



The US, Iran, and Saudi Arabia: An empirical analysis of stimulus response theory: 2009–2020

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Abstract

Objectives: The study presented an empirical analysis of the impact of US foreign policy toward Iran on Iran’s foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia during the Obama and Trump presidencies. It argues that Iran’s foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia is one way of getting back at the US, considering it a key ally. **Method:** It adopted an action-reaction model to test various hypotheses on the proposed relationships, using American and Iranian presidential remarks utilizing stimulus-response theory to test the relationships. **Results:** The study showed a set of correlations between certain US behavior toward Iran and Iran’s foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia, based on the monthly and annual data. **Conclusion:** It concluded that Iran’s action toward Saudi Arabia appeared to be a reaction to the US strategies toward Iran.

Keywords: US foreign policy, Obama, Trump, Iran’s foreign policy, Saudi Arabia

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أمريكا وإيران والسعودية: تحليل إمبريقي لنظرية الفعل ورد الفعل: 2009-2020

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ملخص

الأهداف: قدمت الدراسة تحليلاً إمبريقياً لتأثير السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية تجاه إيران على سياسة إيران الخارجية تجاه المملكة العربية السعودية خلال رئاستي أوباما وترامب. وناقشت الدراسة سياسة إيران الخارجية تجاه المملكة العربية السعودية، وأنها إحدى طرق الرد على الولايات المتحدة، معتبرة إياها حليفاً رئيسياً. **المنهج:** اعتمدت الدراسة على نموذج الفعل ورد الفعل لاختبار الفروض المختلفة حول العلاقات المقترحة، وذلك باستخدام التصريحات الرئاسية الأمريكية والإيرانية باستخدام نظرية التحفيز والاستجابة لاختبار العلاقات. **النتائج:** أظهرت الدراسة مجموعة من الارتباطات بين سلوك أمريكا تجاه إيران وسياسة إيران الخارجية تجاه المملكة العربية السعودية، وذلك بناءً على البيانات الشهرية والسنوية. **الخاتمة:** خلصت إلى أن تصرفات إيران تجاه المملكة العربية السعودية تبدو وكأنها رد فعل على الإستراتيجيات الأمريكية تجاه إيران.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية، أوباما، ترامب، السياسة الخارجية الإيرانية، السعودية

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Introduction

This study aimed to introduce a systematic test of the S-R model of the relationship between US foreign policy towards Iran and Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia, namely, during the presidencies of Obama and Trump.

In every US presidency since Jimmy Carter, Iran has often posed significant challenges to US foreign policy towards the Middle East. In fact, Washington believes that Tehran is the “greatest threat to the peace” in the Arab world (Nasr, 2018). Under both Presidents, Obama and Trump, the US agenda towards the Middle East was largely oriented towards Iran. Obama maintained political diversity and unique practices in dealing with Iran and restored the American norms, ending 37 years of enmity in 2015, reflected by the nuclear deal, whereas Obama's successor, Trump, reversed Obama's foreign policy towards Iran (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2019) and pursued a “maximum pressure” campaign that revolved around isolating and excluding Iran from the region, in which Trump restored hostility and enmity towards Iran (Gause, 2019).

US foreign policy during the presidencies of Obama and Trump may have significantly influenced Iran's regional behavior, including that towards Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has often been the centerpiece of Iran's regional foreign policy, represented by a fluctuating relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

This section will review the key studies of the impact of US strategies on Iran's foreign policy, namely, towards Saudi Arabia.

Nasr and Takeyh (2008) stated that US strategy towards Iran may further destabilize the region. Washington should shape a new

regional security order that includes all regional players, including Iran. EKŞİ (2017) stated that Obama's foreign policy towards the Middle East led Iran and Saudi Arabia to compete over regional hegemony. Schmierer et al. (2016) noted that the Obama doctrine influenced Tehran's foreign policy towards neighboring countries.

Bahi (2017) stated that Obama's landmark achievement, that is, the nuclear deal, escalated regional rivalry to assert dominance in the short term; however, it also led to dialogue and engagement. Benjamin and Simon (2019) pointed out that Trump's foreign policy towards Iran activated several Iranian hostile actions towards Saudi Arabia. Han and Hakimian (2019) added that Trump's policy backfired as Iran ramped up its missile tests and strained relations with Gulf States. According to Katzman et al. (2020) Iran's response to Trump's "maximum pressure" strategy is viewed as "maximum resistance".

Kamrava (2015, pp.98-100) stated that Iran's security strategy towards the Middle East is determined, to a large extent, by the regional role of the United States. Nasr (2018) concluded that stabilizing the Middle East requires adopting a vision designed to include Tehran. Otherwise, it will lead to a direct conflict between Tehran and Washington, including its Arab allies.

In a nutshell, analyses varied in examining Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia as a reaction to US foreign policy towards Iran. Nonetheless, the bulk of the studies were characterized by insufficient systematic explanations and a lack of empirical evidence. Thus, this study proposed a systematic approach in understanding Iran's approach towards Saudi Arabia, as Iran's regional behavior can be a function of the behavior of other actors, including the United States.

Theoretical Framework

Nations interact with other nations; this is considered a dynamic part of international relations. However, nations tend to behave in accordance with what they receive. In other words, a state's action depends on the results of its interaction with other states, in which bargaining behavior occurs in this action system (Sullivan, 2001, pp. 210-221).

Theories of deterrence, namely, the action-reaction (stimulus-response) model, intend to provide an analytical framework and a viable explanation of states' behavior at the international level. The action-reaction model is built upon "an actor responds in kind to another's previous action" (Sullivan, 2001, p. 211). A calculated counteraction follows action. It is likely surrounded by a type of tactic. The strategy of each actor depends on their expectations of the strategy of the other actor (Sullivan, 2001, p. 202).

The bulk of the action-reaction (S-R bargaining) model circulates around "action begets reaction", "hostility begets hostility", and "behavior begets behavior" with the other party (Sullivan 2001, pp. 211-12), in which the US influence over Iran deeply affected Iran's behavior, which includes that towards Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this study will adopt a stimulus-response model and test these propositions, aiming to offer a theoretical explanation of the impact of US foreign policy towards Iran on Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia between 2009 and 2020.

Hypotheses

The study is premised on the following assumption, which is built upon the theoretical basis of the literature: that is, Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia is largely a reaction to the US foreign policy towards Iran, which works as a stimulus.

