



UDC 327

**MEDIATION MISSION OF CHINA IN THE NORMALIZATION OF
RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA**
**ПОСЕРЕДНИЦЬКА МІСІЯ КИТАЮ У НОРМАЛІЗАЦІЇ ВІДНОСИН ІРАНУ ТА
САУДІВСЬКОЇ АРАБІЇ**

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Abstract. *The chosen research topic seems extremely **relevant**, as it focuses on the confrontation between the two regional leaders of the Middle East - Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as China's successful attempt to restore relations between the states as a mediator. The latest events in the Middle East, namely Israel's war in the Gaza Strip, the attack by Israeli aircraft on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and the massive attack of Iranian ballistic missiles and drones on the territory of Israel in early April 2024, caused outrage not only in the region, but also around the world, and cast doubt on the future of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. **The aim** of this study is to identify the causes and factors that influenced and influence relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran from the second half of the 20th century to the present, as well as to consider the effectiveness of China's mediation in establishing relations between them. **Two main methods** were used to analyze the research subject, such as case and event analysis, fragmentarily supported by historical, functional and geopolitical methods. The mentioned two methods made it possible to consider the key features of the problem and provide its abbreviated description. The application of the historical method provided a link to the original source of the conflict; the use of the functional method determined the level of development of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia; the use of the geopolitical method made it possible to determine the situation and the participation of the main actors in the region and on the world stage. A cautious forecast was added in order to predict not the further outcome of the conflict, but the most effective mediators of the confrontation in the region.*

Key words: *regional leaders, China's mediation, massive strike, main actors in the region and in the world, the primary source of the conflict.*

Introduction.

Iran's hegemonic policy of the last decade is nothing but a phase of the conflict that has been ongoing since 1979, when the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a Shia-Islamist and revolutionary-anti-imperialist state, has been competing with Sunni-Islamic and conservative-pro-Western Saudi Arabia. While Tehran seeks to redistribute the regional balance of power, Riyadh tries to maintain the status quo. After all, the kingdom, with the help of the USA, turned not only into the main oil state, but also into the leading country of the Arab world. Iran is a slightly stronger state militarily, with larger armed forces, but in conflict with neighboring countries, as noted above, it primarily relies on the use of ballistic missiles and drones, an alliance with pro-Iranian militias and terrorist groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Yemeni Houthis. But Saudi Arabia is able to deploy only



fragmented and not very strong-armed forces against external enemies [2, p.3].

From the events of the last ten years, Riyadh realized that the USA will no longer guarantee the security of Saudi Arabia, which it has received since 1945. Perhaps the most dramatic implication today is that Saudi Arabia is also interested in a nuclear program. According to official reports, this should be a purely civilian project, but the insistence of the Saudis on their own uranium enrichment shows that they do not exclude the possibility of its military use. With the US still holding back on providing technology, Riyadh is beginning to look to China for help. Saudi Arabia already has modern Chinese missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

Main text.

Relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia reflect centuries of complex dynamics based on historical (history, religion and ideology), geopolitical and economic factors. This dynamic became the basis for the formation and development of extremely complex relations between two key countries in the Middle East, which affect the geopolitical map of the region and international politics in general. By examining the historical and geopolitical factors underlying the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is possible to reveal their influence on the current situation in the region and the world [5, p.1].

From a historical point of view, it should be noted that Iran and Saudi Arabia have a centuries-old and complicated history of relations which has been caused by religious and political factors. First, the two countries practice different strands of Islam: Iran is predominantly Shia, while Saudi Arabia is Sunni, which caused religious conflict, especially during the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, which changed the monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic one. republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and was accompanied by anti-monarchical sentiment and Shia support, which created problems for the Sunni monarchy, because on the territory of Saudi Arabia, about 15% of Shiites live, mainly in the Eastern Province, which creates the risk of an uprising or revolution against the government, which is brutally suppressed, accordingly, Shiites are subjected to discrimination and causes negative criticism from the Shiites of the entire Muslim world. If we evaluate the relations of both countries regarding regional politics from a religious point of view, it should be noted that during the Shiite-Sunni clashes in Iraq and Lebanon, where the countries took different positions; also with regard to Afghanistan, Iran opposed the Taliban and al-Qaeda, although they profess the Shia trend, while Saudi Arabia, on the contrary, supported them [7, p.4].

