Authority, whereas Iran used to support the Hamas, on the grounds that Iran regarded it as the driving force of a new Islamic revolution (Terrill, 2012, pp. 25-26). Nevertheless, Iran has stopped providing the Hamas with money and weapons since 2012, when the Syrian civil war broke out and the Hamas did not support the Assad's regime, as Iran did. Nowadays, their relations have been improving and the meeting of the Hamas Political Chief, Ismail Haniyeh, and the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei is a solid proof of it. (Iran International Editors, 2023).

In 2003, the USA invaded Iraq and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. These events were regarded as a "God-sent" initiative by the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, due to the fact that the new Iraqi government, under the leadership of Nouri al- Maliki, was a Shia one (Rezaei, 2019, pp. 164-165). Moreover, in Iraq, Iran has supported Shia military organizations such as Asaib al Haq and Kataib Hezbollah. These organizations have conducted military and terrorist strikes against the American troops and the Iraqi opposition. Iran has equipped these groups with weapons such as rocket assisted exploding projectiles (Terrill, 2012, p. 36).

On the other side of the coin, though, the role of Saudi Arabia in Iraq was rather clandestine and informal. Saudi Arabian senior religious figures supported one side in the Iraqi civil war and pro-Saudi societal actors supplied "Jihadi tourists" with arms

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[3] Hezbollah al-Hijaz was a radical Saudi Shia Opposition Group based in the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia. The organization which was established in 1987 had close ties with Iran and is responsible for numerous terrorist attacks (Matthiesen, 2010, p. 179).

and money and indirectly incited them to fight and give their lives in Iraq (Dodge, 2018, p. 14). However, Saudi Arabia never supported the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

In 2011, the Arab Spring which broke out in the Middle East, led Syria to a civil war which has been waging up to the present day. Despite the fact that, in the beginning of the war, the sectarian element did not play a significant role, as time went by, however, we observe that the opposition was mainly formed by Sunni groups –armed or not (Gause, 2014, pp. 7-10).

On the one hand, Iran has always supported Assad's regime owing to the fact that in the event that the regime should change, the "Axis of Resistance" would dissolve. Thus, Iran has not only provided Syria with military equipment but also with the latest intelligence monitoring technologies and telecommunication. In addition, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps[4] has trained Syrian fighters as well as recruiting foreign fighters to fight in Syrian territory (Mirza, Abbas, & Qaisrani, 2021, pp. 5-6).

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia in order to moderate the Iranian influence in Syrian civil war, has sent military and financial aid to the Sunni groups who fought against Alawi[5] regime of Assad. We should point out that, originally, Saudi Arabia supported the Free Syrian Army which was the least sectarian of the rebel groups. After seeing that the FSA was insufficient, Saudi Arabia has supported extremist Salafi fighting groups, such as the Islamic Front. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has denied supporting al- Nursa and ISIS (Gause, 2014, pp. 7-10).

As far as the situation in Bahrain is concerned, although the majority of the population is Shia, the government is Sunni. The Sunni government is actually the key to keeping Bahrain resisting the Iranian influence. Thus, in 2011, when the Arab Spring broke out in Bahrain, Iran supported the Shia population. This fact increased the security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran and led the Kingdom to intervening in the war, by sending fighters and military equipment to Bahraini government, with the excuse that they wanted to protect the country from the Iranian threat. It is worth

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[4] The IRGC was created after the Iranian Revolution (1979), in order to protect the Islamic regime. Nowadays, it is one of the major paramilitary groups in the Middle East, which has provided aid to fighters in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, etc. The IRGC exerts a great influence in domestic politics (CFR.org Editors, 2023).
[5] Alawism is a branch of Shiism and the majority of its believers are found in Syria. Alawis seceded from Shia, thus, they are not recognized as Muslims (Kefala, 2021, p. 78).

mentioning that the Saudis wanted the status quo in Bahrain to remain the same, since Bahrain is an island with a geostrategic significance, close to Saudi Arabia. In case Bahrain had a Shia government, Iran would dominate in the Gulf and threat the oil shipment (Mirza, Abbas, & Qaisrani, 2021, pp. 1-5).

The Saudi-Iranian competition for influence is also apparent in the Yemen civil war, which officially began in 2014 and continues up to the present day. The most important events that led Yemen to a civil war was President Saleh's resignation and Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's succesion, in 2011. Three years later, in 2014, Shia Houthis rebels occupied the capital Saana and the northern part of the country (AlJazeera, 2023).

