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THEMATIC DOSSIER: REGIONAL ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ: РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement Reflected in the Western Media and New Opportunities for Russia

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Abstract. In the context of the reconfiguration of the international relations system in the Middle East, there has been a certain stabilization of the situation. To some extent, this is due to the improvement of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In conditions of information confrontation, media often neutralize the significance of certain events, passing off what is expected as reality. In this regard, it became necessary to analyze the reaction of the leading Western media to the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, as this makes it possible to understand how the West explains the significance of this reconciliation to its audience and the potential implications for the region. The analysis of articles was carried out on the basis of qualitative content analysis: the authors manually classified articles by topic, identified and counted frames, and analyzed in detail examples of their use. The main method used was frame analysis. This involves organizing a news story thematically, stylistically and actually in such a way as to convey a certain idea. It was found out that Western media articles focus on the increased role of Saudi Arabia, which does not look back at the United States in its actions in the Middle East. At the same time, all publications lack the idea of the possibility of stabilizing the regional situation after reconciliation, which objectively is not realistic. The recent normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations has led to a certain "conservation" of regional conflicts, but the situation was blown up by the Israeli war in the Gaza Strip, called "genocide" by the UN, and the military operations of the Israeli army against Lebanon, as well as the exchange of strikes between Israel and Iran. In addition, the weakened position of the United States following the reconciliation and the diplomatic success of China are poorly highlighted. The reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran has opened up new opportunities for the Russian Federation to build constructive relations not only with Saudi Arabia and Iran, but also with other important countries in the Middle East. However, the US-Israeli aggression against Iran in 2026 made it more difficult for Russia to develop constructive relations simultaneously with all players in the Persian Gulf, creating new risks and limitations for the implementation of Moscow's multi-vector policy in the region.

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Kew words: Saudi Arabia, Iran, media, USA, cybersecurity, instability, Middle East, Israel

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Саудовско-иранское сближение в отражении западных СМИ и новые возможности для России

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Аннотация. В условиях реконфигурации системы международных отношений на Ближнем Востоке наблюдается определенная стабилизация ситуации. В некоторой степени это связано с налаживанием отношений между Саудовской Аравией и Ираном. Нередко в условиях информационного противостояния СМИ нивелируют значимость тех или иных событий, выдавая ожидаемое за действительное. В этой связи возникла необходимость анализа реакции ведущих западных СМИ на саудовско-иранское примирение, так как это дает возможность понять, как на Западе объясняют значение данного примирения для своей аудитории и какие перспективы для региона влечет за собой это событие. Анализ статей проводился на основе качественного контент-анализа: авторы вручную классифицировали статьи по темам, выделили и подсчитали фреймы, подробно разобрав примеры их использования. В качестве основного метода выступил фрейм-анализ, суть которого состоит в организации новостного сюжета тематически, стилистически и фактически таким образом, чтобы передать определенную идею. Выяснено, что в фокусе статей западных СМИ присутствует частичный акцент на возросшей роли Саудовской Аравии, не оглядывающейся в своих действиях на Ближнем Востоке на США. При этом во всех изданиях отсутствует идея о возможности стабилизации региональной обстановки после примирения, что объективно не соответствует действительности. Наметившаяся в последнее время нормализация саудовско-иранских отношений привела к определенной «консервации» региональных конфликтов, но ситуацию взорвали израильская война в секторе Газа, названная ООН «геноцидом», военные операции израильской армии против Ливана, а также обмен ударами между Израилем и Ираном. Кроме того, слабо освещаются ослабленная позиция США по итогам примирения и дипломатический успех Китая. Примирение между Эр-Риядом и Тегераном открыло новые возможности для Российской Федерации в деле выстраивания конструктивных отношений не только с Саудовской Аравией и Ираном, но и с другими ключевыми странами Ближнего Востока. Однако американо-израильская агрессия против Ирана в 2026 г. осложнила выстраивание Россией конструктивных отношений одновременно со всеми игроками Персидского залива, создав новые риски и ограничения для реализации многовекторной политики Москвы в регионе.