Secondly, the countries have ideological differences: Iran is an Islamic republic, which includes the principles of the Shiite direction, where Iran considers itself as the protector of the weak and seeks to establish its form of government as an example for the Islamic world. Iran supports the opposition against Western imperialism and maintains relations with countries with which it shares the same interests and positions [5, p. 4].

Iran and Saudi Arabia also have a geopolitical rivalry, as they are the leading powers in the Middle East. Iran's goals in the region are to protect, satisfy the needs and increase the influence of the Shia Muslim world, which leads to the support of Shia groups in countries such as Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. Saudi Arabia, primarily



seeing Iran as a threat to its leadership and dominance, is trying not only to counter its actions, but also to protect and preserve the stability of the Sunni-majority population of the region (Figure. 1) [8].

The Maghreb and Orient Courier

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia vs Islamic Republic of Iran : a proxywar in the Middle East

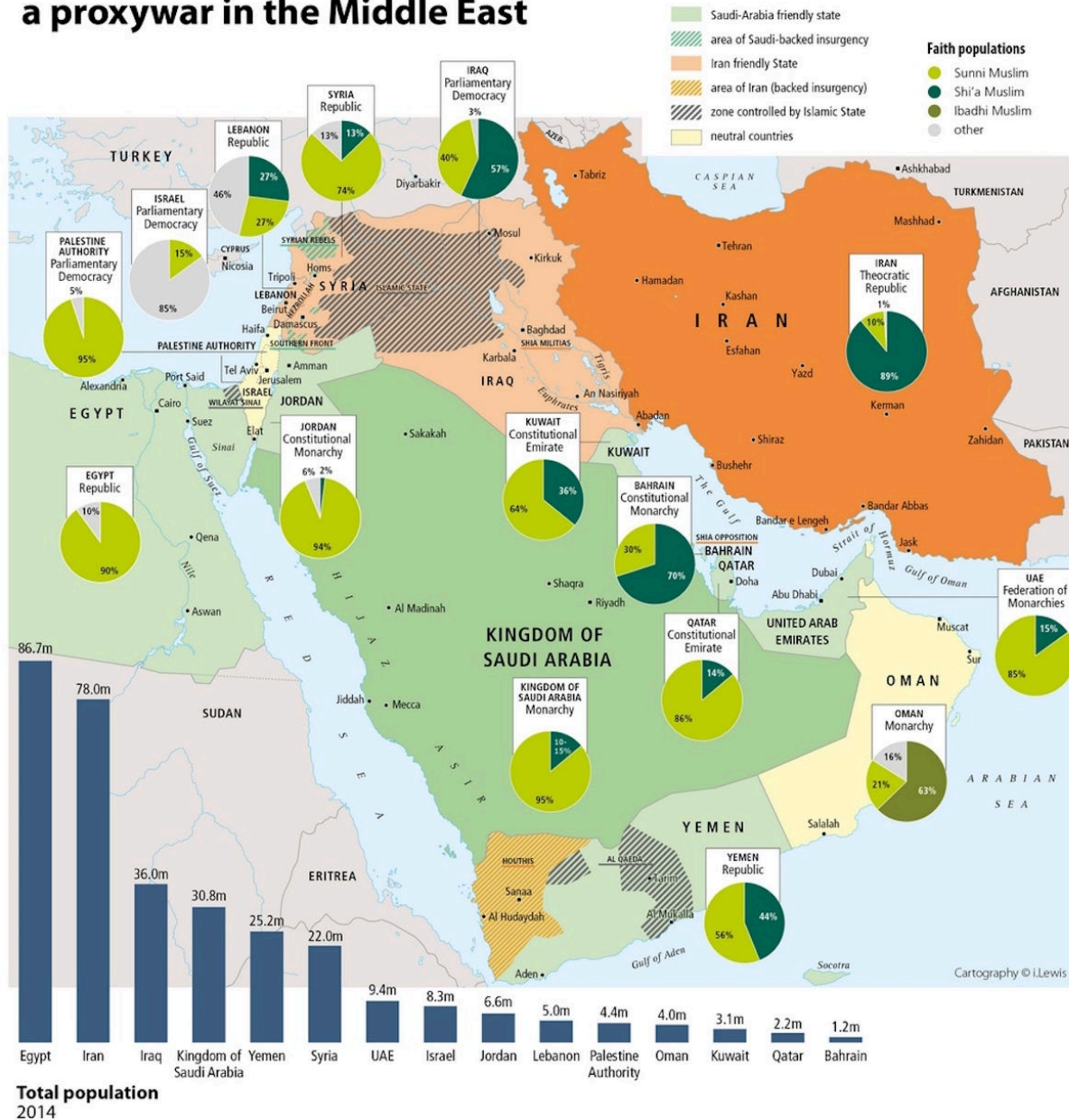


Figure 1 - Confessional population charts indicating the Middle East states which tend to favor one side or another in the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran

A Source: Emmanuel Pene, (2019). *The Maghreb and Orient Courier / the Arab Maps*. URL: <https://lecourrierdumaghrebetdelorient.info/arab-world-maps/arab-world-maps-a-proxy-war-in-the-middle-east/r>

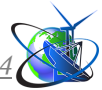


Countries support different sides of conflicts in the region, which leads to proxy wars, for example, regarding the Syrian conflict, Tehran supports the Bashar al-Assad regime, provides financial and military assistance, supports Hezbollah armed groups. Riyadh, on the contrary, advocates the overthrow of the Syrian dictator and provided support for the rebel army. As a conclusion, it can be observed that the civil war in Syria has been going on for more than 10 years, which has caused many victims, destruction and instability [4, p. 38]. Also, worth mentioning is Yemen, where Iran is helping the Houthi rebels, a Shiite Zaydi militia group based mainly in northern Yemen. It was they who seized the power of the Yemeni president Abdrabb Mansour Hadi in 2014, and Saudi Arabia, worried that the Houthis would seize the entire territory of Yemen and Iran would have influence, began preparations for the expulsion of the Houthis and the return of power to Hadi, creating an Arab coalition that supports the regular army. Iraq is also a country where the interests of Riyadh and Tehran clash, where each of the countries supports groups that profess different religious currents of Islam. Therefore, both states compete for regional leadership and try to prevent the expansion of each other, as evidenced by their participation, assistance and support in conflicts which breed instability, terrorism and chaos [3, p.3].

The main theater of conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has traditionally been the Persian Gulf. In the competition for influence in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has always held higher political influence over local states than Iran. Riyadh has actively cooperated with other Gulf monarchies and Yemen to maintain regional stability. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes six Gulf monarchies (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), was established in 1981 during the Iran-Iraq War, as part of a strategy to jointly advance interests in the face of regional turbulence. Ever since the council began to be actively used as an effective tool to implement its members' conservative approach to regional security, Saudi Arabia continues to exert significant influence over Yemen. This influence is mainly due to the significant financial resources that are actively used to support the Yemeni economy, even during periods of political instability [10, p.14].

Iran, although it cannot compete for regional influence in the Persian Gulf, sets itself the task of influencing the Arab countries of the Gulf. He pays special attention to pressuring them to reduce or end military ties with the West. Tehran also seeks to gain some level of influence over local Arab Shia communities in order to pressure Arab governments on issues of importance to Iran. Within the GCC, there is no unified strategy for regulating the growth of Iranian power, but each of the leaders of the Arab countries of the Gulf experiences certain turbulence due to unpredictable Iranian behavior on different scales.

Some countries see Tehran's ability to inspire and support domestic opposition movements against their governments. Gulf countries with significant Shia populations see themselves as particularly vulnerable to Iranian subversion, as Shia communities are often seen as more susceptible to Iranian propaganda than Sunni Muslims. In particular, Bahrain is concerned because the country has a Sunni monarchy and a Shia majority, and relations between the two communities have experienced serious episodes of violence even before the events of the Arab Spring,



particularly in 1994-1999 [10, p.15].

Furthermore, the Iranian-Saudi conflict is significantly determined by the struggle for the control and export of oil and gas, which are key factors for both countries. This competition for energy resources, particularly in the context of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), is the main cause of tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both countries produce large volumes of oil, and Saudi Arabia has a key role in the global oil market as the leader of OPEC. Such competition is not only about market share, but also about geopolitical influence in the global energy market, which has led to price wars between countries.

From time to time, both countries tried to increase the volume of oil supplies to the world market with the aim of undermining each other's economic stability. This led to fluctuations in oil prices around the world and had an impact on the economies of other oil-producing countries. Sanctions have become the only way to stop this conflict. In particular, Iran felt the sanctions because of its support for terrorism and the development of a nuclear program, which had adverse consequences for it: restrictions on economic prosperity and access to international markets.

In 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement was reached, the goal of which was Iran's refusal to enrich uranium above the level of 3.67%, the shutdown of enterprises potentially related to the military direction of the country's nuclear program, and monthly monitoring by the IAEA. (Sinovets, 2021). This is evidenced by UN Security Council Resolution 2231(2015), which confirmed the operation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) [11]. But in 2018, the US pulled out of the JCPOA and reimposed sanctions on Iran, causing a blow to the economy.