In this war, Iran supports the Zaidi Shia Houthis rebels and Saudi Arabia supports the Hadi government. Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, wants Yemen to be weak considering this vital for its security. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is afraid that should Yemen faces a ruined economy, Yemeni immigrants will enter Saudi Arabia's territory. For this reason, Saudi Arabia frequently offers financial aid to Yemen (Salisbury, 2015, pp. 3-4).

In 2015, Saudi Arabia and the GCC launched the "Operation Decisive Storm" with air strikes against Houthis, who were identified as terrorists (Mabon, 2023, pp. 232-233). During this operation, a hot incident took place, during which a Saudi Arabian fighter F-15 flow so close to the Iranian plane that, amazingly enough, the pilots could see each other faces. There was, therefore, the imminent threat of an escalation. It was believed that, if an accident had happened then, Iran would have had no other choice but to respond (Fraihat, 2020, p. 97).

In 2019, Houthis performed a missile attack on the Khurais oilfield and Abqaiq refinery, in Saudi Arabian ground. There were indications of Iranian involvement and fears of an escalation (Mabon, 2023, p. 74). A point worth mentioning is that both Saudi Arabia and USA accuse Iran of sending weapons to Houthis. Actually, in 2022, a UN report stated that Houthis possess Iranian-made ballistic missiles but it is unknown if Iran or a third party has supplied Houthis with them (Heiden & Krijger, 2018, p. 14). Moreover, on March 2023, the USA confiscated weapons which were transported illegally from Iran to Yemen by boat, through the Gulf. According to American Attorney General, Merrick Garland, this illegal operation was organized and executed

by the IRGC, but the Iranian government denied its involvement. Nevertheless, Iran, generally, admits that it has offered financial aid to Houthis rebels (Hagedorn, 2023).

Another issue to be mentioned is the Iranian nuclear program. In 2015, the American president Barak Obama, trying to control the Iranian nuclear activities[6], initiated discussions which led to the adoption of the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action". This plan which was signed by Iran and the P5+1 (the USA, UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) recognized Iran the right to develop a nuclear program, provided that it uses it exclusively for peaceful purposes. Moreover, the plan highlights the importance of non-proliferation of the nuclear weapons. Iran was committed to refraining from developing heavy-water-moderated reactors for a period of 15 years, and to accepting the fact that its uranium enrichment would be in an amount that it could not construct a nuclear bomb (Congressional Research Service, 2019, pp. 1-3).

Concerning Saudi Arabia, it was disappointed with the agreement for a number of reasons. First of all, Saudi Arabia considered that it should have participated in the negotiations, on the grounds that it shares borders with Iran and being its rival, its security is threatened. Moreover, Saudi Arabia believed that Iran, as a nuclear power, could define the balance in the Gulf. Last but not least, the Saudis who regarded America as their ally against Iran, believed that the USA has abandoned them (Fraihat, 2020, pp. 53-54).

The relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran became worsened, in 2016, when Saudis executed the Saudi Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, having accused him of terrorism. After the execution, Iranians protested outside the Saudi embassy in Tehran with the slogan "Death to Saud". Protesters used Molotov, burnt the embassy and a lot of people were wounded. Consequently, Saudi Arabia decided to severe diplomatic relations with Iran and to stop air traffic and trade links (Mabon, 2023, p. 9).

In 2018, the new American President Donald Trump began the "maximum pressing campaign" against Iran. This campaign included the American withdrawal from the JCPOA and the imposition of 1.500 new sanctions to Iran. Saudi Arabia, the

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[6] The Iranian nuclear program started in 1957, when Iran and the USA were still allies (Congressional Research Service, 2019, p. 1).

United Arab Emirates as well as Bahrain supported this campaign, feeling relieved with the election of Trump. (Babar & Fatima, 2022, p. 165)

Over the recent years, since the Abraham Accords[7] was signed in 2020, Bahrain and the UAE have cooperated closely with Israel on security issues. The most significant advantage is that they are benefited by Israeli intelligence and spying software. Taking into consideration that Israeli-Iranian relations have been deteriorating since the Iranian Revolution, we may conclude that Bahrain, UAE, and by extension Saudi Arabia, regard Israel as an important ally against Iran (Mabon, 2023, p. 144).

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[7] The Abraham Accords are normalization agreements signed between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan with the mediation of the USA (US Department of Sate).