Ключевые слова: Саудовская Аравия, Иран, США, информационная безопасность, нестабильность, Ближний Восток, Израиль

Вклад авторов. Васильев А.М.: сбор и обработка данных, научное руководство исследованием. Хайруллин Т.Р.: разработка методологии исследования, анализ и систематизация информации, подготовка рукописи. Оба автора ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction

In recent years, the Middle East has been undergoing a serious transformation of the international system, related to the establishment of a new balance of power in the region. This is due to the emerging softening of competition for regional leadership among the main Middle Eastern players: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Türkiye. If during the events of the Arab Spring the struggle between states was fierce, leading until recently to bloody proxy wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, then in recent years one could observe a certain 'conservation' of regional conflicts and, at the same time, the transfer of regional rivalry to a new track. Saudi Arabia and Iran have played an important role in this process, influencing the behaviour of their allied states and regional movements, as well as international relations in the region overall. Until recently, these two states were in extremely hostile relations, which were beneficial for the main strategic ally of the Saudis—the United States, as well as for Israel. However, the reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran in March 2023 became a serious challenge for the strategic influence of the United States in the Persian Gulf. In this regard, the relevance of the study is connected to the growing role of regional players under conditions of information warfare and the changing geopolitical situation in the Middle East.

Although there have been a number of works published on the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region, most of these focus on studying the activities of these countries as independent actors (Vasiliev, 2024; Doroshenko & Shelkovnikov, 2023; Kosach, 2019; Mitreski, 2022; Posch, 2017; Ali et al., 2022; Akhmedov, 2024; Sazhin, 2024). The Arab Spring marked a transition to a reduction in tensions and the building of constructive relations among regional players (Zvyagelskaya, 2022; Surkov, 2023; Norlén, 2022). However, special attention in such studies is paid to the general issues of the struggle for regional supremacy or to the actions of individual players. The problem of information confrontation between Western countries and the Arab world is mainly covered in a comprehensive way (Kuleshova & Khvaley, 2024; Emelin, 2024).

Proceeding from the ongoing transformation of the international system in the Middle East, associated with the growing role of regional players and the parallel weakening of the United States' position, it seems important to examine the representation of the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation in the leading Western media, since this makes it possible to understand how the West explains the significance of this reconciliation to its audience and what implications this event has for the region.

Research Methodology

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study relies on the theory of framing, which is one of the key approaches in modern media analysis and political communication studies. This theory suggests that the media does not simply convey facts, but rather actively

constructs reality by selecting certain aspects of an event and making them more salient in their message. The conceptual foundations of frame analysis can be traced back to the works of E. Goffman (1974). Subsequently, R. Entman adapted this concept for the analysis of mass media, proposing to 'frame,' i.e., to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicative text in order to promote certain issues (Entman, 1993). This theory has been further developed by D.A. Scheufele (1999), M. Linström and W. Marais (Linström & Marais, 2012).

To solve the research tasks, a corpus of data from leading Western media outlets that reflected the reaction to the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation during 2023 was analyzed. These included mainly British and American media: *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The choice of these outlets is based on their authority, which rests on a number of weighty characteristics, such as the high citation rate of their electronic resources. This was an important criterion for selecting the publications, since it is the broad audience coverage that determines the process of forming the media image of a given phenomenon. Moreover, these publications represent the core in conveying Western political thought. In addition, in our view, the position of the leading periodicals of continental European states regarding the event under consideration differs little from the American-British position, except for some Eurosceptic outlets. Thus, *The Guardian* is a newspaper with one of the largest print circulations and the most visited website among British publications,[1] and two leading American newspapers: the daily newspaper with the most popular news site with an audience of 30 million people per month—*The New York Times*[2] and one of the oldest and most influential daily newspapers, known for its international reporting—*The Washington Post*.

The analysis of the articles was based on qualitative content analysis: the authors manually classified the articles by topic and counted the frames, examining examples of their use in detail. The main method in this work was also frame analysis, the essence of which is to organize a news story thematically, stylistically and factually in such a way as to convey a certain idea (Entman, 1993). The unit of analysis was a coherent passage of text corresponding to the meaning of the frames. Manual coding of the texts was carried out to identify in them the previously established categories of frames, and each frame could not be identified in one article more than once.

The Saudi-Iranian Reconciliation and the Reaction of the Western Media

In March 2023, with the mediation of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran signed a peace agreement, leading to the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two states (Baghernia, 2024; Mnekhir, 2023; Rezapour & Saburi, 2024). Relations between the countries had previously deteriorated sharply in 2016 after the execution the Shiite cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, in Saudi Arabia. In response, protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Iran, leading to a break in diplomatic relations (Vasiliev, 2024).