Working Hypotheses

- H1. The more positive the US remarks of diplomacy toward Iran, the more positive the Iranian remarks on diplomacy and incentives toward Saudi Arabia.
- H2. The more positive the US remarks of incentives toward Iran, the more Iran adopted a positive approach toward Saudi Arabia.
- H3. The more threats the US administration exerted on Iran, the more Iran threatened Saudi Arabia.
- H4. The more the United States sanctioned and tried to isolate Iran, the more the Iranians attempted to make the strategy of sanction and isolation more costly to Saudi Arabia by adopting a negative approach.
- H5. The more United States pursued a positive approach toward Iran, the less Iran pursued a negative approach involving threats toward Saudi Arabia.
- H6. The more United States pursued a negative approach of threats, sanctions, and isolation toward Iran, the less Iran followed the positive approach of diplomacy and incentives toward Saudi Arabia.

Concepts, Operationalization, and Data Sources

Concepts

US foreign policy towards Iran. A range of policy tools intended to reduce the threat posed by Iran, including diplomatic engagement, sanctions, and limited military action (Humud & Thomas, 2023).

Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia. The product of deliberations and compromises between three influential but unequal centers of power, namely, the presidency, the IRGC, and the Leader (Kamrava, 2021).

Operationalization and Measures

US foreign policy towards Iran. It has been examined based on the US presidential remarks towards Iran during the presidencies of Obama and Trump, aimed at revealing the pattern of US behavior towards Iran.

The data has been categorized, based on ideas, into two fundamental groups, that is, positive remarks and negative remarks, which have been selected based on a 50+1 calculation in a way to classify the remarks that are neither entirely negative nor positive from the criterion that has been formed.

Positive US remarks towards Iran include diplomacy and incentives. Positive remarks of diplomacy have been selected based on several keywords: negotiation, dialogue, engage directly, and proposals. Incentive remarks have been defined as motivating an actor to do or fulfill something (Singh, 2009), whereas negative US remarks towards Iran include threats, sanctions, and isolation. Negative remarks of threats consist of threats of military force, warnings, and intimidation, including the “carrot-and-stick” approach, attacking, and withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Sanctions include economic and political sanctions. Isolation has been defined as noninvolvement (Brown, 1939). All of the above-mentioned factors are reflected in numbers that have been formed into several tables and figures that aim to illustrate US foreign policy towards Iran.

Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia. It has been examined using the Iranian presidential remarks towards Saudi

Arabia to explore the pattern of Iran's behavior towards Saudi Arabia between 2009 and 2020, namely, under the presidencies of Ahmadinejad and Rouhani.

Iran's remarks towards Saudi Arabia have been categorized based on ideas into two fundamental groups: positive remarks and negative remarks. The positive remarks include diplomacy and incentives. Negative Iranian remarks towards Saudi Arabia include threats, warnings, and criticisms of Saudi Arabia, including the Saudi intervention in Yemen, its role in the Arab Spring, the opposition to the JCPOA, and Saudi–Trump relations. All of which have been reflected in several tables and figures aimed at demonstrating Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia.

Data Sources

US Presidential Remarks towards Iran. It is acquired from the US government's official website, The White House.

Iranian Presidential Remarks towards Saudi Arabia. It has been collected via the academic research engine Nexis Uni.

Hypotheses Testing Methodology

To test the hypotheses of the study, the following approaches have been adopted:

Firstly, US foreign policy towards Iran has been examined based on remarks of both Presidents Obama (2009–2017) and Trump (2017–2020) to determine the pattern of US behavior towards Iran using a primary resource, The White House.

Secondly, Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia has been analyzed based on the remarks of both Iranian presidents Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2009–2013) and Hassan Rouhani (2013–2020) using an academic research engine, Nexis Uni.

Thirdly, A set of correlations has been sought to find relationships between certain US actions towards Iran and Iran's behavior towards Saudi Arabia, using quantitative and qualitative approaches to test the hypotheses, aiming to prove or negate the hypothesis based on monthly and annual data of US foreign policy towards Iran and Iranian foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia.

Findings

1. The US Positive Approach towards Iran and the Iranian Positive Approach towards Saudi Arabia

1.1 President Obama

Obama's remarkable rise in positive remarks towards Iran during his first full year in office, of pursuing "constructive ties" (The White House, 20 March 2009), and adopting a "new direction" in dealing with nuclear-armed Iran through "direct diplomacy" including "dialogue" and "direct engage" (The White House, 09 February 2009), based on "mutual interests and mutual respect" (The White House, 05 April 2009), was reflected in Ahmadinejad's approach towards Saudi Arabia a year later⁽¹⁾. Ahmadinejad's 24 remarks towards Saudi Arabia during this time centered around building "constructive ties" (Nexis Uni, 12 October 2010) and further strengthening "friendship" (Nexis Uni, 1 December 2010) despite "some differences" over regional issues (Nexis Uni, 6 June 2010), in which he favored a diplomatic approach in dealing with Saudi Arabia.

Obama's series of incentive remarks towards Iran in 2009 and 2010 that centered around incentivizing Iran to meet its international

(1) There are no accessible public remarks of Ahmadinejad on Saudi Arabia in 2009 via Nexis Uni. A search for online news also did not yield any results, including the New York Times and ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Wall Street Journal.

responsibilities and obligations, namely, over its nuclear program (The White House, 08 July 2009; 23 September 2009), in exchange for cooperation, international integration (The White House, 23 June 2009; 10 July 2009; 25 September 2009; 03 November 2009; 20 March 2010; 01 July 2010), to promote regional “peace” (The White House, 23 September 2009), and “greater security and prosperity” for Iran (The White House, 26 June 2009), arguably triggered Ahmadinejad’s considerable incentives approach towards Saudi Arabia in 2010. Ahmadinejad emphasized that regional security could only be achieved through Iranian–Saudi cooperation (Nixes Uni, 13 June 2010; 1 December 2010), as he motivated Saudi Arabia to “fast” “improve” the relations in order to solve regional issues (Nixes Uni, 28 June 2010).

The key traditional element of the US foreign policy towards Iran, namely, diplomacy, sharply decreased in 2011 by 68.4%. Similarly, a substantial decrease of 66.6% occurred in Iran’s approach to diplomacy. The fundamental decline in Obama’s positive remarks towards Iran was roughly offset by Iran’s significant reduction in positive remarks towards Saudi Arabia, namely, between February and September 2011.

The year 2012 saw a considerable number of the US positive remarks towards Iran compared to 2011. Still, there was a consistent approach in Ahmadinejad’s behavior towards Saudi Arabia, as there was a slight decline by 37.5% in positive remarks in 2012 compared to 2011. Despite this reduction, a milestone was achieved during the only Iranian presidential visit to the Kingdom between 2009 and 2020. This visit aimed to “bridge the gaps and narrow the differences through dialog” as the Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi stated (Nexis Uni, 2012).