4. IS THERE ANY SECURITY DILEMMA BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN?

Security is the main issue which has caused the major conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both countries have been facing a clash of security needs and a perceived "encirclement", something which intensifies their conflict. On the one hand, the USA and Israel are considered to be a constant threat by Iran, which also feels encircled by American military forces based in Turkey as well as in the Gulf states including Saudi Arabia. As a result, Iran reacted by gaining ground in spreading its influence in Arab countries. Consequently, Saudi Arabia feels encircled since it is Iran's major opponent in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. It is no wonder that both countries are entrapped in this security dilemma and instead of trying to resolve it in peaceful ways, they have been following strategies of escalation (Fraihat, 2020, p. 4).

In the following lines, we will examine the major factors which act on their security dilemma, such as the geography of the two countries and their relations with other countries. Moreover, social, sectarian and financial factors as well as their military expenditures exacerbate their security dilemma and may lead to a further escalation of the conflict.

4.1 Geography, Population and Economy

First of all, as far as Iran is concerned, it could be characterized as a fortress, on the grounds that it is surrounded by mountains. There is a significant feature in the morphology of Iran that is two huge salt deserts. Right beneath the salt there is mud where one can easily sink or even drown (Marshall, 2021, pp. 62-63). According to Central Intelligence Agency, the Iranian population is estimated to be totally 87.590.873 people and the rate of its growth is estimated to be 0,93% (CIA, 2023). The majority of the Iranian population are Persians but there are significant minorities such as the Kurds, the Turkmen, the Azeri, the Arabs and the Armenians (Marshall, 2021, pp. 65-66). However, the sentiment of national unity and national identity is dominant in the Iranian population, having its roots in the long Persian history and religion. Actually, the 8-year war and resistance against Iraq is exactly the case of the national unity of the Iranian population.

On the other hand, the majority of Saudi Arabian territory is covered by desert and there are no rivers (Marshall, 2021, p. 105). Saudi population is smaller than Iranian

population –only 35.939.806- but the rate of population growth is bigger -1,65%. 90% of the population are Arabs and the rest 10% are Afro-Asians (CIA, 2023). Last but not least, there is a major Shia minority in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia which has had close ties with Iran. This minority which is regarded as a threat by Saudi Arabia, particularly after the events of 2016, increases the security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Matthiesen, 2010).

The most important advantage of Saudi Arabia over the other Muslim countries is that both the Holy Mosques in Mecca –where Muhammed was born- and Medina –where Muhammed was buried- are in its territory. Thus, Saudi Arabia has a great deal of influence on the whole Muslim world. This very influence is questioned by Iran which supports a "multilateral consortium" of Islamic peoples, trying to become the leader of the Muslim world (Mirza, Abbas, & Qaisrani, 2021, p. 3). In any case, the fact that Iran is the oldest state in the Gulf renders it to have expansionistic and imperial tendencies. Undoubtedly, the Iranian perception of itself as a state exacerbates the security dilemma between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Fraihat, 2020, p. 78).

Secondly, regarding the Iranian economy, it is the fourth country in crude oil reserves and the second in natural gas reserves. More specifically, Iran produces 3.450.300 barrels per day and its estimated reserves are 208,6 billion barrels. As far as natural gas is concerned, it is noteworthy that Iranian reserves reach 33.987.296.000.000 cubic meters. Thus, Iran is able not only to consume but also to export its natural gas. For instance, in 2019, Iran produced 237.561.415.000 cubic meters, consumed 220.704.282.000 cubic meters and exported the rest of it (CIA, Iran, 2023).

Nevertheless, Iranian economy is plagued by high inflation, a high rate of unemployment as well as by water shortage. Western sanctions are also hindering the economic development and the oil exportation (Marshall, 2021, pp. 67-68). These sanctions which were imposed due to illegal Iranian nuclear activity, include oil and weapon embargos, limitations in tourism and trade transactions etc.

Concerning the economy of Saudi Arabia, it has always been based on oil. The Kingdom holds the first place in oil reserves, having approximately 17% -or 258,6 billion barrels- of the global oil reserves. Thus, it can produce more than 10.000.000.

barrels per day. As for natural gas, Saudi Arabia produces only as much as it needs for consumption, without importing or exporting it (CIA, 2023).

However, Mohammed bin Salman, the successor to the throne, trying to make Saudi economy independent from oil production, has established the "Vision 2030". This very plan suggests that Saudi economy should emphasize on investments and provision of services, on the grounds that the oil reserves would eventually get exhausted (Vision 2030, 2023).