The lack of dialogue between the two main players in the region has hindered the resolution

[1] Tobitt Ch., Majid A. Newspaper ABCs: Evening Standard Distribution Decline Continues Amid Plan to Drop Daily Paper // PressGazette. September 19, 2024. URL: https://pressgazette.co.uk/media-audience-and-business-data/media_metrics/most-popular-newspapers-uk-abc-monthly-circulation-figures-2/ (accessed: 26.09.2025).

[2] New York Times // Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. July 26, 2026. URL: https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/new-york-times#:~:text=It%20is%20owned%20by%20The,the%20International%20New%20York%20Times (accessed: 27.07.2026).

of conflicts in which both sides have been involved indirectly. The Saudi-Iranian discord has indirectly fueled the war in Yemen, impeded efforts to stabilize the situation in Iraq. It has also contributed to the deepening of the crisis in Lebanon and led to a political stalemate in Syria. It should be noted that initially Russia offered its mediation services in the reconciliation process.[3] However, the active actions of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria has led to a loss of interest by the Saudis and Iranians in Russian mediation, since Iran regarded Syrian territory as its sphere of influence, while the Saudis believed that Russia was hindering their goals in the Syrian crisis, which was to overthrow the regime of B. al-Assad (Vasiliev, 2018).

Some hope was also placed on the United States, but during the first presidency of D. Trump, the country withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran and facilitated the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states—the UAE and Bahrain, while simultaneously aggravating relations with Tehran (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2019; Hamad, 2023).

Later, in 2021, there was some hope for the normalization of Iranian-Saudi relations as a result of Saudi-Iranian negotiations organized by Oman and Iraq. However, the Iranian-Russian rapprochement against the backdrop of the Ukrainian conflict, as well as internal protests in Iran in the second half of 2022, which were a reaction to the death of Mahsa Amini, postponed this event (Mubarak, 2025; Mahmoudian, 2023). Only the easing of internal tensions in Iran, as well as the intensification of China's mediating efforts, led to the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations in March 2023.

[3] Moscow Offered Mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran // RBC. January 4, 2016. (In Russian). URL: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/01/2016/568a4cef9a79476c6b1c2f01 (accesssed: 28.09.2025).

Based on the analysis of 24 publications we found (8 from *The Guardian*, 10 from *The New York Times* and 6 from *The Washington Post*), devoted to the topic of Saudi-Iranian reconciliation and published over the following several months after this event, four key thematic frames were identified, reflecting the main narratives of the Western media about this event. It should be noted that the articles in each of the news outlets largely copied the main message from previous ones, so we focused on individual articles published as a reaction to the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation.

The identification of frames was carried out in two stages. At the first stage, using the method of qualitative content analysis, all analyzed texts were classified into thematic blocks, fixing the main story lines of the coverage of the event (in particular, the role of external players, the change in the regional balance of power and the consequences for the economic isolation of Iran). In the second stage, within each thematic block, stable semantic constructs were identified through manual coding that correspond to R. Entman's definition of a frame as a way of organizing a news story, in which certain aspects of an event are selected and made more salient for the audience. The unit of analysis was a coherent passage of text containing a complete thought within one of the highlighted frames. At the same time, each frame was recorded in one article only once, which made it possible to avoid duplication and ensure comparability of results.

The identified frames and their distribution by publication are presented in the table.

Let us begin by noting that, in general, all publications lack a positive attitude towards the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, which is objectively aimed at reducing regional tensions. As can be seen from the data in the table, the coverage of this reconciliation was accompanied by an emphasis on a number of aspects. In particular,

Frames of Coverage of the Saudi-Iranian Reconciliation in Western Media

No.	Frame name	Media outlet	Reaction
1	The strengthening of Riyadh's independence	The Guardian	Negative
		The New York Times	–
		The Washington Post	–
2	The weakening of US positions due to the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement	The Guardian	–
		The New York Times	Negative
		The Washington Post	–
3	The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement strengthens China's position	The Guardian	–
		The New York Times	Neutral-positive
		The Washington Post	Neutral-positive
4	The economic isolation of Iran is being weakened by the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement	The Guardian	Negative
		The New York Times	Neutral-negative–negative
		The Washington Post	Neutral-nagative