In a reaction to Obama’s action of reaching an accord for the first time with Iran on 23 November 2013 (Gordon, 2013), aimed at temporarily “halting the advancement” of its nuclear program, Obama asserted that the accord had not solved the “problem,” nor the

“mistrust” nor the “enmity and the fundamental challenges of Iran’s nuclear capacity” (The White House, 25 November 2013). President Rouhani reassured Iran’s nuclear intention to the neighboring countries on 26 November 2013, during an interview with Iran’s state-owned television, stating that “Iran has never pursued weapons of mass destruction...It does not pursue them today, and it will not pursue them tomorrow” (Nexis Uni, 26 November 2013).

Obama pursued a less incentive approach in his second term in office (2013-2016) compared to the first term (2009–2012); however, this did not have a fundamental impact on Iran’s positive approach towards Saudi Arabia, as the positive remarks of diplomacy overwhelmed Iran’s foreign policy, namely, from 2013 to 2015, despite the lack of an incentive approach by the US towards Iran.

Obama’s six-month agreement in 2013 (Gordon, 2013) stimulated plenty of Rouhani’s positive remarks towards Saudi Arabia in 2014, namely, in March and September, a month before the end of the interim agreement, where the Iranian president stated that a “preliminary step” has been set to achieve “good relations” (Nixes Uni, 16 April 2014) and restore trust (Nixes Uni, 1 March 2014; 24 September 2014), “close cooperation” (Nixes Uni, 3 March 2014), and “warmer” and “closer” relations with the Kingdom (Nixes Uni, 23 September 2014), aimed at enhancing regional security (Nixes Uni, 26 February 2014), namely, Gulf security, as well as economic relations (Nixes Uni, 23 January 2014). It is evident that the interim agreement activated Rouhani’s moderate behavior towards Saudi Arabia, in which a positive approach was adopted, reflecting a sharp increase in positive remarks by 560% in 2014 compared to the previous year.

President Obama’s achievement of the nuclear deal in 2015 was arguably reflected in Rouhani’s approach towards Saudi Arabia a year onwards, as Rouhani’s 2015 remarks marked a sharp decline, characterized by a temporary shift towards Saudi Arabia, triggered

by the Hajj incident. Nonetheless, Rouhani's moderate approach appeared slightly during an interview with Iran's state-run TV channel on 13 October 2015, in which he called for "clarifying" aspects of the stampede in Mina in a way to prevent "such incidents" (Nixes Uni), as Rouhani sought to reach a practical understanding, avoiding an "extremist approach" (Sinkaya, 2015). It can be said that the nuclear deal further influenced Rouhani's soft approach, as a fundamental shift occurred in Rouhani's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia following the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018.

The Obama administration's significant milestone in 2015, the JCOPA, made a dramatic increase of 210% in Rouhani's positive approach towards Saudi Arabia in 2016, which was reflected in President Rouhani's remarks following the official announcement of the implementation of the JCPOA, stating that the "implementation of the JCPOA will improve the relationship" (Nexis Uni, 18 January 2016). This was followed by more than ten positive remarks centered around mending fences with Saudi Arabia and achieving détente (Nexis Uni, 27 January 2016; 28 January 2016; 29 January 2016; 2 February 2016; 26 March 2016; 21 August 2016).

Rouhani pursued a moderate foreign policy of restoring relations and constructive interaction with the neighboring countries, namely, Saudi Arabia. This was part of Obama's approach towards Iran of engaging and rejoining Iran to the "community of nations" (The White House, 28 January 2014) in exchange for a set of nuclear obligations (The White House, 05 August 2015; 01 April 2016).

It can be deduced that President Obama's positive approaches, namely, incentives and diplomacy, including direct engagement and negotiation towards Iran, begot a positive Iranian approach towards Saudi Arabia, namely, through diplomacy characterized by cooperative behavior, constructive interaction, and achieving détente.

1.2 President Trump

President Rouhani's positive approach towards Saudi Arabia, including the expansion of relations and constructive integration, reducing tension and building confidence, experienced a decline, namely, following Trump's release of a new strategy in October 2017 to address the "full range of Iran's destructive actions" that aimed at denying "all paths to a nuclear weapon," countering Iran's "destabilizing activity" and support for "terrorist proxies in the region" (The White House, 13 October 2017). In reaction to the shift in US foreign policy towards Iran, in which a new dynamic had been set, including Trump's approach of reversing the Obama administration's strategy of direct engagement towards Iran (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2019), a dramatic shift in Iran's behavior towards Saudi Arabia emerged, in which Rouhani's positive remarks towards Saudi Arabia declined by 71% during his second term, namely, between 2017 and 2020, compared to 2013–2016.

Iran's positive approach marked a steady approach towards Saudi Arabia in 2018 and 2019, as Rouhani's positive remarks of expansion and renewal of relations with Saudi Arabia dramatically declined, reaching only three remarks in 2020 (Nixes Uni, 22 July 2018; 06 August 2018; 24 September 2018; 25 September 2018; 06 February 2019; 15 September 2019; 18 September 2019; 22 September 2019; 03 December 2019; 08 July 2020; 12 August 2020), whereas Trump's positive remarks on diplomacy towards Iran marked a significant increase by 80% in 2018, which was boosted by 155.5% in 2019, in which Trump's 18 remarks in 2018 and 46 remarks in 2019 heavily centered on seeking to "find a real, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the Iranian nuclear threat" (The White House, 8 May 2018). Nonetheless, the Trump administration largely failed to

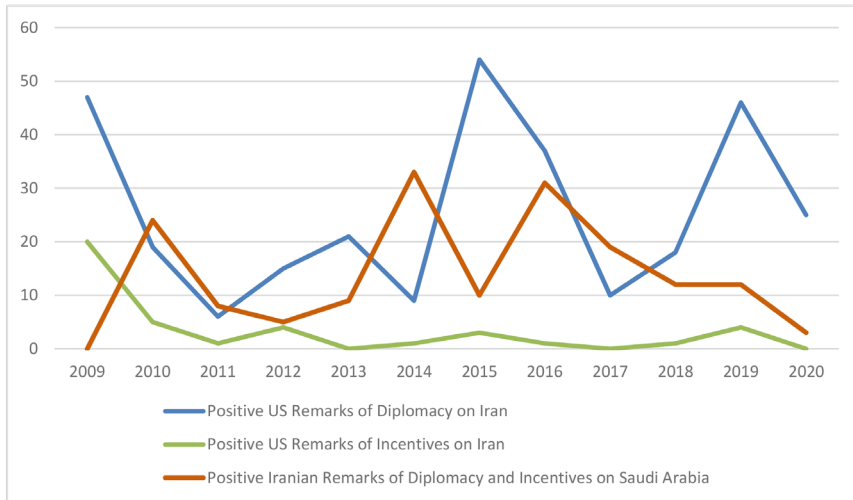
achieve “another great deal” (The White House, 19 August 2020). This change was reflected in Rouhani’s series of negative remarks towards Saudi Arabia following Trump’s exit from the JCPOA.