Since the United States pulled out of the deal in 2018, Iran has lost 90% of its oil exports, a key source of income. The result of the sanctions is obvious for the economy, as according to the International Fund, Iran's GDP decreased by an estimated 4.8% in 2018.¹⁰ The unemployment rate, meanwhile, increased from 14.5% in 2018 to 16.8% in 2019.¹¹ Relations between the US and Iran have been strained by the recent attacks on Saudi oil facilities. But Iran found support in China - the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement for 25 years, according to which China invested 400 billion dollars in the Iranian economy, which can be assessed as the resurrection of the Iranian economy, and not its collapse [9, p.3].

In this case, Iran resorted to finding new economically strong allies, such as Russia and China. Saudi Arabia felt the consequences of changes in the energy sector, even if it was not imposed international sanctions. The kingdom's long-standing dominance of the oil market has begun to be questioned by the rise of shale oil production in the United States and the general shift to renewable energy sources globally. Saudi Arabia's bid to maintain its influence in the region, determined in part by economic factors, has been greatly enhanced by these changes in the energy landscape.

Besides, an obstacle to rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia is strained relations with those countries that act as mediators in established relations. Initially, the USA and Russia acted as mediators, but even here there were shortcomings and the inability to establish relations. The participation of the USA in the conflict was



active, but it was more favorable to Saudi Arabia: Iran was an opponent. Evidence of the development of the conflict is the provision of military support to Saudi Arabia and the imposition of sanctions against Iran, especially after Iran's nuclear program in 2015, which further complicated US-Iranian relations. Russia also took an active part in stabilizing relations, maintaining ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. But there is a disadvantage that Russia supports the dictatorial regime in Syria, which Saudi Arabia opposes. It should be noted that it was China that succeeded in the role of mediator, because it managed to conclude an agreement between the two warring states in March 2023 despite such factors as confessional, religious, political and geopolitical. International mediation efforts have faced many challenges in resolving the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia due to its complexity and deep nature. The role of major global players, including the United States, Russia, and China, shaped the trajectory of the conflict, while the rivalry affected international relations, contributing to tensions and instability in the Middle East and the world [5, p.9].

Diplomatic ties between the two countries were last severed in January 2016, when the Saudi embassy in Tehran was attacked in response to Riyadh's execution of top Shia Muslim leader Nimr al-Nimr on charges of terrorism on Saudi soil. According to the spiritual leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the "martyr" was executed for his oppositional views on the government, which professes the Sunni example of Islam. The situation became even more complicated in September 2016, when Iran accused the Saudi authorities of deliberately killing about 400 Iranian pilgrims during a stampede in the holy city of Mecca in 2015.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for the Middle East and Africa, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, said that "by taking hasty and rash steps to break diplomatic relations, Riyadh is making a strategic mistake that can only increase the threat to security and the region and lead to an even greater increase in terrorism." and extremism". It should be noted that the conflict between the two leading countries in the region leads to chaos and unresolved regional problems and conflicts, such as in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, and it also leads to an aggravation of the refugee issue. [4, p. 40].

Thus, it can be concluded that the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia has a deep history defined by religious, political and ideological differences. Religious differences between Shiites and Sunnis, exacerbated by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, became an important factor in the tension. Ideological differences determine the positions of both countries in regional conflicts, leading to proxy wars and instability in the region. The geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is expressed in the struggle for leadership and influence in the Middle East. The conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Persian Gulf is defined by various aspects such as political influence, regional stability, interaction with other countries and competition for control of energy resources. Saudi Arabia, acting as the leader of the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, maintains the highest political influence, maintaining regional stability and cooperation with other golf monarchies. On the other hand, Iran seeks to influence Arab countries, in particular through pressure on them in matters of military cooperation and interaction with the West.

The conflict is also determined by geopolitical and economic aspects, in



particular in the struggle for control over energy resources. This manifests itself in price wars, fluctuations in oil prices and competition for geopolitical influence in the world market. The sanctions are affecting the economies of both countries, and Iran is seeking new allies, such as Russia and China, to mitigate the economic fallout. Strained relations with mediators such as the US and Russia do make it difficult for a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The different approaches of these countries, in particular on issues related to Iran's nuclear program and military support to Saudi Arabia, make reaching a peaceful settlement a difficult task.