Source: compiled by A.M. Vasiliev and T.R. Khayrullin.

only the British *The Guardian* noted that the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran demonstrates Riyadh's determination to conduct a foreign policy independent of the West, while the two American publications chose not to focus on this.[4]

Another, no less important aspect was the weakening of the US position due to the policy of the Biden administration towards Riyadh and the region as a whole. At the same time, as noted, the United States traditionally acted as an initiator and mediator in the settlement of Middle Eastern issues. Only one of the two American publications—*The New York Times*—focused on this.[5] However, the US failures turned out to be linked to the diplomatic success of China, whose achievements were assessed in a neutral-positive key mainly by American publications, noting at the same time that this victory was rather accidental for Beijing than natural.[6] It should be emphasized that an important feature was that the British publication lacked coverage of the second and third aspects, which were the criticism of the actions of global players, including the United States and China.

The last aspect that was mentioned in the materials from all three publications was the concern that the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation could disrupt US efforts to isolate Iran economically through sanctions if Saudi Arabia starts investing in the Iranian economy.[7] The British *The Guardian* also expressed concern that *Iran International*, a news channel created

[4] Wintour P. Iran and Saudi Arabia Agree to Restore Ties After China-Brokered Talks // The Guardian. March 10, 2023. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/10/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-restore-ties-china-talks (accessed: 28.09.2025).

[5] Baker P. Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S. // The New York Times. March 11, 2023. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html (accessed: 26.09.2025).

[6] See: Baker P. Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S. // The New York Times. March 11, 2023. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html (accessed: 26.09.2025); Dadouch S., Hudson J., Parker C. Iran and Saudi Arabia Set to Restore Ties After Mediation by China // The Washington Post. March 10, 2023. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/10/saudi-iran-diplomatic-ties-restored/ (accessed: 28.09.2025).

[7] See: Wintour P. Iran and Saudi Arabia Agree to Restore Ties After China-Brokered Talks // The Guardian. March 10, 2023. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/10/iran-saudi-arabia-agree-restore-ties-china-talks (accessed: 28.09.2025); Dadouch S., Hudson J., Parker C. Iran and Saudi Arabia Set to Restore Ties After Mediation by China // The Washington Post. March 10, 2023. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/10/saudi-iran-diplomatic-ties-restored/ (accessed: 28.09.2025).

in 2017, aimed at Iranian viewers and funded by Saudi Arabia, could resume broadcasting in the UK. Iran has repeatedly accused the UK and Saudi Arabia of waging an "information war" through *Iran International*, targeting Iranian youth and the nation, seeking to cause unrest in the country.[8] In February 2023, *Iran International* temporarily moved its headquarters to Washington, D.C., due to increased threats from the Iranian government against its journalists based in the UK.[9] According to *The Guardian*, the resumption of *Iran International* would be an expected consequence of the resumption of diplomatic relations. Ultimately, the fears of the British newspaper were justified, and in September 2023 the channel returned to London.[10]

It should be noted that in the Saudi[11] and Iranian[12] official media, the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement was assessed positively, although these publications limited themselves to mentioning the mediating role of Iraq, Oman and China, and also emphasized the importance of establishing diplomatic relations for ensuring regional stability and security. Regarding China's position, its official stance and the stance of the Chinese media was obviously positive.[13] This is quite typical for media that are under state control and whose position is subject to the process of domestication.

In our opinion, the lack of a positive tone in the Western media regarding the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation and the downplaying of the role of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the region does not correspond to reality. The insufficient coverage of the weakening of the US position under the Biden administration potentially opened up new opportunities for other global players, which could contribute to the transformation of the international system in the Middle East. Moreover, some shifts in ensuring regional stability and security, not reflected in the Western media, but clearly emphasized in the Saudi and Iranian media, were observed in the region after the reconciliation, right up to the exacerbation of relations between Iran, on the one hand, and the United States and Israel, on the other, resulting in an armed conflict that also affected the US allies in the form of the Arabian monarchies.