Table 1

Remarks of the US towards Iran and Iran towards Saudi Arabia

The US President	Positive US Remarks of Diplomacy on Iran			Positive US Remarks of Incentives on Iran			The Iranian President	Positive Iranian Remarks of Diplomacy and Incentives on Saudi Arabia		
	Year	Total	Percentage Change	Year	Total	Percentage Change		Year	Total	Percentage Change
Barack Obama	2009	47	-	2009	20	-	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2009	0	-
	2010	19	59.5%	2010	5	-75%		2010	24	2400%
	2011	6	68.4%	2011	1	-80%		2011	8	-66.6%
	2012	15	150%	2012	4	300%		2012	5	37.5%
	Hassan Rouhani	2013	21	40%	2013	0	-	2013	4	-20%
								2013	5	25%
								2014	33	560%
								2014	9	-57%
Donald Trump	2015	54	500%	2015	3	200%	2015	10	-69.6%	
	2016	37	-31.4%	2016	1	-66.6%	2016	31	210%	
	2017	10	-72.9%	2017	0	-	2017	19	38.7%	
	2018	18	80%	2018	1	100%	2018	12	-36.8%	
	2019	46	155.5%	2019	4	300%	2019	12	0%	
	2020	25	-45.6%	2020	0	-400%	2020	3	-75%	

Source. The White House, Nexis Uni (Appendix A, C, E, and G); <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks>; <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/remarks/>; <https://advance-lexis-com.qulib.idm.oclc.org/bisacademicresearchhome?crd=7c366a45-9fad-48da-9db1-f74ba37194d1&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true>

Figure 1*Positive Remarks of the US towards Iran and Iran towards Saudi Arabia*

2. The US Negative Approach towards Iran and the Iranian Negative Approach towards Saudi Arabia

2.1 President Obama

A rapid increase of sanctions and isolation marked Obama's approach towards Iran in 2010, which contained Iran as a "pariah" (Tzemprin et al., 2015). In contrast, a marginal number of negative remarks of threats emerged in Ahmadinejad's foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2011. Ahmadinejad implicitly warned the region's countries of the US "traps" (Nexis Uni, 4 April 2011) and criticized their relations with the United States, including Saudi Arabia (Nexis Uni, 28 December 2011), namely, the US arms sale to Saudi Arabia (Nexis Uni, 22 September 2010). This was further triggered by Obama's slight increase in the carrot-and-stick approach

by 12.5% in 2010 compared to 2009, in which a set of rewards and consequences were imposed against Iran over its nuclear program (Cram, 2017) (The White House, 05 April 2009; 25 September 2009; 26 September 2009; 19 May 2010; 01 July 2010).

Obama's carrot-and-stick approach in 2011 remarkably increased by 600% in 2012, reflecting an uptick in threats remarks by Ahmadinejad towards Saudi Arabia, which roughly increased by 40% during 2012. In remarks by the Iranian President, Ahmadinejad implicitly criticized Saudi relations with the "arrogant powers," including the United States (Nexis Uni, 08 February 2012), namely, the \$60 billion arms deal between the US and Saudi Arabia (Nexis Uni, 12 May 2012). Iran claimed that the United States and its allies sought to curb Iran's "progress," viewing Iran as an obstacle to their regional aspirations, including "absolute" domination of the Middle East and the stability of the Zionist regime (Nexis Uni, 21 January 2012). Yet, a less confrontational approach dominated Ahmadinejad's negative remarks of threats between 2010 and 2013, represented by remarks implicitly criticizing Saudi Arabia's regional behavior.

Rouhani's negative remarks of threats in 2014 and 2015 were overwhelmed by an implicit approach of criticizing Saudi Arabia, in which Rouhani's 2014 remarks mainly centered around implicitly warning (Nixes Uni, 22 June 2014) and criticizing the Saudi support of "terrorist groups" (Nixes Uni, 14 June 2014). In 2015, there were more than 15 remarks criticizing and warning the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen implicitly (Nixes Uni, 09 April 2015; 21 April 2015; 29 April 2015; 09 May 2015; 03 June 2015; 23 July 2015). Nonetheless, nearly two months following the nuclear agreement in July 2015, a flurry of condemnation occurred against Saudi Arabia, namely, following the Hajj incident, marked by implicit criticism of Saudi Arabia (Nixes Uni, 24 September 2015). Rouhani's implicit

course of criticizing Saudi Arabia, activated by Obama's approach towards Iran, is represented by a slight decline in a negative approach, in which Rouhani avoided aggressive behavior and adopted a less confrontational approach towards Saudi Arabia.

Similarly, a sharp wave of negative remarks was directed against Saudi Arabia in 2016 as a reaction to the Saudi's action of executing the Shiite dissident Nimr Al Nimr in January 2016, leading to a diplomatic severance following the Iranian storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. However, Iran's response was mainly centered around "heated rhetoric" (Shahidsaless, 2016), arguably driven by Obama's significant decline in negative remarks of threats towards Iran by 70%, marked by reaching a nuclear agreement, under which the nuclear deal reduced the potential for regional conflict, particularly with Saudi Arabia (Robinson, 2023). A fundamental shift occurred in Rouhani's course toward Saudi Arabia following the decision of Obama's successor to withdraw from the nuclear deal. In addition, a US report, issued in 2016, showed Iranian–Saudi cooperation despite severing diplomatic ties, namely, through an Iranian–Saudi agreement on the resumption of Hajj for Iranian citizens, as well as Iran's deal with oil-exporting countries within OPEC, including Saudi Arabia (Han & Hakimian, 2019).

2.2 President Trump

Trump's foreign policy towards Iran was dominated by negative behavior, in which the negative remarks of threats skyrocketed in 2017 by 966.6% compared to 2016, resulting in a fundamental shift that emerged in Rouhani's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia, represented by a more assertive behavior (Eisenstadt, 2018). This was embodied in Rouhani's 2017 explicit remarks criticizing the Saudi-led war in Yemen (Nexis Uni, 17 January 2017; 26 October

2017; 08 November 2017; 21 November 2017; 28 November 2017; 10 December 2017). Rouhani's series of negative remarks appeared significantly following Trump's new strategy towards Iran, as more than 15 remarks were issued on 13 October 2017, aimed at "confronting" the "rogue" regime, including its nuclear activity (The White House).