As was mentioned, leading countries such as the USA and Russia were unable to act as mediators in establishing relations due to strained ties. Therefore, the role of mediator was taken over by China, which marked a diplomatic coup. On March 10, 2023, the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iranian accord was concluded in Beijing, whereby Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to resume diplomatic relations after a seven-year standstill [6].

After a long period of tension in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran are seeking deescalation to avoid direct confrontation. This is becoming a profitable solution for regional and international players, as the importance of the Persian Gulf in energy and maritime trade aspects is growing. The agreement represents itself as a framework and is a starting point, the main principle of which is "non-interference in the internal affairs of states". With this agreement, Saudi Arabia is focusing on strengthening the country's economic power, which includes several key steps. Among them are: restoration of diplomatic relations with Qatar; the Al-Ula Declaration was signed in 2021 [12]; reconciliation with Turkey in 2022; humanitarian aid to government-held regions of Syria after the 2023 earthquake; strengthening informal relations with Israel. Thus, it should be noted that economic goals are a priority in the foreign policy decisions of the Gulf monarchies. After the events of the Arab Spring, Riyadh and Tehran tried to extend their influence through other countries by interfering in internal affairs, but the conflicts in Syria and Yemen continue, creating tensions in the region.

The diplomatic agreement with Saudi Arabia is defined as a triple achievement for Iran. First, Tehran's regime, which is under sanctions, is now in a position to attract investment from the Gulf monarchies if the deal is implemented to alleviate the deep social effects of the prolonged economic crisis.

Second, Iran can use the rapprochement to overcome the isolation that surrounds the country as a result of the brutal suppression of a popular uprising, and to try to change the dominant narrative about Tehran, especially in the "Global South."

Third, the agreement helps Iran to remove deterrence from Israel, as Saudi Arabia and, previously, the United Arab Emirates, have resumed bilateral channels with Iranian representatives. This could lead to easing tensions in the region and open up opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between different states. However, there is a question whether Iranian-backed armed groups in the Middle East will support the deal. So far, these groups, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, pro-Assad Syrian militias and Hezbollah in Lebanon, have expressed no particular interest in weakening the deal.

It will be important for Iran to control these groups, as their asymmetric attacks



could put the deal under pressure. For example, the Iraqi government, which is supported by a Shiite coordination structure, can influence groups that Iran uses for armed actions. Syrian pro-Assad militias may seek continued regime rehabilitation to strengthen their position, while Hezbollah may leave regional de-escalation to political-institutional negotiations. Given the importance of these groups to Iran, especially the Houthis in Yemen, the diplomatic deal may remain on the brink of uncertainty as they may find it unsatisfactory and resume attacks on Saudi territory or naval targets in the Red Sea [1, p.3].

Against this backdrop, it is clear that a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement can have potential as long as all parties involved, directly or indirectly, see it as a benefit.

The successful implementation of this agreement will be critical, as will the role of the facilitator. This agreement is a complex result of the endogenous process of de-escalation in the Middle East. Although China played an important role in the deal, giving it prestige, it was mainly a "sponsor" of the deal, as the statement said - as a sort of mediator, but not an active participant. China acted as a "sponsor", cultivating neutrality between the two rivals. However, Beijing's third role in the Persian Gulf may become questionable if difficulties arise during the implementation phase. Therefore, it is likely that the Arab mediators, in front of China, will fulfill the role of resolving the conflict between the still hostile capitals of the Persian Gulf.

The 2023 agreement has been compared to agreements that were signed earlier between Saudi Arabia and Iran: the General Cooperation Agreement (1998) and the Security Cooperation Agreement (2001), because these agreements, which were signed two decades ago, were mentioned in the new agreement of 2023.

However, Saudi Arabia is likely to be cautious about establishing economic ties with Iran because it does not want to fall under US sanctions, and normalization itself does not mean full trust between the parties. Noting the easing of tensions in the region such as Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, Regarding the eight-year war in Yemen, where Iran and Saudi Arabia support opposing sides, the political scientist believes that ending this conflict could be a key outcome of the agreement, but achieving it will be difficult. That is, high levels of mistrust and geopolitical rivalry require sustained and systematic efforts to reduce tensions.

In terms of winning the deal, China emerged as the big winner, strengthening its influence in the region and emphasizing its role as a guarantor of the deal. In addition, the agreement shows that the US cannot ignore China's role in regional affairs and security in the Persian Gulf, where energy reserves and transport routes are important to the Chinese economy, overriding US interests [6, p. 4].