Some Results of the Saudi-Iranian Reconciliation in the Region and New Opportunities for Russia

The conclusion of the peace agreement did not eliminate the complex set of contradictions that had accumulated in relations between the

[8] Ebrahim N., Al Lawati A. London-Based TV Channel Sparks Iranian Leaders' Ire amid Protests // CNN. October 24, 2022. URL: https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/24/middleeast/saudi-iran-media-protests-mime-intl/index.html (accessed: 30.09.2025).

[9] Wright G. Iran International: Channel Leaves UK After Regime Threats // BBC. February 13, 2023. URL: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64690387 (accessed: 26.09.2025).

[10] Sazmane Gozareshgarane Bedune Marz az bazgoshayiye daftare Iran International dar London esteghbal kard [Reporters Without Borders Welcomes the Reopening of the Iran International Office in London] // Iran International. October 20, 2023. (In Farsi). URL: https://www.iranintl.com/202309257706 (accessed: 28.09.2025).

[11] Hamad A. Saudi Arabia, Iran Agree to Re-Establish Diplomatic Relations: Statement // Al-Arabiya. March 10, 2023. URL: https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/03/10/Iran-Saudi-Arabia-agree-to-re-establish-diplomatic-relations-Iranian-state-media (accessed: 30.09.2025).

[12] Iran—Saudi Reconciliation to Boost Regional Security: Shamkhani // Tasnim News Agency. March 10, 2023. URL: https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/03/10/2865411/iran-saudi-reconciliation-to-boost-regional-security-shamkhani (accessed: 26.09.2025).

[13] See: Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Saudi Arabia—Iran Talks in Beijing // Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN. March 11, 2023. URL: https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202303/t20230311_11039297.htm (accessed: 26.09.2025); Iran Hails China's Important Role in Tehran—Riyadh Détente // People's Daily Online. March 14, 2023. URL: https://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0314/c90000-10222070.html (accessed: 26.09.2025); Chinese FM Spokesperson's Remarks on Saudi Arabia—Iran Talks in Beijing // Xinhua. March 11, 2023. URL: https://english.news.cn/20230311/64c36dce524f4a9484137d1e7820756c/c.html (accessed: 26.09.2025).

states over decades, but transferred the struggle for leadership to a more 'civilized' track. This involves avoiding direct involvement in military conflicts (especially if it requires large financial costs) and focusing on the use of 'soft' types of proxy instruments that would contribute to strengthening the positions of one of the two countries in the region. This approach is largely associated with the risk of large financial costs, which increased with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Khayrullin & Korotayev, 2023; Alwahaibi et al., 2021), and subsequently with the financial-economic and food crises. It seems that the key players in the region have come to understand the need to stop 'hot' proxy wars and find new ways to compete for regional leadership.

A direct consequence of the reduction in tensions in the context of the Saudi-Iranian confrontation in the region was the Yemeni conflict (Bhattarai & Bhattarai, 2024; Sevinç & Özden-Cankara, 2024). Yemen received a respite from hostilities from April 2023, when a UN-supported truce came into force. Although the truce expired in October of the same year, peace continued for some time, and back-channel negotiations between the Houthis and the Saudis were resumed.[14]

Despite the fact that the renewed conflict between the Palestinian movement *Hamas* and Israel led to numerous casualties and a humanitarian catastrophe in the enclave, the situation in the region remained for a fairly long time in the tone set by the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation. Not a single Arab country, despite calls from the local population to forcefully stop the ongoing Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip, entered into open confrontation with Israel, limiting itself to the use of diplomatic methods to stop the conflict (Byman, 2024; Kamalov, 2024). There were no fundamental differences on this issue in Iran's position either, whose attitude towards Israel is extremely hostile. Even the intensified confrontational background between the two countries on 1 April 2024, associated with the Israeli airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, which killed at least 13 people, including two high-ranking generals of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), led to demonstrative military actions by Iran against Israel and the appearance of an Israeli retaliatory strike. Tehran limited itself to launching retaliatory strikes with ballistic missiles and drones on Israeli territory, although unprecedented in scale, but carried out after warning Israeli military about the impending strike. Israel repelled most of the threats with the help of its air defence system, and then carried out a limited strike on Iranian territory (Khayrullin, 2024).