A flurry of negative Iranian threats emerged against Saudi Arabia in 2018, further intensified in 2019 in a reaction to Trump's action of withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 and the pursuit of a maximum pressure campaign against Iran, by which Rouhani claimed that the US withdrawal from the JCPOA was a "plot by... Saudi Arabia" (Nixes Uni, 24 July 2019). Rouhani alleged that the Saudis "forced" Trump's administration to exit from the deal (Nixes Uni, 18 May 2019; 16 October 2019; 12 November 2019) because they were "against it" (Nixes Uni, 4 May 2019), as Saudi Arabia viewed Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA as a critical milestone success ("Saudi Arabia Says", 2018).

Trump's action of doubling down the strategy of sanctions and isolation in 2018 compared to 2017, which further increased by 40% in 2019 as a part of the maximum pressure strategy, begot a forceful reaction by Iran. Iran formed a foreign policy approach as part of an effort it termed "maximum resistance" that activated many provocative and hostile actions, including destroying vital infrastructure in the Gulf region, namely, Saudi tankers, on 13 June 2019 (Katzman et al., 2020). Rouhani threatened to disrupt the neighboring oil shipments if the United States forced all countries to stop buying Iranian oil (Nixes Uni, 03 July 2018). Yet, during the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2018, as part of nuclear-related sanctions, Trump stated that "we're working with countries

that import Iranian crude oil to cut their purchases substantially” (The White House), all of which represented a “tense phase” elevated by the attacks against the oil facilities in Saudi Arabia in September 2019 (Mazzucco, 2022). Rouhani viewed it as legitimate “self-defense” and a “reciprocal” reaction against the Saudi action in Yemen (Nixes Uni, 16 September 2019; 23 September 2019).

Trump’s negative remarks of threats against Iran and Rouhani’s negative threats towards Saudi Arabia characterized a steady course of behavior between 2018 and 2020, reaching a peak in 2019 when US threats, sanctions, and isolation against Iran prompted Iranian threats against Saudi Arabia. This was reflected in Rouhani’s negative remarks between 2018 and 2020, which shifted from implicitly to explicitly criticizing the Saudi regional behavior, specifically in Yemen (Nixes Uni, 21 February 2018; 28 February 2018; 02 March 2018; 18 June 2018; 06 August 2018; 24 September 2018; 24 November 2018; 18 September 2019; 27 September 2019), and criticizing the Saudi–US relations (Nixes Uni, 25 May 2018). Fifty-eight percent of Rouhani’s negative remarks towards Saudi Arabia in 2018, 68% in 2019, and 83% in 2020 centered around criticizing the Saudi-backed US strategies towards Iran, including the Saudi’s opposition to the nuclear deal (Nixes Uni, 01 January 2018; 06 May 2018; 23 September 2018; 04 May 2019; 24 July 2019; 01 August 2019; 15 October 2019; 16 October 2019; 12 November 2019; 04 December 2019; 15 January 2020) and nuclear-related sanctions (Nixes Uni, 04 December 2019), including Iranian oil (Nixes Uni, 24 April 2019).

Table 2

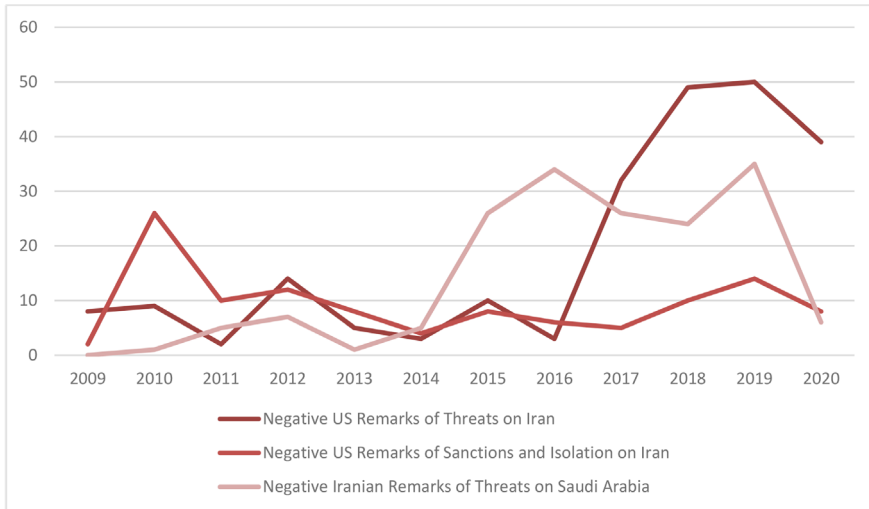
Negative Remarks of the US towards Iran and Iran towards Saudi Arabia

The US President	Negative US Remarks of Threats on Iran			Negative US Remarks of Sanctions and Isolation on Iran			The Iranian President	Negative Iranian Remarks of Threats on Saudi Arabia		
	Year	Total	Percentage Change	Year	Total	Percentage Change		Year	Total	Percentage Change
Barack Obama	2009	8	-	2009	2	-	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2009	0	-
	2010	9	12.5%	2010	26	1200%		2010	1	100%
	2011	2	-77.7%	2011	10	-61%		2011	5	400%
	2012	14	600%	2012	12	20%		2012	7	40%
	2013	5	-64%	2013	8	-33.3%	Hassan Rouhani	2013	1	-85.7%
	2014	3	-40%	2014	4	-50%		2013	0	-
	2015	10	233.3%	2015	8	100%		2014	5	500%
	2016	3	-70%	2016	6	-25%		2015	26	420%
Donald Trump	2017	32	966.6%	2017	5	-16.6	2016	34	30.7%	
	2018	49	53.1%	2018	10	100%	2017	26	-23.5%	
	2019	50	2%	2019	14	40%	2018	24	-7.6%	
	2020	39	-22%	2020	8	-42.85	2019	35	45.8%	
							2020	6	82.8%	

Sources. The White House, Nexis Uni (Appendix B, D, F, and H); <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks>; <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/remarks/>; <https://advance-lexis-om.qulib.idm.oclc.org/bisacademicresearchhome?crid=7c366a45-9fad-48da-9db1-f74ba37194d1&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true>

Figure 2

Negative Remarks of the US towards Iran and Iran towards Saudi Arabia



3. The Positive Approach of the US towards Iran and the Negative Approach of Iran towards Saudi Arabia

3.1 President Obama

An asymmetrical course of behavior marked Ahmadinejad’s approach towards Saudi Arabia, compared to Obama’s approach towards Iran, characterized by a notable decrease in Obama’s positive remarks of diplomacy and incentives by 59.7% in 2010, and further in 2011 by 74%, reflecting a slight increase in Ahmadinejad’s negative remarks of threats towards Saudi Arabia between 2010 and 2011.