4.1.1 The Arabian/Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz

Both the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz have a geostrategic significance for the whole international community, owing to the fact that it serves for the transportation of the oil from the Gulf countries to the rest of the world. Iran and Iraq have been always competing about the domination and the control of the Gulf whereas Iran and Oman have been always competing about the control of the Straits of Hormuz. Iran considers itself to be the most suitable state to control the Gulf as a "natural state" which preexisted from the other "artificial" ones, created by the Western countries in the 20th century (Mabon, 2016, pp. 75-76).

The Saudi Arabian-Iranian conflict began as a consequence of the US military presence in the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz, which has increased, after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Saudi Arabia believes that this very American presence could not only reassure the security in the Gulf but also moderate the Iranian hegemony in the Gulf. On the other hand, Iran feels threatened and insecure by the American presence in the Gulf and its alliance with the other Arab States (Mabon, 2018). Thus, Iran, trying to decrease the security dilemma, has, at times, threatened the international community to close the Straits. The consequences would be catastrophic due to the fact that the 1/5 of the oil supplies passes through the Straits of Hormuz (Marshall, 2021, p. 68). This Iranian advantage, in turn, intensifies the insecurity of Saudi Arabia.

4.2 Military Forces

On the one hand, Iranian armed forces are estimated to be around 550.000-600.000 (CIA, 2023). Iran's military power consists of the Artesh Army and the IRGC (TRT Editors, 2019). On the other hand, the fact that Saudi Arabian military forces are estimated to be half of the Iranian military forces (CIA, 2023), increases the insecurity of Saudi Arabia. This insecurity is further intensified due to the fact that Iran has also

succeeded in producing weapons of its own -particularly ballistic missiles- whereas Saudi Arabia just imports weapons (CIA, 2023). Thus, Saudi Arabia in order to both counterbalance Iran and to finance its operations in Yemen, has spent around 75 billion dollars in military expenditures, being classified 5th worldwide, in 2023. (Military Spending by Country, 2023)

Comparing the military forces of the two states, we observe that Iran has superior land and naval forces. To be more specific, Iran has 4.071 tanks and 2.630 total artillery whereas, Saudi Arabia has only 1.273 tanks and 665 total artillery. Thus, the latter, in order to counterbalance the superiority of the former, has obtained more armored vehicles, possessing now 85.140 whereas Iran has only 69.685. As for the naval forces, Iran possesses 19 submarines whereas Saudi Arabia has none (Global Firepower Editors, 2023). Additionally, Iran has fast attack crafts which can deploy missiles, 107 mm rockets, or anti-ship cruise missiles. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has old medium-range missile stocks which have been supplied from China (TRT Editors, 2019).

Saudi Arabia, trying to counterbalance the Iranian superiority in land and naval forces, emphasized on air forces. More specifically, Saudi Arabia has 897 aircrafts - 283 of them being fighter aircrafts-, whereas Iran has only 541 -196 of them being fighter aircrafts. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has 258 helicopters whereas Iran has half of them (Global Firepower Editors, 2023). A point to highlight is that Saudi Arabia bought the defensive aircrafts "Tornado" and the antiaircraft systems "Patriot" in order to counterbalance the Iranian fighter aircrafts "F-4 Phantom" and the Iranian UAVs, respectively. Obviously, Saudi Arabia tries to decrease the security dilemma with Iran by buying suitable defensive weapons to deal with the Iranian offensive weapons.

Last but not least, the most important disadvantage of Saudi Arabia is that it does not actually know how to fight. Its experience is limited to its involvement in Yemen war. In Yemen, Saudi Arabians used their air forces particularly while on land, the UAE soldiers fight by their side (TRT Editors, 2019). On the contrary, Iran has significant experience in fighting. Besides its involvement in the Syrian civil war, Iran has been fighting against Iraq for 8 years. Actually, the inexperience of Saudi Arabia and the experience of Iran increases the insecurity of Saudi Arabia. This insecurity

exacerbates the security dilemma of Saudi Arabia which tries to ensure an American involvement in case of a Saudi Arabia-Iran war.

4.2.1 Weapons of Mass Destruction

Saudi Arabia's major fear is a nuclear Iran. For the time being, Iran does not officially have nuclear weapons. However, it has uranium deposits –a key element in order to produce nuclear weapons- and uranium mills to process the uranium (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Moreover, Iran has already had a nuclear reactor as well as another one under construction (CIA, 2023). The USA support that in the case that the Iranian uranium deposits may not be sufficient for a nuclear program, they are sufficient to produce around 300 nuclear weapons (Congressional Research Service, 2019).