The culmination of the escalation seemed to be the assassination on 31 July 2024 in Tehran of the head of the *Hamas* Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh. *Hamas* and the Iranian authorities accused Israel of the murder and promised to avenge the death of the leader, but under pressure from the international community they refrained from immediate retaliatory actions.[15] This also includes the continuing provocations by the IDF in September 2024, which were expressed in the bombing of *Hezbollah* positions in Lebanon and the subsequent assassination on 28 September of the movement's leader H. Nasrallah

[14] Dadouch S., Hudson J., Parker C. Iran and Saudi Arabia Set to Restore Ties After Mediation by China // The Washington Post. March 10, 2023. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/10/saudi-iran-diplomatic-ties-restored/ (accessed: 28.09.2025).

[15] Mpoke Bigg M. Why Iran Has Not Yet Retaliated Against Israel for Hamas Leader's Killing // The New York Times. August 12, 2024. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/12/world/middleeast/iran-israel-retaliation-attack-explained.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20240813&instance_id=131575&nl=the-morning&regi_id=198131589&segment_id=175008&te=1&user_id=a538ce3591d3fb84c03a02767269eb0e (accessed: 26.09.2025).

(Oluwashakin & Aboyade, 2024; Mohammadi, Abedini & Kiani, 2024). The Iranian missile strike on Israel in October 2025 and periodic missile launches into Israeli territory by Yemeni Houthis also do not fundamentally change Iran's overall stance.

The stabilization of the situation in the Middle East that was established for some time, with the exception of the Israeli war in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military operation in southern Lebanon, and also the swift military coup in Syria in December 2024, opened up new opportunities for China and Russia, which could compete with the United States in the region. However, if China, despite its economic power and recent diplomatic success, still lacks significant political weight in the region and is not viewed by the United States as a serious threat, then Russia, as the successor of the USSR, has a rather rich history of relations with the countries of the Middle East, which, after a certain pause, are in the stage of active development (Vasiliev, 2018). This also applies to Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

For the Russian Federation, the development of relations with both Riyadh and Tehran was complicated by the difficult relations between these states, which until recently resulted in fierce proxy wars. This further deepened the rivalry between regional players. However, the normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations opened up new opportunities for Moscow. At present, Russia is building quite productive relations with all the main contenders in the struggle for leadership in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia moved to a qualitatively new level after the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, the foundation of which was laid in October 2022, when the leaders of the two powers agreed within the framework of OPEC+ to significantly reduce oil production a few weeks before the US midterm elections (Ren & Cai, 2024; Ghoshal & Pradhan, 2024). According to some data, in the period from March to October 2023, the trade turnover between Russia and Saudi Arabia grew by 20%.[16] In October 2023, the Joint Russian-Saudi Intergovernmental Commission on Trade-Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation, established in October 2002 on the basis of the Russian-Saudi Business Council, resumed its work.[17] Within the framework of the commission, working groups operate that develop promising projects in the investment, industrial, agricultural and other areas. In addition, trusting relations developed after the episode of Saudi Arabia's mediating efforts in the exchange of prisoners between Russia and Ukraine in 2023, as well as the beginning of Saudi Arabia's joining BRICS on 1 January 2024, against the background of Moscow's chairmanship of the association. An important breakthrough in relations was the launch of direct air links between Moscow and Riyadh,[18] as well as the introduction of a visa-free regime in May 2026.[19]

Relations between Russia and Iran assumed a partnership character after their joint support

[16] Novak Estimated the Growth of Trade Turnover Between Russia and Saudi Arabia // RIA Novosti. October 11, 2023. (In Russian). URL: https://ria.ru/20231011/tovarooborot-1901951004.html?in=t (accessed: 28.09.2025).

[17] Alexander Novak Chaired the Meeting of the Joint Russian-Saudi Intergovernmental Commission Within the Framework of the Russian Energy Week // Government of Russia. October 11, 2023. (In Russian). URL: http://government.ru/news/49769/ (accessed: 28.09.2025).

[18] Russia and Saudi Arabia Have Launched Regular Air Service // Ministry of Transport of the Russian Federation. August 1, 2025. (In Russian). URL: https://mintrans.gov.ru/press-center/news/12031 (accessed: 28.09.2025).