President Obama’s approach of adopting a positive means in dealing with nuclear-armed Iran, namely, dialogue (The White House, 09 February 2009), direct engagement (The White House,

20 March 2009), and avoiding isolation in 2009 (The White House, 27 February 2009), was reflected positively in Ahmadinejad's approach towards Saudi Arabia, where a significant retrenchment in negative remarks occurred in the following year, 2010. Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad's negative approach marked a notable increase in 2011, aimed at warning the pro-American regime (Nixes Uni, 04 April 2011) and criticizing Saudi-US relations (Nixes Uni, 28 December 2011). Similarly, in 2012, Ahmadinejad's anti-US sentiment approach (Sinkaya, 2015) continued to primarily target conservative pro-US regimes, namely, Saudi Arabia, including criticizing the Saudi-US rapprochement against Iran (Nixes Uni, 21 January 2012) and the US arms sales (Nixes Uni, 12 May 2012), simultaneously with Obama's sharp decline in positive remarks of diplomacy and incentives towards Iran in 2011 by 74% compared to 2010.

Obama's dramatic increase of positive remarks towards Iran in 2012 by 157% and slightly further in 2013 by 16.6% was represented by reaching a foundation for a comprehensive agreement for the first time in nearly a decade, namely, the interim agreement (Gordon, 2013). This subsequently stimulated a significant decline in Ahmadinejad's negative remarks of threats during the final seven months in office (January-July) by 85.7% and by 100% during Rouhani's first five months in office (August-December) in 2013.

Obama's positive remarks of diplomacy and incentives towards Iran heavily centered on the event in 2014 in which Obama "finalized an interim agreement with Iran" (The White House, 13 January 2014) that "rolled parts" of Iran's program, emphasizing that the "mistrust" between Iran and US cannot be "wished away" (The White House, 28 January 2014). This was reflected heavily in Obama's decision to exclude Iran from the US-led coalition against ISIS (Maloney, 2014).

In response, Rouhani warned the countries that had joined the US-led coalition, including Saudi Arabia, in a remark during the UN General Assembly Session (Nixes Uni, 25 September 2014).

The year 2015 ended with a total of 57 positive US remarks on Iran, marked by a landmark accord reached between Iran and several global powers, including the United States (Robinson, 2023). This nuclear deal boosted Iran's standing from a pariah to a legitimate regional actor and a stronger regional opponent (Tzemprin et al., 2015). It would escalate to a regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia to assert regional dominance in the short term (Bahi, 2017). This was reflected in Rouhani's fundamental increase in negative remarks of threats towards Saudi Arabia by 420% in 2015 compared to the previous year, namely, following July 2015, which centered around implicitly and firmly condemning the Saudi-led airstrikes on Yemen (Nixes Uni, 23 July 2015; 22 September 2015), and the Saudi role in the fall of oil prices (Nixes Uni, 13 September 2015; 13 October 2015; 29 December 2015).

Iran's negative approach of threats towards Saudi Arabia marked a slight increase in 2016 by 30.7% compared to 2015. This was inflamed by the execution of the Shiite cleric Nimr Al Nimr in January 2016. Nonetheless, Iran's reaction was overwhelmed by anti-Saudi rhetoric, avoiding aggressive behavior (Shahidsaless, 2016), predominantly influenced by the Iranian nuclear deal (Han & Hakimian, 2019).

3.2 President Trump

Trump's first full year in office was marked by a remarkable decline in positive remarks of diplomacy and incentives towards Iran by 73%, compared to Obama's last full year in office. This

was followed by a gradual increase by 90% in 2018 and 163% in 2019. Nonetheless, Rouhani's multitude of negative remarks of threats towards Saudi Arabia were marked as a relatively consistent approach, oriented towards a more assertive course of behavior towards Saudi Arabia.

The shift in the US foreign policy from Obama to Trump arguably demonstrated a fundamental shift in Rouhani's foreign policy towards Iran, in which Rouhani's negative approach towards Saudi Arabia was characterized by explicit warning (Nixes Uni, 10 December 2017), criticizing the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen (Nixes Uni, 17 January 2017; 26 October 2017; 08 November 2017; 21 November 2017; 28 November 2017; 18 September 2019) and enormously criticizing the Saudi-US rapprochement, namely, the Trump administration (Nixes Uni, 19 May 2017; 27 May 2017; 02 July 2017; 03 July 2017; 08 November 2017; 06 February 2018; 25 May 2018; 15 September 2019), including the US arms sales (Nixes Uni, 22 May 2017; 07 September 2017; 24 November 2018) and the Saudi support for the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, as this approach continued to emerge until Trump's last year in office (2020) (Nixes Uni, 06 May 2018; 23 September 2018; 04 May 2019; 18 May 2019; 24 July 2019; 01 August 2019; 15 October 2019; 12 November 2019; 04 December 2019; 15 January 2020; 19 February 2020).

Table 3

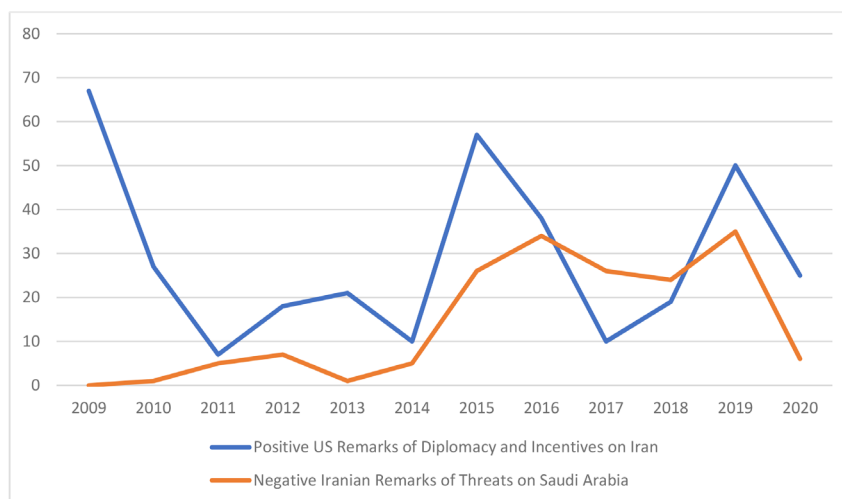
Positive Remarks towards Iran and Iranian Negative Remarks towards Saudi Arabia