Both the isolation of Iran and the imposed sanctions on it, intensifies the security dilemma that Iran feels. Iran, in an effort to decrease its insecurity, tries to obtain nuclear weapons. At the same time, this Iranian effort increases the security dilemma of Saudi Arabia, as well. In 2009, Saudi Arabian king Abdullah declared that "*If they get nuclear weapons, we, in turn, will get nuclear weapons too*". Undoubtedly, a nuclear Iran could change the whole balance of power in the region, threatening the security of Saudi Arabia (Mabon, 2016).

4.3 Relations with the Other Countries

After the Iranian Revolution and the dethronement of the Shah, the relations between Iran and the USA were aggravated. The US military presence in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Turkey, Pakistan, Kuwait, Jordan, Djibouti and Israel makes Iran feel surrounded, insecure and threatened (Fraihat, 2020, p. 51).

Undoubtedly, the most important alliance of Saudi Arabia against Iran has been the USA. America makes Saudi Arabia feel safe, on the grounds that the two states have been cooperating on both military and financial issues. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia has been providing the USA with oil, whereas, on the other hand, the USA sells military equipment to Saudi Arabia. In addition, the two states have participated in common military exercises and US soldiers have trained the Saudi Arabia army (United States Department of State, 2012, p. 67).

These facts have led Iran to developing ties with Russia in order to not only moderate the influence of the USA in the Gulf but also to counterbalance the alliance between the USA and the Kingdom. Iran, trying to reduce its security dilemma with Saudi Arabia, has begun to cooperate with Russia on security issues concerning the region from the Caspian Sea to Afghanistan (Mezran & Varvelli, 2019).

Actually, Iran has supplied Russia with Iranian Shahed UAVs drones, which drones Russia has been using in its war against Ukraine[8] (Szuba, 2022). Moreover, the western countries have accused Iran of supplying Russia with missiles, bullets and weapons. Russia, in turn, has agreed to sell Russian Sukhoi aircrafts to Iran, which would help Iran increase its air defense system (Al-Monitor Editors, 2023).

On the other hand, even though Saudi Arabia condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it did not impose sanctions on Russia, as the western countries did (Cafiero, 2022). Moreover, MbS agreed with Russia to increase the oil prices from 80 dollars per barrel to 100 dollars per barrel. Consequently, Saudi Arabia managed to provide funds to its investments whereas Russia managed to finance its war against Ukraine (Psilos, 2023).

Focusing on the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia has created a strong military alliance with the UAE, especially after the outbreak of the Arab Spring (Ziadah, 2019, p. 295). At the same time, Iran approached Qatar and both states signed a security agreement. In 2017, their ties were reinforced due to the embargo that a series of states –including Saudi Arabia and the UAE- imposed on Qatar (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Nowadays, there are some breaches in the relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, owing to different financial interests as well as on different security priorities. More specifically, the signing of the Abraham Accords and the MbS's decision to lift the Qatar embargo are examples to show the extent of the breach (Ghosh, 2021). Undoubtedly, the fact that Saudi Arabia lifted the embargo has increased the security dilemma with Iran, on the grounds that the Kingdom could now approach Qatar.

Concerning Israel -the nuclear power of the region-, it is one of the major enemies of Iran and a USA ally. At the same time, Israel has signed normalization agreements with Saudi Arabia's allies, such as the UAE and Bahrain. (Mirza, Abbas,

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[8] Iran has not condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

& Qaisrani, 2021, p. 2). Up to the present day, Saudi Arabia and Israel have not normalized their relations. Nevertheless, in September 2023, MbS, in an interview, declared that the two states are getting closer to a normalization agreement, on condition that a proper solution to the Palestinian issue is found (AlJazeera, 2023). This normalization would definitely change the balance of power in the region, increasing the insecurity of Iran and as a result, the security dilemma between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

5. THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN AND THE ROLE OF CHINA

In 2023, China achieved to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia in the table of negotiations. Undoubtedly, the establishment of stability in the region is one of China's first priorities, on the grounds that this region is essential for BRI (Heiden & Krijger, 2018, p. 15). Moreover, China has, on the one hand, strong commercial ties with Saudi Arabia and on the other hand, it has signed a financial agreement with Iran, in 2021. Last but not least, China buys great amounts of Iranian and Saudi Arabian oil (Esfandiary & Jacobs, 2023).