[19] On the Entry into Force of the Agreement Between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the Mutual Abolition of Visa Requirements for Citizens of the Russian Federation and Citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. April 6, 2026. (In Russian). URL: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/2091431/ (accessed: 10.05.2026).

for the regime of B. al-Assad in the Syrian conflict and the expansion of military-technical cooperation (Al-Basre, 2023). After the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation, Moscow's and Tehran's ties continued to strengthen at various levels. The number of meetings at the ministerial level and at the level of subordinate working groups on energy, logistics, military-technical cooperation, countering cyber threats, etc. increased. Additionally, Russian-Iranian consultations at the deputy ministerial level on bilateral relations, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), problems in the Middle East and North Africa, and the resolution of the situations in Syria and Afghanistan are held on a regular basis. A serious breakthrough in relations was the signing on 17 January 2025 by the leaders of Russia and Iran of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, consisting of a preamble and 47 articles. The document is based on issues of bilateral military-technical cooperation, ensuring international security and "strengthening peace and security in the Caspian region, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East."[20]

Thus, the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation opened up qualitatively new opportunities for Russia, expressed in energy coordination and the expansion of the OPEC+ format. Moscow proved capable of building a dialogue simultaneously with Riyadh and Tehran without entering into contradiction with either of them. In addition, the reconciliation removed some of the restrictions for the implementation of large-scale logistics projects, such as the North—South corridor.[21] The successful completion of this route will allow Russia to establish uninterrupted supplies of goods to the Persian Gulf countries and South Asia.

However, the situation changed dramatically after the US-Israeli aggression against Iran, first in June 2025, and then after the large-scale military operation on 28 February 2026. These rapid developments led to US-Israeli missile strikes on critical infrastructure in Iran, which killed a number of high-ranking officials and military personnel, including the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In response, Iran launched missile strikes on Israel and American military bases located mainly on the territory of the Persian Gulf monarchies. This led to a sharp deterioration in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and an unprecedented escalation between Iran and the UAE. These events complicated Russia's ability to build a constructive dialogue simultaneously with all players in the Persian Gulf. An additional factor changing the configuration of external ties was the signing by Ukraine in March 2026 of defence agreements with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE,[22] which created for Moscow both symbolic risks and practical obstacles to the implementation of already rather fragile agreements in the field of military-technical cooperation, and also called into question all the achievements of the previous period on the political-diplomatic track.

Conclusion

The Saudi-Iranian reconciliation has been presented by Western media as an event that has rather negative dynamics than positive ones.

[20] Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran // President of Russia. January 17, 2025. (In Russian). URL: http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/6258 (accessed: 29.09.2025).

[21] Korotayev A.V., Khayrullin T.R. Trade and Logistics Cooperation Between Russia and Key Countries of the Persian Gulf // Russian Council of International Affairs. June 23, 2026. (In Russian). URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/torgovo-logisticheskoe-sotrudnichestvo-rossii-s-klyuchevymi-stranami-persidskogo-zaliva/(accessed: 06.07.2026).

[22] Vakulina S. What Are Ukraine's New Gulf Defense Deals? Here Is What Zelensky Signed // Euronews. March 30, 2026. URL: https://www.euronews.com/2026/03/30/what-are-ukraines-new-gulf-defence-deals-here-is-what-zelenskyy-signed (accessed: 12.04.2026).

The theoretical and methodological framework based on frame analysis helped to clarify this conclusion. Perhaps the main reaction of all Western media we examined was that the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation could disrupt US efforts to economically isolate Iran. Mainly American media also focused on the weakening of Washington's position in the Middle East during the Biden presidency and the diplomatic success of China, which, according to the analyzed media, was rather accidental than natural. In turn, the British publication drew attention to the increased role of Saudi Arabia, which no longer looks back at the United States in its actions in the Middle East.

At the same time, all publications lack the idea of the possibility of stabilizing the regional situation after the reconciliation, which does not objectively correspond to reality. The Saudi-Iranian reconciliation led to a certain stabilization of the situation in the Middle East, with the exception of the Israeli army's military actions in the Gaza Strip, the exchange of strikes between Israel and Iran, and Israel's military actions against Lebanon. Even US-Israeli aggression against Iran after 28 February 2026 did not ultimately lead to an open armed conflict on a regional scale, although the confrontation between the United States and Iran continues.

For Russia, which has a rich history of relations, the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation opened up for a rather short period the opportunity to build constructive relations simultaneously with all key players in the region. However, the renewed deterioration in Saudi-Iranian relations complicates Moscow's task of simultaneously maintaining all directions on the Middle East track.

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