The US President	Positive US Remarks of Diplomacy and Incentives on Iran			The Iranian President	Negative Iranian Remarks of Threats on Saudi Arabia		
	Year	Total	Percentage Change		Year	Total	Percentage Change
Barack Obama	2009	67	-	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2009	0	-
	2010	27	-59%		2010	1	100%
	2011	7	-74%		2011	5	400%
	2012	18	157%		2012	7	40%
	2013	21	16.6%	Hassan Rouhani	2013	1	85.7%
	2014	10	52.3%		2014	0	-
	2015	57	470%		2015	5	500%
	2016	38	-33.3%		2016	26	420%
Donald Trump	2017	34	30.7%	2017	34	30.7%	
	2018	10	73.6%	2018	26	23.5%	
	2019	19	90%	2019	24	-7.6%	
	2020	50	163%	2020	35	45.8%	
	2020	25	-50%		6	-82.8%	

Sources. The White House, Nexis Uni (Appendix A, C, F, and H); <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks>; <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/remarks/>; <https://advance-lexis-com.qulib.idm.oclc.org/bisacademicresearch/home?crd=7c366a45-9fad-48da-9db1-f74ba37194d1&pdmfid=1516831&pdisurlapi=true>

Figure 3

US Positive Remarks towards Iran and Iranian Negative Remarks towards Saudi Arabia



4. The Negative Approach of the US towards Iran and the Positive Approach of Iran towards Saudi Arabia

4.1 President Obama

Ahmadinejad's 2010 positive remarks of diplomacy and incentives marked a significant increase, reflecting an asymmetrical approach to Obama's considerable decline in negative remarks between 2009 and mid-2010. Obama's approach of less sanctions (The White House, 23 September 2009; 25 September 2009; 08 April 2010), isolation (The White House, 27 January 2010), and threats, including carrot-and-stick approach (The White House, 05 April 2009; 26 September 2009; 19 November 2009), triggered a series of positive remarks towards Saudi Arabia, namely, expansion of cooperation in solving regional issues (Nixes Uni, 11 March 2010; 06 June 2010; 13 June 2010; 28 June 2010), which was subsequently emphasized during a phone conversation between President Ahmadinejad and King Abdulla on 21 November 2010 (Nixes Uni).

A fundamental decline in Ahmadinejad's positive approach occurred following June 2010, namely, in 2011, by 66.6%, representing less cooperative behavior towards Saudi Arabia (Nixes Uni, 02 September 2010; 12 October 2010; 01 December 2010; 10 November 2011). Ahmadinejad's remarks mainly centered around reassuring Iran's intentions towards the neighboring states, including Saudi Arabia (Nixes Uni, 29 November 2010; 01 December 2010; 22 October 2011), namely, slamming the United States, stating that the United States seeks to create dispute between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Nixes Uni, 04 April 2011; 24 October 2011; 10 November 2011). This reflected the essential piece of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, namely, confronting the United States (Sinkaya, 2015), which was activated following Obama's plenty of negative remarks in July 2010, in which sanctions, isolation, and threats, including a carrot-and-stick approach, dominated Obama's foreign policy towards Iran (The White House, 01 July 2010).

A crucial increase in Obama's negative approach towards Iran emerged in 2012 by 116.6% compared to 2011, in which Obama doubled down on the policy of sanctions, isolation, and threats. This subsequently drove a slight decrease of 37.5% in Iran's positive approach towards Saudi Arabia in 2012, which heavily centered on strengthening regional security and shifting away from foreign interference, including the United States (Nixes Uni, 18 October 2012; 28 October 2012). Nonetheless, a sharp increase of 80% in 2013 in Iran's positive approach towards Saudi Arabia during the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency and the onset of President Rouhani's tenure was largely driven by the significant decrease in Obama's negative approach by 50% in 2013, namely, threats, which represented eliminating the carrot-and-stick approach and favoring a military option (The White House, 21 March 2013; 30 September 2013; 14 November 2013).

The year 2014 was marked by a remarkable increase in Rouhani's positive remarks on diplomacy and incentives, whereas a fundamental retrenchment of Obama's negative remarks is marked by 46%, characterized by the elimination of isolation and less sanctions strategy that aimed at bringing Iran to the negotiation table and reaching a comprehensive deal (The White House, 13 January 2014; 24 March 2014; 05 November 2014). This paved the way for Iran to reintegrate into the regional and global political and economic level, which was Obama's long-term foreign policy goal towards Iran (Gause, 2014). This was demonstrated in Rouhani's positive remarks, as relatively 60% centered on building constructive political and economic cooperation and integration with the region, namely, Saudi Arabia (Nixes Uni, 23 January 2014; 22 February 2014; 26 February 2014; 03 March 2014; 16 April 2014; 28 June 2014; 30 August 2014; 23 September 2014).

The year 2015 marked a drastic shift in Rouhani's positive approach towards Saudi Arabia, characterized by the elimination of positive remarks of diplomacy and incentives between February and August 2015. This reflected an asymmetric approach to Obama's series of threats remarks on Iran, including "military options" (The White House, 05 August 2015) and "continue enforcing...sanctions" (The White House, 09 February 2015) in getting a diplomatic resolution and changing the course of Iran's behavior (The White House, 17 April 2015; 14 July 2015; 05 August 2015; 25 September 2015; 28 September 2015), whereas Obama's elimination of negative remarks following September 2015 was reflected by a slight increase in Rouhani's positive remarks towards Saudi Arabia between October and December 2015, represented by a watered-down approach in response to the Hajj incident (Nixes Uni, 13 October 2015), and a more incentives-oriented approach towards Saudi Arabia, including dealing with regional issues (Nixes Uni, 02 November 2015; 29 December 2015).

The notable decrease in Obama's negative approach towards Iran in 2016 was marked by the lifting of sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program on 16 January 2016 ("Timeline of US sanctions", 2023). This shifted Iran from isolation into economic and political cooperation and stimulated a notable reversal in Rouhani's positive approach towards Saudi Arabia in 2016, an increase of 210% compared to 2015, characterized by more incentives (Nixes Uni, 22 September 2016) and diplomacy in Iran's approach towards Saudi Arabia, including the desire to expand relations (Nixes Uni, 01 January 2016; 06 January 2016; 19 January 2016), mend ties, and achieve détente (Nixes Uni, 06 January 2016; 18 January 2016; 27 January 2016; 28 January 2016; 29 January 2016; 02 February 2016; 26 March 2016; 21 August 2016).