The latest events in the Middle East, in particular Israel's war in Gaza, the elimination of Iranian officials as a result of Israeli air strikes in Damascus, and the massive attack of Iranian ballistic missiles and drones on the territory of Israel in early April 2024, caused outrage not only in the region but also in the whole world and put under the question of the future of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. One of the key factors complicating the normalization of relations is the constant resistance of Israel's allies. For Tel Aviv, strengthening Iran's influence in the region and reducing its isolation is of particular concern. A potential detente between the two countries could significantly change the geopolitical landscape of the region, but



some experts have expressed doubts about the sustainability of the process.

Summary and conclusions.

Based on the conducted research, it is possible to conclude that Iran and Saudi Arabia have strong roots of conflicts caused by various factors.

Firstly, it is a religious factor. The majority of the population of Saudi Arabia is Sunni, and in Iran it is Shia, especially after the Islamic Revolution. This factor was important, because the Shia had anti-monarchical sentiments, which began to worry Saudi Arabia so that a similar revolution would not happen in the territory of the kingdom.

Second is the ideological factor. The Islamic Republic is based on the principles of Shia Islam, acts as a role model for the entire Islamic world and opposes "Western imperialism". Saudi Arabia, in turn, supports relations with Western partners, advocates Sunni Islam and the preservation of the monarchy.

Thirdly, this is a geopolitical rivalry. Both states are regional leaders. Iran wants to expand its spheres of influence among the Shiite world. The confirmation of this is the support of groups in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, where instability has been generated for a long time. Saudi Arabia also seeks to strengthen its position and support the Sunni world, but sees Iran as a direct threat to the region, so it tries to weaken its position. But unfortunately, this rivalry has spilled over between the two countries into the entire region, leading to regional instability, terrorism and so-called proxy wars in countries like Syria and Yemen.

Also, it is important to note that China's mediation in the partial restoration of Saudi-Iranian relations is an unexpected breakthrough. On the one hand, China is on the way to a successful reconciliation of the two leading countries in the region, which could be its victory not only as a mediator, which the USA and Russia failed to do, but also in diplomacy in general. But on the other hand, mistrust and geopolitical rivalry can be observed in relations, especially events between Israel and Hamas.

The 2023 agreement re-enforced agreements previously made between the two countries as early as the beginning of the 21st century on security and economic cooperation, but enough time had already passed to lead to changes in the countries' foreign policies. Especially Iran - developing a nuclear program, sponsoring regional organizations (Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthis in Yemen), which bring with them anxiety and instability in the region. To put an end to the conflict in Yemen and Iranian-Israel escalation is especially important; it can further strengthen Saudi-Iranian relations.

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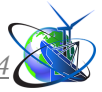
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Анотація. Обрана тема дослідження видається надзвичайно актуальною, оскільки зосереджена на протистоянні двох регіональних лідерів Близького Сходу – Саудівської Аравії та Ірану, а також успішній спробі Китаю налагодити відносини між державами як посередника. Останні події на Близькому Сході, а саме війна Ізраїлю в секторі Газа, напад ізраїльської авіації на консульство Ірану в Дамаску та масований удар іранських балістичних ракет і безпілотників по території Ізраїлю на початку квітня 2024 року викликали обурення не лише в регіоні, а й у всьому світі, і поставили під сумнів майбутнє відносин між Саудівською Аравією та Іраном. **Метою** даного дослідження є виявлення причин і факторів, які впливали і впливають на відносини між Саудівською Аравією та Іраном з другої половини 20 століття до сьогодення, а також розгляд ефективності посередництва Китаю у налагодженні відносин між ними. Для аналізу предмету дослідження було використано **два основних методи**, таких як кейс та аналіз подій, фрагментарно підкріплених історичним, функціональним та геополітичним методами.



Зазначені два методи дозволили розглянути ключові особливості проблеми надати її скорочену характеристику. Застосування історичного методу дало посилання на першоджерело конфлікту; використання функціонального методу визначило рівень розвитку відносин між Іраном і Саудівською Аравією; використання геополітичного методу дало змогу визначити ситуацію та участь основних акторів у регіоні та на світовій арені. Додано обережний прогноз з метою прогнозування не подальшого результату конфлікту, а найефективніших посередників протистояння в регіоні.

Ключові слова: регіональні лідери, посередництво Китаю, масований удар, основні актори у регіоні та у світі, першоджерело конфлікту.