During the negotiations which took place in Beijing from 6-10 March 2023, Saudi Arabia, Iran and China signed the "Joint Trilateral Declaration" aiming at restoring the Saudi Arabian-Iranian diplomatic relations within a two-month period. The agreement was signed by the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, Saudi national security advisor Musaad bin Mohammed Al Aiban and the director of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Wang Yi. The agreement stresses the need that the two states respect the basic principles of International Law, which are the "principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of another state" and the "principle of state sovereignty". The two states are also committed to complying with the agreements, they had signed in 1998 and 2001, concerning trade and cooperation in fields such as culture, science and technology, as well as information exchange to combat against terrorism (Esfandiary & Jacobs, 2023).

After signing the agreement, the Saudi King invited the Iranian president to Riyadh, while Saudi Arabian finance minister declared that "the Kingdom was ready to invest in Iran". Moreover, Saudi Arabia claimed that it would stop supporting anti-Iranian media, while Iran declared that it would stop offering Houthis military aid. A point worth mentioning is that Saudi Arabia itself considers the agreement with Iran to be a way out of Yemen (Esfandiary & Jacobs, 2023). On June 17th 2023, the foreign ministers of the two states met in Tehran. Among other declarations, the Saudi minister said that it is vital that the two countries cooperate on security issues in the Gulf and on counteracting of WMD proliferation, as well (Motamedi, 2023). Later on, in August 2023, the Iranian Foreign Minister visited Saudi Arabia and discussed with Saudi

Foreign Minister. Last but not least, the Iranian President Ebrahem Raisi accepted the invitation of Saud's family to visit Saudi Arabia (AlJazeera, 2023).

The agreement has been welcomed by Iraq, which believes that Saudi Arabia could now invest in it. On the other hand, Israel, which had hoped to make Saudi Arabia its ally, is so concerned not only because its project for a regional coalition against Iran is collapsing but also, because it witnesses China gaining ground at the expense of the USA (Esfandiary & Jacobs, 2023). As for America, it has been relieved with this agreement, owing to the fact that tensions in the Gulf region would decreased. Nevertheless, the role of China as a mediator intensifies the idea that the USA have lost ground in the region (Harb, 2023).

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the "Joint Trilateral Cooperation" could be the beginning of a further cooperation between the two states. The states have already participated in significant organizations such as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Nowadays, there are discussions about Saudi Arabia's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization -Iran is an observer state in the organization (AlJazeera, 2023). Moreover, the member states of the BRICS have called both Iran and Saudi Arabia to participate in their alliance (Ali, 2023).

Last but not least, the agreement, undoubtedly, decreases the security dilemma between the two states while it promotes dialogue and perspective for further cooperation. China, as a neutral partner who maintains ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, could ensure the idea of a dialogue. To restore their relations could be similar to the idea of restoring French-German relations after the WWII. That is to say, Germany and France cooperated in the context of the European Coal and Steel Community but France could not avoid feeling insecure (Fraihat, 2020, p. 16). Many analysts claim that even today France feels insecure sharing borders with Germany. Thus, although liberalists support that an institutional cooperation could decrease the security dilemma, the realistic point of view that alliances may last as long as the interests of the states are common, clearly applies to Saudi Arabian-Iranian relations.

6. CONCLUSION

All in all, in the current assignment, we dealt with the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and we explained how this rivalry led them to participating in proxy wars in Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen etc. Moreover, we proved that there has been a security dilemma between the two states, cultivated by the insecurity they feel. This dilemma lies in inequalities concerning the military forces and the economy of the two states. Undoubtedly, the alliances each state has created, intensify their security dilemma. Last but not least, this is also exacerbated due to "Sunni-Shia conflict".

This very dilemma is nowadays moderated after the Chinese initiative, which promotes the cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in order to restore their diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, their security dilemma could not be eliminated altogether, on the grounds that their differences are a lot more than their common interests.

To be more specific, as for their common interests, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the BRI and the Chinese investments are seductive for both states. Furthermore, both states share a common interest being the promotion and the maintenance of security in the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz, because of the oil reserves there. On the other side of the coin though, concerning their differences, they disagree on how they can achieve this security. Moreover, Iran and Saudi Arabia have different interests in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq and this could not easily change owing to the Iran-Israel conflict. It might be possible for Saudi Arabia to become an ally with Israel whereas this is not the case for Iran.

Last but not least, despite their conflicted interests, there could be future prospects in further improvement of Saudi Arabian-Iranian relations. This could happen if the two states stop investing in hard/military power and focus on soft power, such as dialogue, cooperation and common participation in institutions. In any case, according to a realistic point of view, if the two states share the same interest –that is to say, escaping from a security dilemma-, they will have no other choice but to cooperate until they achieve their goal, instead of going to war.

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