4.2 President Trump

Obama's successor, President Trump, made a crucial shift in US foreign policy towards Iran. Trump's tenure was marked by 208 negative remarks of threats, sanctions, and isolation that ultimately ratcheted tensions (Gause, 2019). In this striking shift, a fundamental shift in Iran's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia occurred, characterized by a notable decrease of 38.7% in Rouhani's positive remarks of diplomacy and incentives, followed by a further 36.8% in 2018 and 2019, and remarkably in 2020 by 75%. This was largely guided by the Saudi stance towards the JCPOA (Nixes Uni, 01 January 2018; 06 May 2018; 23 September 2018; 04 May 2019; 24 July 2019; 01 August 2019; 15 October 2019; 12 November 2019; 04 December 2019; 15 January 2020) and Saudi-Trump relations (Nixes Uni, 22 May 2017; 06 February 2018; 24 April 2019; 12 August 2020). Rouhani's decline in positive remarks is represented by a call to Saudi Arabia to shift away from the United States, favoring Iran (Nixes Uni 24 November 2018, 03 December 2019, 12 August 2020); Rouhani warned the Kingdom about the United States (Nixes Uni 08 November 2017, 13 October

2019, 17 November 2019, 12 August 2020). This was further reflected in Rouhani’s proposal for a regional “collective cooperation” of “HOPE” that fundamentally aimed to solve regional issues, including those related to “security” and “economic,” as Rouhani stated on 23 September 2019 (Nixes Uni).

Table 4.

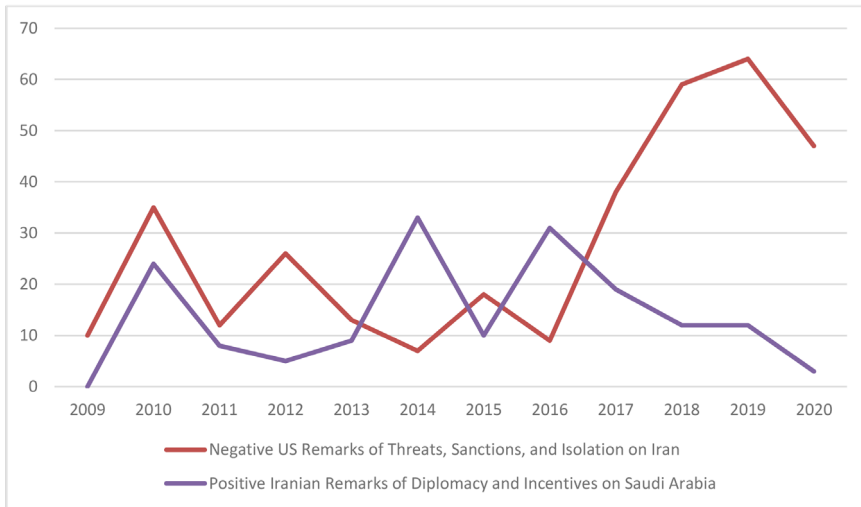
US Negative Remarks towards Iran and Iranian Positive Remarks towards Saudi Arabia

The US President	Positive US Remarks of Diplomacy and Incentives on Iran			The Iranian President	Negative Iranian Remarks of Threats on Saudi Arabia		
	Year	Total	Percentage Change		Year	Total	Percentage Change
Barack Obama	2009	10	-	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad	2009	0	-
	2010	35	250%		2010	24	2400%
	2011	12	-65.7%		2011	8	-66.6%
	2012	26	116.6%		2012	5	-37.5%
	2013	13	-50%	Hassan Rouhani	2013	4	-20%
					2013	5	25%
					2014	33	560%
					2015	10	-69.6%
2016	9	-50%	2016	31	210%		
Donald Trump	2017	38	322.2%	2017	19	-38.7%	
	2018	59	55.2%	2018	12	-36.8%	
	2019	64	8.4%	2019	12	0%	
	2020	47	-26.5%	2020	3	-75%	

Sources. The White House, Nexis Uni (Appendix B, D, F, and H); <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-and-remarks>; <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/remarks/>; <https://advance-lexis-com.qulib.idm.oclc.org/bisacademicresearchhome?crd=7c366a45-9fad-48da-9db1-f74ba37194d1&pdmfid=1516831&pdurlapi=true>

Figure 4

US Negative Remarks towards Iran and Iranian Positive Remarks towards Saudi Arabia



Conclusion

The study explored the impact of the US strategies toward Iran and Iran's behavior toward Saudi Arabia. It attempted to test the stimulus-response theory on the impact of US foreign policy toward Iran on Iran's foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia during the presidencies of Obama and Trump.

The study concluded a set of correlations between certain US behavior toward Iran and Iran's foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia, based on the monthly and annual data.

- A positive Iranian approach was adopted toward Saudi Arabia between 2009 and 2016 that increased overwhelmingly following Obama's series of positive approaches toward Iran, represented by direct diplomacy, and incentivized Iran to change its behavior.

- A sharp decline in Rouhani's positive remarks toward Saudi Arabia occurred during Trump's presidency (2017-2020).
- A significant drop in Iran's negative approach toward Saudi Arabia occurred between 2009 and 2014, reflecting a symmetrical course of behavior to Obama's negative approach toward Iran. Nonetheless, Iran's remarkable increase in negative behavior between 2015 and 2016 was marked by an implicit course of criticizing and warning Saudi Arabia.
- Trump's negative approach triggered a sharp wave of negative Iranian remarks towards Saudi Arabia, characterized by an explicit course of warning and criticizing Saudi Arabia.
- An asymmetrical course of the behavior emerged in Iran's remarkable drop in negative remarks toward Saudi Arabia compared to Obama's dramatic increase in positive remarks toward Iran (2009-2016).
- Trump's significant decrease in positive remarks toward Iran, namely, in 2017, stimulated a fundamental increase in Rouhani's negative remarks.
- An asymmetric course occurred in Obama's negative approach toward Iran and Iran's positive approach toward Saudi Arabia (2009–2016).
- A sharp drop in Rouhani's positive remarks toward Saudi Arabia (2017–2020) emerged as a reaction to Trump's action of adopting a negative approach toward Iran, predominately stimulated by Trump's exit from the JCPOA.

It seems that Iran's foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia was, to a large extent, influenced by the US foreign policy toward Iran. It has been shown that a more softened approach occurred in Iran's behavior toward Saudi Arabia, namely, during Obama's presidency.

Nonetheless, during Trump's presidency, Iran's behavior was oriented mainly towards pushing against US aggressions toward Iran, targeting a strategic US ally, namely, Saudi Arabia, in response to the US aggressive behavior toward Iran.

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